
A FAIT ACCOMPLI**THE COMPLETE HINDUISATION OF THE LALDAS ORDER**

The formulation of the persona of Laldas from a *nirgun bhakti* follower to a *sagun* saint and deity is central to the rise and success of the religious order. The complete conversion of Laldas into a 'Hindu' saint requires a profound restructuring of his identity. This undertaking involves assigning him a new role while simultaneously erasing or modifying his traditional religious image, which had been distinguished by a shared form of religiosity. The changes observed within the Laldas order also signify a deliberate undermining of the saint's religious teachings and principles. This subversion of Laldas's original teachings implies a shift towards a more homogeneous understanding of the order, where the liminal elements of his beliefs are now incorporated into the broader narrative of neo 'Hinduism'.

This new imagery of Laldas has been achieved by first transforming the traditional shrines spatially and then constructing new temples in various parts of north India to practice anthropomorphic image worship. It is also an effort to achieve a new social construction of a religious space. In fact, spaces contested for ideological, economic and religious reasons generally reflect efforts to create new meanings for them in a changed context, leading to spatial transformations (Low 1996). Currently, the shrines of Laldas are examples of what Lefebvre (1991: 164–68) refers to as 'dominated space' and 'appropriated space'.¹ More importantly, the spatial changes at the religious shrines of Laldas signify ongoing efforts to transform the meanings of a traditional sacred space. This is being achieved by the process of what Low (1996, 2009) describes as 'the social construction of space'.² In this process,

new symbolic meanings imbued with new religious significance of Laldas are created. Devotees' social interactions, memories and daily use of the material setting effectively transform Laldas's traditional shrine spaces into new arenas of ritual scenes and actions, ultimately Hinduising what was once a shared/mixed sacred space.

Most of these changes are quite recent in origin and are undertaken by the financially rich Baniya community. Moreover, their socio-economic power and traditional devotional beliefs also contribute to these spatial and architectural transformations at the traditional shrines. In analysing the domination of Hindus at these traditional religious sites, the main attention is paid to the structure, control, and agency of followers, on one hand, and new religious discourses and practices surrounding these sacred spaces, on the other. Spaces are contested precisely because they concretise the fundamental and recurring, but otherwise unquestioned, ideological and social frameworks that define everyday practice (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003: 18).

This transition of Laldas into a new form is impossible without simultaneously introducing new symbols, to which Hobsbawm and Ranger (2012) would perhaps refer as 'the invention of tradition'. The ongoing processes of invention applied to the saint and his religious order highlight Hobsbawm and Ranger's notion that 'many traditions which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented' (1). Laldas's liminal identity has thus been changed into a Hindu identity as a result of the pressure exerted by the Baniyas to adopt Hindu symbolism and remove the Islamic ones.³ In the following sections, the current spatial as well as social-religious, economic, symbolic and imaginary transformations in the traditionally shared shrines of Laldas are explained as 'Hinduising' endeavours by the Hindu Laldasis.

THE INVENTION OF TRADITIONS: STRATEGIES OF APPROPRIATING LALDAS

Building new temples, celebrating Hindu fairs and festivals in his name and writing and reinventing legends, myths and songs are some of the ways in which the religious order of Laldas is being brought into the fold of mainstream Hinduism. Each of these processes is analysed in detail to illustrate the current changes and new additions to the order. These changes are also premised upon the idea of serving the saint by Hindu devotees in

various ways, such as by providing material donations to *śram dān* (donation of labour). For instance, whenever a new temple was built or the renovation in the main shrine was undertaken, the devotees always framed such initiatives as performing *sevā* (service) to Laldas.

TEMPLES

In Mewat and surrounding regions, many Laldas temples have mushroomed in the last 20 years. These temples are in the style of north Indian Hindu temple architecture. Generally built on a platform, the central objects of worship in these temples are the well-adorned images/idols of the saint (Figure 4.1). Rather than worshipping the graves at traditional shrines, anthropomorphic stone idols are now the main objects of veneration among the Hindu Laldasis. In the middle of the nineteenth century, Powlett (1878: 53) had noticed a popular story about the incarnation of the saint that ‘Laldas entered the world in this “*kaljug*” [dark age] because God was neglected, and men in their folly worship stones’. Clearly, the saint’s primary emphasis was on refraining from idol worship. Contrary to the saint’s original values of worshipping a formless God, as previously noted, the wealthy Baniyas currently worship the saint in the *sagun* form (God with attributes) of the Vaishnava *bhakti* tradition. These developments have turned the peasant household ascetic ideals of Laldas (ideals meant for the Meo peasants in the past) upside-down, transforming the religious order into an orthodox *sagun* Vaishnavite form of Brahminical Hinduism.⁴

In Brahminical Hinduism, the worship of idols is not seen as the worship of an object but rather as the worship of the divine presence that is believed to inhabit the object. The *murti* (idol) is seen as a representation of the divine and is revered as such.⁵ While not all Hindus practice idol worship, it is a common practice among Brahminical Hindus and an integral part of their religious and cultural traditions. Traditionally, the *sagun bhakti* appeared to be an orthodox form of Brahminical devotion which did not want to compromise the authority of Brahmins since many religious figures of the *nirgun bhakti* generally rejected image worship, temple, ritual, pilgrimage and so on (Schomer and McLeod 1987; Vaudeville 1993). The orthodox Vaishnava tradition has although acknowledged that salvation is open to all regardless of social status; ritual barriers between high and low castes have not been seriously challenged on a practical level. More importantly, the religious leadership has remained almost exclusively in the hands of



FIGURE 4.1 One of the new temples of Laldas

Source: Photo by the author.

Brahmins (Schomer and McLeod 1987: 8). Thus, the recent transformation of the religious order of Laldas by the Baniyas is consistent with Brahminic Hinduism that affirms the role of rituals, the mediation of the priestly class and the necessity of institutional religious practices for the devotees. For

example, in many new temples of Laldas, Brahmins serve as priests, instead of Meo *sādhs* who were traditionally the main custodians and clerics at all shrines of Laldas.⁶

Historically, image/idol worship was essentially a more popular practice among Brahmins and high-caste circles than among lower-caste Hindus (Tarabout 2010: 56–84). ‘Low-caste’ communities worshipped a wide variety of objects, while Brahmin temples most likely housed anthropomorphic images and idols of Hindu deities. Together with objects, sounds, animals and rituals, the image was one piece of Hindu representation of the sacred. In particular, anthropomorphism was only one mark of ‘Hinduism’ among many and showed a particular form of religious orientation which best reflected the mode of praying of ‘upper-caste’ Brahminical Hindus in the orthodox Vaishnavite form (Lipner 2017). Although the relationship between Brahmins and image is considerably complex, Brahminical devotional practices certainly shaped image worship over time. For instance, image/idol worship was not a major object of concern from the fifth and eleventh centuries CE among classical Indian philosophers, but Vaishnava temple worshippers—in other words orthodox Brahmins—popularised this practice (see Colas 2010). Thus, all the current religious practices that prioritise image/idol worship in temples over any other meaningful representation of God must be seen in the context of Brahminical Hinduism that directly or indirectly attempts to preserve the ritual and social position of Brahmins as priests intact.

Gradually, the practice of image worship evolved and reached its deepest manifestation within the Baniya merchant and trading community. This was primarily because it satisfied their spiritual aspirations and aided them in effectively carrying out their business endeavours. The famous example of this orthodox Vaishnava form of worship is Gandhi. It is worth noting that his perception of Ram differed significantly from that of Kabir’s Ram (Agrawal 1994, 2010, 2021). Gandhi’s affinity towards a *sagun* (with attributes) manifestation of Ram can be attributed to his own Baniya caste background and the prevalent beliefs within his community. Likewise, the ongoing transformation of Laldas by the Baniya community can be seen as their attempt to incorporate him into their traditional devotional framework. This objective has been achieved through many initiatives, such as the new temples built by the Hindu Baniyas. As recalled by many Baniya interviewees, a tangible presence or visual image of Laldas assured them of the saint’s assistance whenever it was required. Be it daily life struggles or hardship in

business, the physical presence of Laldas in new temples was assumed to be psychologically satisfying to devotees who could see the saint, touch or feel him, argue and fight with him or worship and pray to him. Therefore, they began to install idols to not only to respond to Laldas's growing appeal but also make him physically present. However, the emphasis on the visual led to an imaginary religious persona of the saint, which differs from temple to temple. All the idols installed in the newly constructed temples are distinct in appearance from one another. For instance, in Punahana, the Laldas idol wore no turban, while in a nearby Jat village in the same area, the saint's idol was adorned with a permanent turban and garlands (Figure 4.2).



FIGURE 4.2 Various new temple idols of Laldas with turbans

Source: Photos by the author.

There was also a degree of differentiation and contestation within the religious order's inventions. For example, some temples had simultaneously built a grave to signify Laldas's *samādhī* status while others objected to it.⁷ If a temple was located in a village, the peasant devotees usually had a symbolic grave to signify his yogic persona, whereas Laldas temples in urban areas and towns did not include any such representation by the Baniyas. More often, peasants perceived saintly virtues in austerity and sacrifice (*tyāg*) for the sake of others. Laldas's *samādhī* was the representation of his sacrifice or *tyāg* for public welfare. Various social sections of the Mewati society perceived religious values of the same personage differently from each other.

There is a set of contradictions in all these processes that indicate how peasant and non-peasant communities, like the Jats and the Baniyas respectively, differently associated their religious practices with Laldas. The idol installation and vivification processes also varied and followed separate patterns from temple to temple. In the temple of Punahana, this ritual process was performed by a Brahmin priest.⁸ On the other hand, the temple in the nearby town of Hathin invited the traditional Meo Muslim priest (*sādh*) from the main shrine to undertake the vivification ceremonies. Although a Meo Muslim still inherits the seat of priesthood at the main shrine in Sherpur generation after generation, a Hindu Brahmin is appointed in most of the newly constructed temples to oversee daily rituals and offer prayers. These new temples denote not only the rapidly expanding religious order of Laldas but also the near completion of the saint's transformation into a Hindu deity.

NEW GENEALOGY

In the whole politics of appropriation, the saint's ancestry and Meo genealogies indirectly complement Baniya's claim on Laldas. The genealogy of Laldas reflects the Meos' connection with Hindu gods and warrior figures. The majority of Hindus today believe that Laldas is the current reincarnation of Yudhishtira, the eldest of the Pandava brothers, from the Hindu (Indic) epic called the Mahabharata. Many local temple committees have published brochures and booklets over the past decade telling this story in a hagiographic form (Figure 4.3).⁹

The main objective of these stories is to depict Laldas as a timeless figure who has existed in different incarnations throughout the four distinct Hindu epochs, representing the cyclical concept of time in Hinduism. Recent



FIGURE 4.3 Newly published booklets and pamphlets about Laldas

Source: Photo by the author.

pamphlets illustrate this by presenting his latest and past reincarnations in the following manner:

satyug me harishcandra huye, tretā me prahlād, dvāpar me pāndav huye, kalyug me bābā lāldās.

In *satyug*, [you were] Harishchandra, Prahlad in the *tretā* epoch, A Pandav in *dvāpar*, and Baba Laldas in *kalyug*.

The Laldas incarnation story asserts that he was born as Raja Harishchandra in an ‘upper-caste’ family in *satyug*, in the Hindu epoch *tretā* into the *asura* (demon) category as Bhakta Prahalad, followed by two more incarnations in *dvāpar* and *kalyug* epochs as Yudhishtira among the Pandavas and Laldas among the Meos, respectively. The primary purpose of this incarnation narrative is to emphasise that Hindu gods and saintly figures have not only manifested themselves in supposedly ‘high-caste’ categories,

such as Brahman and Kshatriya, but also in the middle-caste status peasant communities like the Meos and even among *asuras* (demons), as seen in the case of Bhakta Prahalad. This highlights the notion that divinity can transcend caste boundaries and encompass diverse socio-religious contexts.

The printed materials spread the message that Hindu characters and deities have always transcended caste, community and religious-class (god and demon) related boundaries. To fulfil this objective, stories in these pamphlets constantly cite the examples of Hindu gods and saintly figures taking incarnations into socially and religiously diverse communities. Assuming that this is not the first time a Hindu religious figure has been born outside a 'high caste' of the Hindu religion, the publications imply that it has been an ongoing trend. To provide the saint's recently invented 'Hindu' identity with an ideological legitimacy, a shifting range of incarnated identities is, thus, used here as evidence of Laldas being 'Hindu'. By doing so, a kinship relation and a genealogical lineage between Lal-Khan/Laldas (who belonged to a Muslim community with a comparatively 'low-caste' peasant status) and the Hindu figures has been invented. Given the distinctive differences between the Meos and other Muslim communities, Laldas needed to be legitimised by these stories of Hindu gods and figures who transcended religious boundaries. At the same time, these stories provided with an invented genealogy that could be helpful in incorporating Laldas as a 'Hindu' figure.

Meo genealogies also bolster the Laldas's 'Hindu' image through the Meo community's self-perception of a 'Hindu' past. The Meos do not deny the genealogical connection between Laldas and Hindu gods, since they also relate themselves to characters from the Mahabharata and with other notable Hindu religious figures. Nonetheless, the genealogy of the Laldas incarnation as Hindu characters helps current Hindu Laldasis' attempts to appropriate the saint and his order in Hindu form. In addition to the Meo community genealogy, there is also a list of ancestry connecting the saint to various Meo Muslim families of Laldasi origin.¹⁰ Hindu devotees sometimes disputed Laldas's genealogy, whereas his ancestry was largely acknowledged. The reason for Laldas's contested genealogy is the shared nature of the sectarian order's beliefs.

The Meo ancestry is recorded by Brahmins called the Jaggas (record-keepers). The chronicles of the Jaggas are regarded as rich and reliable historical sources by the state. Often, a specific Jagga family preserves records of its peasant patrons for multiple generations. Once a year, the Jaggas visit the family and record all the significant occurrences, mostly births, deaths,

material that identifies his lineage and details his current descendants.¹¹ The present custodians of the Laldas shrine at Sherpur are his descendants from the Duhlot *pāl* of the Meos. The saint propagated devotion to the god Ram, but the Duhlot clan links its origins to the Hindu god Krishna, an incarnation of Vishnu.

According to his ancestry, provided to me by Hiralal Jagga, his father's name was Chandmal and his mother's was Samda. He was born in Dholidoob near the present-day Alwar district in his maternal grandfather's house. A shrine is located there, and it is also his parents' burial place. The current Meo priests who sit at Sherpur and Bandholi (a shrine of his son Kutub) are descendants of the saint, currently representing the 11th generation. Among all the sons, only his second son Pahada was married. He is said to have been the progenitor of the current line of the *sādhs*, who are also fulfilling the duties of a custodian.

As the *sajrā* tells us, the saint Laldas simultaneously lived as a householder and as an ascetic. He had six wives, seven sons and seven daughters. The shrine at Sherpur contains 16 graves of his family members (Figure 4.5). According to the popular story in Mewat, his first son, Kutub, meaning 'polar star', lived for only 18 days. The reason for Kutub's short life was that the polar star cannot be held in captivity.

The birth of Kutub is linked with a series of other events in Laldas's life extolling his personal virtues. A voice at a mosque (Harmandir), where Laldas had gone to worship, predicted the birth of a son who would be a polar star (Kutub). Laldas responded to the announcement with a single word: 'bhala!' (goodness). A few months later, to put his faith to the test, a daughter was born instead of a son, who died immediately (Powlett 1878: 54). Laldas was not sad since he believed that God worshippers (*harbhagatan*) should always be pleased. Soon after, God talked to him about the 'Kutub' once more. Laldas showed no signs of impatience or nervousness. A second daughter was born, but she died as well. Laldas stated, 'I have faith in God' (*sain ko mero biswas*) (Powlett 1878: 55).

The birth of Kutub after 18 months of pregnancy is presented as a remarkable event in the saint's family, serving as an example of wondrous occurrences associated with him. Although the child was only 18 days old, he spoke and chastised his mother for not showing him his father. Laldas was summoned and had a conversation with the child, after which the child passed away in a state of contentment. A devoted *sādh* cleaned and clothed the corpse, and his sister Sarupa (firstborn) pleaded with her father to erect a



FIGURE 4.5 The graves of Laldas (*top left*) and those of his sons, parents and wives (*clockwise*)

Source: Photos by the author.

shrine in his honour (Powlett 1878: 55). The child's remains were transported to Bandholi, where the two dead infant sisters (Riddhi and Siddhi) had reportedly been buried. The path was blocked by a wide creek, but as Sarupa continued walking, a dry passage surfaced. The body was then brought to Bandholi, where a *dargāh* (tomb) was built, and which now enjoys a great reputation of a shrine or temple. For generations, Laldas's descendants have been living in the vicinity of these shrines.

As already stated, all the descendants are called 'Meo *sādh*', and their beliefs and practices are different from other Meo Muslims. They do not

observe a complete Islamic life despite being Muslims. When Hindus first attempted to expropriate the *samprādāya* (order), the Meo *sādh*'s relationship to the shrines was also questioned. Inside the main wall of the Sherpur shrine, there was a housing complex, consisting of some *kaccā* (mud) houses and three smaller shrines. The pink-and-white buildings that housed numerous graves were encircled by an exterior wall that served as the back wall of many rooms. These rooms also functioned as the temple office, shrine lodges, kitchens, stores and so on. In the middle of the shrine compound, the thatched houses with mud walls belonged to the families of former Meo *sādhs* (the priests of Laldas) who had been living here since before the outer wall fencing was constructed (Figure 4.6).

In 2016, every building within the temple complex, except the *sādhs*' residence, was undergoing renovations. Inside the shrine wall, the Meo Muslim residents of the *sādh* background were under immense pressure by the Hindu Laldasis to move somewhere else so that the shrine could fully be



FIGURE 4.6 The *kaccā* houses of the traditional Muslim *sādhs*

Source: Photo by the author.

developed into a grand Hindu temple. The temple management continued to request these *sādhs* to vacate the premises. Hindu Laldasis regularly offered deals to these Muslim residents from time to time. But the Meo Muslim residents rejected such offers because, as one of the *sādhs* stated, leaving the shrine would imply an end to their claim on Laldas.

The Meo *sādhs* used the saint's ancestry to support their traditional custodianship claim. Currently, the district court has also accepted their claims.¹² However, the Hindu Baniyas are making strong efforts to remove the Muslim *sādhs* from the positions of priesthood in the traditional Laldas shrines, seeking to replace them with Hindu Brahmin priests. In an interview, a Hindu Laldasi of the Baniya caste background stated that the replacement of the Muslim priests is the Hindus' current goal.¹³ In this debate, the record and production of ancestry lines and genealogical records provide a concrete historical significance. Genealogical information thus functions not only to satisfy the basic need of knowing how one is associated with other people within a community but also to create a cultural document. In the case of Meo Laldasis, the ancestry line legally supported their claims and provided 'evidence' to their connection with the saint.

PILGRIMAGE

Annual fairs and festivals have long been reported at the saint's main shrine in Sherpur. Powlett (1878: 59) wrote:

... fairs are held at Laldas places three times a year. At Sherpur, on *asoj* 11 (October), on *asārh punam* (full moon) about July, and on *māgh punam* about November.

Powlett also reported the total gathering of at least 10,000 pilgrims from neighbouring areas. Whereas in the past this gathering of pilgrims was made up of Hindus, Muslims, Jains and Sikhs from distant places, currently it has acquired a distinctive Hindu character. These days, such *yātrās* (pilgrimages) commence from a particular temple and end at the tomb. During a 60-kilometre pilgrimage from the Punahana temple to the Sherpur shrine, I noticed the immensely Hinduised nature of the religious order.¹⁴ Hindu Baniyas carried saffron flags, a ribbon was tied around their heads and they were constantly chanting the Laldas *cālīsā* (mantra) and prayers, followed by

a slogan, *laldas bābā ki jai ho* (hail to Baba Laldas). Pilgrimages like this one are routinely organised by different temple committees.¹⁵

Apart from regular pilgrimages from one temple or another to the tomb, each temple organises regular *shobhā yātrās* (pageants) in its locality. I attended one of these pageants during which a small idol of the saint dressed in white saintly attire sat in the middle of a beautifully decorated palanquin carried by four men. The Hindu devotees—mainly Baniyas—followed the procession, which passed through Hindu-dominated local streets and *mohallās* (parts of the town) in a Muslim-majority area. These pageants were generally organised to spread the fame of Laldas locally and attract other Baniyas who had not yet developed ties with the saint. It was expected by the temple committee members of various temples that with the rising fame of the Laldas it was the responsibility of every devotee to undertake initiatives related to the overall growth of the order.

PRAYERS AND BHAJANS (HINDU RELIGIOUS SONGS)

As mentioned in earlier chapters, the old religious text known as *nuktāvalī* was divided into various parts which included both life stories and *bhajans* in different genres, ranging from classical Indian *rāgs* to dialogues and discussions with the saint. These days, newly composed religious songs have been added to these traditional materials. These new additions are found in published materials such as the cheap pamphlets and booklets (see Appendix A.2). The main motive is to articulate a Vaishnava-style *saguṇ bhakti* and to make Laldas a household figure in Mewat. The new prayer songs have similar themes and styles to those composed to worship a *saguṇ* Hindu god such as Vishnu, who is present all the time in front of the eyes of a devotee in the form of an idol. For instance, the *ārtī* song of Laldas cited ahead, which Hindu devotees sing every morning and evening in the temple of Punahana, renders this style of *saguṇ*-like Vaishnava worship more explicit:

om jai bābā laldas, om jai bābā laldas
sab dukh hārī sankat tārī, āya tere pās (om jai bābā laldas ...)
balyā avasthā me van jākar tumne tap kīnā
devan karī parīkshā, vahā pe bajāke mradu vīnā (om jai ...)
lakdī becan alwar jākar, karat pet uddhār
*cale bhārōtā uncā sarse, deo karat jai jai kār (om jai ...)*¹⁶

Hail to Baba Laldas, hail to Baba Laldas
 O destroyer of all the sorrows and problems, I came under your
 patronage (hail to Baba Laldas ...)
 You meditated in the jungle in the childhood
 Gods tested you, while playing the soft music of veena¹⁷ (hail to Baba
 Laldas ...)
 By selling woods in Alwar, satiated the hunger
 The bales (you carried) remained untouched and high above the head,
 gods hailing victories (hail to Baba Laldas ...)¹⁸ (Appendix A.2)

This hymn, which is sung during the morning and evening *ārtī* prayers, has not been mentioned in any of the historical accounts of the colonial ethnographer Powlett or in the text of Dugrisi Sadh.¹⁹ Such prayers were not commonly sung at the traditional shrines of the saint. This song closely resembles the Hindu manner of praying in front of the idol of a god. Thus, it is clearly a recently invented tradition to fit the needs of the Vaishnava *saguṇ bhakti* tradition. At the main shrine, the same *ārtī* is sung in front of the saint's grave.

TEMPLE COMMITTEES

The management of the religious order operates at two levels: the temple committee at the main shrine and various local temple committees in the areas wherever new temples are built. Committees are named in the style of *Sri Baba Laldas ji Maharaj Mandir Vikas va Seva Samiti* (Sri Baba Laldas-ji Maharaj Temple Development and Service Committee—a recently adopted name) (Figure 4.7). The name of a temple is usually followed by a place name, which generally refers to government-registered bodies of different temple committees under the same name. However, the conscious use of a phrase 'temple development' in the nomenclature points to the fact that the integration process is still underway. All members of the local bodies except the main committee at the main shrine are Hindus, mostly members from the Baniya community. Since the main shrine is a place for shared worship, the Muslim priest had to be included when the committee was first formed in the 1960s.

Apart from the disputes between Hindus and Muslims about the identity of the shrine, a legal case about the formation of committees is pending in the court. This case provides more information about the history of the temple

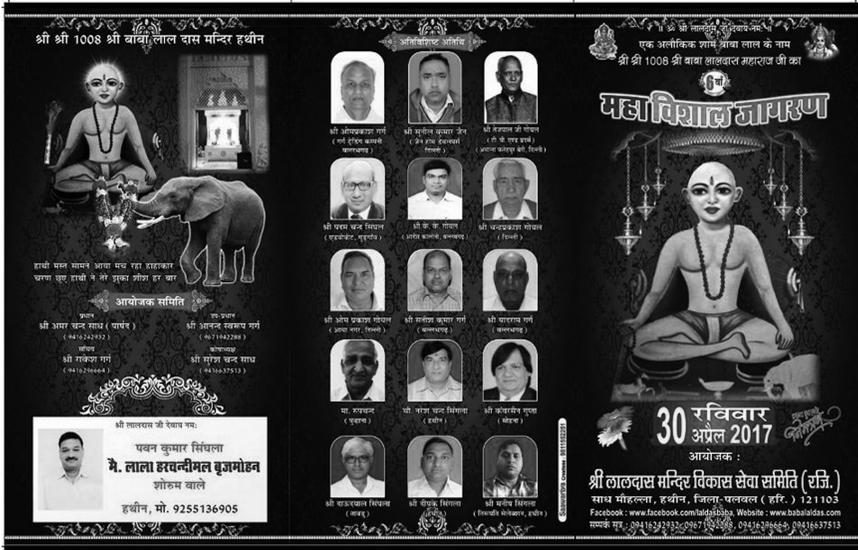


FIGURE 4.7 Invitation for a jāgrān by a temple committee

Source: Photo by the author.

committees.²⁰ On 14 June 2010, another case was registered on behalf of ‘Sri Laldas Dharm Pracharak Sangh’ (Sri Laldas Religious Missionary Union), which became a registered body on 17 November 1966 under the Rajasthan Public Trust Act of 1961.²¹ Without going into too much detail about the case here, the legal battle shows the role of various kinds of temple trusts, many of which are recently formed. Eventually, the temple and the trust gained control over a substantial amount of resources, primarily land, connected to several shrines and *baithaks* (resting place) of Laldas.²² In the past, wealthy followers generally donated land to all the religious places connected to Laldas. The Baniyas, thus, have also staked their claim to the shrine properties by establishing these temple committees.

METHODS OF ADVERTISING

Popular narratives of Laldas as a ‘Hindu’ saint are widely circulated through cheap pamphlets and social media platforms, such as Facebook and WhatsApp. In this way, the invention of traditions is often the means to legitimise newer forms of religious practices. There are a series of advertising processes by which the Laldas order and the saint are being given a new outlook.

These temple committees take Hindu-style measures to promote the religious order. For instance, to popularise the religious order and to give it a Hindu identification, they organise *kirtans* and *bhandārā* (music and feasts), celebrate the saint's birthday and circulate news of any event through local newspapers. Members of the temple committee at Punahana were regularly invited to visit a believer's home for *kirtan*. The idea of *kirtan* was first advised by a very devout follower, the late Ramdas Aggarwal (a Baniya), who was said to have been blessed by the saint. Ramdas had gone through many struggles until he was introduced to the saint in the early 2000s by a friend. His family was in significant debt as his business was not profitable. In these circumstances, he thought he would try appealing to the miraculous saint Laldas. A miracle happened in his life and he became rich after visiting the shrine of Sherpur. He subsequently formed a deep association with the saint and continued venerating him wholeheartedly. Later in life, he devoted himself completely to the service of the saint after handing over the business to his sons. The story of Ramdas made the religious order more famous among merchants, traders and other Hindus in Punahana who expected similar miracles in their lives. In collecting stories of the saint, I was advised repeatedly during fieldwork to go and visit Ramdas's family as they were the ones most blessed by the saint.

Every Sunday, as a part of disseminating the teachings of Laldas, a group of his devotees performed devotional songs in private houses under the banner of 'Laldas Kirtan Mandali' (Laldas Music Society). Among local Hindus, the Baniya community overwhelmingly supported the religious order of Laldas. Their monopoly over the saint acted to exclude 'lower castes' from worship. However, 'lower-caste' individuals continuously made significant efforts to counter this by organising devotional musical programme consisting of prayers offered to Laldas. Invitations to such events were always accepted promptly by 'Laldas Kirtan Mandali', although many Baniyas felt a little uneasy about participating because they might have to accept water and food served by 'lower-caste' people. Usually, Baniya visitors to the homes of 'lower-caste' devotees politely refused food and water offered to them.

The practice of *bhandārā* (ritual feast), common in north India, is another ritual practice adopted by Hindu Laldasis at the main shrine and new temples. Although the act of performing *bhandārās* has multiple meanings and significance for a person, from fulfilment of wishes to celebrating major life events such as births, deaths and marriages, over time this practice was adopted by Sikh and Hindu devotees of Laldas. It not only helped popularise

the religious order but also gave Hindus the opportunity to perform selfless service to the saint.

The new advertising endeavours undertaken by devotees and various Laldas temple committees extended to both print and electronic media, as well as broadcast and social media, in order to widely circulate the stories of the saint's miracles. Cheap pamphlets, audio and video cassettes of songs, CDs and *bhajans* on YouTube were popular hits. Devotees of Laldas also connected with one another using social media platforms such as Facebook. As his religious order increased in fame, more and more people began to come from Delhi to visit the Laldas shrines. They used social media to connect with other devotees, informing each other about events such as *bhandārā*, *sevā* or the celebration of festivals. For any material needs at the main shrine, the social media groups and individuals also circulated information on these online platforms. Various devotees responded very quickly, taking responsibility for providing the required materials in the form of *dān* (gifts), a return gift offered to the saint. Social media was thus used not only to circulate information but also for mobilisational purposes such as requesting a collective *śram dān* (gifts of labour), if the shrine had to be cleaned, painted or repaired. As a result, numerous webpages were created that were devoted to Laldas to actively respond to the queries from new urban devotees. Due to an active mediatised engagement and other forms of communication, the religious order has achieved a new height in the form of both material resources and new devotees. The immense flow of material resources has contributed to the overall transformation of the shrines.

THE ROLE OF MONEY

In the transformation of the meaning of religious order, the Baniya community's wealth is instrumental in the articulation of a new social and religious ideology. Money has played a significant role in the rapid transformation and spread of the Laldas religious order. As the religious order has a strong hold among the affluent community of Baniyas, it has attracted an enormous amount of money and resources in the last couple of decades. For instance, all the temples are being built on a grand scale, using expensive marble stones. Many smaller temples of Laldas have been transformed into marvellous-looking religious places throughout north India. These temples were rather small and simple until two decades. Building grand temples was possible due to this excessive flow of material resources and money. Although

it is impossible to locate the reasons for this sudden increase in the flow of material resources, the period of this transition certainly has roots in the rise and circulation of stories about the saint's miracles. *Bābā naye bhakto ko jald pakadate hai* (the saint fulfils the wishes of new devotees very quickly)²³ was a statement circulating among devotees that attracted many people. Out of approximately 500 Baniya households in Punahana, the followers of the saint have risen from 20 households in the early 2000s to about 400 in 2019.²⁴ The motivation behind their belief in the saint stemmed from witnessing the prosperous growth of certain Baniya businesses after they began adhering to the religious teachings and practices of Laldas.

The celebration of any event related to the saint is marked by extravagant expenditure and grand displays, thanks to the abundance of resources available. The expenses incurred for these events are covered by the respective temple committees, primarily through donations. In the past, these donations mainly consisted of items such as oil, corn, millet and sugar. However, in present times, the shrines and newly constructed temples benefit from a regular influx of cash donations. The majority of these monetary contributions come from Hindu Baniyas who perceive the saint to be the provider of everything in their lives.

The excessive flow of money and resources, in the form of *cadhāvā* (offerings), has also given rise to a new type of succession dispute over the priesthood between the two Meo priestly families at the main shrine. A court case to determine the true successors of the Muslim priests has been going on in the high court of Rajasthan.²⁵ The succession dispute is connected to a larger dispute between Hindus and Muslims in 1998. During the outbreak of the conflict, the then priest Sallu fled, fearing for his life at the hands of the workers of the Hindu organisations, the Shiva Sena and the Bajrang Dal. Since, the main caretakers of the shrine were forced to flee, the district administration hastily chose another Meo to be the priest. The then district magistrate who had come to resolve the issue gave the keys to another Meo *sādh* from the village. He did it to open the shrine, ensuring that the daily rituals and prayers could continue to take place. When the original caretakers arrived back at their residence, they discovered that another priest had taken their place and refused to hand over the keys. They took this issue to the court and are still waiting for the decision to be delivered.²⁶ It is mostly the families of these displaced *sādhs* who still live inside the shrine. They believe that they were deceptively removed from the position so that the Hindu management of the shrine could appoint a Meo priest of its liking. The animosity between

the 'temple' management committee controlled by Hindus and the main custodians of the shrines is still intact.²⁷ The current nature of the succession dispute over the priesthood owes much to the increase in offerings of money and other materials that the serving priest has the right to keep. This episode that sparked the controversy regarding the priestly succession among the Meo *sādhs* led to the discussion of replacing them with Brahmin priests. Therefore, the status of these traditional Meo Muslim priests of Laldas, who lived close to the shrines, was now under question.²⁸

It is impossible for the Meos to halt the transformation of Laldas's shrines as the wealthy class of Hindu Baniyas are among his main followers. However, Muslims' opposition to the Hinduisation process is reserved only for the mosques present inside the saint's shrines, which are restricted from functioning at the hands of Hindu devotees. All these processes have contributed to shaping a distinct contemporary identity for the religious order and the saint that is altogether different from the past. The overall transformation of Laldas is simultaneously facilitated by the transformation of the Meo community from a 'Hindu-Muslim' group to a markedly Muslim community who discourage Meo devotion to Laldas as antithetical to Islam, just as they oppose the veneration of many other Sufi saints. They now identify Sunni Islam as the true religion. The primary reason for the Muslims disputing the claims of Hindus over Laldas and his shrines relates to the control of space. If they can control Laldas shrines, these shrines may provide for the Tablighi Muslims a space within which to encourage the true path of Islam. This reasoning impacts the number of Muslims attending the shrines of Laldas. Religious forces often strive to define a shared religious space in line with their respective ideological leanings by constructing and imparting some distinctively new characteristics to traditionally constructed religious spaces. Such processes are social as both the production and the construction of space are contested for ideological or economic reasons (Low 1996: 862). Likewise, the traditional shrines of Laldas are socially produced sacred spaces, but socio-religious forces are currently working towards redefining their meaning.

With the rise and success of the transnational Islamic faith renewal movement known as the Tablighi Jamaat, the Meos have come to imagine themselves more as Muslims. In Chapter 5, the impact of the ideological stand of the two reformist organisations, Arya Samaj and Tablighi Jamaat, with regard to Sufi and Bhakti saints of Mewat is discussed. It aims to understand the implications of the reformist notions on shared faiths and shared shrines.

The situation around the shrines of Laldas and other saints in Mewat reveals the tension between the two kinds of followers of Laldas on the one hand and between the Sufi and Tablighi Muslims on the other.

NOTES

1. Lefebvre (1991) shows that the concept of domination of space is inseparable from the concept of appropriation of space. Both processes go hand in hand. In Lefebvre's words: 'Dominated space and appropriated space may in principle be combined—and, ideally at least, they ought to be combined. But history—which is to say the history of accumulation—is also the history of their separation and mutual antagonism. The winner in this contest, moreover, has been domination' (166).
2. Low (1996, 2009) contrasts 'the social construction of space' with 'the social production of space'. 'The social production of space' emphasises how in the past spaces were socially, religiously, politically and economically produced, alienating them from their natural settings. By contrast, 'the social construction of space' gives an account of the symbolic and phenomenological experience of space as governed by contemporary socio-religious processes such as religious conflicts, control, ideological and commercial exchanges, and technological developments. Thus, spaces are historically engendered (socially produced) into physical-material settings by various factors, but forces constantly try to construct new meanings around the use of space.
3. Previously, Laldas's liminal condition was a kind of inter-structural zone in which he advocated a unique religious synthesis, being neither a Muslim nor a Hindu. In the post-liminal phase, however, the dominant imagery of Laldas is of a Hindu saint marking a transformation of the religious order and his religious persona.
4. In Vaishnava form of worship, Brahmins have the ritual right to worship deity's idols in temples. As stated earlier, Brahmanical Hinduism reinforces the authority and traditions of Brahmins in Hindu society by various religious means including, but not limited to, maintaining hierarchy, following doctrines of purity and pollution, worshipping idols and assigning a central importance to priests and rituals among others.
5. The concept of idol worship is based on the belief that the divine can manifest itself in physical forms, and that the worship of these forms can help devotees

- connect with the divine. The *murtis* are seen as a medium through which devotees can communicate with the deity and receive blessings.
6. A follower of Laldas is generally called *sādh* meaning a ‘yogi’ or ‘meditator’. The traditional shrines were mostly attended by Meo *sādhs* officiating as priests. The title *sādh* nowadays is also used by non-Meo followers of the saint who are not priests.
 7. A *samādhī* is a temple, shrine or memorial containing the remains of the deceased (similar to a tomb or mausoleum). *Samādhī* sites are frequently constructed in this manner to honour Hindu saints or gurus, whose spirits are believed to have entered a state of meditative consciousness at the time of death.
 8. Idol vivification at Punahana temple happened on 26 January 2016. The date is mentioned on an invitation card which contained details about the saint, prayers, *bhajans* and *cālisā* (usually a prayer made up of 40 hymns) attributed to him. I am grateful to the Brahmin priest of the temple for providing me with this information and source materials.
 9. Each Laldas temple has a temple committee. All these temple committees are linked to the main temple committee of Sherpur at the main shrine.
 10. It is important to note here that the use of ancestry is somewhat different from genealogies. Ancestry generally concerns itself with a family rather than a whole community. It helps to establish a descendant’s claim on an ancestor’s heritage, although sometimes it can generate negative impacts.
 11. The ancestral lineage of Laldas has given rise to a conflict between Hindu and Muslim Laldasis in the region, as both groups vie for ownership of the traditional shrines associated with Laldas. This dispute also extends to various branches of Meo *sādh* (priestly) families, who also compete with each other for the priestly positions within these shrines. The conflicting claims and rivalries reflect the complex dynamics surrounding the religious and communal ownership of the Laldas shrines.
 12. *Sri Laldas Religious Development Organisation vs Sallu*, District Magistrate Court, Alwar, 34, 37, 38, 39, Specific Relief Act, 1963, 14 June 2010.
 13. Interview with Mahesh Sadh, 19 July 2016, Punahana, Haryana.
 14. I attended this pilgrimage during the course of my fieldwork at the beginning of 2016.
 15. Field notes dated June 2016. Also see ‘Baba Laldas *kā melā* 20 *ko*’, *Dainik Bhaskar*, 16 June 2016, <https://www.bhaskar.com/news/RAJ-ALW-MAT-latest-alwar-news-021003-374748-NOR.html>, accessed 10 September 2017, for more details.

16. I am unable to cite the full song here. This excerpt gives an idea of the way new songs are styled after typical Hindu *ārtī* songs.
17. An Indian classical music instrument.
18. Cited from, *Śri bābā Laldas ji mahāraj murtī prān pratisthā and bhavya jāgran*, public invitation booklet (2015), printed by Goyal Printers, Punahana, Mewat, Haryana. The English translation of the worship song does not rhyme like the Hindi version. It is provided to help non-Hindi readers understand the meanings in the song. For the full song, see Appendix A.2.
19. Powlett cites a large number of hymns, prayer songs and oral stories that include similar hymns mentioned in the hand-written text of Dungarisi. This also shows the historicity of the oral songs and stories related to the saint.
20. A copy of the court case was provided to me by a lawyer friend who practised in the District and Session Court of Alwar, which is where the hearing of the dispute was taking place. There were no such committees in the past until disputes began occurring at the traditional shrines. To legitimise their claims over the Laldas shrines, all of a sudden, Hindu followers formed a committee in 1963. One of the Meo *sādhs* told me that this was also a strategy to control all the resources of the shrines. The names of these temple committees have been changed a few times.
21. According to the filed petition, *Sri Laldas dharm pracharak sangh banam Sallu putra Mohammed Khan vagera*, 14 June 2010, District and Session Court, Alwar, Case/Acc No. 006452. The case is filed for stopping Muslims from allegedly performing an Islamic prayer in a supposed Hindu temple.
22. *Baithak*, literally meaning 'meeting-place', are those places in Mewat where Laldas either meditated or spent some time preaching.
23. Field notes. The research participants usually mentioned many names during interviews whose wishes were granted by boon of the saint; Ramdas's name was mentioned again and again.
24. These statistics were mentioned to me during an interview with the then secretary of 'Sri Laldas Temple Development, Punahana'. The figures were mentioned in his private notebook. Though it is not a significant piece of evidence, in light of other events it certainly shows a growth in the number of followers of the religious order.
25. *Sallu versus Igris alias Pappu*, 2005, 7 July 2006, Civil Judge and Judicial Magistrate Court, Alwar, Diwani Case No: 1/2005. A judgment in this case on two occasions is given in favour of the previous priest Sallu which is disputed again by appealing in the high court of Rajasthan, *Sallu versus Igris alias*

Pappu, 1 February 2010, Upper District Magistrate Court, Alwar, Diwani Case No: 08/09.

26. *Sallu and others versus Igris*, Junior Magistrate Civil Court, Alwar, jo 39. r.1-2, 151, 2005.
27. Pappu is distantly related to the traditional custodians of the Sherpur shrine. He does not belong to the main line of the descendants of Laldas.
28. *Sri Laldas Religious Development Organisation vs Sallu*, District Magistrate Court, Alwar, 34, 37, 38, 39, Specific Relief Act, 1963, 14 June 2010.