3

THE LALDAS SHRINES AND INTER-RELIGIOUS DISPUTES

> Sherpur, nine miles north-east of Ramgarh, is remarkable for the tomb of Laldas, whose body is said to have come to Sherpur from the neighbouring Bharatpur village of Nagla, six months after death and burial. The tomb is a very substantial masonry building 100 feet long, with a high dome, and walls 5 feet thick. The interior is vaulted and low. The body of Laldas lies in a crypt several feet below the surface. Many other members of Laldas's family were interred at Sherpur. (Powlett 1878: 153)

When I began my fieldwork, I visited the Laldas shrine in Sherpur under the impression that it was a temple. However, upon approaching the structure, I noticed that its dome was somewhat atypical and gave it the appearance of a tomb rather than a temple. Unlike north Indian temples, which typically feature tower-like canopies, the shrine of Laldas had the usual architectural style of an Indo-Islamic structure (as shown in Figure 3.1). Additionally, there were a number of saffron-coloured flags hoisted at the top of the domes. As I explored the site, it became clear that this building was not a conventional Hindu temple, even though there were many Hindu symbols present.

A massive hoarding with the slogan *pujaniya sant śrī 108 bābā śri lāldās mahārāj jī* (The holy saint *śri* 108 Baba Laldas *maharaj*), a common epithet for a Hindu saint, stood above the main gate of the outer wall with the Hindu *svāstika* marks on both sides. From outside, the symbols and iconography (except for the dome and the *sayyed*s' graves at the four corners) gave the

FIGURE 3.1 A side view of the Sherpur shrine

Source: Photo by the author.

shrine building its striking appearance of a temple. Overall, these Hindu symbols currently overpower Islamic symbols and shared aspects in these traditional shrines transforming the overall appearance and nature of the order.

The Hindu devotees are committed to remove all the Islamic symbols from the religious order, which also includes replacing the Meo Muslim priests (*sādh*s) with Brahmins on the priestly seats. These attempts of omitting all traces of shared heritage and Islamic architectural remains, such as the domes and mosques, from the shrines indicate a strong desire among the Baniya community to appropriate the saint according to their own devotional practices. As a result, the Hindu Laldasis have been trying to erase or modify the symbolic and architectural traces of a shared religious history from the Laldas shrines. The matter has sparked numerous conflicts between the two factions of followers.

Initially, some Muslim residents of Sherpur indicated to me the presence of the two non-operational mosques inside the Laldas shrine complex, one on

FIGURE 3.2 The decommissioned mosque at the Laldas shrine
Source: Photo by the author.

the top of the main shrine's sanctum-sanctorum and the other in the exterior courtyard in front of the main entrance (Figure 3.2). These mosques were once utilised by Muslim villagers to offer *namāz*, but they are now closed. In recent decades, Hindu Laldasis forced the decommissioning of these

mosques. However, disputes over the Laldas shrines and these mosques first arose around the time of the Partition of India in 1947 and are attributable to the Hindu Laldasis' ownership of the shrines following the emergence of numerous conflicts with the Meo Laldasis.

Throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there is no historical evidence of disputes at the three major shared shrines of Laldas.[1] But, during the twentieth century, these sites underwent a transformation and are now contested religious places between the Hindu and Muslim Laldasis. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the demonstration of one religious community's dominance over the other with reference to shared/mixed shrines has frequently occurred on a global scale (Hayden et al. 2016). One of the parties that share a sacred site either seizes or demolishes the existing symbols of the other religion from the shrines (Hayden 2002: 205). For instance, Hagia Sophia in Istanbul was converted from a Greek Orthodox Church into a museum and then into a mosque.[2] Similarly, in India, a great number of shared sacred spaces are in danger of losing their identity as liminal/hybrid ritual spaces and being labelled as 'Hindu' shrines (see Sikand 2002b).[3] These holy sites have become centres of contention, with fierce religious rivalry. The most notable example is the Babri mosque,[4] which became a disputed site around the time of India's independence (Ludden 1996). Likewise, Hindus and Muslims have contested countless other sacred spaces with time, particularly shrines of Bhakti and Sufi saints (Bellamy 2011; Sikand 2002b, 2003). Sikand (2002b), for example, lists five shared shrines contested by Hindu and Muslim factions in Karnataka alone. Most contestations were over identity, ritual and ownership of space. I investigate here the interreligious disputes at the Laldas shrines to identify what caused these antagonistic attitudes and sporadic acts of violence between Hindu and Muslim followers of the saint.[5] Passive forms of intolerance and disputes surrounding these shrines may be better described by using Hayden's (2002; Hayden et al. 2016) study of sharing sacred spaces. Some of the ways in which inter- and intra-religious and theological tensions result in new material developments around mixed sacred sites indicate the nature and changing patterns of dominance.[6]

Contestations often arise at Sufi graves and Bhakti saints' shrines due to frequent interactions between members of various religious groups, leading to a gradual display of dominance over each other (Hayden et al. 2016). Although many saints like Laldas preached the transcendence of religious boundaries, adherents of 'pure Islam' advocated by Sunnis and 'orthodox Hindus' are

attempting to reinterpret the teachings of these saints to conform to their current worldviews. Consequently, members of both religious communities seek to either demonstrate a saint's irrelevance to a particular religion (by Sunni followers of 'true Islam') or assimilate them into the current standard definition of 'religion' (by most adherents of 'orthodox Hinduism'). As a result, with its preaching of a unique theological synthesis, the religious order of Laldas has been converted from a liminal collection of beliefs into a zone of intense religious conflict.

Contrary to the dominant scholarly view that disputes over sacred sites are 'the product of religious forces beyond the influence of political actors' (Hassner 2003: 4; Sikand 2002b), I argue that the contestations were not only reflections of local and national politics but also evidence of the evolution of new dimensions in local religious cultures. These developments were undoubtedly also influenced by the changing dynamics and co-relationships between social communities across time and space. Some of the main religious differences were primarily related to the emergence of new devotional patterns, newer forms of religiosity in conjunction with economic transformations and the reinforcement of some traditional religious beliefs among the Meos and the Baniyas. Laldas's shrines and symbols, as well as the Muslim custodians traditionally associated with the saint's sites, have been destabilised and transformed as the order's identity is being redefined. In the sections that follow, the emergence of competitive sharing, the passive meaning of tolerance and examples of low-intensity violence in the vicinity of the Laldas shrines are discussed.

THE EMERGENCE OF DISPUTES

Regarding the controversies surrounding the Laldas shrines, the historical records of Alwar from the first half of the twentieth century shed some light on the complexities of these interreligious contestations. From these records, it emerges that these confrontations at the shrines date back nearly a century. The first serious interreligious conflict occurred at the shrine of Dholidoob, where the saint's parents are buried; many Meos were arrested in 1914 and 1932 for offering *namāz* at this disputed site (Figure 3.3).[7] A police inspector who investigated the incident also reported similar communal tensions at the main shrine of Sherpur in 1939.[8] Laldasis of both Muslim and Hindu factions

FIGURE 3.3 The Dholidoob shrine of Laldas, Alwar

Source: Photo by the author.

frequently levelled accusations against one another, claiming that the other party was either 'Islamising' or 'Hinduising' the shrines, respectively. The officer found no concrete proof to back up their respective claims, but several court documents from Alwar's archives confirm his version of the conflict in question. The matter of offering *namāz* at these two Laldas shrines arose sporadically throughout the first half of the twentieth century.[9]

In a lawsuit filed in 1945 in the princely court of the Maharaja of Alwar, the Baniya Laldasis accused the Meo Laldasis of transforming the Dholidoob shrine into a mosque by offering Islamic prayer (*namāz*) there.[10] The civil suit filed by Hindu Laldasis on 21 November 1945 included the names of six Meo Muslim individuals who allegedly 'desecrated' a 'temple' by organising an Islamic prayer. The court was urged to prohibit the accused from calling *azān* and offering *namāz*.

A month later the accused Meos lodged an objection to this appeal, and on 17 January 1946, the Munsiff Court issued a temporary restraining order against the Muslim Laldasis. Afterwards, the appellate court later ruled that

the Hindu Laldasis were entitled to full possession over the front part of the shrine and the Meo Laldasis were entitled to perform *namāz* in the back portion.[11]

This decision did not put an end to the controversy due to the insistence of both factions on removing completely the symbols of the other from the shrine. Consequently, there were a number of other episodes of confrontations between the two groups regarding defining the identity of the saint and the nature of his shrines. When the matter became more serious, the prime minister of the princely state of Alwar took an active part to deal with the ongoing conflicts. He consulted both parties to reach an amicable agreement. It was ultimately decided that the status quo would be preserved and that both factions would retain their right to worship at the shrine. Hindu-style prayers and Islamic *namāz* began to be offered in the front and the back portions of the Dholidoob shrine. These developments were unique as the Laldasis, according to the teachings of the saint, were not supposed to be much concerned with *ārtī* (Hindu prayers) or *namāz*. Laldas had urged his followers to rise above the religious identities and practices of institutional religions. But almost 300 years later, his followers were contesting against each other to define him within rigid institutional religious boundaries. However, there is no trace of disputes around such notions before the twentieth century.

Both factions continued to report occasional complaints of disturbances during their respective prayer sessions. The situation remained stable until September 1946, when the Hindu Laldasis insisted on observing Laldas's *srāddh* in the shrine, a Hindu ceremony for commemorating the death of parents and ancestors. This issue rekindled the conflict. The prime minister ordered the deployment of police at the site and instructed the district magistrate to fix separate times for *namāz* and *ārtī*. Hindu and Muslim Laldasis again continued to attend the Dholidoob shrine of the saint. The *srāddh* ceremony of the saint was observed on 24 September 1946 in the evening following the *namāz*. The celebration of this event apparently triggered a confrontation between the factions in which several Hindu Laldasis were hurt, including four policemen.[12] The whole incident eventually led to the arrest of many Meos who were holding a *pancāyat* (a caste-council meeting) related to the matter on the same day.

The debate and discussions surrounding the clash reflected the ongoing debate about nation and nationality at that time, which revolved around the status of Muslims in an independent India. The Hindu Sabha of Alwar, a
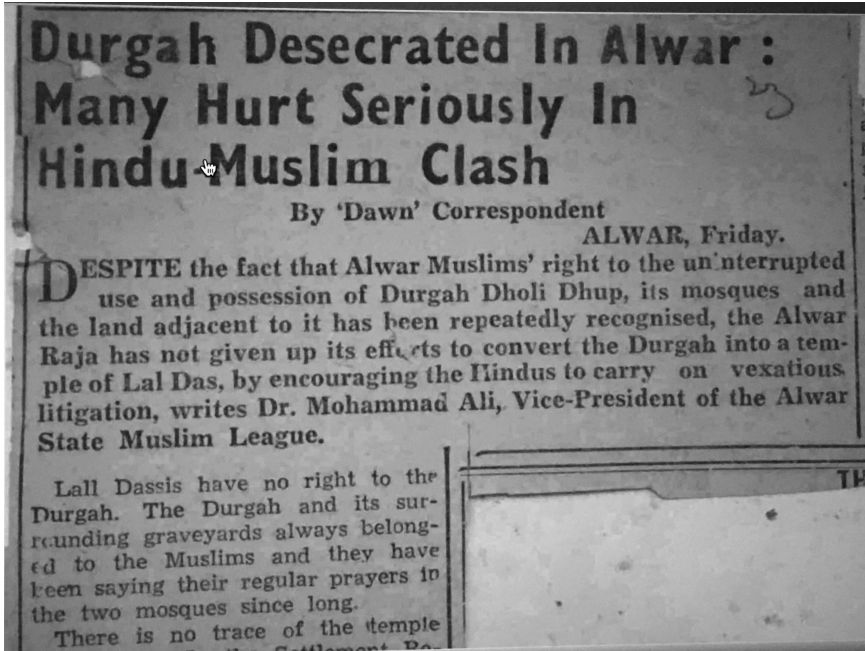
FIGURE 3.4 A news report about the dispute, 1946, by the *Dawn*

Source: District Archives, Alwar.

regional branch of the All India Hindu Mahasabha,[13] immediately condemned the attack on Hindus and demanded harsh punishment for those responsible for the incident. In a similar manner, the Alwar branch of the Muslim League defended Muslims in a lengthy letter to the prime minister of Alwar.[14]

Concerns of both parties were confined to their own respective religious communities, indicating the bounded notion of communities that had become entrenched in the region in the twentieth century. This issue also caught the attention of the media, religious organisations and political parties. For instance, on 6 October 1946, the *Dawn* newspaper, which was founded by Muhammed Ali Jinnah of the Muslim League, wrote: 'Durgah Desecrated in Alwar: Many Hurt Seriously in Hindu–Muslim Clash' (Figure 3.4). In the same edition, the *Dawn* cited this incident as evidence of Hindu oppression of Muslims to support the call for a separate nation of Pakistan:

> [I]t is high time that the Indian Musalmans tell their leaders that they are prepared to make all sacrifices which the *Qaed-e-Azam* [Mohammed

Ali Jinnah] in his political prudence may demand, and now they are in a
position to stand on their legs in order to march to the gates of triumph.
(*The Dawn* 1946)

Hindu and Muslim politico-religious organisations actively framed
the discussion to serve their contemporary political objectives. Muslims
accused Hindu Laldasis of desecrating the mosque in the *dargāh*, and Hindus
accused Muslim Laldasis of converting the temple of Laldas into a mosque.
Throughout the dispute, both Hindu and Muslim factions of Laldas remained
highly critical of different symbolic religious aspects present in the shrine.
Muslim advocates constantly referred to the Hinduising of the site and the
desecration of Islamic symbols. For instance, the president of the Alwar
Muslim League reported a conversation with the Imam of the mosque
of Laldas's Dholidoob shrine, saying that the minarets in the west of the
premises had been dismantled and the holy Quran thrown away.[15] Muslims
also objected to the hanging of *jhālar* (furbelows) and garlands of flowers as
in a temple. Similarly, Hindus protested that Muslims were converting the
shrines into mosques by destroying Hindu symbols, such as idols and images
of the saint, furbelows and garlands. Regardless of the reality of the claims,
it is evident that these allegations of sacrilege were also an attempt to erase
evidence of a shared past of the religious order.

These religious transformations are closely related to changes in socio-
economic structure and the interrelationships of various social groups
sharing a locale. The changes in religious forms also track changes in
political dominance, locally and more widely—thus considering 'religion' as
a reflective sphere rather than necessarily a causative factor (Hayden et al.
2016). Here, Hayden's notion of 'religioscapes' is useful in the sense that it
refers to social space being marked physically by the religious use of a shrine
by mutually competing religious communities. These religious groups not
only see themselves as belonging to different 'religions' but also form their
respective 'religioscapes' around a shared/mixed shrine (Hayden et al. 2016).
Moreover, when two of these religioscapes remain in contact for long, the
features of a sacred space in proximity to one another will reveal the power
dynamics between the two groups.[16]

Although the entire dispute remained shrouded and attracted less
attention than the Partition violence in the state in 1947, these contestations
took on a new form in the post-independence period. Due to the persecution
experienced during the Partition, a significant number of Meos either

migrated to Pakistan or opted to settle in regions outside of the princely state of Alwar (Copland 1998; Mayaram 1997a). As a result, the Hindu Laldasis gradually gained control of these contested sites during this turbulent period. Once the Hindu Laldasis gained control of all the Laldas shrines against the backdrop of anti-Muslim violence in the state, they strengthened it further in the post-independent phase. So, between the 1950s and 1990s, the shrines remained relatively peaceful due to Muslims' vulnerability in the area and the comparatively increasing lack of interest in devotion to saints. The Hindu majority, however, had already begun the process of gradually capturing and transforming these shrines into temples. By this time, Hindu Baniya devotees had formed a trust to manage the temple properties, organise fairs and festivals, and keep the shrines as 'Hindu temples'.[17]

This process of redefining the religious identity and practice of the Laldas order was also aided by the stance of the Tablighis, who desired a complete dissociation between local Muslims and such saints.[18] Tablighi Jamaat activists encouraged Muslims to neglect these shrines and the graves of saints. The Tablighi form of Islam had already made inroads among the Meos following the Partition of 1947 (Sikand 2002a; Mayaram 1997a). Many Tablighis asserted that Allah did not protect many Meos during the violence of the Partition because they were not 'proper' Muslims (Sikand 2002a; Mayaram 1997a). In this way, the Tablighis began to change the traditional meaning and practice of 'local Islam' by completely discarding the role of saints in Islam. Instead, they attested a global form of 'Islam' strongly premised upon the idea of religious 'purity' dictated by Islamic texts such as the Quran and the Hadith. The notion of religious purity required the Meo community to renounce their 'mixed' traditions and the conventional religious association with a saint in favour of 'authentic' Islam by mostly its Sunni followers.

As far as the most recent dispute at the Sherpur shrine of Laldas is concerned, it occurred in 2012 (Parashar 2012), when the Hindu Laldasis who currently controlled the shrine tried to install an idol of the Hindu god Shiva. The Meo villagers and *sādh*s resisted this move on the grounds that it would bring about some 'dramatic' changes within the shrine. In response to this opposition, the Baniyas made an appeal to the local branches of right-wing Hindu organisations, such as the RSS, the Shiv Sena and the Bajrang Dal.[19] The right-wing activists outpoured in large numbers from neighbouring areas and demonstrated with firearms.[20] For the first time in the history of the dispute, Meo villagers were forced to flee their homes in order to protect themselves. Meo villagers had not witnessed anything of this magnitude

since the time of the Partition. Moreover, Muslims did not respond in the same manner for two reasons: the Hindu majority's clear domination and the Tablighi Jamaat's success in preventing saint veneration among the majority of Muslims. In addition, Muslim political organisations were more concerned with preserving peace and order than with combating Hindus. But the idol of Shiva could not be restored finally. When the idol was placed on the premises, it unexpectedly shattered into pieces, leading Hindu worshippers to interpret it as a sign of the saint's anger. Consequently, they abandoned the proposal, and the disagreement did not escalate any further.

The Hindu Laldasis admitted in various legal proceedings that the Laldas order belonged to both Hindus and Muslims, but a process of slow Hinduisation had already begun and continues to this day (analysed in the next chapter). Hayden (2002: 228) contends that

> processes of competition between groups that distinguish themselves from each other may be manifested as syncretism yet still result, ultimately, in the omission of the symbols of one group or another from a shrine.

This perfectly describes the current scenario at the Laldas shrines. The omission of Islamic symbols and the simultaneous inclusion of new symbols is a well-planned strategy to place the Laldas shrines within Hinduism. The mosques in the shrines are completely abandoned, although not demolished. On multiple recent instances of renovation, the minarets have been remodelled to resemble temple domes. Saffron flags and Hindu symbols such as the 'Om' give the shrines an overwhelming appearance of Hindu temples. However, the Muslim *sādh*s, the graves in the shrines and the presence of two mosques on the premises continue to indicate the complexities of the religious order.

I contend that since the time of saint, there has been a substantial shift in the meanings of the terms 'Hindu' and 'Muslim'.[21] The terms 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' existed prior to British colonialism; they were not exclusively colonial inventions (Lorenzen 1999). Moreover, Hinduism was always defined by diversity in religious beliefs, practices and cultural life.[22] In fact, the term 'Hinduism' was not used in its contemporary political sense at least until the late British colonial period.[23] The anecdotes of Laldas evidently proved the complexity of these interactions in the evolution of institutionalised forms of religious identities.[24] Moreover, prior to the twentieth century, the Hindu

and Muslim followers of Laldas were not concerned with situating the saint in a specific 'religion'. Before the twentieth century, religious identities were more fluid and marked by a more complex religious engagement in shared settings. An increasing conviction in the (need for) homogeneity of religious communities was the root cause of the current contentious nature of shared spaces. This idea also changed liminal and shared religious practices at the local level. The concept of a single Hindu or Muslim community in Alwar was gradually formed over time. As a result of numerous different influences, including the shifting form of religious cultures across social communities of varying economic backgrounds, these shared spaces began to reflect wider disputes in the state. Furthermore, the changing political climate in India has also contributed to the transformation of the dynamics of socio-religious interactions. The rise of Hindu nationalism and the increasing polarisation of communities in the twentieth century had further fuelled inter-religious conflicts. The disputes at the shared shrines of Laldas were also influenced by communal relations in Alwar, to which I turn my attention next.

COMMUNAL RELATIONS IN ALWAR

Since the political and religious worlds are often closely interwoven, disputes at shared sacred places can mirror broader societal concerns. In the twentieth century, India's divisive colonial and post-colonial religious politics reached their zenith, impacting all aspects of social and religious life, including socio-religious interactions surrounding shared shrines. The political sphere encompassed and profoundly affected the uniform notions of disparate 'religions' in making. Twentieth-century Alwar was no exception in this regard.[25] Alwar, unlike other princely states in Rajputana, had a substantial Muslim population.[26] Since the late nineteenth century, the Alwar state underwent some profound political changes marked by anti-Muslim rhetoric. Jai Singh (r. 1892–1937) and his nephew and successor Tej Singh (r. 1937 onwards), who ruled the state until 1948, implemented several pro-Hindu measures. In 1911, Hindi superseded Urdu as the state's official language and became the only medium of instruction in schools (Copland 1998: 117). In 1925, a new rule outlawed the establishment of private Urdu-language *maktab*s (schools) and forbade the construction of new mosques (Copland 1998: 117). In 1930, the government ceased its customary financing of the Tazia celebration and offered a substantial aid to Hindu festivals (Mayaram

1997a: 60). In a state where one-fourth of the population was Muslim, these measures unavoidably influenced people's attitudes and shaped sentiments along religious lines.

Moreover, both rulers publicly embraced Hinduism throughout this period. Jai Singh reportedly assumed the persona of a pious Hindu saint (taking on the *rājrīsī* title), dressed simply in saffron clothes, presided over religious rituals and organised Hindu *dharm sabhā*s (Hindu religious organisations) for the purpose of preaching Hinduism to the masses. Hinduism was becoming more prevalent in the government, public places and the school curriculum. Earlier, Jai Singh had presented himself as an exoticised representation of native sovereignty at the beginning of the twentieth century, an Indian king who spoke fluent English and drove a Rolls Royce (see Mayaram 1997a: 53–84). In his subsequent transformation into a nationalist icon, he frequently displayed overtly 'Hinduised' religious behaviour. For example, he avoided using leather goods and wearing Western clothing in favour of *svadeshī* (homemade) items and clothing, shook hands with the British while wearing gloves and modelled the layout of the kingdom after the *rāmrājya* (kingdom of Ram) of ancient Ayodhya, including giving the streets names from the Ramayana (Mayaram 1997a). He saw himself as a descendant of Ram. He served as the president of the Sanatan Dharma Sabha and a member of the board of governors for Banaras Hindu University, two of the top Hindu organisations of the time (Mayaram 1997a). Overall, the state resisted colonisation and westernisation by adopting indigenous Hindu symbols. These measures were not just anti-British but also anti-Muslim in nature.

Hence, Alwar experienced a change in state policy defined by the adoption of Hindu symbols. Hindus also dominated the top positions in the bureaucracy. Hindus occupied about 95 per cent of prominent positions in the 1930s (Copland 1998: 117). The people's demand for democratic reforms in the state, such as the establishment of a responsible government based on popular representation under the supervision of the Maharajas, bolstered competitive feelings among the socio-religious groups manoeuvring for power. Consequently, competitions between religious communities in Mewat originated in the realm of high politics, despite the fact that the issues of mobilisation varied depending on the economic and social backdrop. The necessity to mobilise people for local councils and governmental bodies further exacerbated the religious sentiment. Under the rubric of responsible government—a demand of local movements such as Prajamandal in the 1920s throughout Rajputana (see Hooja 2006: 969–1096; Sisson 1971; Stern

1988: 288–318)—princely rulers were compelled to appoint members of civil society as ministers in their councils. The plea was analogous to the Indian nationalists' demand for increasing Indianisation of services and posts. As a direct consequence of this, there was a fierce competition to mobilise communities on the basis of their caste and religious allegiances.[27] The entire state of Rajputana, including Alwar, saw an increase in the number of political activities taking place in both rural and urban areas (Hooja 2006: 969–1096; Sisson 1971; Stern 1988: 288–318). The electoral processes for forming local governmental entities increased the sentimental potential of the public in an effort to gain power for leaders belonging to their own religion and caste. Throughout post-colonial democratic politics, these alliances continued to remain active. In the Punjab province of which Mewat was a part, numerous religious organisations like the Arya Samaj were established in the late nineteenth century (Jones 1976, 1995). These reform organisations further aggravated communal feeling in the state through their programs (see Copland 1998, 1999: 116–19; Mayaram 1997a: 53–84, 2004b; Sikand 1997, 2002a, 2004, 2006).

Alwar, being a part of Mewat, drew the attention of the Arya Samaj due to the fact that a significant number of Meos and other Muslims, like the Jogis, still traced their ancestral lineage back to Hindu deities and goddesses. After a few decades, alongside its other objectives, the Samaj attempted to 'reconvert' Muslims back to Hinduism. Through its controversial *śuddhī* campaign, the Arya Samaj directed its initial reconversion efforts at the Muslim castes that had liminal identities—such as the Meos and the Muslim Jogi bards[28]—or who had retained some connection to Indic symbols and practices.[29] The rhetoric used against Muslims had the additional goal of isolating them from everyday public life.[30]

Śuddhī, which literally means 'purification', was an integral ritual part of traditional Hindu practices. Adherents would perform a set of rites, such as bathing in the Ganga River, going on pilgrimage or feeding Brahmins, to atone for their impure status. Defilement could result from a variety of circumstances, including crossing the sea, killing a Brahmin and so on (Jones 1976: 129). Rituals of *śuddhī* in orthodox Hinduism, such as feeding cows and Brahmins, were taken from the *Manu-smriti*, a book of ancient Brahminical laws (Jones 1976: 90–100). From 1910 onwards, the Arya Samaj reinterpreted the concept of *śuddhī* by including new practices such as the chanting of the *gāyatrī* mantra and the performance of *yagna* (fire ceremonies), among other means.

According to historical accounts, the earliest instance of widespread religious conversion occurred in March 1908 in the Deeg region of Bharatpur that borders Mewat. Sikand (1997) notes that the Arya Samaj allegedly went around poisoning the minds of the ignorant and simple village Muslims by telling them that their ancestors had been forcibly converted to Islam by the Muslim kings. Mayaram (1997a) elaborates on the significant role that the states of Alwar and Bharatpur played in the process of organising *śuddhī*.

The Arya Samaj mounted a successful *śuddhī* (purification/conversion) campaign in and around areas where there was a large Muslim presence. Teams of Arya Samajists accompanied by a Brahmin would travel to villages in an effort to convert the heads of villages and households comprising Malkans and Meos. These two communities of Muslims were described as being '250 years old' and '500 years old', respectively (65–66). In official and Arya Samaji narratives, Meos were considered 'half Hindus' and needed to choose between becoming 'fully Hindu' or being exterminated (Mayaram 1997a).

As communalism had already taken root within the state, the inter- and intra-religious confrontations frequently occurred. In 1932, a communal riot broke out in the city of Alwar over the issue of religious processions during Holi and Muharram (Mayaram 1997a: 71–75). In the same year, there were many other clashes between Meo peasants, the state, the Chamars and the Baniyas. Opinions of scholars vary about the nature of these events. Mayaram (1997a) asserts that very few Meos took part in the Alwar city riots. Copland (1999) disagrees with Mayaram regarding the presence of Meos in the 1932 Alwar riot, characterising it as a case of communal and religious conflict. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, there was significant Hindu–Muslim animosity in several parts of Mewat. As a result, it was easier to consolidate people's sentiments along religious and communal lines against the backdrop of deteriorating communal relations.

The Partition of India put the final nail in the coffin of Hindu–Muslim relations in Mewat; in Alwar, there were widespread religious riotings. Locally, the Partition was called as *bhagā-bhagī* (push and run). Alwar had a mixed population of Hindus and Muslims, and there were several incidents of violence and tension between the two communities in the months leading up to the Partition. Throughout this period, the right-wing political campaign not only fostered an anti-Muslim political ideology but also promoted the use of force and violence against Muslims. The rulers of Alwar and Bharatpur endorsed this entire Hindu nationalist agenda against their Muslim subject. On 18 April

1947, Narayan Bhaskar Khare, a member of the Hindu Mahasabha, a Hindu right-wing organisation, was named the prime minister of Alwar. He held sympathies with the RSS and endorsed the massacre of Mewati Muslims.[31] Police reports suggest that after the Hindu–Muslim riots in Tijara, there was a strong communal hostility in the Naugaon and Sherpur areas of Ramgarh.[32] Throughout the Partition process, soldiers of the princely kingdoms and neighbouring Hindu peasant communities assaulted Meo villages with the objective of *safāyā* ('clearing up') (Mayaram 1997a: 178–83). Mayaram (1997a: 181) provides an account of these forced conversions in 1947 by a captain in the Alwar state army:

> The women, if they were of marriageable age, were all taken. They were *shuddh* [purified] after drinking *ganga jal* [sacred water of the Ganga River] and could be taken. No, the Meos were not Muslims, they were half Hindu. In their marriages they had both *pherās* and *nikāh* [Hindu and Muslim rites]. They were not with the Muslim League. They did not want to go to Pakistan. But we had orders to clear them. Not a single Muslim was left in Alwar. Alwar was the first state to clear all the Muslims. Bharatpur followed. Yes, Bharatpur also supported the RSS.

Copland (1998) states that entire villages were destroyed, dozens of mosques were desecrated, thousands were slain or forced to convert to Hinduism under the threat of death and tens of thousands were forced to flee for their safety (215). He further describes the unprecedented number of killings as 'ethnic cleansing' (202). The Meos were given the choice to either convert or be killed. If they agreed to convert, the *śuddhī* squad would shave the men's beards and ask them to eat a piece of pork (Mayaram 1997a: 181).[33] Some of those who converted received land grants from the Alwar state.[34] The situation in Alwar worsened after the Partition of India in August 1947. There were reports of large-scale violence and massacres in which both Hindus and Muslims were targeted. Many people were forced to flee their homes and seek refuge elsewhere. The violence continued for several weeks, and it is estimated that several thousand people lost their lives in Alwar and the surrounding areas during this period. The Indian government eventually sent in troops to restore order, and peace was gradually restored in the region. However, the communal tensions and violence that occurred in Alwar in 1947 remain a tragic chapter in India's history.

The heightened focus of reform organisations on Muslims not only contributed to the promotion of communal and religious divisions but also instilled a sense of obligation among Mewati Muslims to adopt a more pronounced Islamic identity. In some cases, this pressure resulted in their further Islamisation. Islamic organisations like Anjmun Hidayatul Islam, Intekhab-e-Tehreek and the Muslim League responded to the Arya Samaj's *śuddhī* (conversion) campaign in the early twentieth century. These responses were shaped by the increasing communal tensions, growing political awareness and competition between the two religious communities during that time (Mayaram 1997a; Sikand 2002a, 2004). In response, these Islamic organisations urged Muslims to hold steadfast to their faith. The *śuddhī* campaign instilled fear among Indian Muslims as it posed a threat to the unity and integrity of the Muslim community in northern India. According to Minault (1982), '*śuddhi* and *tabligh* were two sides of the same coin' (193), but the idea of *śuddhī* was rooted in a fervent religious fanaticism.[35]

By the end of the nineteenth century, debates had already emerged between religious authorities of the Arya Samaj, religious clergies, *ulemā*s (teachers) of the Islamic Deobandi school and Christian preachers on the issue of the supremacy of their respective religions (B. Metcalf 1982: 198–234).[36] The Islamic scholar and one of the founders of the Deoband school, Maulana Muhammad Qasim, wrote a number of polemics directed against the Arya Samajis, showing that 'the theme of Muslim defence against newly aggressive Hinduism was to become increasingly important' (214). It is in this socio-religious environment of the 1920s, almost 50 years after the foundation of the Arya Samaj, that the Tablighi Jamaat became active in Mewat. The Tablighi Jamaat, founded in the 1920s by a Deoband trained Islamic *ulemā*, Maulana Ilyas, also focused on Mewati Muslims, with the objective of turning them into better Muslims. It promoted the slogan 'O Muslims, become Muslims' (Ilyas 1989; Troll 2008). Ilyas's fundamental concern was to change the behaviour of 'nominal' Muslims like the Meos so that they performed Islamic conduct such as offering *namāz* five times a day. He sought to refine and discipline the *dīnī* (religious) life of Muslims. Ilyas was born and brought up in Nizamuddin, Delhi, near the *dargāh* of the Chishti Sufi saint Nizamuddin Auliya.[37] He later moved to Deoband in Uttar Pradesh to receive an Islamic education at the *madrasa* there (Nadwi and Kidwai 1979; Numani 1991; Robinson 1988: 20–23).

The Tablighi Jamaat's main focus remained on disciplining the lives of Muslims according to the teachings of the Quran and the life of Prophet

Mohammed. The faith renewal movement, as B. Metcalf (2000) calls it, had little success in the beginning, but the violence accompanying the Partition of the subcontinent in 1947 changed Hindu–Muslim relationships in the region. In the wake of the separatism and communal violence of twentieth-century India, religious identities came to be defined clearly. Demands from neighbouring Hindu communities and princely states to define Muslim religious identity vis-à-vis Hinduism translated into overwhelming support for the Tablighi Jamaat organisation by the Meos. Although the Meos had been practising a local version of Islam for centuries, the realisation of their Muslim self in relation to Hinduism was generated from their collective experience of alterity, the mutual and exclusive definition of 'the other' in terms of religious categories. Partition violence prompted the hardening of boundaries around Muslim identities.

As was demonstrated in the previous chapters, up until the late 19th or early twentieth century, the shrines of Laldas were shared places of prayer and religious interaction that were tolerant of different beliefs and peaceful in nature. In general, the differences were constructed along other measures of identification, such as caste, sect, clan, village and ethnic difference rather than on the religious differentiation of 'Hindu' or 'Muslim'. It was not until much later, when the circumstances changed, that the two identities of 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' crystallised and elevated themselves to a higher priority than other identities, such as that of caste and sectarian order. As a direct consequence of this, the concept of toleration and the sharing of a sacred space came under attack as uniform notions of religious communities emerged.[38] Accordingly, diverse sets of religious practices around Bhakti and Sufi saints like Laldas who opposed identification with and categorisation in terms of 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' were also subsumed under these categories. This uniform type of power espoused by reformers and political elites appeared for the first time in the twentieth century (described in Chapter 5) and worked against the diversity of religious practices and identities.

Nevertheless, before the twentieth century, this religious encounter, despite disputes and violence, was marked by consciously and unconsciously embracing mixed cultural-religious symbols and not so much by the notions of bounded segregation in public culture so that it contained a more dynamic form. This does not imply here that religious boundaries are not fluid today. Rather, both 'Hinduism' and 'Islam' still display multiple forms of plural religious practices functioning around a fluid religious consciousness and a malleable religious boundary. But institutional forms of religious

consciousness around 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' identities (uniform, orthodox, political, inclusionary and exclusionary[39] and the narrow one as often traditionally defined by political and religious elites) gradually acquired more importance and a powerful existence. Nowadays, a visible and binary form of religious identities (Hindu and Muslim) does exist among Indians alongside the plural religious practices. These differences and identitarian trends can also be discerned in the religious ways in which devotees positioned their religious practices. Often, they continued to follow their own specific set of traditions marked by their respective community orientations. In the next section, it is shown how the Laldas shrines and the order underwent a radical transformation in the last three decades based on devotional differences.

DISPUTES AND DIFFERENCES IN DEVOTIONAL STYLES

Laldas identified himself as 'both Hindu and Muslim and beyond, all at the same time'. Unlike Kabir, who put forth a sharp critique of both religions (Lorenzen 2011: 20), Laldas, though closer to the *kabīrpanth*, advocated an innovative religious synthesis for his followers. He combined practices of 'Hinduism' and 'Islam' within the *bhakti milieu* of the time, departing from the teachings of his guru, Kabir. For example, Kabir rejected the boundaries of caste and religion, but Laldas appeared to partially accept religious boundaries by deploying messages of religious unity. These differences were based in their class and caste background as the saints of middle caste-class status (like Laldas) often acknowledged religious boundaries (Gold 1992), whereas gurus of 'lower-caste' backgrounds, such as Kabir and Ravidas, did not (Friedlander 1996, 2023; Lorenzen 1987).

As noted in the previous chapter, Laldas drew religious inspiration for his preaching from Gadan Tijara, a local Chishti saint. On this issue, Gold (1992) notes that Hindu *sant* piety has greater structural connections to Indian Sufism than to any other form of Indian mysticism. In the previous chapter, it was also discussed that various verses of the hagiographic text named the 'Bhakti' and 'Sufi' modes of piety as the 'true' path, as opposed to the institutionalised forms of 'Islam' and 'Hinduism'. In that story, Laldas and the Chishti saint Gadan Tijara concurred, implying that the Sufi path and the *nirguṇ bhakti* worship are complementary. For Meo Muslim peasants, Laldas represented an additional step; a religious framework in which the values of asceticism—as Burchett (2019) demonstrates, influenced by the

yogic teachings of Bhakti, Nath Yoga and Sufism in the preceding centuries—could coexist with those of a settled household.[40] Meo peasants preferred the meditational style of devotion within a family set up. Renunciation or a complete withdrawal from worldly affairs was not the supreme goal of many Meos. Thus, strong renunciatory principles such as those of Nath Yogis are typically portrayed as submissive to Laldas's power.

The confrontation between Laldas and the Naths is narrated in another tale from the hagiography. His teaching attained a superior status over the Naths after a spiritual contest with a Nath guru called Naga Sadhu. The Naga/Nath Sadhu once asked Laldas to feed his 1,400 disciples. Laldas successfully met this challenge by supplying vast quantities of food from his *kamandal* (urn).[41] This contest also metaphorically shows two philosophically and religiously different worldviews based on sectarian (*panth*) differences. Although Laldas's devotion was rooted in the *nirguṇ bhakti* tradition, he introduced one major change: the promotion of household ascetic values in line with Vaishnava devotion. Here, a distinction needs to be made between two kinds of asceticism born out of the Vaishnava and Shaiva traditions. Vaishnava *bhakti* emphasises the importance of remaining engaged in the household and domestic system, while the Shaiva traditions, particularly the Nath teachings, often advocate for detachment from the household and material life. As described earlier, Saint Laldas's *Kabirpanthi* belief in *nirguṇ* Ram was also closer to the Islamic conception of Allah about the idea of one formless God; so it did not put him in conflict with his background as a Meo Muslim. Laldas's ascetic ideals were for a settled Meo household in line with the Meo Muslims' genealogical claims.

As a relatively powerful class of peasants, the Meos were eager to preserve their worldly advantages and superior standing.[42] Asceticism, such as that practised by the yogis of the Nath and other monastic orders, which emphasised detachment from material concerns, did not represent the supreme value system for them. Laldas's teachings, unlike those of the Nath, did not prohibit worldly attachments or power. This issue is further exemplified in the text *nuktāvalī*, which begins with a condemnation of begging, a central doctrine of the Nath tradition to curb one's ego by asking for alms. Laldas's emphasis placed on this point is not only different from Nath doctrines but constitutes one of the most striking and fascinating aspects of his teachings. The saint may be considered an advocate of household labour to feed oneself than to beg on the street, as the excerpts that follow will demonstrate:

Lāljī bhagat bhikh na mange,
mangat aawe sharm
ghar ghar haudat dokh
hai kya badshah kya haram. (Powlett 1878: 56)

Devotees of Laldas do not beg
Begging is shameful
Wandering from house to house is wrong
Even if they be those of kings or queens.

This verse conveys the idea that the followers of Laldas should not resort to begging as a means of sustenance. Begging was considered shameful and inappropriate, and the saint emphasised the importance of self-sufficiency and dignity, encouraging individuals to earn their livelihood through honourable means. Furthermore, the saint instructed his followers to concentrate on God's service by keeping his name in their hearts:

Lāljī sādhu aisā cahīye
dhan kamākar khāy
hirde har kī cākrī
parghar kabhu nā jay. (Powlett 1878: 58)

Says Lalji, the Sadh should be [the] one
Who earns the food he eats
Let God's service be the heart's,
And go not about begging.

Moreover, he dismissed *yog* in favour of *bhakti* and *gyān* (devotion and knowledge). For instance, one of the couplets suggested, 'It is easier to throw oneself into burning fire and die than to bear the daily torture of yoga. It is like a constant fight with oneself and without arms' (Maheshwari 1980: 127–28). The main messages conveyed by these couplets attributed to Laldas are to exercise self-mastery over one's thoughts and feelings, to make a living via honest labour and to treat people with compassion among other similar precepts. Ultimately, his teachings were a mirror of the Meo agricultural world, which was partly 'Islamic' and partly 'Hindu' in character, connected to both belief systems by multiple socio-economic and cultural strands. Laldas himself was married (he had six wives), looked after cows and performed

'miracles'. Simultaneously, the *nirguṇ bhakti* that he preached served as a meaningful cultural symbol that resonated with the Sufi Islam that Meo peasants adhered to while retaining the Hindu connections encoded in the Meo *pāl* genealogy.

Philosophically, the distinction between *nirguṇ* (God as formless and without attributes) and *saguṇ* (God as visible and with characteristics) may seem vague (Vaudeville 1987).[43] Due to the similarities between the two closely intertwined types of religiosities, scholars generally believe that the line between the two is extremely blurry (Hawley 1995; Gold 1992; Lorenzen 1995). *Saguṇ*, in a simplistic understanding, means 'worshipping god with a physical form' or 'anthropomorphic body'. However, the *nirguṇ* concept is closer to the Islamic concept of Allah (Alam 2004), both of which complemented the religiosity of the Meo Muslim Laldasis as distinct from institutional religions. Although roots of both visions already existed in Vedic and Puranic Hinduism and Sanskrit *kāvya* (literature) (Doniger 2014: 151–56), the *saguṇ* form was an expression of orthodox Brahminical image worship in Hinduism, whether in temples or elsewhere.[44]

Moreover, *nirguṇ bhakti* was an attack on both the Brahminical Hinduism of temple worship and caste society.[45] Several caste and class groups adopted and altered these divisions according to their own values (Gold 1992: 26). For example, the gurus from the lowest level of caste society, such as Kabir, Ravidas and Dadu,[46] rejected the Brahminical form of the Hindu religion and caste hierarchy categorically, whereas later preachers, such as Laldas, who came from a middle-caste background, were ambiguous in their criticisms of these institutions. Saints who did not belong to 'lower castes' appear to have partially accepted religious boundaries as a means of negotiating differences. Laldas, for instance, proposed a religious synthesis as opposed to a full rejection of religious borders. This was firmly entrenched in the liminal and rural social and religious experience of the Meos.

On the other hand, the middle-class Hindu Baniyas were connected to the Meos through a system of traditionally organised commercial and social relations.[47] Baniyas are a highly dispersed assortment of traders, merchants, shop owners and affluent businessmen whose economic status might vary enormously.[48] Although the Baniyas, as a class, maintained an upper hand over peasants in India (Hardiman 1996), their source of income also depended on peasants who utilised their money-lending and usury practices. In Mewat, through their various roles such as village grain dealers and small money lenders, the Baniyas were closely tied to the Meo agricultural world

until a complete disintegration of their relationship of interdependence in the last three decades.[49] In the past, powerful Hindu, Jain and the Marwari merchants[50] had worked closely with the state and had financed pilgrims and patronised temples and shrines.

By the end of the nineteenth century, there was a new middle class of Baniyas (Bayly 1992: 369–75), whose position grew even stronger in the late colonial period (Hardiman 1996: 62–92).[51] Since the Baniyas are traditionally involved in trade, commerce, imports or exports, business and shop-keeping, money and wealth are fundamental to their daily concerns. *Nirguṇ bhakti*, or devotion to God without form, did not appeal them, as many devotees of Laldas suggested that they often prayed to an idol. Before beginning their day, a *darśan* of a deity, in this case Laldas's, was the main part of morning rituals. The act of *darśan* (seeing a divine image or idol) is the central part of Brahminical Hinduism (Eck 1998). Baniyas expected to see the saint Laldas and anticipated that he would always be physically present to assist with business-related difficulties and grant boons.[52] This requirement of the Baniyas is expressed in contemporary *bhajan*s (religious songs) distributed in new pamphlets, in which Laldas saved a merchant whose ship was sinking in sea:

> *śahar āgro modi shah, tāke grah dravya ki cāh*
> *jākī jahāj samundra me atkī, puchat phire bāt ghat-ghat kī*
> *jab bābā tumko yād kiyā, pahuce jahāj ubārī tumne bedā pār kiyā.*[53]

> In Agra lived Modi Shah, he desired wealth and prosperity
> His ship was stuck in the sea, [he] wandered in need of help
> When he remembered you, Baba [Laldas], you appeared and resolved his issue.

The merchant, Modi Shah, found himself in a dire situation and sought help from others. As he reached out to various individuals, he received conflicting advice and opinions. However, amidst the confusion, intrigued by the tales he had heard about Laldas, Modi Shah decided to pray to the saint, hoping to find solace by his presence. While praying to Laldas, Modi Shah expressed his desperation and made a heartfelt promise to offer him a tenth of his goods if they were to be saved (Powlett 1878: 55). Laldas had a reputation for his kindness and wisdom. Moved by the sincerity of the merchant's plea, Laldas, who possessed an extraordinary ability to perceive the thoughts and

prayers of others, heard the distant cry for help. Acting out of his inherent benevolence, Laldas ensured that the merchant's materials were safeguarded and remained unharmed (Powlett 1878: 56). However, when Modi Shah tried to express his gratitude by offering a gift of thanks to Laldas, the saint humbly declined. Laldas, being a selfless soul who harboured no desire for material possessions, directed the merchant to donate the gift to those less fortunate instead. He believed that the true essence of generosity lay in aiding the impoverished and needy.

In a similar vein, the hagiography, popular narratives and cheap booklets also describe the story of a wealthy and influential Kayath, a clerk from Agra, who suffered from leprosy. Afflicted by this debilitating disease, the Kayath faced immense hardships in his life. When he learned of Laldas's extraordinary kindness towards the shipwrecked merchant, his heart stirred with hope (Powlett 1878: 56). Driven by curiosity and a desperate desire for relief from his affliction, the Kayath decided to seek out Laldas on a full moon night, knowing that it was the saint's preferred time to interact with people. When the Kayath finally encountered Laldas, the saint perceived the suffering in his eyes and immediately recognised the torment he was undergoing. With great compassion, Laldas instructed the Kayath to renounce his worldly possessions and embark on a path of righteousness. Eager to find relief from his condition, the Kayath faithfully followed the saint's counsel and relinquished everything he owned. As the Kayath bathed at the confluence of two rivers in Allahabad after a ritual ceremony, a moment of profound transformation occurred (Powlett 1878). The leprosy that had burdened him for so long was entirely eradicated, and he emerged from the sacred waters reborn, free from the physical and emotional pain that had plagued him.

These stories illustrate the prevalent expectations surrounding Laldas, a revered saint, who was believed to possess the power to alleviate the struggles of everyday life. People sought his assistance in their worldly pursuits, yearning for support and guidance. Laldas's acts of kindness and selflessness resonated deeply within the hearts of those he encountered, instilling in them a renewed faith and the belief that compassion and righteous living could bring about desired transformation and relief. Moreover, these stories invoke the popular expectations from the saint that were premised on the well-being of worldly life desiring assistance in everyday struggle.

Another important belief among Baniyas is the importance of family and community. Baniyas are known for being tightly knit and supporting each

other in business and personal matters. Family and community are seen as the foundation for success in life. Laldas supported a devotion that coupled household asceticism with the fulfilment of one's social responsibilities. This was more appealing to the Baniyas but in a *saguṇ* mode of worship. The *nirguṇ* Ram of Laldas and the belief of his Meo followers were similar to the conception of an Islamic deity. By contrast, the Baniyas prefer the *saguṇ* form of Ram—an ideal husband, obedient son, a promoter of law, order and caste hierarchy. A *saguṇ* deity is believed to assist in fulfilling one's responsibilities to family and community, as well as in making a living through commercial pursuits. Therefore, the Baniyas historically required the bodily presence of a deity in times of business-related problems. Baniyas had a strong devotion to Laldas for prosperity and good fortune. They often worshipped the saint before beginning any new business venture, hoping to gain his blessings and ensure success. Their commitment to what Bayly (1992: 381) calls 'a highly orthodox and Brahminical style of life'[54] prompted the transformation of the imagery of Laldas. Baniyas began appropriating the saint into a *saguṇ* and a more orthodox and Hinduised form of Vaishnava worship in order to obtain his physical presence. They needed to see a physical form (Figure 3.5) of Laldas to perform daily puja, which involved the offering of prayers, flowers and food to the saint.

Several temples in Mewat and the adjoining areas now contain an idol of the saint, and many new ones are being built in the Hindu style with idols of Laldas installed. Newly built temples are run entirely by Hindu members, mostly by Baniyas. This transition from the *nirguṇ* to a *saguṇ* form of the saint also entails changes in meaning-making; his teachings are interpreted in the context of the ways of life of Hindu merchants and their connection to Brahminical forms of worship.

There have been considerable differences in Baniya and Meo religious cultures in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. But these differences became seminal in the twentieth century, when the social and economic relations between Baniyas and Meos totally dissolved. Changes in rural economic relations and the emergence of a new economic order in India, commonly referred to as the liberalisation of economy, further led to the collapse of their mutual dependence (Mohanty and Lenka 2016; McCartney 2009; Patnaik 2001; Vakulabharanam and Motiram 2011). For instance, as the 1990s progressed, Meo peasants were less reliant on Baniyas for petty loans. The perpetual economic distress for middle-class peasants like the Meos had relatively improved with the liberalisation of economy.[55] The state

FIGURE 3.5 The deity Laldas in an anthropomorphic form for *darśan*
Source: Photo by the author.

made significant efforts to improve the condition of peasantry contributing to the demise of traditional economic relations in the rural areas. This is the primary reason why all new temples of Laldas have been constructed after the 1990s, when the Baniyas could afford to disregard their traditional social and

economic ties with the Meos.[56] Historically, both communities required each other's assistance in daily life. Once this need was replaced and reshaped by the forces of liberalisation in the 1990s, resulting in the free mobility of labour, the emergence of a new banking system and loans advanced by the state to peasants, the Baniya Laldasis began to fiercely oppose the Meo Laldasis. They also began to strengthen their religious loyalties with 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' separatist politics. Following this period, the Baniyas, in the backdrop of the developing political power of Hindutva, exerted considerable effort to alter the Laldas religious order.

To sum up, the shared devotion of Laldas began to change with the Baniyas's rise to prosperity and the rupture of their customary bond with the Meos. Also, prior to the twentieth century, Hindu–Muslim politics were less polarised and the Meo population outnumbered the Baniyas. The local Baniyas have earned the backing of other local Hindu castes and Hindu organisations, such as the RSS, the BJP, the Bajrang Dal and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council, or VHP) in the previous 30 years. The Meos as a Muslim community are now far more vulnerable facing a united Hindu opposition. The Baniyas have always been among the most vocal supporters of Hindu nationalism in India (Jaffrelot 2009; Sharma 2007). Consequently, the disputes around Laldas have now taken on the character of a religious conflict between Hindu and Muslim communities, rather than between Hindu and Muslim Laldasis or Baniyas and Meos. At the same time, social groups engaged in shared devotion were also undergoing economic and social transformations as well as religious ones. These processes also frayed the shared religious fabric, and the transformation of society and politics affected shared worship spaces. This subsequent shift in religious opinion concerning Laldas has been greatly aided by the money and power of wealthy Baniyas who deny Meos' claims that Laldas was a *pīr*, claiming instead that he was a Hindu saint. The Baniyas have signified this assertion recently by constructing new temples in the style of Hindu temples.

The objective of the next chapter is to understand what socially, spatially and religiously changed around the religious persona of Laldas. In particular, it looks at the processes adopted and considerable efforts made by Hindu devotees to appropriate Laldas. It is often the symbolism of the shared shrines that initially undergoes modifications, rather than the removal of (impure) faith in saints like Laldas, who are being currently assimilated into Hinduism by Hindu followers and encouraged to discard by Sunni Muslims.

NOTES

1. As shown before, these three major sites belong to the tombs of the saint, his parents and his sons and daughters at different places in Alwar. There are other numerous places known as Laldas temples now in the region where he is said to have spent some time during his life.

2. From its construction in AD 360 until the capture of Constantinople by the Ottoman Empire in 1453, Hagia Sophia served as an Eastern Orthodox Church. Up until 1935, it was a mosque before becoming a museum. The site was converted back into a mosque in 2020. It was converted immediately with the conquest of Constantinople in 1453 to demonstrate Muslim dominance; converted into a museum by Ataturk in 1935 to demonstrate power of the secular state over religion; re-converted by Erdogan now to demonstrate the end of the secular state; see Aykaç (2018); and Oztig and Adisonmez (2023).

3. Shared shrines have attracted research aimed at examining, on the one hand, their role in promoting tolerance, peace and interreligious engagements (Albera and Couroucli 2012; Bowman 2012) and, on the other, the nature of competition between religious communities, the forms of communal and ethnic strife, and levels of intolerance (Barkan and Barkey 2014; Hayden 2002; Hayden et al. 2016). However, in the case of India, some shrines appear to promote religious conviviality and active social engagements between members of different religious communities (Bigelow 2009, 2010) while others display more contestation—albeit short-lived—and passive tolerance (Hayden 2002; Sikand 2002b).

4. The Babri mosque was located in the Faizabad district in Ayodhya, the mythical birthplace of the Hindu god Ram. It was one of the largest mosques in the state of Uttar Pradesh. According to the mosque's inscriptions, Mir Baqi, on orders of the Mughal emperor Babur (after whom it was named), built it in 1528–29 CE. In 1992, the mosque was demolished by activists from Hindu right-wing groups (Ludden 1996).

5. There are debates among scholars about whether shared shrines promote tolerance and peace or not. These debates have been multifarious and context specific. Tolerance is the main theme in cosmopolitan scholarship. The basic idea of tolerance is about respecting 'others' who are different in creed, colour, gender, religious belief, ethnicity and so on (Appiah 2017). Political dynamics play a significant role, with shared sacred spaces becoming contested or fluid depending on the local social and religious narratives. While some shrines promote peace and others interethnic and religious conflicts, this depends

on what is happening in and around a particular shrine. For instance, in the Punjab region of north India, which experienced the most devastating impact of Partition violence in 1947, the tomb of a Sufi saint at Malerkotla became a central object in sustaining peace. Bigelow (2009) shows that the shrine at Malerkotla facilitated interpersonal engagement across social and religious lines, which helped the communities reject communalism.

6. The ideas of 'competitive sharing' and 'antagonistic tolerance' were originally developed by Hayden (2002; Hayden et al. 2016), who investigated the nature of tolerance among an assortment of faiths at shared sites in the Balkans, the Mediterranean regions and India. Hayden suggests that there generally appears to be 'antagonistic tolerance' and 'competitive sharing' within the dynamics of those involved with sharing religious shrines. In Hayden's (2002: 205) words, this kind of sharing of a religious space is 'compatible with the passive meaning of tolerance as non-interference but incompatible with the active meaning of tolerance as the embrace of the other'.

7. Dholidhoop Shrine, 1946, basta no. 72, file no. 39L/P/1946, Rajasthan State Archives, Bikaner.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. 'The personal communication of Prime-Minister with District Judge of Alwar state', in *A Brief History of the Case as Derived in the Munsiff Court 1946*, 13 February 1946, Alwar, basta no. 72, file no. 39L/P/1946, Rajasthan State Archives, Bikaner.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid. 'A confidential letter of the district magistrate to the prime minister of Alwar State', personal communication, 25 September 1946.

13. All India Hindu Mahasabha was formed in 1915 during a Kumbh Mela to protect the interests of Hindus in India. The organisation was highly anti-Muslim in its political rhetoric.

14. Dholidhoop Shrine, 1946, basta no. 72, file no. 39L/P/1946, Rajasthan State Archives, Bikaner.

15. Ibid.

16. As Hayden et al. (2016) suggest: the features of these religioscapes will be the focus of competition in the form of either 'competitive verticality' between minarets or bell towers or 'competitive audibility' between *azaan*s, or prayers.

17. The present name of the trust is the Laldas Mandir Avam Vikas Samiti (the Laldas Temple and Development Committee). It looks after the work of organising annual celebrations, executing developmental works and

managing offerings at the shrine. Almost all the members of this committee are Baniyas.

18. As discussed in Chapter 5, the stand of the Tablighis also partly helped the Hindu Laldasis to legitimise the Hindu status of Laldas, rather than the traditional view of him as a liminal figure.

19. Founded in the year 1925, the Rashtriya Sawayam Sevak Sangh (RSS, meaning 'National Self-Help Group') has advocated since then for the transformation of India into a Hindu nation. Their idea is based on political mobilisation of Hindu sentiments against Muslims and other religious minorities. All these organisations claim to belong to one Hindu nationalist family; for more information, see Jaffrelot (2009); and Sharma (2007). The RSS avoided direct involvement in politics. Instead, they focused on physical training, military drills and promoting the teachings of Hinduism. The RSS works as an umbrella organisation for the VHP and the Bajrang Dal.

20. I learned of this incident through interviews with Sherpur residents in 2016.

21. When Islam arrived in India around the twelfth century, it intermingled with and influenced local ideas to add further layers of diversity to the subcontinental religious world. Dalmia and Faruqui (2014) note that almost 40 major Sufi saints of different backgrounds belonging to different *silsilā*s (Sufi saintly lineages), such as the Chishtiyya, Qaddiriya, Suhrawardy, Madarriya and Nakhsbandi, traversed the territory over a span of a few centuries. The coming of Islam and its associated *silsilā*s added more cultural streams, and the local communities responded by wholeheartedly adapting them into their previously held beliefs. Borrowing from Cynthia Talbot's work (2009), I argue that Indian Muslims were deeply embedded in their local societies and cultures while participating in the cosmopolitan world of Islam. As Talbot puts it, 'local connections of people and communities were never weakened by their allegiance to Islam' (213).

22. According to Thapar (1989: 216), 'Hinduism is a mosaic of distinct cults, deities, sects, and ideas', that arose out of interaction, acculturation, incorporation and constant engagement in the vibrant social life of many caste communities. In this context, it may be argued that when Islam came to India (through Sufis, soldiers, traders and rulers), Hinduism was already so diverse that Islam, particularly the Sufi version, would not have been alien to its diversity. In other words, the coming of new religious traditions inevitably added to the range of this already diverse religious world.

23. There is a debate among scholars about whether Hinduism was or was not a colonial construct. While strong arguments suggest it was not (see Lorenzen

1999; Pennington 2005), its evolution as a religious category was mediated by colonial milieu and thoughts of Indian urban nationalist elites and their use of religious symbols. I opine that the category 'Hinduism' acquired new meanings during colonial rule, but a sense of 'Hindu' was already there. It was to this incipient Hinduism that Kabir, Gorakh, Laldas and other religious figures were referring to. However, this Hinduism was an orthodox Brahminical construct according to the sayings of many saints.

24. Institutional forms of Hindu and Muslim identities and practices were mainly associated with Brahmins and Mullahs respectively and were closely tied to political power. It solidified more in the twentieth century.

25. During late Mughal rule in the seventeenth century, Bharatpur and Alwar were carved into two regional kingdoms by rulers from Jat and Rajput caste backgrounds, respectively. From the beginning of indirect British colonial rule in the area after the battle of Laswari in 1803, the two kingdoms were under indirect British rule like other parts of Rajputana until India's independence in 1947.

26. Meos were listed as the single largest caste in Alwar (Cole 1932: 129; Copland 1999: 118). Thus, Muslim homogeneity at least on caste norms was an important fact in Alwar.

27. Although caste has always been important in India, such moves of democratisation by the colonial state gave Indians a new impetus to define its importance. Caste discourse became closely associated with colonial politics, including in indirectly ruled princely states. Cohn (1987: 230) writes that 'through the asking of questions and the compiling of information in categories which the British rulers could utilise for governing, it provided an arena for Indians to ask questions about themselves, and Indians utilised the fact that the British census commissioners tried to order tables on caste in terms of social precedence'.

28. Jogis are also call Naths. These two terms have been interchangeably used.

29. Historically, for Arya Samaj reformers, the Muslims of Mewat and adjoining regions were ideal *śuddhī* candidates as their practices and beliefs drew on both religions. The organisation made Agra, a town 100 kilometres from Mewat, a centre of *śuddhī* activities. Initially, the Rajput groups, known as Malkans, who had converted to Islam underwent this process of reconversion. The Rajput Shuddhi Sabha—an offshoot of the Arya Samaj established in 1909 for the reconversion of the Muslim Rajputs—claimed to have converted more than one hundred thousand Malkan Rajputs of western Uttar Pradesh by 1910 (Hardiman 2007: 24–26). Further attempts at conversion among the

Malkan Rajputs in the 1920s sparked uproar among Muslims, who suspected a systematic plan to convert Indian Muslims to Hinduism. Tensions around Muslim conversions became so politically and socially charged that Gandhi was impelled to write a letter in *Young India* in 1924 criticising the Arya Samaj *śuddhī* campaign (Adcock 2014).

30. In response to the British imperial focus on classification and difference, Indian nationalists used symbols of religion in their political mobilisation, thereby making society more religiously conscious. Gandhi, for example, adopted Hindu symbols in his nationalist politics of mass mobilisation (Minault 1982; Robb 1986). State policy and the goals of religious reform organisations all contributed towards a rise in the general animosity between Hindus and Muslims.

31. Members of the right-wing Hindu organisations such as the Arya Samaj, the Hindu Mahasabha and the RSS had close associations with the Congress party before 1947. Many political figures changed their loyalties frequently.

32. Meo Disturbance in Meo Area 1947, basta no. 58, vol. I, file no. D.o.R.-47, Revenue Department, Alwar State, Alwar District Archives.

33. Offering pork was a means to test converted Muslims' desire to renounce Islam.

34. Grants of Jagir to converted Meos 1947, basta no. 58, file no. D.o.R.-47, Revenue Department, Alwar State, Alwar District Archives.

35. The *śuddhī* movement had already converted more than 150,000 Malkan Muslims by 1925 (Sikand and Katju 1994: 2216), and other Muslim communities like the Meos were being targeted. In this context, Muslim religious leaders believed that only the active teaching of Islam (*tabligh*) could save their religion from the brink of extinction in India (Sikand 1997). Both orthodox and non-orthodox *ulemā*s united to resist *śuddhī*.

36. The Arya Samaj and the Deoband, Metcalf (1982) shows, used Christian techniques of proselytising, such as printed materials. Both Hindu and Muslim revival movements used newspapers, pamphlets and cheap books to engage in what was then called 'pamphlet warfare' (211).

37. Nizamuddin Auliya (1238–1325 CE) was, probably, the second most important saint in the Chishti order after Saint Moinuddin Chisthi. His tomb at Delhi has been a place of popular veneration. The Tablighi Jamaat's main centre is located in the vicinity of Nizamuddin Auliya's *dargāh*.

38. Brass (2010) talks about the non-existence of a single Muslim political community before the twentieth century. The formation of separate and bounded Hindu and Muslim political communities is, thus, a twentieth-

century phenomenon. Although these categories existed in the pre-colonial period (Lorenzen 1999, 2011), they were organised around a fuzzy and fluid religious consciousness.

39. Inclusionary of diverse religious streams under the respective labels of Hinduism and Islam and exclusionary of each other's closely related religious traditions and practices such as Nath, Sufism and Bhakti. Nath and Bhakti traditions are subsumed under Hinduism, and Sufism under Islam.

40. Alwar is an important monastic centre of the Nath order. The Bharthari Dham (temple) of a great Nath yogi Bharthari is in Alwar. Nath yogis usually advocated leaving material attachments, household duties and family life behind to attain power and liberation.

41. This story was recorded in the saint's biography written by Dungarisi Sadh.

42. As noticed earlier, in their genealogical claims, the Meos connect themselves with the Hindu warrior gods and figures.

43. This division has been challenged by many scholars. In fact, imagining a *nirguṇ* deity is very difficult.

44. Doniger (2014) shows a *nirguṇ–saguṇ* tension in the Brahmin-authored Puranas such as Bhagwat Gita. She writes, 'Epic and Puranic Hinduism abound in examples of resistance to the *nirguṇ* ideal' (152).

45. One of the key criticisms of Brahminical Hinduism is its association with caste discrimination and social inequality. The caste system is deeply ingrained in Hindu society, and the Brahmin caste has traditionally held a position of power and privilege. This has resulted in a system of social and economic inequality that has marginalised and oppressed 'lower castes', such as Dalits or ex-untouchables, for centuries. Another criticism of Brahminical Hinduism is its treatment of women. Women have been subjected to social and religious restrictions and discrimination within the Brahminical Hinduism. They have been denied equal opportunities in education and employment and have been subjected to patriarchal norms and practices that have restricted their freedom and autonomy.

46. Kabir and Dadu are considered 'low-caste' Muslims while the saint Ravidas was an 'untouchable'. Historically, the existence of these gurus is still a matter of debate.

47. See Chapter 1 for my usage of the term 'Baniya' and their connection with the Meos.

48. The relationship between the Baniyas and the Meos and the issue of domination was far more complicated. Hardiman's work (1996) considers the Baniyas as a dominant group in western India on the basis of usury practices.

In this system, the Baniyas, particularly the Mahajan and Shahukar, were backed by the state. However, in Mewat, usury practices have not been studied. Going by the current and historical situations, I find Meos to be more dominant numerically, politically and socially in Mewat. Although the Baniyas are economically well off, a large section of the Meos is equally economically powerful. The Meos' dominance is greatly affected by the rise of Hindu–Muslim politics. Baniyas use Hindu–Muslim politics as well as social-religious ties with other Hindu castes and the Baniyas of outside Mewat to fight against the Meo domination.

49. The reasons for the disintegration of the economic and social arrangement of the Meos with the Baniyas are multiple and interlinked. These are liberalisation, the free movement of labour, invention of new technologies, the increasing growth of banking system and the provision of loans by government.

50. Marwari means a person from the Marwar region of Rajasthan. The Baniyas of this region are called the Marwari Baniya. They are spread all over India and are a wealthier class than other Baniyas. There were fewer Jain Baniyas in Mewat and they, too, are idol worshippers.

51. Most Baniyas in Mewat are still small shop owners. The rise of their influential economic status as a class is recent in origin. For instance, in Punahana, most of my Baniya informants claimed success in their businesses, a result of their devotion to Laldas in the last 20 years.

52. Hardiman (1996: 84) notes that many Jain Baniyas of Rajasthan justified their worship of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, arguing 'Lord Mahavira (the founder of the Jain religion) was a renouncer who would not provide blessings for material gain, forcing them to turn to Lakshmi'. Carrithers (2000) refers to the spiritual cosmopolitanism of the Jains as 'polytropy'.

53. See Appendix A.2 for the full song.

54. The closest similarity between Laldas's teachings and Baniyas's conventional belief was vegetarianism. Both Jain and Hindu Vaishnavite Baniyas in Rajasthan were strict vegetarians (Hardiman 1996: 65–67).

55. Unlike poor farmers, whose conditions worsened, and were forced to commit suicide in various parts of India, the middle-class peasants benefitted from this policy change; see Mathur (2010).

56. Many Meos and Baniyas opined that we had cordial relations with each other in the past. Their relations were premised on the need for each other in commercial and economic activities centred around agricultural products

of Meo peasants. Many Baniyas with small businesses still buy milk, wheat, pulses, grams and other food stuff from Meos to sell it in the local market and to supply them to Delhi. This kind of interdependence and economic relations were common in rural areas. Baniyas with their economic power advanced loans to small- and middle-caste peasants.