

Advance Praise

Skillfully blending insights and methods from anthropology, sociology, religious studies and history, Mukesh Kumar's empirically rich and highly original study complicates simplistic understandings of religious ideology and practice in northern India. One can only hope that his carefully researched monograph will find the broad transdisciplinary readership it deserves.

Harald Fischer-Tiné, Chair of Modern Global History, ETH-Zurich

This remarkable book shows how sixteenth-century north Indian Lāldāsī tradition embraced aspects of cultures which today span a landscape divided by fault lines of Hindu and Muslim identities. Through both intensive field work and in-depth textual studies it documents both the history of the tradition and modern reconstructions of Lāldāsī identities. This study will be welcomed by those interested in the interaction between Hindu *sants* and Muslim Sufis. It casts new light on interactions between *sants*, such as Kabir and Ravidas, and their doctrine of *nirgunḥ bhakti*, devotion to the divine as formless, and Sufi *pīrs*, such as Laldas, whose teachings embodied the concept of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, the oneness of God. This book is a mine of original insights into the original genesis of this Sufi–*sant* interaction and a critical examination of how social and religious realities in north India have impacted on living contemporary Lāldāsī traditions.

Peter Friedlander, Associate Professor in South Asian Studies,
Australian National University, Canberra

Most studies of religious sites in India that have sometimes been shared by Hindus and Muslims and sometimes contested by members of these groups, focus on individual locations at specific moments in time. In the important and highly innovative study, Mukesh Kumar looks at the changing configurations of the networks of sites dedicated to Laldas, a saint whose teachings contain elements commonly associated with both Hinduism and Islam, even though those religious traditions are supposedly mutually incompatible. The politicisation of religion in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has not only increased contestation over the shrines but also induced many of Laldas's followers to find covert ways of drawing on both traditions despite the efforts to 'purify' the sites that have been made by orthodox Muslim and Hindu leaders. The multi-sited fieldwork data are rich, and the analyses provocative. This book sets a new, high standard for works on shared and contested religious sites in South Asia, and more widely.

Robert M. Hayden, Professor Emeritus, University of Pittsburgh

This is a very important book. Against the background of India's current, tragic polarisation between Hindus and Muslims, it reminds us that things were not always so. It focuses on the social expressions of *nirgun bhakti*, worship of the formless absolute, which rejects institutionalised religion altogether and therefore allows and even encourages various forms of religious exchange between Hinduism and Islam. By means of a subtle, detailed historical and ethnographic analysis, Mukesh Kumar shows how the followers of Laldas, a sixteenth-century mystic, responded to the changing religious landscape in subsequent centuries, trying (but ultimately failing) to preserve their particular form of Hindu–Muslim synthesis in the face of those forces trying to separate the two communities.

William Sax, Professor and Head, Department of Anthropology,
South Asia Institute, Heidelberg University

BETWEEN MUSLIM PĪR AND HINDU SAINT

Between Muslim Pīr and Hindu Saint studies the changing form of religious culture around the *bhakti* figure and the religious order of Laldas that has undergone multiple transformations since its inception in the sixteenth century in the Mewat region of north India. The study uncovers the fascinating historical and contemporary dimensions of Hindu–Muslim socio-cultural interactions around his shrines. It explores reformist and extremist politics that influenced shared religious traditions, shedding light on the impact of the reformist ideologies of the Arya Samaj and Tablighi Jamaat on the followers of Laldas. It presents a compelling analysis of how some shared religious practices persist and adapt amidst the pressures of dominant reform movements, highlighting the resilience of faith and the strategies employed by believers to maintain their religious convictions. The inclusion of marginalised voices, particularly women maintaining their disagreements by concealing their faith in the saints and traditional bards expressing their righteous views through folk songs, adds a poignant and powerful dimension to the narrative. Through its comprehensive and thought-provoking approach, the book provides valuable insights into the continuously evolving religious landscape of north Indian devotional Hinduism and popular Islam.

Mukesh Kumar is a postdoctoral fellow (2021–23) at ETH Zürich. Previously, he was an Alexander von Humboldt postdoctoral fellow (2019–21) at the South Asia Institute of Heidelberg University. He has published several research articles in international journals, such as the *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion*, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (Cambridge University Press), *Contemporary South Asia* (Routledge), *History and Anthropology* (Routledge) and *Economic and Political Weekly*.

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LALDAS AND THE DEVOTIONAL
CULTURE IN NORTH INDIA

MUKESH KUMAR



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