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LALDAS AND RELIGIOUS DUALITY OF *PĪR* AND *SANT*

Folk stories in Mewat narrate how, in the sixteenth century, Sahab Khan, the Mughal governor of Tijara, near the present-day Alwar district in eastern Rajasthan in north India, summoned Laldas (1540–1648 CE) to account for not practising Islam, despite being born into a Muslim family. Sahab Khan offered him meat, saying it was Muslim food that a Muslim should willingly eat. This move was intended to symbolise the saint's Muslim identity and to reintroduce him to the Islamic fold from which he had strayed. The meeting with Sahab Khan is documented in a hagiography—compiled and written in rhyming verses by a Laldas devotee called Dungarisi Sadh:[1]

> *tabaī mughal ne svāgat karī, baitho pīr dayā tum karī,*
> *rotī-khānā karo kabāb, bhūkhā khāyā badā śabāb,*
> *dān yār to badā ajīj, upar musalmān ki cīj*
> *musalmān hove khāye khulāye, to vah rāh khudā kī pāve.* (Dungarisi n.d.: 26; see Appendix A.1)[2]
>
> Then the Mughal welcomed him saying, sit *pīr* and bestow your blessings on me
> Eat a meal of bread and kebab, it is really tasty when you are hungry
> Serving you is a matter of immense joy, this is also a Muslim practice
> If a Muslim eats it himself and feeds others, then he attains the path of God.[3]

Although the Mughal officer's invitation for Laldas to consume *kebab* might seem like a respectful act, it was, in fact, a deliberate tactic aimed to ascertain the saint's religious standing. By depicting Laldas's religious conduct as transgressing Islamic boundaries in these hagiographic narratives, the text seeks to establish his identity as a Hindu saint. According to the verses, Sahab Khan heard reports that Laldas did not pray as a Muslim: he neither performed ablution nor invoked the name of the Prophet, despite being a member of the Meo Muslim caste and the 'Islam' religion. In another set of stanzas, Dungarisi Sadh goes on to narrate the doctrine taught by the saint to both Hindus and Muslims, which got him in trouble:

> *śīlvant santan sukhdāī, satjug kī sī rāh calāī*
> *daurī khabar tijāre gayī, sahib khan sū jā kahī*
> *jāt meo arū musalmān, hindū rāh calāī ān*
> *rojā bang nivāj nā pathe, īd-bakrīd kū man nahī dhare*
> *rojā rakhe nā kalmā kahe, hindū turak sū nyārā rahe*
> *nabī-rasūl kahe nā kahāve, rām-rām mukh setī gāve*
> *ketā hindū musalmān, ek hī rāh calāī ān.* (Dungarisi n.d.: 23–28; Powlett 1878: 55)
>
> He was benevolent, gratifying the saints, his conduct was like that of *satyug*
> This news sped to Tijara, Sahab Khan was notified
> He is Meo by caste and a Muslim, but he preaches the ways of Hindus
> He neither fasts nor offers *namāz*, and has little interest in celebrating Eid and Bakrid
> He does not keep *rojā* nor recites the *kalmā*, he remains aloof from Hindu and Turk
> He does not utter or encourage others to speak the name of the Prophet [*nabī-rasūl*], his mouth only chants Ram-Ram
> He says, whether a Hindu or a Muslim, the path is the same.

Sahab Khan decided to test him due to the complaints that were made against Laldas's unconventional religious behaviour. The saint's adherence to strict vegetarianism resulted in a miraculous event when he accepted meat from Sahab Khan; the moment the saint touched the meat, it transformed into rice (Dungarisi n.d.: 23–28). This was not the end of their encounter. The daughter of the Mughal governor was tormented by a malicious *djinn*. Kazis and Mullahs were unsuccessful in exorcising him, but when Sahab Khan's wife approached Laldas, the issue was resolved. When Laldas met the girl, she instantly began to kiss his feet and the *djinn* surrendered before the saint, leaving the girl's body.

In another account, the saint was interrogated by a different Mughal *faujdār* (garrison commander or police officer) of Bhadarpur, Alwar. This time, Laldas was accused of murdering a Mughal official who had laid hands on another man's wife. To teach Laldas a lesson, the *faujdār* dispatched an unruly horse with soldiers to fetch him on its back. As the saint arrived while riding the horse, the *faujdār* was surprised to see how well he controlled the (unruly) horse and that there were both Hindus and Muslims among his followers who had accompanied him. Laldas and his 12 companions were then detained overnight under the surveillance of Mughal soldiers. They all miraculously disappeared from there. When the guard was imprisoned for presumably allowing them to go, they subsequently reappeared in the prison. Later the Mughal official asked the saint a few questions about his caste and religion and expressed amazement in the following words:

> *faujdār jab pūchī bāt, fakar kon tumārī jāt,*
> *dīn tumhārā kinhūn nā jānā, jinhe sunā acraj āna.* (Dungarisi n.d.: 13)
>
> When the faujdar asked the saint, what is your caste
> Nobody knows your religion, whoever hears this is a surprise.

The saint replied:

> *hindū-turak ek sā būjhe, sāhib sab ghāt ek hī sūjhe*
> *bolan hār kine batāyā, jāmā ek meo ghar pāyā,*
> *vastra vivek morchal hāth, mūrakh ho so pūche jāt.* (Dungarisi n.d.: 13)
>
> Hindus and Turks are same, God considers them as one,
> Tell me, who taught you this? [I] received [my] clothes in a Meo family,
> Clothes, wisdom, and my free hands, only a foolish man enquires about caste.

As the discussion continued, Laldas voiced his opinions and stated, 'Love God'. He elaborated that God is a unique entity and should be viewed separately from religious boundaries. The saint highlighted that Hindus and

Turks (Muslims), despite their contrasting beliefs, follow the same route towards their desired goal. The saint's response to the official's question emphasised the unity of God and the absurdity of asking about caste identity. Laldas used the metaphor of his birth into a Meo family (receiving his flesh and clothing) to assert that this is not who he is. The official, disturbed by Laldas's behaviour, demanded payment before releasing him. Laldas declined the offer, stating that he is not wealthy. Hearing this, the *faujdār* forced the saint to drink water from a poisoned well. Another miracle ensued: the poisoned well turned into a source of sweet water. The *faujdār* stood in front of the saint, humbly folding his hands, and inquired about the saint's 'true' identity. In order to clarify his religious stand, the saint instructed his followers, expressing his belief and true religious intentions in the following couplet, which refers to the advocacy of God in *nirguṇ* form:

> *mai hu lāl, tu merō dās, nirguṇ bhakti karo prakās*
> *niraṇkar ko sumran kijō, yahī sīkh sādhuṇ ko dījo.* (Dungarisi n.d.: 4)
>
> I am Lal, you are my follower [*das*], spread the doctrines of *nirguṇ bhakti*
> Recall the formless, give this lesson to the sages.

In the hagiography, various encounters between Laldas and state officials or individuals seeking assistance provide a glimpse of his 'religion'. The verses make it abundantly clear that his 'religion' is distinct from both 'Hinduism' and 'Islam'.[4] Without creating distinctions between his followers, he welcomed people of all castes and religions into the order, urging them to be compassionate towards all living beings by following his principle of *jivdayā* (kindness to living beings). When he was accused of murder, Laldas in his defence said that 'I never even hurt an ant, so why would I kill anyone'. But the Mughal officer insisted that Laldas could not be considered a true *pīr* (saint) without proof of his *ajmat* (greatness). The officer mockingly asked: *ajamat kachū dikhaho hum kū, sahī pīr hum jane tam kū* (If you demonstrate your greatness to us, then only we will consider you to be a true *pīr*). At this stage, the hagiography condemns the despicable act of the Mughal officer (frequently labelled as *asur*, or demon) who killed a deer and commanded Laldas to revive it. Although Laldas remained patient and did not respond to the officer's provocation, he eventually used his stick to bring the deer to life for the sake of the animal.[5]

Numerous similar miracles, recounted in couplets in the hagiography and supplemented by the information in Powlett's gazetteer, are fundamental to the formation of the religious order known as *lāldāsī samprādāy*. The origin tale of Laldas varies from place to place in north India. Laldas's life is recounted in numerous regions of Alwar and Bharatpur through oral accounts, handwritten poetry and pamphlets. Laldas was born into the Duhlot *pāl* of the Meo Muslim community in approximately 1540 CE, and he spent his early years in the care of his maternal grandparents in Dholidoob, Alwar. Having resided in Dholidoob for numerous years, Laldas would frequently roam the nearby hills of Alwar, as well as venture into the forests, in search of logs and firewood that he could sell to support his family's livelihood. Later, Laldas relocated to Bandholi, 16 miles northeast of Alwar. He diligently worked there, driven by both a sense of altruism and the need for his own sustenance. Residing atop a hill, the saint followed rigorous ascetic practices, while enduring scorching weather and showing no fear of snakes and tigers (Powlett 1878: 54). Additionally, he healed the poor and sick. Soon he had disciples from all castes. Then, after a brief stay in Todi and Rasagan villages, he settled in Nagla, where he remained for 40 years until his death in 1648 and was buried in Sherpur (Powlett 1878: 54). These six locations are the most revered in the order.

Laldas did not live a life of celibacy, even though he had practised the most severe forms of asceticism. He had a daughter named Sarupa, who also possessed the power to perform miracles. Popular stories indicate that Laldas once conveyed to Sarupa that both greatness and the ability to perform wonders were ultimately futile, as they vanish like smoke in the wind; the only things that mattered were purity of soul and kindness to others. He stated further that those who owned these virtues would reach a state of perfect tranquillity in heaven (called *har ke lok*) and would no longer be subject to the cycle of birth and death. Laldas's son Pahara as well as his two brothers, Sher Khan and Ghaus Khan, also performed miracles for people's welfare. All of these individuals, closely related to Laldas, placed their faith and confidence in one God (Ram), and not in any other deity or divinity.

Throughout north India, various figures by the name of Laldas have been conflated in popular parlance. These stories provide conflicting descriptions of the figure variously called Baba Laldas, Baba Lali and Baba Lal Dayal. His admirers in Dhayanpur include Sikhs and Shams Guptis, who remember him as Baba Lal Dayal. However, Mewat's Laldas currently overpower the stories and persona of other figures by the same name. Although the saint is considered to be the contemporary of the great Mughal emperor Akbar, there are stories of a figure known as Laldas who had intensive interactions with other Mughal rulers over spiritual matters. In Mewat, popular accounts, printed materials and other historical sources make several references to this encounter. He is referred to as a Hindu gnostic in these oldest accounts.[6] The Mughal prince Dara Shukoh, who was interested in Hindu philosophy, had an extensive dialogue with the saint Laldas, which is also available in various versions of the text *Su'āl va javāb-i Dara Shukoh va Baba Lal Das* (Questions and answers between Dara Shukoh and Baba Laldas) (Hasrat 1953; Hayat 2016; Wilson 1861) (Figure 2.1).[7]

With time, the religious order of Laldas has assumed enigmatic religious forms outside of Mewat. For instance, the same Laldas is regarded as a follower of the river goddess Ganga in the Saharanpur district in western Uttar Pradesh (see Figure 2.2). A well-known legend in the region states that the saint spent some time there and commuted daily for around 60 kilometres to Haridwar, a sacred city on the banks of the Ganges, to take a dip in the holy river.[8]

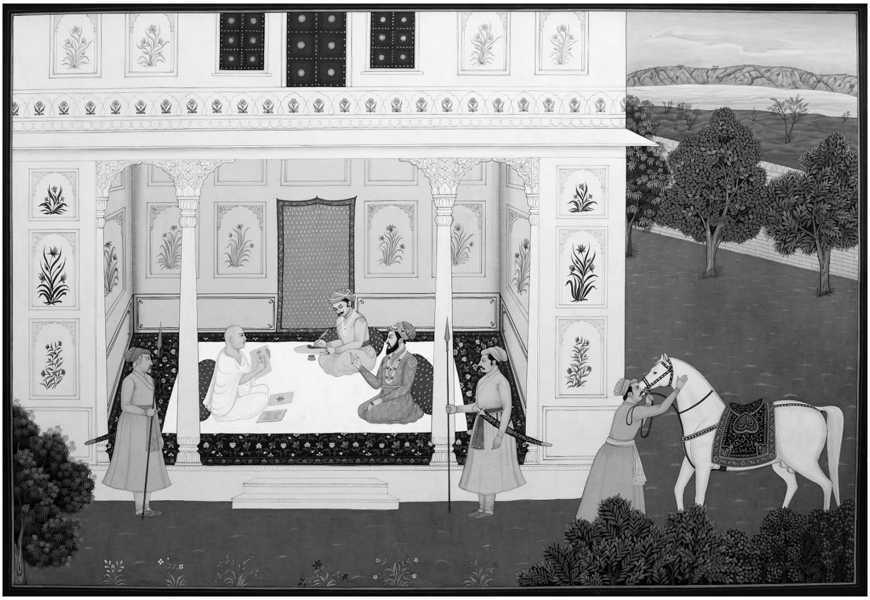


FIGURE 2.1 Laldas in interaction with the Mughal prince Dara Shukoh

Source: FACT (Foundation for Advancement of Cultural Ties), http://www.darashikoh.info/, accessed 17 November 2017.

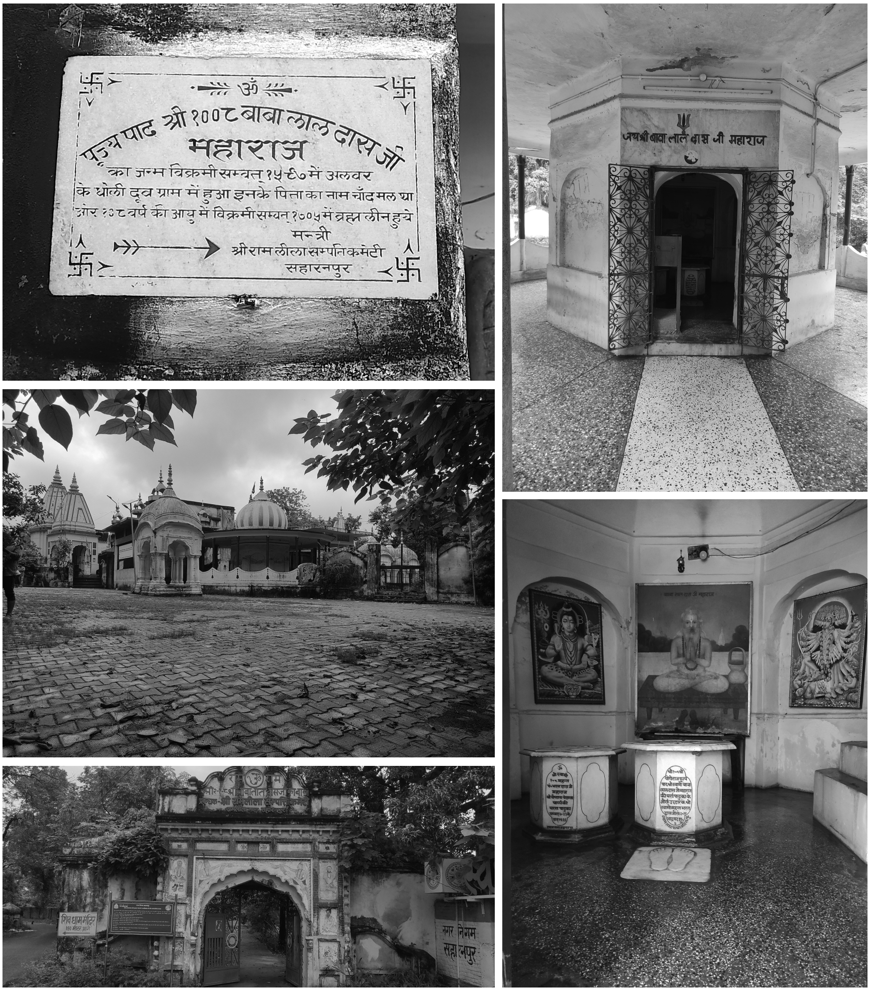

ॐ
पूज्य पाद श्री १००८ बाबा लाल दास जी
महाराज
का जन्म विक्रमी सम्वत् १५९७ में अलवर
के धोली दूब ग्राम में हुआ इनके पिता का नाम चाँद मल था
और १०८ वर्ष की आयु में विक्रमी सम्वत् १७०५ में ब्रह्म लीन हुये
मन्त्री
श्री राम लीला सम्पति कमेटी
सहारनपुर
जयश्री बाबा लाल दास जी महाराज
नगर निगम
सहारनपुर

FIGURE 2.2 The Laldas temple in Saharanpur

Source: Photos by the author.

In response to his unwavering devotion, Mother Ganga, the goddess, bestowed a blessing upon him. Manifesting herself, she caused a stream to flow in front of his hut, making it easier for him to conduct his daily rituals in the holy water. Currently, the stream goes by the name Paondhoi (literally, foot rinsing) river. The saint Laldas, also known as 'Bhagirath of Saharanpur',[9] plays a significant role in regional folklore.[10] Similar to this, Laldas is associated with a Vaishnava sect in Dhyanpur, Punjab. From Dhyanpur to Mewat and Saharanpur, there are several accounts of his birthplace and miracles. The Dhyanpur temple considers Lahore to be Laldas's birthplace, while the Saharanpur temple clearly associates it with Mewat. H. H. Wilson (1861: 347) notes that he was born in Malwa during the reign of Mughal king Jahangir (c. 1605–1627) and later travelled with his guru Chetan Swami to Lahore. While the Dhyanpur temple claims that he was born during Firoz Shah Tuglak's reign and lived for 300 years (c. 1355–1655), in Mewat, he is believed to have lived from 1540 to 1648 CE.

However, unlike other ambiguous claims about the identity of the figure Laldas, in Mewat, stories about his identity are supported by historical evidence such as a family genealogy recorded by the Jaggas.[11] Some of the Meo families traced their ancestral links with Laldas/Lalkhan (*pīr*) through both maternal and paternal sides. Given that 'das' was a frequent word for a saint with a 'Bhakti' background, Lalkhan Meo in Mewat may have undergone a similar identity adaption and change to become Laldas. As with all oral traditions, it is impossible to say with certainty that all of these stories are about the same person named Laldas. Laldas's identity is interwoven with several personas. Currently, the same Laldas is popularised throughout north India as the great saint of Mewat and *sāmpradāyik sadbhāvanā ke pratīk* (the emblem of communal harmony),[12] overpowering the origin tales at other locations indicated earlier. Devotees across north India have presently come to identify Mewati Laldas as the 'real' Laldas. Currently, many shrines and temples dedicated to Laldas have recognised the Sherpur shrine as the main 'temple' of the saint where devotees regularly offer tributes. Many devotees from other parts of India come to visit his shrine during an annual pilgrimage, considering Mewat to be the birthplace of Laldas. Despite the diversity of these tales, they have certain characteristics, most notably the intersection of Sufi and Bhakti themes.[13]

The devotion of the Meo and other Mewati Muslims to the Bhakti and Sufi saints prior to the twentieth century is significant in this context because it suggests that Indian Muslims' entanglement with the religious boundaries and institutional practices of Islam was very varied. This was not in contrast to the many different castes of Hindu peasants at the time, each of which followed its own unique set of Indic rituals and beliefs. The teachings and biographies of Laldas provide evidence of such patterns of Hindu–Islamic cultural interaction and the nature of 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' identities prior to the twentieth century. The following is an example of how Laldas used to convey his messages of religious indifference:

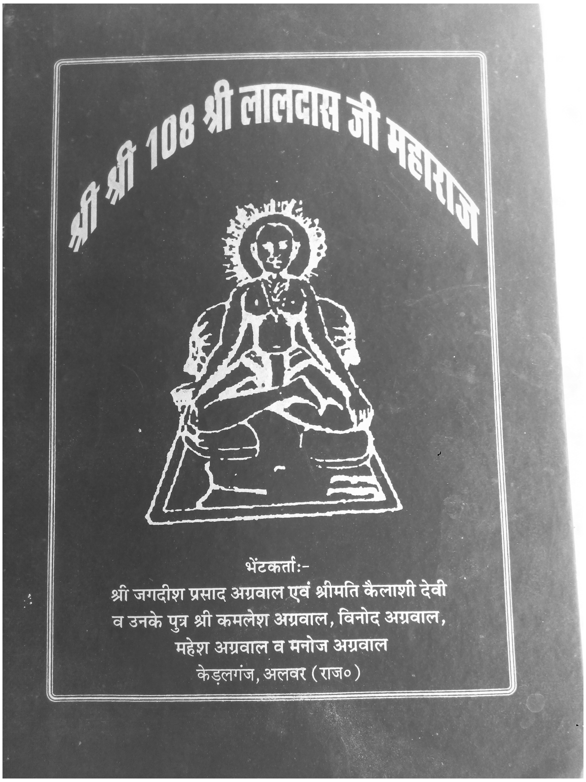
kāhe lal saiṇ ko pyāro, sāhab ek banāvan har
hindū-turak ko ek hī sāhab, rāh banāī do ajab. (Dungarisi n.d.: 26)

Says Lal, the beloved of God, the Almighty has created us one
There is one God of Hindu and Turk, but the two strange paths have been made.

Laldas through messages urged Hindus and Muslims to see the futility of their differences and to look beyond their religious affiliations to more universal concerns. Moreover, religious identities were often represented through *panth*s and ethnic designations. For instance, the hagiography frequently uses *turak* and *mughal* to refer to the behaviours of state officials rather than to indicate their Muslimness. Religious orders, such as that of Laldas, contradicted the institutional forms of religions associated with political power and represented by the 'professional' clergy.[14] Here, the concern for the institutional form of Islam (like Sahab Khan's concerns) is associated with state and representatives of its power. Often in the text, the ethnic label 'Turk' is used to depict the 'Islam' of the political rulers. In many other instances across Rajasthan, religious categories were often replaced by such ethnic labels (Turks, Mughals) (Talbot 2009) or sect names (Bhakti, Sufi and Nath traditions), prioritising the latter over the former.[15] Oral histories, folk tales and saint hagiographies aid in understanding several strands of meaning involved in slowly shaping a more uniform religious practice around the persona of Laldas. In particular, interviews with Laldas's followers and hagiographical writings about the saint show that religious interaction surrounding the saint was multifaceted, complex and dynamic, in contrast to the present day's narrower religious classifications.

THE LALDAS ORDER: AN ORCHARD OF DIVERSITY

The hagiographical narratives of Laldas are more common today among Hindu followers. The Hindu Laldasis are striving to construct the persona of Laldas as a miraculous *bhakti* saint who is significantly distinct from and superior to his Islamic counterparts. Nonetheless, the tales mentioned in the hagiography do not hide Laldas's distinctive position of being in-between. The first section of the biographical text about Laldas, the *nuktāvalī*,



श्री श्री 108 श्री लालदास जी महाराज

भेंटकर्ताः-
श्री जगदीश प्रसाद अग्रवाल एवं श्रीमति कैलाशी देवी
व उनके पुत्र श्री कमलेश अग्रवाल, विनोद अग्रवाल,
महेश अग्रवाल व मनोज अग्रवाल
केड़लगंज, अलवर (राज०)

FIGURE 2.3 A typeset version of the biographical text of Laldas, *nuktāvalī*

Source: Photo by the author.

chronicles the saint's entire life in verse form, including accounts of his incarnations, miracles and other significant occurrences.[16] The text is divided into sections like *śrīmad lāldās gītā*, *samvād sār* (a dialogue between the saint and a disciple) and *sākhī* and *rāg* (tales and songs sung in Hindustani classical music style) (Figure 2.3).[17]

The text narrates life stories of the saint and his sayings in couplets, adopting a poetic style similar to that of the great epics in Sanskrit and Hindi. For instance, the opening stanza of the text says:

> *sadhu-sant kī āgya pāū, śrī lāl bhakt kī kathā sūnāū*
> *pur-pattan sherpur vās sthān, jahāṇ dungrisi sādh ne kiya bakhān*
> *san pandrah sau sattānave mein lāl liyo avatār*
> *hindū-turak bīc baithkar kinhā bhakti pracār.* (Dungarisi n.d.: 1)

> If the saints and sages permit, I will tell the story of Sri Laldas.
> I was born in Pur-Pattan and reside at Sherpur; Dungrisi Sadh's [my]
> narration begins there.
> In the year of 1597, Lal was incarnated
> He spread the messages of *bhakti* sitting among Hindus and Turks.[18]

In addition to using Urdu terms to convey specific meanings within stanzas in Hindi, the text also sporadically employs the Mewati dialect of the region. As an illustration, one tale of a childhood miracle—the saint's mastery over a mad elephant—is recounted in the text using a 'linguistic duopoly'[19] (Bakshi 2012) of Hindi and Urdu. The Mewati dialect and the vernacular languages have an impact on the text, but Hindi and Urdu are given priority:

> *ek din mārag lāge jāy, bhay mantā gaj nād nacāī*
> *main mantā gaj bahut alām, karī sūṇḍ sū tīn salām.* (Dungarisi n.d.: 6)

> A fearless elephant trumpeted loudly, walking on a street one day,
> That elephant was very angry [*alām*] and bowed [*salām*] three times
> with its trunk.

In the above couplet, the Urdu word *alām* refers to the disturbed status of an insane elephant. As soon as the saint confronts the elephant, the animal bows to him. The Islamic greeting *salām* is used here to refer to the elephant's submissiveness to Laldas. The narrative style of the text, loaded with vernacular terms, blends words from the Mewati dialect with infrequent usages of Urdu words and numerous references to the mode of oral use of Hindu epics and religious texts. The verses thus depict a 'linguistic duopoly' in which the Mewati dialect, the Urdu and Hindi languages, and the epic prose style converge to serve the narrator's purpose of describing a saint who transcended institutional religious boundaries. The text also displays the intimate connection between the familiar and the known 'religious other' in a world conscious of religious differences but connected in multiple ways through shared ideals of public life. Similar examples throughout the text indicate the complex nature of a closely knit interlingual world, often reflected in the literary 'web of intertextuality' (Ramanujan 1989: 190).[20] Such examples point to the intimately related literary and oral traditions of 'Hinduism' and 'Islam' and institutional and vernacular/popular cultures.[21]

Similarly, another stanza of the text employs the Arabic/Urdu word *mustaqīm*, meaning 'a straight path' or 'the right path' in Islam.[22] The text uses the phrase to talk about the path of *nirguṇ bhakti* taken by Laldas. For instance, after the *faujdār* realised that he mistreated the saint, he ordered his soldiers to approach Laldas again. This time, the soldiers acknowledged the saint as a true *pīr*:

sunte hi cākar dauḍe āye, pīr-murīd dhyān me pāye
unkā aisā sāncā dīn, sāī nām sū hai mustaqīm
lāldās tum sacce pīr, ab baksho merī taqsīr. (Dungarisi n.d.: 14)

The soldiers came running as they heard the order, *pīr-murīd* were in meditation
Their religion is so true, their path is linked to the name of *sāī* [God]
Laldas you are a true *pīr*, now please forgive my crime.

The use of the phrase *mustaqīm* indicates that for Laldas the right path to God is 'formless devotion'. The term used here is taken from the Quran, where it appears multiple times implying 'straight' or 'right' path as seeking to be led to God, indicating a longing for intimacy, nearness, knowledge and love of God. In Islam, it is often used in the context of the guidance provided by Allah for Muslims to follow in order to attain success and salvation by walking on the path of righteousness. The 'straight path' by Laldas is defined in a manner of Sufi spiritualism by the fusion of the external aspects of religious behaviour with the internal dimensions of spirituality. *Mustaqīm* results in a cohesive blend of the exoteric (worldly) and esoteric facets of Laldas's faith. Moreover, the usage of *mustaqīm* in the couplet above negates worshipping God through observable human actions (idol or image worship) and prefers nurturing a profound personal spiritual bond with Him. Laldas, thus, advocated the value of living a life of moral uprightness and following the straight path towards God, without being concerned with religious labels or categories. The numerous interactions of Laldas with Mughal officials mentioned earlier indicate the nature of his teachings centred around the idea of one formless God that he taught to his followers. Rising above worldly boundaries to love 'God' in a true sense was the central tenet of his preaching.

In many other verses of the *nuktāvalī*, the Bhakti and Sufi modes of piety are seen as true paths that are different from the ways of both institutionalised religions.[23] Moreover, Laldas's beliefs in the *nirguṇ bhakti* of Ram complemented his Meo Muslim background. Meos believe in the Islamic conception of Allah, a formless entity, developed through Sufi influence in the region. There are many close parallels between various popular modes of religiosity in the Laldas order that strongly intersected theological doctrines of Sufism and *nirguṇ bhakti*.[24] Both conceptions stress upon a formless imaginary of God. A conversation with a Sufi saint, Chishti Gadan of Tijara, who purportedly inspired Laldas to work for the cause of *dīn* (religion) expresses the concern of *waḥdat al-wujūd*:[25]

> *gadan kahe tum dar mat māno, dīn durast kar durmat bhāno*
> *durmat kutiyā dur uḍāo, hindū-turak kū rāh gavāho*
> *hindū-turak ka aisā hait, jaise dharā bijūrā khet*
> *pahel vidu kā yah jasle, sāī kahen soi kah de.* (Dungarisi n.d.: 7)
>
> Gadan says don't be afraid, strengthen your religion and eradicate evil thought
> Banish the evil of bad thought, show the path to Hindus and Turks
> Such is the manner of Hindu-Turks, like a man of straw in a field
> First take this vow, whatever *sāī* [God] says is so.

Chishti Gadan noticed Laldas levitating during meditation. Upon discovering the nature of his piety and unworldliness, the Sufi saint instructed Laldas to preach both Hindus and Muslims. The conversation between Laldas and Gadan indicates that both Hindus and Muslims (Turks) needed to be brought on the right path (*mustaqīm*). Among saints like Laldas, the Sufi concept of *waḥdat al-wujūd* (unity of being) finds a closer structural parallel with the interpretations of non-dualism provided by Indian philosophers like Shankara, Chaitanya and Nimbarkar (Alam 2004: 91–98). Alam (2004: 91–92) writes that this idea of the oneness of God

> was expressed in the *nirguṇ bhakti* assertation of the fundamental unity of Hindus and Turks. Kabir, for instance, saw no difference between Ram and Rahman. Notable in his poetry is the coalescence of Hari and Hazrat, Krishna and Karama, Muhammed and Mahadev, Ram and Rahim.

Similarly, *waḥdat al-wujūd* is a central concept in Sufi Islamic philosophy that refers to the idea of the unity of existence.[26] The concept maintains that existence, or *wujūd*, is one and unique reality from which all reality derives, considering that the external world of sensible objects is but a fleeting shadow of the formless God (Akbar 2016; Zolghadr 2018). *Waḥdat al-wujūd* finds its ultimate expression in the doctrines of *nirguṇ* saints like Kabir, Ravidas, Nanak and Laldas, among others.

Laldas and Chishti Gadan, both, echoed a shared critique of hegemonic religions which are predicated on institutionalised 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' practice as distinguished by ignorance and the absence of a true love for God. They believed that the emphasis on outward practices and rituals can obscure the deeper, more meaningful aspects of religion, and that this can lead to a superficial and ritualistic approach to spirituality. Their conversation reflected a commitment to the inner spiritual dimension of religion and a desire to transcend the limitations of institutional structures and dogmas in order to connect with the divine in a more direct and meaningful way. The unanimity of the two figures in the narratives thus illuminates the critique of both usual 'Islamic' ways of life and 'Hindu' modes of worship. These two traditions enhanced and complemented each other.

Laldas is said to have gone on the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca three times during his life. On each of his journeys, he brought back a brick and used it in building mosques. Two mosques, the Mecca and Medina, still exist in the vicinity of his shrine at Rasgan village, where he spent his married life. As an incipient Indic cultural tradition, this kind of religious interaction is necessarily an indication of the co-existence of opposite religious values alongside the desired ones. In this process, religious synthesis and the negation of values take place simultaneously. For instance, when a person follows mixed religious practices, he or she can simultaneously be both Hindu and Muslim, neither and beyond representing a break from already established categorical societal norms. For instance, when Sahab Khan sent soldiers to bring Laldas, the saint was sitting at the Mecca mosque he had built (Figure 2.4).

Laldas was reciting *saī* (God) Ram's name, despite the fact that he was sitting at the Mecca mosque to send the message of religious indifference among his followers:

> *us fakar ko dekho jāye, es ghoḍā pe lāo caḍhāī*
> *dehāde jab nagale āye, makkā mahjad baithe pāye.* (Dungarisi n.d.: 12)
>
> Go and see that *fakir* [mendicant], bring him on this horse
> When they reached Nagla, they saw sitting him at the Mecca mosque.

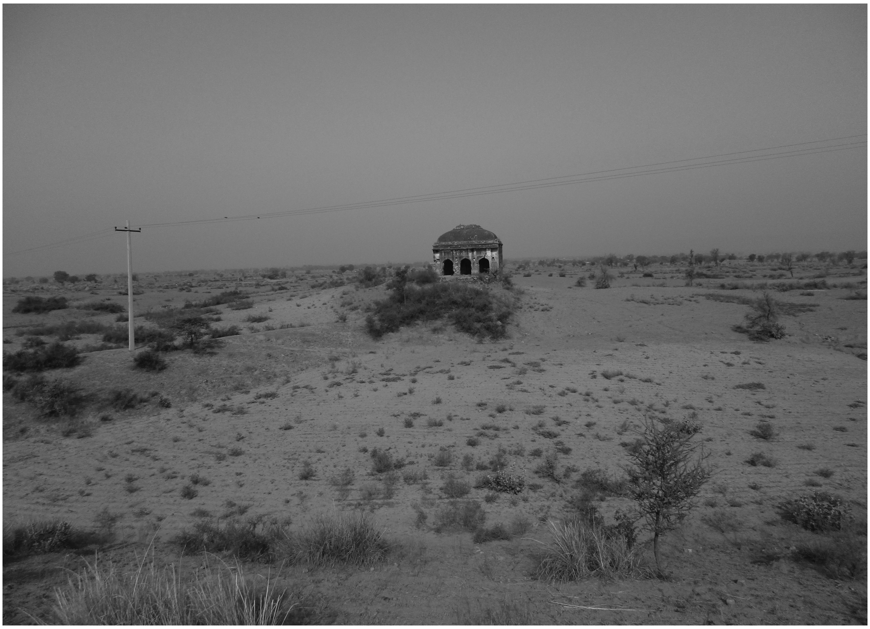


FIGURE 2.4 The abandoned Mecca mosque

Source: Photo by the author.

For the saint, religion and its symbols meant to invoke the one formless entity. Other similar verses in the text, although the text is oriented towards Hinduism, clearly indicate the saint's proximity to as well as distance from both Islamic and Hindu religious symbols and practices.[27] Laldas thus separates himself from both the Muslim identity of his birth and orthodox Hindu forms of religious practice. He presented a unique form of religious liminality and a betwixt and between zone which unsettled fixed notions of 'religion'.[28] He stood for *nirguṇ bhakti* ideas that were compatible with his Islamic faith.

The hagiography's goal of detaching Laldas from Islamic aspects, although successful, could not hide the saint's distinctiveness. Saint Laldas's liminal status is visible in his non-observance of the Islamic practices of *rojā* and *namāz*, despite being born a Muslim.[29] But the text shows that Laldas also opposed Hindu religious doctrines. For example, he does not condone idol worship, although it is one of the central aspects of 'Hinduism', but instead encourages the *nirguṇ bhakti* of Ram. This idea resonated the sayings of many other saints who spoke against Brahminical Hinduism and the *saguṇ* mode of devotion that was widely prevalent at the time.[30]

Although the text stressed that Laldas was a *bhakti* saint and adherent of Ram, this was not the only story. There are occasional references in the text that give some indication of Laldas's equal proximity to certain tenets of the Islamic (*Islamicate*) religion. Laldas foreswore some 'Islamic' and 'Hindu' rituals and borrowed concepts from both religions to create an alternative set of practices in a liminal space where the participants' preceding identities, groups or commonalities could be transformed into new behaviours and rituals. This inter-structural liminal period was also a period of creativity.[31] A liminal phase is characterised by a period of limbo, uncertainty and an anti-structure stand.[32]

While applying the perspective of liminality on the ambiguity of Laldas's identity as a Hindu *sant* and/or a Muslim *pīr*, one needs to be wary of homogenising religious behaviour of a liminal group.[33] Various caste communities of Indian Muslims, like many Hindu castes, invented their own versions of the Indic religious world in which a wide range of religious symbols coexisted in an unusual way.[34] One central idea in Laldas's teachings is that the distinction between Hindus and Muslims is meaningless. Laldas emphasised a kind of equality and non-difference between the two religions, while also enriching the Meos' version of popular Islam. His religious messages and symbolic acts drew a large number of adherents from both faiths.[35] In other words, similar to many saints and religious orders, Laldas advocated common religious ideals for both Hindus and Muslims without denying the authority of God or the gods of either religion. The members of both religions were asked to follow a righteous path in the context of the similarities and differences (institutional and dogmatic) in pursuit of a common universal spiritual message. The history of the Laldas order exemplified the acculturated form of the popular religious world, in which sect and ethnic differences were more important than identification with Hindu and Muslim identities and differences. Moreover, in this regard, he is comparable to Satya Pir of Bengal and other saints who blurred 'the line between Hindu and Muslim as religious categories' (T. Stewart 2000: 22).

Despite the fact that 'Islam' and 'Hinduism' had an equal impact on people's lives in Mewat,[36] the Bhakti and Sufi doctrines drew people's attention and garnered greater followings than the two dominant religions, as evidenced by many folk accounts about Laldas. The order of Laldas, while incorporating certain principles from both 'Hinduism' and 'Islam', deliberately distanced itself from the two religions. These Bhakti and Sufi saints gave priority to the local over the non-local or imperial/political, to esoteric mysticism over dogmatic practices and to monotheism over polytheism. The saint venerated by the Meo peasants neither completely disavowed Meo versions of popular religion nor demanded an allegiance to either 'Hinduism' or 'Islam'. His stories were embedded in shared pluralistic contexts. The Meos' religious environment from Laldas's time until the twentieth century was more heterogeneous, diverse, pluralistic and hybrid. His anecdotes indicate that diverse identities, practices, beliefs and symbols were combined and merged in the popular religious world that transcend and contradict our contemporary understanding of both religions as disparate 'entities'.

LALDAS AND COW VENERATION

Cow veneration is commonly perceived as a 'Hindu' tradition. Most Hindus in contemporary times regard Muslims to be the natural enemy of cows since they eat beef. The cow, like other Hindu peasant communities, operates as an Indic religious motif in the cultural practises of the Meo Muslims of the Laldasi heritage. Yet, in recent years, advocates of right-wing Hindutva ideology have entirely seized the iconography of the cow in order to garner political mileage. For many Meo Muslims who are Laldas followers, the veneration of cows is imbricated with their peasant identity and rustic religiosity surpassing dogmatic notions of religions. Contrary to the prevailing portrayal of Meo Muslims as enemies of the cow by the Hindu Right and certain prominent media sites, Meos had a tremendous amount of respect for the animal. For instance, one day, I spotted a beautifully adorned cow sitting in front of a Meo's house. I enquired about the reason for doing so from the house-owner. An elderly Meo replied, 'We are the followers of Laldas and always have had cows in our house for religious and agricultural reasons.' In addition, he stated, 'This cow is about 20 years old and has provided them with an abundance of products, including milk, butter, bullocks, and manure. Therefore, it will be "inhuman" to sell her to be butchered for a small amount of money.' The man wanted the cow to die a natural death.

There were numerous such examples that demonstrated the impact of Laldas's teachings on his Meo Muslim disciples. A blind Meo, a devoted follower of Laldas, spent his entire day grazing a herd of cows, bullocks and other animals. He was doing so to follow Laldas's path since, as he remembered, the saint himself gave him the instruction to care for cows in his dream. He has devoted his entire life to the cause since then. Muslims in this region believe that they will continue to be blessed and protected by Laldas as long as his precepts are obeyed. His profound fondness for cows became widely recognised to the extent that, until recently, Meo Muslims would present a young yellow heifer to his shrine during times of hardship as a gesture of devotion. For instance, many Meo Muslims continue to think that if the rain fails, a yellow heifer must be offered to the saint, and it will rain before the devotees return home.[37] The yellow heifer will live in the vicinity of the shrine and enjoy the protection of the saint.

As Laldas solidified his religious ideas, he not only advocated *nirguṇ bhakti* (formless devotion) but also preached the values of cow herding and vegetarianism. Vegetarianism was fundamental to the creation of his religious order, which was premised upon the concept of *jivdayā* (kindness to all living beings). Laldas also emphasised that those who take the life of another person will face consequences, as God will hold them accountable. He added further, the righteous never forget to be afraid of God. Laldas's teachings rejected the idea that 'religion' is primarily about following rules and regulations, or about achieving a particular status or position in society. Instead, he emphasised the importance of the inner spiritual experience and the need to cultivate a deep and personal relationship with God. His traditions also stressed the importance of compassion, service and love towards all beings as a natural expression of the love and devotion that one feels towards God.

He also took his family's cows to graze on a nearby hillock in the Aravalli mountain range. There he is said to have engaged in *tapasyā* (meditation) of *nirguṇ* (formless) Ram while surrounded by the grazing cows. A very old, ruined building marks the spot of his meditation (Figure 2.5). Numerous couplets attributed to the saint contain explicit or implicit allusions to his association with both religions, and the remaining ruins serve as tangible evidence of his devotion to both faiths. Laldas is believed to have prayed to Ram at the mosque located near the adjacent ruined building. Another mosque from the same era was also present in close proximity (see Figure 2.6). It was at this very place that Laldas encountered Bhogari, one of his future wives. Bhogari's father, a shepherd who spent time with Laldas, had been apprehended by tax collectors of the Mughal state. The informants in the field and bards narrated that Bhogari's father was detained due to his alleged non-payment of *jamā* (rent).

By the time of this encounter between Bhogari and Laldas, he was renowned for his miracles, particularly those performed in the service of

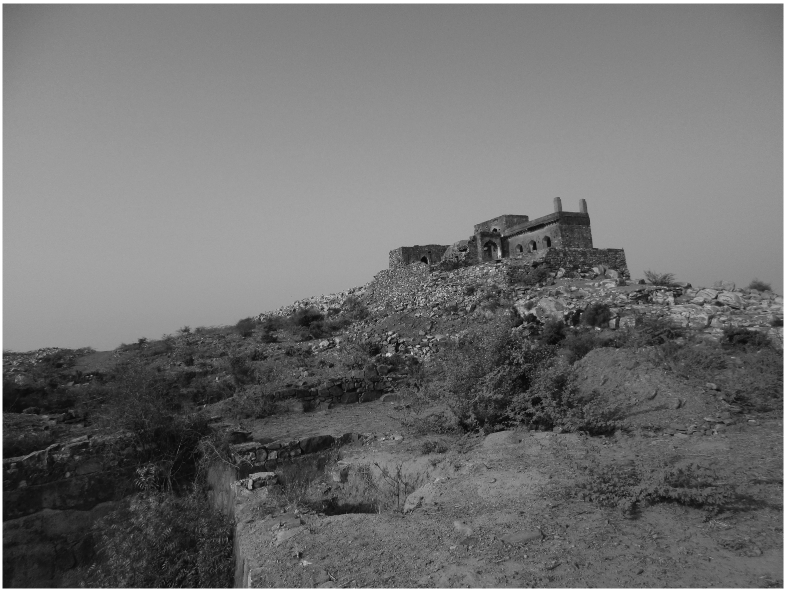


FIGURE 2.5 The meditation place of Laldas on the Aravalli Hills

Source: Photo by the author.

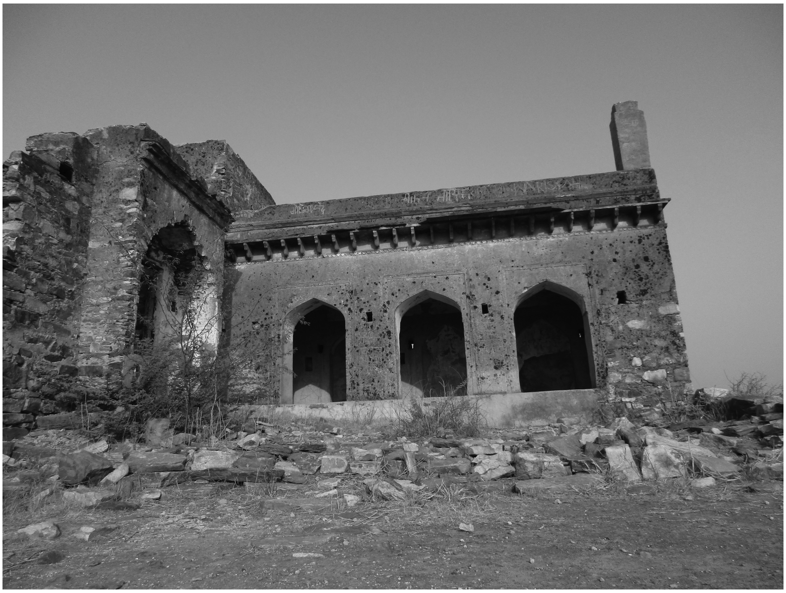


FIGURE 2.6 A mosque attached to the place of Laldas's meditation

Source: Photo by the author.

the poor and destitute. Laldas produced a gold coin and gave it to Bhogari in order to settle her father's debt and free him from prison. But he swore her to secrecy regarding this incident. Bhogari was flattered by the saint's action and chose to marry him. Upon her father's return to the house, she informed him of her decision, and shortly thereafter, Bhogari and Laldas were married. As a result, Laldas moved on to the next stage of the Hindu life cycle, which is the stage of a householder. Laldas's marriage is significant because, in contrast to many saints, Sufis and Yogis who promoted a full detachment from the material world, it gave Meo peasants a model of householder asceticism. The saint's model of asceticism within a married life was more in tune with the peasant ideals of the Meos.

Many popular religious traditions of saints like Laldas evoked the centrality of peasant life through their teachings, including those of Tejaji among Jat peasants in Rajasthan, the cowherd god Krishna among Yadav (Ahir) peasants, Gazi Miyan among Ahir and Kurmi peasants in Uttar Pradesh and Baba Laldas among the Meos. It is important to remember here that the love for cows as an Indic phenomenon closely follows the Krishnaite tradition among cow herders.[38] Grazing, saving the life of cows and taking care of them were everyday characteristics of peasant rusticity. Both Tejaji and Gazi Miyan in the respective folklores of Rajasthan and the Gangetic belt died saving cows from Hindu attackers (Amin 2016; Bharucha 2003). Moreover, Gazi Miyan, who was an eleventh-century Muslim iconoclast known for smashing Hindu idols and historically hostile to Hinduism, gradually transformed into a figure of veneration among Hindus and Muslims. In Indo-Gangetic folklores Gazi Miyan kept company with *gvāl*s (shepherds) and vowed to protect cows—a quintessentially Indic Krishnaite theme—from Hindu perpetrators (see Amin 2016).[39] Such Indic forms of religiosities generally straddle the boundaries of mutually contrasting religious orientations. Cows had several symbolic meanings among peasant castes. Specifically, cow devotion denotes a divide between peasant and non-peasant societies, non-Brahminical and Brahmanical religiosities, and low and high cultures.

In India, animal grazing overseen by *charvāhā* or *gvāl* (shepherds) is a communal practice and a popular trope in local religions; for example, the god Krishna spent his adolescence in the company of *gvāl*s and was indulged in shepherding. Many stories reiterate and reflect the same Krishnaite theme about Laldas that he used to take risks to protect animals. Although saintly religious paths attract people from all caste backgrounds, including upper caste Brahmins and Baniyas of orthodox religious standing, the significance of peasant life lived by these saints invokes the religiosity of popular world where Indic themes found their most deep expression. The walls of the main shrine of Laldas in the village of Sherpur, a few kilometres away from his birthplace, are decorated in paintings depicting the saint's life. Nearly every image portrays him surrounded by cows (Figure 2.7).

Many saintly figures often come from Hindu and Muslim peasant or low caste backgrounds, and the common thread that runs through their biographies is their devotion to caring for cows and ensuring their well-being. It was popularly believed that Laldas would protect cows at any cost. In the hagiography of Laldas, a devoted follower is described to have unintentionally caused the death of a calf from his herd of cows. Overwhelmed by the circumstances, he hastily buried the deceased calf beneath a heap of hay.

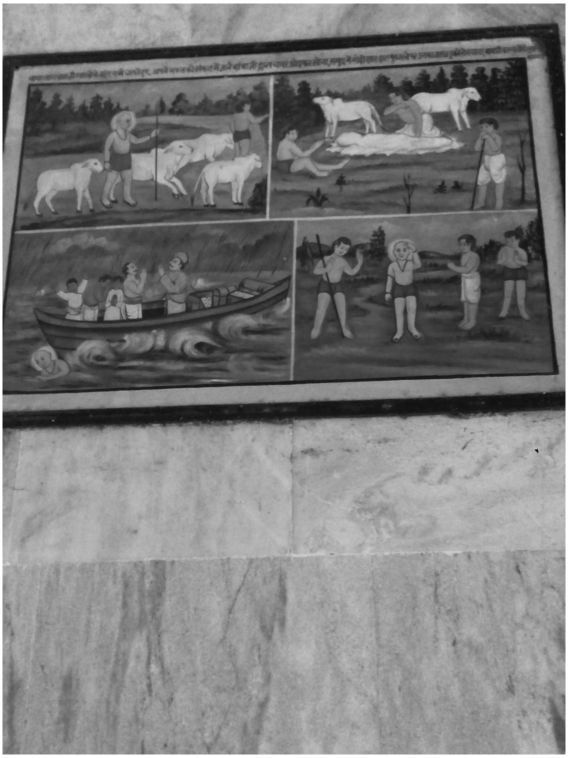


FIGURE 2.7 Laldas surrounded by cows

Source: Photo by the author.

Upon the mother cow's return from grazing, she began to moo anxiously in a desperate search for her calf, the mournful cries persisting throughout the night. Early the next morning, the follower visited Laldas and recounted the entire incident, including the cow's distressing moos. In response, the saint conveyed, 'There is nothing hidden from Ram; He is the one who grants and takes away life from all' (Dungarisi n.d.: 39–40). Laldas consistently displayed profound kindness towards cows, and as soon as the follower returned home, he witnessed the cow playing joyfully with her calf.

Although the politics around cows in north India have caused various sectarian conflicts in Mewat, many Meo people are still of the opinion that cows ought to be protected for a variety of reasons, including the socio-economic and religious significance of cows. When the Haryana Gauvans Sanarakshan and Gausamvardhan Act, 2015—also known as the Cow Protection Act—was passed, more than 200 village *pancāyat*s in Mewat declared cow slaughter to be a horrific crime and made their intentions to save the animal noticeable by implementing state policies. It was an effort to repudiate Mewat's reputation of being 'anti-cow'. The concerned *pancāyat* pledged to take decisive action against the wrongdoer, promising to hand them over to the authorities and sever ties with the offender's family. This stern stance would be enacted if anyone from the 200 villages was found guilty of engaging in cow smuggling, cow slaughter or trading of beef (*The Tribune India* 2016). Many Meos felt relieved that such a regulation will assist them in combating the false and tarnishing image of the community as 'cow smugglers', despite the fact that such an initiative was strongly entwined with the nationalistic politics of Hindutva and the cow protection drive by the ruling BJP. Consequently, many *gauśala*s (cow shelters) were opened by Meos (*The Tribune India* 2016). These newly opened cow shelters also proved to be beneficial for managing stray cows and bullocks. Due to their relatively poor milk production, compared to buffaloes, and the evolving agricultural technologies, cows were no longer a reasonably viable option for household economies. As a result, several farmers had let their cows wander the streets. The practice created yet another difficulty with crops being harmed, and it had turned into a recurring issue of how to handle stray animals, especially cows, in relation to the region's prevailing politics of cow protection. *Gauśala*s, thus, received widespread Meo support to protect their harvests from stray animals. Historically, the reasons for cow protection have varied depending upon socio-economic realities. Laldas and his Muslim followers in Mewat still respect and venerate cows as much as other Hindus do simply because of the peasant religiosity that provided the origin for the practice.

ORDAINED AND NON-ORDAINED *SĀDH*S

Examples of the saint's equidistance from both religions and the distinctive religious synthesis that he preached can be found in the Muslim adherents of Laldas. As was already mentioned, practically all Laldasi shrine priests are Meo Muslims known as *lāldās kā sādh*. The term *sādh* originates from *siddh*, meaning 'perfect' in meditation. Etymologically, *sādh*, *siddh* and *sādhu* are related, describing those among the Hindus who lead religiously oriented lives. A devotee of Laldas may be called a *sādh* in Mewat, but the term more commonly refers to the Meo Muslim priests who sit at Laldas's shrines, although in recent times some of the priests have also been Hindus.[40] Muslim *sādh*s traditionally performed this duty, which has brought upon them the disapproval of non-Laldasi Muslims. In one famous popular saying, the *sādh*s' lifestyle is the object of sarcasm and disapproval:

> *dāḍhī-mūnch katā ka raho risāy*
> *dono dīn sū jāyego lāldās ko sādh.*
>
> They are pleased to shave off their moustaches and beards
> They will fail both religions, these *sādh*s of Laldas.

The complexity of these religious beliefs is exemplified by the fact that the priest at the Sherpur shrine is a Muslim of Meo caste who neither observes *rojā* (fasting during the holy month of the Ramzan) nor recites the *kalmā* (the lines of the Quran)—a man who is neither a Muslim nor a Hindu but a Laldasi. Every tradition that has the potential to surpass the tenets of 'Hinduism' and 'Islam' is criticised by religious purists because it undermines the foundation upon which their beliefs rest. The conversations with a large number of Hindu and Muslim *sādh*s during fieldwork indicated that in many aspects of their personal lives, their behaviours frequently transcended religious borders and therefore was frequently criticised by the non-Laldasi Meos.

Muslim *sādh*s, particularly the older generation, do not grow beards like other Muslims, nor do they pray in mosques or observe Ramzān fasting. A *sādh* of Laldas, Nasimuddin shared that he had never consumed meat in his entire life. He believed that the saint would punish anybody who broke this custom, and as a result, no member of his family will ever disobey the saint. He recalled that on one occasion his nephew disobeyed this rule and ate meat, which led to him experiencing extreme discomfort in his stomach. Later, he was brought to the shrine to pray for forgiveness.

It is a common practice among the followers of Laldas, who are collectively referred to as Laldasis and originate primarily from the Duhlot *pāl* of Muslim Meos, to abstain from eating meat. Although the consumption of pork is forbidden, Islam does not encourage vegetarianism as a lifestyle choice. On the other side, in Hinduism, both religious and personal reasons are associated with vegetarianism. In the case of Laldasi Muslim Meos, vegetarianism embodies values of a complex religiosity that render the theological beliefs of both Hinduism and Islam superfluous. The family of Nasimuddin had been the caretakers of the Sherpur shrine for many generations, and they had always adhered to the Laldasi path. As a result of the beliefs and practices that they uphold, Meo Muslim *sādh*s are confronted with a myriad of societal problems in the areas where they live. The marriage of their children can be difficult if the prospective in-laws anticipate adherence to strict Islamic behaviour, particularly after the success of the Tablighi Jamaat in Mewat. On the day of the wedding of Nasimuddin's daughter, Muslim relatives of the groom who were of the Tablighi background insisted on providing meat at the wedding ceremony. This resulted in a fight, which ultimately led to the cancellation of the marriage.[41]

Women married into *sādh* families first pay a visit to the shrine to establish a bond with the religious order and abandon the Islamic customs of their birth families. Nasimuddin's wife, Ruksana, recollected that for her it was a smooth transition from her prior Islamic belief. She believed that the saint fortified her faith at every step in becoming a *sādh*. As was the case with Laldas himself, the *sādh*s are also family-oriented individuals who generally married Meo women but do not dine with non-Laldasi Meos. The initiation procedures which a convert like Ruksana must undergo in order to become a member of the order included showing a sincerity of faith. Traditionally, to prove that a *sādh* has given up his pride, a male *sādh* was obligated to blacken his face, ride a donkey facing backward and wear a string of shoes around his neck (Powlett 1878: 59). After that, a cup of sherbet is presented to him, and at that point, he is initiated into the order. It has been advised for Meo *sādh*s by the saint to let their homes be emptied of possessions for the welfare of others. In addition to providing for themselves through their own labour, a good Laldasi is expected to share some of the wealth that they have earned with others in need (Powlett 1878: 59).

Presently, these Meo Muslim *sādh*s are very few in numbers, but there are a large number of Meos who merely hold Laldas in reverence as a *pīr* and a great Meo. It appears that the only form of worship is the recitation of Ram's name and the singing of hymns; however, meditation, also known as 'keeping God's name in the heart', is said to be considered a fundamental practice for these followers. No one questioned the religious practices of Muslim Laldasis till recently, but life is more difficult, as Ruksana recalled, because other Muslims want the Meo Laldasis to uphold strict Sunni Islamic principles. Her spouse has made an exception by going to the local mosque and participating in the Eid and Bakr-e-Eid celebrations in the name of community solidarity. However, the Laldasi Meo Muslims have not yet fully departed from the fundamental principles of the order as a result of the pressure to adhere to Islamic law. Rather, it has inspired the creation of new traditions, such as modifying the Laldas-oriented traditional belief system to incorporate reformist teachings. For instance, Laldasi Muslims buy goats and offer them to someone else to sacrifice on their behalf on Bakr-e-Eid, an Islamic festival of sacrifice, to avoid going against Laldas's teachings. Hence, the two faiths are balanced to some extent by every Muslim *sādh*.

Hindus, too, in some cases, have started using the term *sādh* as a second denomination of their names. Hindu devotees of Laldas are prohibited from worshipping any goddess, as Hindu goddesses require ceremonial meat offerings. I observed that many young Hindus from Punahana who previously prayed to the Goddess Kali had to quit this practice when they embraced Laldas. The saint had come in people's dreams, exhorting them to place confidence in Sufi saints rather than a goddess, so approving and demonstrating the Laldasi path's relationship to Sufism.

Every day it is the duty of the *sādh* to bathe and open the shrine and perform *ārtī* in front of Laldas's grave at Sherpur (Figure 2.8). A group of Hindu devotees, including the members of the Sherpur temple committee,[42] join the *sādh* for evening prayers. The Muslim priest's austere lifestyle, and his performance of Hindu rituals at the saint's shrine which resembles an Islamic *dargāh*, signifies the border crossings in Indic lives. The rituals include Hindu-style *ārtī* and *bhajan*s (Hindu religious songs) with Hindu devotees. Given that they worship a wide variety of deities, the majority of Hindus do not perceive any conflict in these rituals.

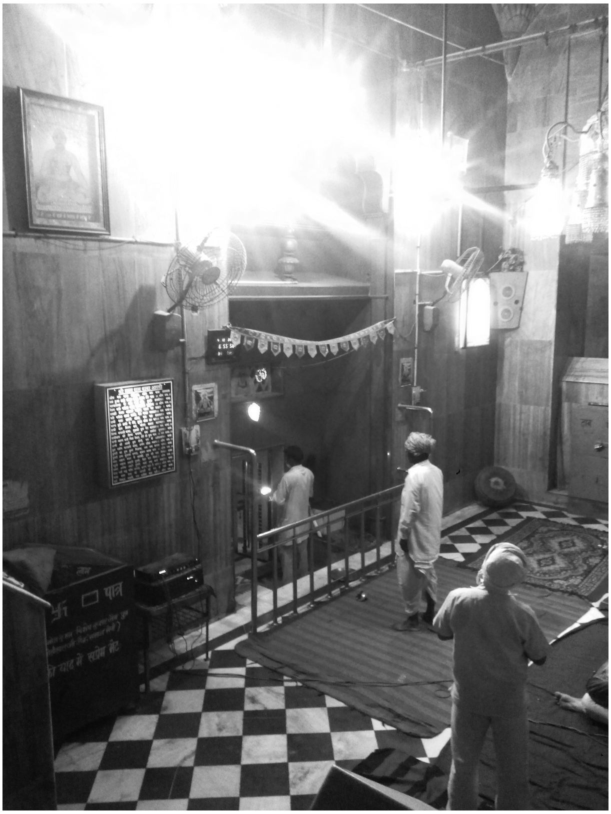


FIGURE 2.8 The current Muslim *sādh* performing *ārtī* at the Sherpur shrine
Source: Photo by the author.

Cloth offerings to both the saint and the guardians of his tomb are another example of a mixed ritual practice.[43] The grave of four *sayyed*s, located at each corner of the Sherpur shrine, symbolically served as a sign of protection for the saint's and his family's graves. Safeguarding the graves is a popular Muslim practice, and the community known as Sayyeds or Fakirs usually did this job for Meos and other Muslims in Mewat. The Islamic insignia of a *chaddar* or *galeb*, traditionally used to cover tombs, is presented to these four *sayyed*s (fakirs) as is the case with other Sufi saints. Both Hindus and Muslims use the Islamic way of reverence when presenting the cloth to Laldas and the four *sayyed*s, albeit the cloth presented to Laldas is white rather than green, as it is in Sufi *dargāh*s.

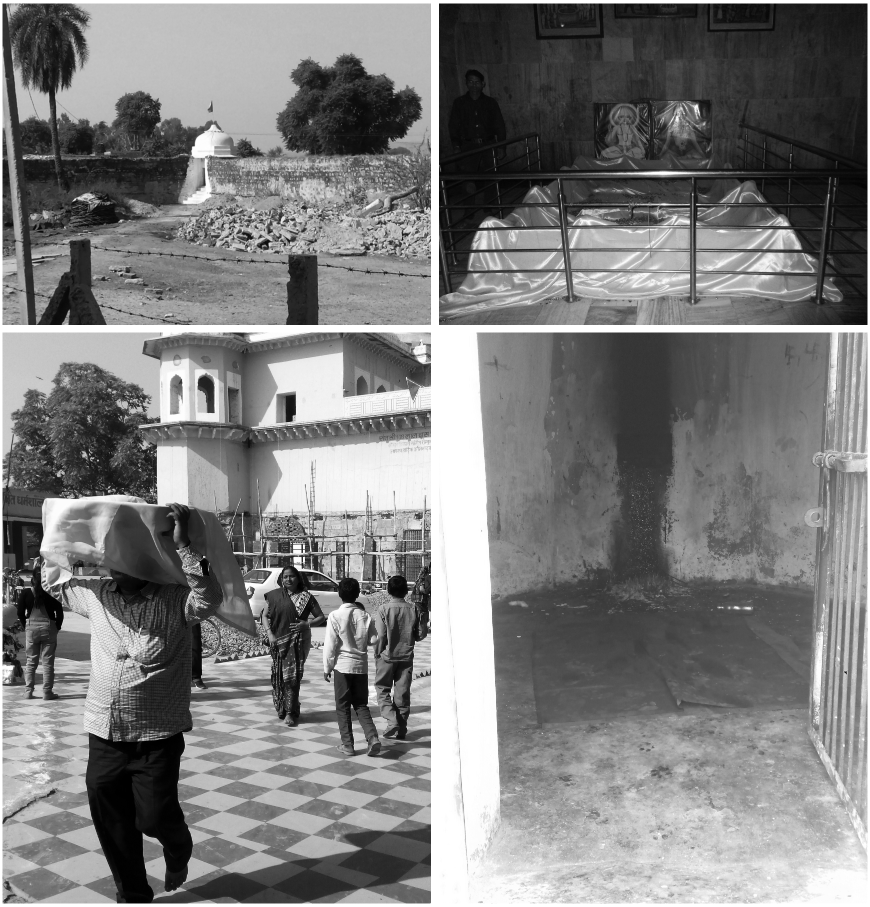


FIGURE 2.9 White sheets offered to Laldas (*top right*), a visitor carrying sheets (*top right*) and a *sayyed*'s tomb with the green sheet (*lower left and right*)

Source: Photos by the author.

Hindu and Muslim devotees buy both white and green *chaddar*s to offer to the saint and the *sayyed*s respectively (Figure 2.9). Sallu, an elderly *sādh* who claimed to be a hundred years old, shared that the practice of offering a white *chaddar* was 'a perpetual tradition at least in my life span and probably in my father's too', not a recent change.[44] The symbolism of offering white cloth to Laldas, a customary apparel for Hindu ascetics, along with the green cloth to *sayyed*s (traditional for the Islamic dead), synthesises differing religious symbolism and practices in the *panth*.

Laldas's Hindu, Muslim and Sikh followers, who visited the shrine in the morning and evening, followed more or less the same practice of offering grains to the shrine. They offered grain to feed animals and birds. Other offerings included oil, incense sticks, rice, corn and sweets. Every Sunday and the day before a full moon were observed as days of fasting. On these days, only one meal (dinner) was prepared in a household, after which a lamp must be lit and maintained throughout the night.

The experience of a miracle by visitors or the fulfilment of their wishes being as a result of their faith in the saint formed an important strand in their devotion to Laldas. If the wishes of a visitor to the shrine were fulfilled, that person would show gratitude to the saint in various ways, including offering a *chaddar* or installing memorabilia in the shrine.[45] Unlike many other Sufi saints who are usually worshipped on Thursdays, Laldas is customarily worshipped on Sundays, his birthday, although visitors pray at the shrine every day, most prostrating themselves in front of the grave. They then circumnavigate the grave, walking on the path between the main *sanctum* and the outer walls, Muslims reciting verses from the Quran and Hindus singing the *bhajan*s of Laldas. In addition to granting miracles and blessings, the saint served various beneficial roles in people's daily lives. The shrine was also frequently used for *pancāyat* meetings to settle disagreements, as it was believed that witnesses would not lie within the premises. It was a common belief that the saint would personally supervise the procedures. When someone's sincerity needed to be proven, the community would bring him to the shrine, place some rice in his hand and ask the *sādh* to recite some lines from the Quran or offer prayers to the saint. If the rice turned red, it indicated guilt for the offender. Also, I witnessed a land dispute between two families. The dispute had remained unsolved for a long time. Both factions agreed to a final hearing in the shrine. Snacks and beverages were provided, and some older people were asked to oversee the event. Nobody objected to the final decision, and it went as easily as a conversation in a dining room. This attests to the continuing importance of the saint within the area.

To briefly sum up here, through his teachings, Laldas was opposed to the pre-existing social and religious hierarchy. This is consistent with the views of other Bhakti personalities, such as Kabir, Ravidas and Dadu.[46] Caste and religious identities were concepts that were questioned by a number of saints who came from a lower socio-economic background. The teachings of Laldas reflected the specific caste connections of the Meo community towards both religions and the rural background of his family and community. His primary concern was the transcendence of institutional religiosities related to mainstream 'Hinduism' and 'Islam' through the imbrication of Meo relationships with vernacular and acculturated forms of religiosities, thereby making the boundaries between the two religions more fluid. This was accomplished by merging beliefs in his order. Religious orders such as that of the Laldas expressed a distinct form of religiosity while simultaneously diminishing the significance of the religious categories of 'Hindu' and 'Muslim'. In spite of this, the preoccupation with maintaining one's religious identity gradually grew dominant at the shrines of Laldas. Chapter 3 will analyse the emergence of disputes between the Meo and the Baniya Laldasis around the traditional shrines of Laldas to understand the changing form of religious culture and to describe the reasons behind those disputes.

NOTES

1. Dungarisi Sadh published the biography of his guru Laldas called *Sri Laldas Maharaj ki paricawali* (The introduction of Laldas) in *doha-caupai* (couplets/quadruplets). This is a narrative poem written in simple Mewati and comprised of roughly 580 verses. It is broken up into 31 *nukta*s, which can be translated as 'small chapters'. It is the only historical biography of Laldas that has been found.
2. Although Dungarisi is said to have compiled the verses of Laldas, other portions of the text such as the biographical *nuktāvalī* seem to have been added later. Since it is the work of many authors and the verses are not identifiable, I am treating it as anonymous but will refer to the cited couplets under the name of Dungarisi Sadh. The verses are of unknown dates. All these couplets from the text are in Appendix A.1.
3. Unless otherwise indicated, the translations of the verses throughout the book are mine. I take responsibility for any errors.
4. Masuzawa (2005) points out that the category of religion is based on a particular understanding of what counts as 'belief' and 'practice'. This understanding is shaped by Christian theology and assumes that religion involves belief in a transcendent reality and the worship of a deity or deities. However, many non-European cultures do not fit this model of religion, and their belief systems were often classified as 'superstition' or 'magic' by Europeans. Similarly, the model of 'world-religions' is problematic, too.

5. These aforementioned popular stories of Laldas appear in the hagiography, along with other tales of Laldas's miracles. These also appear in the accounts of the colonial ethnographer and British colonial settlement officer P. W. Powlett, who undertook an extensive survey of Alwar state in the 1850s and wrote the *Gazetteer of Ulwar* in 1878. Powlett (1878: 53–60) cites many verses of the hagiography under the subheading '*panthi*s or sects' in the chapter on religion. This provides some idea of the earliest date of the circulation of this hagiography: probably sometime between the late seventeenth and mid-eighteenth centuries. Powlett and other sources indicate the verses were already in circulation before his survey work. Powlett describes Laldas as the most famous saint of the area.
6. In exploring the identity of Laldas in general, Hayat (2016) notes the distinctive nature of the saint, although he ultimately accepts the suggestion of Laldas's Punjab origin (Lahore, presently in Pakistan). Hayat's conviction about the time frame of the several meetings between Laldas and Shukoh, that is, before 1654, follows the works of Hasrat (1952) and Qanungo (1952), while Wilson assumes it to be in 1649. Hayat, however, agrees that the time period and the number of the meetings remain ambiguous. There is no mention of these cases in the historical manuscripts and sources. Indeed, sources refer to the impossibility of any interaction between the Mewati Laldas and Dara Shukoh, as the former is believed to have died in 1648.
7. Among all the available variants, Hayat (2016: 13) notes there are six manuscripts and two texts that record these dialogues. Hayat's list includes eight works and a partial mention to one other work. Kept in various archives and libraries in London and Berlin, the manuscripts and texts are available in Persian, English and Hindi languages. Hayat meticulously notes the minute differences in all these works.
8. Fieldwork, July 2016, Saharanpur.
9. In Hindu mythology, Bhagirath was responsible for bringing the river Ganga from the heavens to the earth. Shiva, residing on mount Kailash, then channeled her through his thick locks.
10. In Saharanpur, Laldas was a good friend of a Muslim saint called Haji Shah Kamaal. The extraordinary friendship between the two is still a unique symbol of communal harmony. Haji Shah Kamaal remained in the vicinity of Laldas and took spiritual advice from him. A *majār* (tomb) of Shah Kamaal is located next to Laldas's temple. Both saints are said to have followed the same lifestyle.

11. Jaggas are a community of Brahmin genealogical recordkeepers in Mewat. The state acknowledges that the Jagga documents are credible pieces of historical and legal evidence.
12. Many cheap pamphlets about Laldas have the title 'the great saint of Mewat and the symbol of communal harmony'.
13. Bhakti and Sufism are movements of theistic devotion in Hinduism and Islam. While Bhakti spread from south to north India from the tenth century onwards (Hawley 2015a), the currents of Sufism arrived in India around the thirteenth century from the Persian and the Arab world (Ernst and Lawrence 2016). Central to the practices of both traditions are mysticism and god-centred meditation. Both Bhakti and Sufi ideas were also circulated through collections of the teachings and sayings of numerous saints, disseminated through songs and oral presentations, which were centred on devotion to one God (in Sufi Islam and *nirguṇ bhakti*) or multiple gods and goddesses such as Ram, Vishnu, Krishna, Shiva, Durga and Kali in other Bhakti traditions (Hawley 2011; Prentiss 1999; Schomer and McLeod 1987; Vaudeville 1993). Saints of both traditions inspired poetry, musical cultures such as classical *rāg*s and *qawwalī*, advocated socio-religious reforms and through their teachings challenged and sometimes reinforced religious orthodoxy and orthodox practices.
14. The ethnic label 'Turk' shows the multifarious nature and various ways of identification with religious identity.
15. The coming of the Turko-Persian and Sufi versions of Islam to north India added one more dimension to the diversity of traditions on the subcontinent. The period from the seventh to twelfth centuries was marked by the dominance of Shaivite traditions in which the god Shiva and many *tāntric* goddesses acquired supreme standing in the court culture of the ruling classes. Closely related to Shaivite philosophy were the Naths and yogis, whose anti-institutional ideas opposed the Brahminical hierarchies of society. Later, the Naths and extreme Shaivite yogis had a particular interaction with the Brahmanical as well as Bhakti and Sufi movements (Burchett 2019). Nath (Jogi/Yogi) Shaivism, Bhakti and Sufism were, thus, reflexive currents challenging orthodoxy and societal norms, and advocating alternative realities. According to Ernst (2005), by the time Sufism arrived in India at the beginning of the thirteenth century, the Nath yogis, strong proponents of an anti-Brahminical society, were already organised into a group similar to Sufis. The encounter between the two led to an exchange of practices, such

as Hatha yoga being adopted by the Sufis (Bouillier 2015). Many scholars also believe that Sufis later influenced the poetry of the *nirguṇ bhakti* saints (Horstmann 2014) as well as their (inner) vision of God (Vaudeville 1987).

16. The term *nuktāvalī* is made of *nuktā* + *avalī* words, whereby the *nuktā* stands for 'couplet' and *avalī* for 'collection', meaning 'the collection of couplets'. The *nuktāvalī* is the first part of the 600-page-long handwritten text. Although the first part is compiled by Dunagarisi Sadh as the text mentions it, the task is equally difficult to date the text and the circulation of hymns.
17. I am very grateful particularly to Anand Sadh, Ramnaresh Sadh and Sonu Aggrawal, among others, for providing me with a copy of the text *Śrī lāldās nuktāvalī*. Though the date of compilation of the text is not known, I assume it to be from the 1940s to 1950s on the basis of the written style of Hindi.
18. The English translation of the couplet completely loses its rhyming characteristics. Readers of the Hindi language would be able to grasp this nuance in the verse.
19. Linguistic duopoly refers to the dual connection of the Mewati dialect, a spoken Indo-Aryan dialect, with the Hindi and Urdu languages. In the text, *nuktāvalī*, words of Mewati, are used with Hindi, Sanskrit and Urdu words. The style in the text is similar to rhyming scriptures. Bakshi (2012) argues that 'Mewati is possibly undergoing a shift towards Hindi-Urdu with Urdu playing a key part due to its associations with Islamic identity' (234). The large presence of the Tablighi Jamaat–run *madrasa*s is also pushing this shift towards Urdu.
20. Ramanujan's (1989) 'intertextuality' incorporates different forms of 'reflexivity', a key for understanding the relations between various Indian literary traditions of myths and folktales.
21. For instance, motives, words, symbols and narrative frameworks produced in Sanskrit, Hindi and Urdu were extensively used in Mewati in a reflexive manner in producing the Mewati versions of the Hindu epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata.
22. *Mustaqīm* (Mustaqeem) is an Arabic term which also denotes the quality of being 'upright' or 'righteous' in conduct.
23. All the verses cannot be cited here. They repeatedly appeal to Hindus and Muslims to follow *nirguṇ bhakti*.
24. The common idea between most *nirguṇ bhakti* and Sufi saints was that they identified God as one and as a formless entity. Many Bhakti and Sufi saints were poets or at least their sayings have been collected and transcribed in the form of poetry. Their philosophical positions ranged from monotheism

and dualism to absolute monism. However, most saints were mainly regional, expressing variations in teachings, devotional practices and ritual observance. The world of Sufism and Bhakti cannot be understood as uniform sects or movements; diversity, complexity, ambiguity, complex interactions within and between the two are their major features. Avoiding essentialist categorisation of both must involve what Carl Ernst (2005) calls 'the polythetic approach to religion' (20), in which 'numerous examples of hybrid and multiplex symbols, practices, and doctrines can be at work in any particular religious *milieu*' (21). Bhakti and Sufism in north India reached their zenith between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries. Many saints became identified as the founders of religions, *panth*s, orders, cults and sects. For instance, the Sikh religion was founded by a famous Bhakti saint Guru Nanak.

25. The concept of *waḥdat al-wujūd* originated with the Sufi mystic Ibn Arabi in the twelfth century and has since been developed and discussed by many other Sufi scholars and philosophers. According to this concept, everything that exists is a reflection of the divine reality, and all creatures are ultimately one with the divine. In other words, the Creator and the created are not separate entities but rather one and the same. God alone is the all-embracing and eternal reality.
26. *Waḥdat al-wujūd* literally means 'the Unity of Existence' or 'the Unity of Being'. *Wujūd*, meaning 'existence' or 'presence', here refers to God. This concept has been interpreted in different ways by different scholars and practitioners of Sufism and has been criticised for being too abstract or mystical. However, for many Sufis, the idea of *waḥdat al-wujūd* is a fundamental tenet of their faith and a source of spiritual inspiration and guidance. It is seen as a way to experience the divine presence in all things and to cultivate a sense of oneness with the universe.
27. While there is little explicit representation of Islamic aspects in the text, a careful reading of the couplets indirectly points to this aspect.
28. Here I borrow from Victor Turner's (1969) theory of liminality and its development by scholars such as Shail Mayaram and Dominique Sila Khan (D. Khan 2004a: 1–10, 2004b; Mayaram 1997c, 2004a). In his analysis of a three-phased ritual process, Turner (1969) notes that liminality is the transition phase of an individual from one state to another (94–96, 101–08). Participants are first detached from their previous social life and identity and spend most of the time in an inter-structural zone, which is neither here nor there. Liminal entities straddle thresholds; they are betwixt and between,

representing margins and ambiguity. For instance, according to Turner (1969), 'deaths, being in the womb, invisibility, darkness, bisexuality, an eclipse of the sun or moon depict liminal situations' (94–130) and are stages of separation from fixed points in society. Liminality can be a permanent state or move into new phases (post-liminality) accompanied by transformed identities.

29. The concept of liminality itself requires the social recognition of bounded categories—a liminal entity generally falls between two such mutually inconsistent categories; for more information, see Douglas (2002). Douglas notes that the danger is perceived precisely because the liminal condition is not 'pure', not clearly within the categories.
30. Brahminical Hinduism has been criticised for its narrow and exclusive worldview. It tends to view the world through a lens of hierarchy and binary oppositions, such as pure and impure, good and evil, and us and them. This has led to a lack of tolerance for diversity and alternative perspectives and has resulted in conflict and violence against marginalised communities and religious minorities. Brahmanical Hinduism advocates visiting temples and offering ritual services to an idol or image. It bolsters the role of Brahmins as mediators between God and human beings. As per the sayings of many Bhakti saints and poets, who criticised the authority of Brahmins in their teachings, the mediation of Brahmins hinders any possibility of communicating directly or having a meaningful relationship with God.
31. Liminality implies an anti-structural stance and emphasises the phase of transformations and its emphasis on ambiguous scenarios. It is linked with the ideas of threshold and transition, referring to a betwixt and between status, or something which is neither here nor there. The term was used by Turner to understand the life of a Ndembu youth in terms of phases. Youth or the period of initiation was referred to as a period of transformation or a liminal phase.
32. Based on this understanding, both Mayaram and Sila Khan (D. Khan 2004a, b; Mayaram 1997b, c, 2004c) prefer the concept of liminality over syncretism as it implies the existence of 'a line of thought that emphasizes "fuzzy" thinking as an alternative to binary logic of "either/or"' (D. Khan 2004b: 212). However, Sila Khan uses 'threshold' instead of liminal in the study of understanding Hindu–Muslim religious identities in South Asia.
33. One problem in Mayaram and Khan's analyses of 'liminal' or 'threshold communities' is that all members of a liminal group are imagined to be ritually and religiously engaged in following a uniform set of practices, although

their identities are rightly pointed out to be liminal. Understanding the life of liminal individuals of a liminal group as uniform leads one to believe that all liminal participants behave religiously, ritually and politically in the same way as other liminal members. It assumes that all liminal participants follow a set of liminal or threshold guidelines beyond which liminal participants do not go. In short, liminality has been considered a bounded category, without scholars problematising and reflecting on internal diversity. On the other hand, when such groups are taken as homogeneous, internal contradictions are completely erased. In most accounts, liminal groups are referred to homogeneously as if their liminal identity is synonymous with the behaviour of every liminal individual. The assumption is that everyone else is behaviourally the same in the betwixt and between period.

34. Taking into account the general consensus among scholars on the terms 'Islamicate' and 'Indic', the Mewat region represents a typical Indic world. It refers also to any other particular tradition followed and influenced by more than one religious community, which cannot be characterised purely in terms of Hindu, Muslim, Christian or any other religious categories but are generally influenced by South Asian religious narratives. However, Indic practices indicate a context where relationships, religious practices and beliefs in South Asia are not static even in liminal and shared pluralistic contexts. Indic forms of interconnections prioritise shared values and shared lives instead of a bounded, discrete and monolithic analysis of religious and other closely associated categories.
35. Such messages are common among the saints of Nath, Bhakti and Sufi backgrounds. The idea was to emphasise a form of religiosity meant for all humans, the one beyond religious differences. Often, their teachings promoted peace, love, harmony and equality by using a religious vocabulary. In the Bhakti tradition, spiritual leadership was most often in the hands of low and middle caste-class saints. The authority of the Brahmins and the Sanskrit traditions was replaced by devotional songs in vernacular languages to emphasise universal righteousness (Schomer and McLeod 1987).
36. Punjabi and Bengali Muslims were spiritually dependent on miracles and magic to a degree incompatible with a genuine belief in any omnipotent god (Eaton 2004; Mujeeb 1985). In the 1901 Census of India, Bengali Muslims were reported to be joining in the Durga Puja, worshipping the Sitala and Rakshya goddesses during epidemics and using Hindu astrologers and almanacs in their everyday lives (Eaton 2004: 110–25). The cult of mother goddesses had great popularity in the initial years of Islamisation in Bengal. For instance,

the sixteenth-century Bengali poet Sayyad Murtaza addressed Fatima (the daughter of Prophet Mohammed) as Jagat Janani (the mother of the world) (Eaton 2004: 114).

37. Many anecdotes of offering a yellow heifer were repeatedly told to me.
38. The terms 'Indic' and 'peasant' continue to mutually define each other by borrowing tropes, symbolism, language, semiotic and elements of religious cosmology from diverse religious traditions, ways of being and various, including but not limited to hunting-gathering and agricultural, modes of resource use. Religious and caste communities of peasant origins commonly share similar stories with identical plots. There is a long history of peasant communities living an Indic form of life. These communities have their own distinctive cultural practices and beliefs, and they have played an important role in shaping the shared social and economic landscape. Their socio-religious customs continue to be deeply connected with Indic practices without strongly identifying with one institutional religious category or another. For instance, all these peasant communities continue to engage with what Afsar Mohammad (2013: 3) calls 'localised Islam' at the Sufi shrines of Muslim holy saints known as *pīr*s within a frame of peasant and rustic-inflected devotional religiosities.
39. Another typical example of Indic is the worship of the Sufi saint Nizamuddin Auliya as Krishna.
40. The Hindu *sādh*s belong to diverse communities (Brahmans, Gujjars and Badhai) and are currently performing priestly rites at two different Laldasi shrines. It is not clear when they began this role.
41. Nasimuddin suggested they eat meat outside the premises of the Laldas shrine but not within the premises where they live.
42. This committee was recently formed. More information about it comes in Chapter 4.
43. These protectors or guardians are called fakirs or *sayyed*s.
44. Interview with Sallu, 10 August 2016, Alwar.
45. People donated all kinds of things such as watches, money, images, calendars and so on to be kept in the shrines once their wishes had been fulfilled.
46. See Callewaert and Friedlander (1992) and Friedlander (1996: 106–23), especially for Saint Ravidas's concerns for salvation in the social context of the struggle between Bhakti saints and the orthodox Brahminical tradition.