



Fig. G: Inside the shrine of Ghazi Miyan (Fülling 2015)

The shrine of Ghazi Miyan: multi-religious space in Alai Pura, Varanasi

Keywords: Religious geography, Construction of space, Identity, Sacred space, Muslim shrine

1 Introduction

In contemporary social science literature the constitution of places is of major interest (cf. de Certeau 1988, Foucault 1984, Lippuner 2014). The central assumption of these authors is that *space is practiced place*. This means that geographical places are not provided by nature but are socially constructed through the charging with specific meanings by means of certain practices and interpretations (Lossau 2014, 25-37).

The city of Varanasi is a place which is charged by a multiplicity of religious meanings that have evolved over a period of many centuries. As a sacred space for the Hindu religions but with a significant share of Muslim populations this process is also characterised by rivalries between Muslims and Hindus (cf. Desai 2003). However, the analysis of the construction of religious spaces in Varanasi was largely focused on Hindu beliefs and religious practices, as Varanasi is considered to be one of the holiest cities in Hinduism. As the permanent abode of the deity Shiva and an important centre of pilgrimage, many places and routes in and around the city have been ascribed religious meanings, dating back to the *mahatmyas* (hymns of glorifications) and the *puranas* (ancient stories of gods, kings and saints). Today, these meanings and narratives shape the identity of the city as a Hindu place (cf. Eck 1983). In this paper the focus shall be turned away from the almost exclusive concentration in the literature on Varanasi as a Hindu city. In fact, the city also has a considerable Muslim tradition, which goes back to the time of the Islamic Mughal Rule from the 12th to the 18th century (Desai 2003, 24). With a Muslim population of about 30% in Varanasi City, Islamic sites and social and religious practices shape the city in significant ways (Singh 2009: 36).

Despite the rivalries and conflicts between Hindus and Muslims in India that are mainly carried out on a political level the two religious groups do not only share an everyday life, but many also visit the same religious sites. The shrines of Ghazi Miyan and Alvi Shahid, located in the north of the city are important examples of these shared practices. This paper aims to assess how the “*accumulation of meanings in an immobile place*” (Foucault 1984, 26) works in the context of multi-religiousness in the Muslim dominated area of Bari Bazar / Alai Pura in the north of Varanasi.

2 Researching the construction of religious spaces

This paper takes a closer look at the two shrines Ghazi Miyan and Alvi Shahid and aims to figure out how multi-religiousness is practiced and meaning ascribed. It aims to analyse how rituals carried out separately or together by Muslims and Hindus, beliefs and aspirations shape the Ghazi Miyan area as a multi-religious space and the religious

identities of the visitors. For this purpose three dimensions deserve scrutiny: the organisation of the shrines, the social structure of the visitors, and the religious rituals performed.

These different dimensions were approached mainly through qualitative interviews with the visitors, the employees and the heads of the different shrines and complemented by several observations and a mapping of the area. Specifically, 50 interviews were carried out with visitors, mainly in context of the shrine of Ghazi Miyan but also with people visiting the four other shrines in the closer neighbourhood that partly share visitors with Ghazi Miyan and Alvi Shahid. Also vendors selling devotional items used by visitors of the shrines were interviewed to learn about their perceptions and the role of the shrines for their livelihoods.

Additionally, several interviews were carried out with the heads of the shrines, the employees and other local residents. They were questioned about the economies, the organisation and the maintenance of the shrines, as well as on the legal status of the whole area of Ghazi Miyan. In order to get a deeper knowledge of the performed rituals and to complete the findings from the interviews, participatory and non-participatory observations were made. The data gained through this methodology is analysed in light of the construction of the Ghazi Miyan area as a multi-religious space and the production of multi-religious identities of the visitors.

3 Historical Background

The shrine of Ghazi Miyan is dedicated to the martyr Salar Masud Ghazi. In fact, there are no sources which prove that he actually existed. There are, however, several separate sources which tell a similar story about Salar Masud (v. Schwerin 1984, 146). The prefix “Ghazi” can be found in many places scattered over North India, for example in the names for Muslim warrior shrines or saintly shrines, which memorize several *Ghazis* (warriors) and *Shahids* (martyrs) (Amin 2005, 6).

Salar Masud (*1015-†1034) was the nephew of the Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavi, a conqueror from today’s Afghanistan. According to the myths, he was killed in a battle at Bahraich, close to the present-day border between India and Nepal, against a Hindu ruler just one night before his wedding (Schwerin 1984, 146, Gaborieau 1975, 238, Singh 2013, 128, Visuvalingam and Chalier-Visuvalingam 2006, 112). Therefore, the main shrine of Ghazi Miyan today can be found in Bahraich, but all over India and also in Karachi, Pakistan, about one hundred further smaller versions can be found. According to v. Schwerin 1984, 148 and 156), Salar Masud was buried at the site of an unspecified original Hindu temple either dedicated to the Sun or to Shiva. Since the spot had therefore been sacred before, the local population might have continued to visit the place and transferred attributes originally attached to Shiva, such as power, generosity and wrathfulness to Ghazi Miyan.

While Salar Masud was bound for Bahraich, he dispatched Malik Afzal Alavi and a part of his army towards Varanasi. Although being defeated there, Muslim civilians were permitted to settle down in today’s Ghazi Miyan-area which was renamed “Alavipura/ Alaipura” after

the Muslim conqueror Qutb-ud-din Aibak devastated and captured the city of Varanasi. According to Visuvalingam and Chalier Visuvalingam (2006, 112), “...almost the entire building scheme around the Bakaria Kund were constructed, generally on the site of and with the materials obtained from demolished Hindu temples.”

4 Organising and practicing sacred space

The area Bari Bazar in Alai Pura is today mainly inhabited by Muslim weaver households (*ansari*). In an area of about two hectares, five shrines and at least nine mosques can be found. These buildings are surrounded by several graveyards with numerous tombs (*mazar*)

of unknown *shahids* but also inhabited by residents of the neighbourhood (Fig. 6.1). The two shrines of Ghazi Miyan and Alvi Shahid are closely connected as visitors are obliged to visit Alvi Shahid first before going to Ghazi Miyan. Because of this connection, all statements that will be made on the composition of the visitors, their backgrounds and their aspirations apply to both places. All shrines receive Hindu as well as Muslim visitors, although they are places where Muslim saints are buried. However, during fieldwork it became soon apparent that in fact, only the shrines of Ghazi Miyan and Alvi Shahid receive a considerable number of Hindu visitors. Accordingly, the main focus of this paper is on this pair of shrines, while the other sites found in the area will not be considered in much detail.

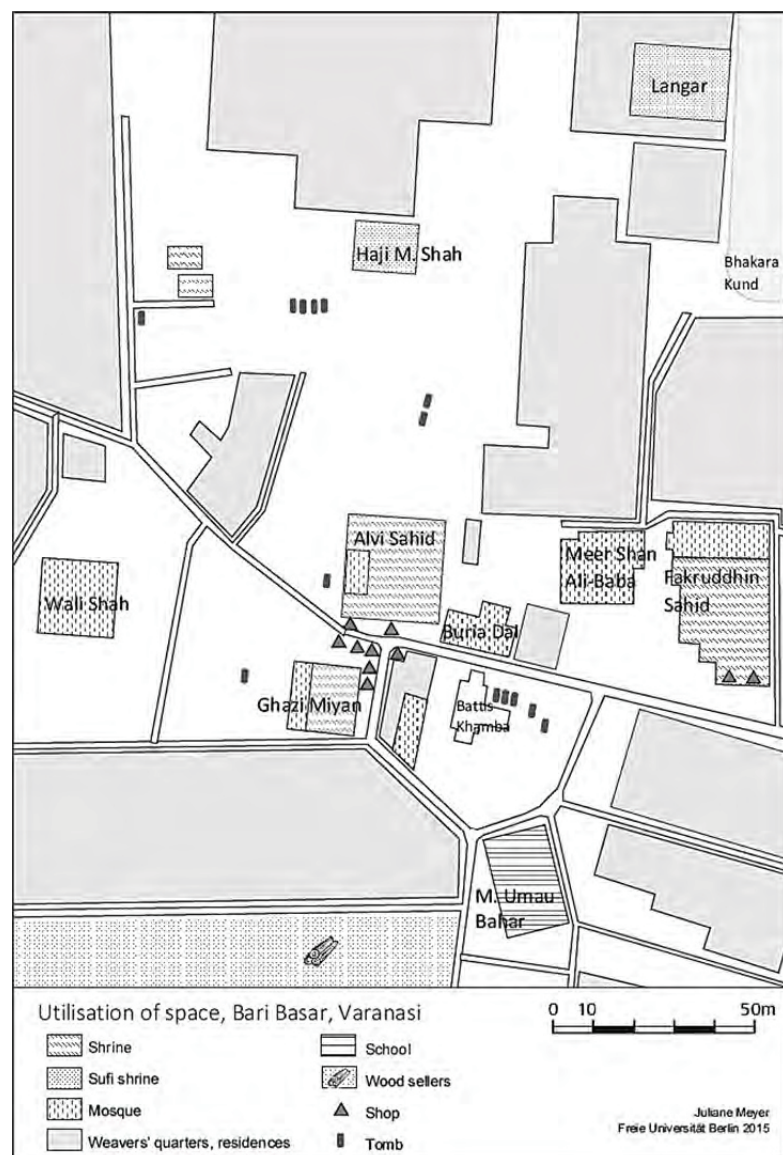


Fig. 6.1: Shrine-Area at Alai Pura, Varanasi (Source: own design)

4.1 Organisation of Ghazi Miyan and Alvi Shahid

The two shrines are opened on Thursday and Sunday from 7am to 7pm. During the other days of the week, the caretaker of the shrines who is a local resident will open the shrines for visitors if they ask for it. According to the head of Ghazi Miyan 150-200 visitors visit the

shrines on Thursdays and 300-500 visitors on Sundays. The head of the shrine has exercised his function for the last 30 years and his family holds this hereditary position since 1835, when the shrine was restored. The exact age of the place is however unknown. The head mainly fulfils tasks concerning the assistance of visitors in conducting the rituals and giving devotions to the saint.

He is also a representative in the Sunni Waqf Board, an institution attached to the Indian Ministry of Minorities that administers all Sunni *waqf* property. *Waqf* is a specific form of religious endowment that refers to the practice of *zakat* (obligatory alms), representing one of the five pillars of Islam (Strothmann 2012, 50). Usually *waqf* properties include land or buildings for a special purpose such as a shrine or a school. Most Muslim religious sites in India are this kind of religious property. The *waqf* Board provides guidelines for the management of the places and collects a yearly amount of 7% of all donations. The yearly donations at Ghazi Miyan sum up to Rs 15.000-20.000. For historical and today unknown reasons the legal status of Alvi Shahid however differs from Ghazi Miyan, which is why the donations collected at this place are kept for the private use of the head of this place.

Once a year a large festival takes place around the shrine, attracting a huge number of visitors. The organisation of this Ghazi Miyan *mela* commemorating the yearly death anniversary of Salar Masud is one of the central tasks of the head. This task is supported by a committee, consisting of ten visitors of the shrine chosen by the head and confirmed by the Sunni Waqf Board. The *mela* takes place on the first Sunday of the Hindu month of *Jyestha*, between May and June. The organisational and ritual preparations of this large event start around March.

The shrine has no formal salaried employees but the family of the caretaker undertakes different tasks concerning the maintenance of the shrine and building as a family tradition. While the caretaker is the key holder of the two shrines, his mother is responsible for the cleaning of the places. She also provides different religious services like the distribution of sacred water at the door of the shrine and the ritual shaving of the heads of babies and small children (*mundan*). The brother of the key holder slaughters the chicken used as offering to the saint. The payment for these services depends on the economic situation of the visitor and can range between Rs 51 and Rs 501. The additional amount of 1rp should reinforce the effectiveness of the rituals and is sometimes also added to the regular donations. None of the employed family members has a formal contract. They hold the position as caretakers and key holders since generations and derive their incomes from the payment for their services and donations given by the visitors.

In front of the shrine several small vendors offer devotional items needed for the rituals carried out at the shrine. Their presence fluctuates and on Thursdays there are three and on Sundays eight shops offering their goods. The vendors are not obliged to pay rent for the place. All vendors are Hindus, except of the family members of the caretaker who also run a shop. The income from such a small business varies between Rs100 and Rs1,000 per day, depending on the assortment offered at the shop and especially on the weekday as the number of visitors is significantly higher on Sundays.

Five of the shops are run exclusively by women who all stated to be single. They are either widowed or left behind by their husband and fully dependent on these earnings, whereas the male shopkeepers all have additional sources of income.

4.2 Social Structure of the visitors

The visitors of Ghazi Miyan and Alvi Shahid mostly belong to lower social groups; many are weavers and small shop owners from the neighbourhood. This social structure also corresponds to the accounts of v. Schwerin (1984, 145) and Visuvalingam and Chalier-Visuvalingam (2006, 112-114) who state that the worship of saints is more characteristic for lower Muslim castes who are not so familiar with Muslim traditions and its doctrine, but rather follow Islamic folk religion. The Hindu visitors as well belong to lower castes, which is typical for many shrines in India. Apart from the visitors residing in the close neighbourhood a considerable number of visitors come from longer distances up to 20 km. Most of them visit the shrine on a regular basis every Thursday and Sunday or just every Sunday. The gender ratio and also the ratio of Hindu to Muslim visitors are about equal (Fig. 6.2).

In comparison to the big catchment area of these two shrines, the visitors of Fakhruddin Shahid, a nearby shrine which shares a number of visitors with Ghazi Miyan and Alvi Shahid, were without exception power loom weavers from the direct neighbourhood.

Visitors at the Shrine Ghazi Miyan

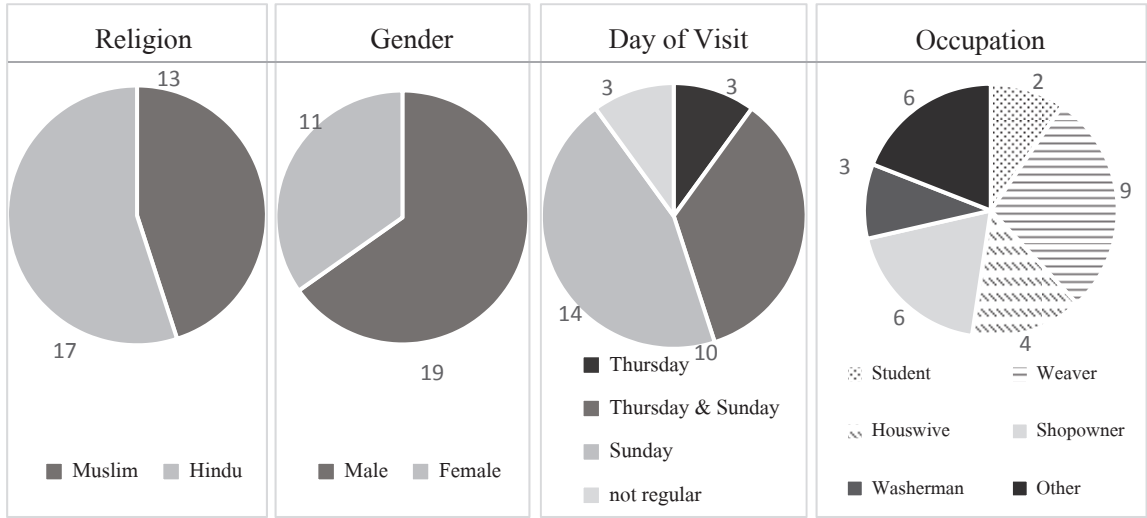


Fig. 6.2: Visitor-Structure at the shrine of Ghazi Miyan. (Source: own survey, N = 30).

However, apart from the vendors only few other people make their living at the shrine and are dependent on the generosity of the visitors. Between three and ten beggars can be found directly opposite of the entrance of the place. Most of them come on a regular basis and occupy their fixed places. The negotiations on claims on the places mostly depend on traditional or established rights, for example through relatives who occupied that place before. Their income varies, but can amount up to Rs 100 on a Sunday. The interviews with the beggars revealed that beyond the income aspect they also appreciate to sit near the

shrine and feel the presence of Ghazi Miyan. They sense or expect an improvement of their situation from that meditative sitting near a holy site.

4.3 Religion and Rituals

Muslims as well as Hindus have equal rights and follow similar rituals when visiting the shrines. None of the surveyed persons, neither Hindu nor Muslim feel disturbed by the other religion. The head of the shrine repeatedly emphasised the equality of the two groups. For the visitors, there is no contradiction in Hindus worshipping a Muslim martyr. According to the narration of one visitor, the ruler fought by Salar Masud was said to be cruel and violent, especially towards Hindus of lower castes, so his death was a relief for many. Moreover, the fact that the original shrine in Bahraich continued an already existing worship of Shiva and also that Ghazi Miyan was built on an originally Hindu site might have initiated the togetherness of the two religions at a very early stage. However, as none of the surveyed visitors actually knew the historical background of the place or the story of Ghazi Miyan this presumed background does not influence the attitudes of the visitors at all.

Hindus adore Ghazi Miyan directly as a God. Because of his sainthood, Muslims see him as amplifying their communication with Allah. Many visitors of Ghazi Miyan and Alvi Shahid have visited both shrines for several years; some people do that already for their whole life. They come with their families, their spouses or alone. In most cases the reasons for the first visit are on health grounds, for example a disease of a family member. Because of the critical financial situation, many people seem to prefer to visit Ghazi Miyan over the visit of a doctor. Fifty per cent of the regular wishes from Ghazi Miyan are about the general health and welfare for themselves and their families. About twenty-five per cent of the visitors have a specific request for health. Asked about the satisfaction of their demands, most of the visitors affirm an improvement of their own or their family-members' health. The other twenty-five per cent ask for a better business and an improved economy in general. Some younger visitors also demanded to improve their education.

Although the nearby shrine of Fakhruddin Shahid is said to be visited equally by Hindus and Muslims, the observations and interviews showed that Hindu visitors are only a small minority at Fakhruddin. The likely reason for this observation is that classical and more orthodox Islamic teaching is much more present at the place. Female visitors are required to cover their head with a scarf and their areas of visit are strictly separated from those which are visited by men. Furthermore, the reading or citation of Quran verses is part of every *fatihah* carried out at Fakhruddin, whereas at Ghazi Miyan and Alvi Shahid the provided Quran books were never used by visitors during times of observation. Another major difference to the shrines of Ghazi Miyan and Alvi Shahid was the duration of visits. While visitors of Ghazi Miyan and Alvi Shahid stated that they prefer quick stay of merely ten minutes at each shrine, visitors tended to stay for a much longer period at Fakhruddin Shahid, often up to one to two hours. Especially women often lingered and prayed together for much longer periods than they do at Ghazi Miyan. Visitors also stated that they appreciate the calmness of the place when compared to Ghazi Miyan. As such, the shrine

of Fakhruddin Shahid appears to differ from Ghazi Miyan in terms of religious strictness and in the kind of atmosphere people search for.

4.3.1 Rituals

During their visit at the shrines, Hindus and Muslims share most of the rituals they carry out. Some rituals, however, are only performed by one of the groups. Both Hindu and Muslim visitors use white sugar pearls flavoured with cardamom called *elaichi dana* and flower garlands as a part of their praying ritual. Ready-made packages of devotional items needed for prayers include incense sticks (*agarbati*), sugar pearls and flower garlands that are sold by the vendors around the shrines. Some of these packages also include *chadar*, a red scarf used for rituals by laying it on the grave. Whereas *fatiha* is an invariable praying ceremony for Muslims, Hindu visitors rather speak individual prayers. Only Hindu visitors use sticks fragrancd with rose water (*itrafaha*) for their praying. They also use *Kapoor* or *camphor* to burn. *Nara*, small red and orange bands, are offered at the shrine too. Hindu visitors strap them to the windows for offering prayer to Ghazi Miyan and remove them again when Ghazi Miyan has satisfied their demand. During the *mela*, there are also some rituals performed only by Hindus. The handprints (*panja*) at the shrine are made only by Hindu pilgrims from *ubtan*, a turmeric-based paste used as a part of the Hindu wedding procedure.



Fig. 6.3: Muslim visitor praying *fatiha* in front of the grave (*mazar*) of Salar Masud. The offering of flowergarlands, originally practiced by Hindus is also conducted by Muslims (Fülling 2015).

Important special requests to Ghazi Miyan are directed via individual papers called *arsi* (Fig. 6.3). The pilgrim or visitor writes his request on a paper to be hung above the grave so that the wish is located very close to Ghazi Miyan. They pray and donate some money for supporting their wishes to Ghazi Miyan. For illiterates, it is possible to get some help from the head of the shrine who writes the paper for them. Once a year, before the *mela* starts, all papers are removed, burned and buried at the graveyard.

Especially during the *mela* and on Sunday, the offering of a chicken (*kanuri*) is very common. Visitors usually bring the chicken on their own and can also take the giblets home to prepare and eat them. The ritual itself starts with the chicken being decorated with flower garlands and being blessed by the head while at the same time the prayers are said. Afterwards, the chicken is slaughtered and eviscerated in the inner yard next to the shrine.

Another ritual which is executed at Ghazi Miyan is *mundan*. This Hindu ritual belongs to *samskara*, a collection of rites of passage which vary in number and type, depending on the region and tradition (Pandit 2005, 125). *Mundan* is the removal of a baby's hair by shaving.

The children are usually 1-3 years old (Pandit 2005, 128; Fig. 6.4). According to Pandit (ibd.), this ritual is performed to clean the head of the child to ensure the growth of the hair. Visitors of the shrine who carried out this ritual referred to it as gratitude to Salar Masud for fulfilling the wish for a child. Although the ritual is a traditional part of Hindu culture, Muslim families conduct *mundan* as well and stated that they expect this to be beneficial for the future life of their child.

Although both rituals can be performed both at Ghazi Miyan and Alvi Shahid only few such cases were observed during fieldwork. The reason for this is likely of practical nature as the rituals are usually performed after the daily prayers. Because Alvi Shahid is always visited before Ghazi Miyan it would be the obvious choice to carry out the rituals there.

Another reason is the greater attraction attributed to Ghazi Miyan. Although there is no official hierarchy between both places, it appears that Ghazi Miyan is perceived by visitors as more central and more important. This is also evident when looking at the scarce literature dealing with the shrine where Ghazi Miyan takes centre stage, whereas Alvi Shahid is not mentioned at all (Singh 2013, Visuvalingam and Chalier-Visuvalingam 2006). The *mela* also supports that thesis: the festival



Fig. 6.4: Head shaving of a child (*mundan*) (Fülling 2015)

celebrated in May at the anniversary of the death of Ghazi Miyan does not include Alvi Shahid. Alvi Shahid does not have its own *mela*.

4.3.2 The *Mela*

Every year, the Ghazi Miyan *mela* as a huge festival attracting large crowds takes place in the shrine-area of Bari Bazar, mainly financed by donations. During the preparation for the *mela* there is a close cooperation between the Ghazi Miyan shrines in Bahraich and in Varanasi. According to the head of the shrine about 35.000 people visit Varanasi on the first Sunday in the Hindu month of *Jyestha* that corresponds to May-June in the Gregorian calendar. From Sunday evening to Monday noon the death anniversary of Salar Masud and his wedding procedure (*barat*) are celebrated. Many rituals are performed in and around the shrine of Ghazi Miyan. Besides this *shadi mela* (wedding party of Ghazy Miyan) another 15 *melas* are celebrated at different shrines in the city of Varanasi between the first and the third Sunday of the month. The main Ghazi Miyan shrine in the town of Bahraich attracts several hundred thousands of Muslim and Hindu pilgrims every year, and the *mela* (referred to as *urs* in Bahraich as the term used for commemorating the death anniversary of a saint) is also celebrated in spectacular fashion. In Varanasi an additional *urs* for Ghazi Miyan takes place whose date is fixed according to the Islamic calendar. On this occasion a special *fatiha* is performed for the Muslim visitors. However, the attendant festivities are much smaller and not even known by most of the visitors. The *mela* is held at all Ghazi Miyan shrines in India.

One month before the *mela* the caretaker and the resident community start to prepare the shrine. *Lagan* is the preparation for a wedding ceremony that is symbolically celebrated during the *mela*. At the shrine the preparation starts with whitewashing the shrine. Afterwards, it is decorated with electric lighting and artificial flower garlands. The caretaker rubs the shrine with a mixture of turmeric powder, sandal, rose water and sacred *kiva water* to commemorate the wedding of Salar Masud. Fifteen days before the *mela*, the caretaker joined by a delegation from the resident community travels to Bahraich to pay their respects. Traditionally this annual pilgrimage was performed by foot and took fifteen days; nowadays the delegation travels by bus. In Bahraich the pilgrims buy flags called *balam* for bringing them back to Varanasi and presents are exchanged between the heads of the shrines.

The actual ceremony starts at Saturday night when Muslim women bring offerings to the shrine and pray. On Sunday during the *shadi mela* all visitors from all religions celebrate together. The rituals *mundan* and *kanuri* are practiced frequently, and the *barat* ceremony is carried out around noon. During this symbolic procession, the community sings marriage songs and a groom walks through the area to represent and re-enact Salar Masuds wedding, which never took place. After a break on Monday until the third Sunday the *mela* is shifted to the shrines of other noble men, who came with Ghazi Miyan every evening and a “scenic landscape” emerges during this period of time (Singh 2013, 136).

The festival outside on the shrine’s graveyard is attended by a huge crowd and catered by many shops offering toys, food and flowers. The pilgrims offer *malida* to Ghazi Miyan, a sweet and thick bread made with milk. *Langar*, a free meal, is prepared at the shrine and distributed to visitors and pilgrims. Contrary to other shrines such as the *sufi* shrine named Langar located in the north of the research area (Fig. 6.1) *langar* at Ghazi Miyan is not exclusively aimed at needy people but is prepared to serve the regular visitors. Nevertheless, some visitors bring homemade food and distribute it to the beggars at the shrine.

5 The construction of space and identity in a multi-religious place

The Ghazi Miyan area in Bari Bazar is a religiously loaded place where everyday life and spirituality are closely linked together. The whole area as the former home and the graveyard of numerous *shahids* becomes a holy place. Through the practice of the rituals during regular visitations and the *mela* as the major annual event attracting large numbers of visitors this special religious landscape is reproduced by the visitors as well as by the institutions such as the Sunni Waqf Board.

The two shrines Ghazi Miyan and Alvi Shahid stand out because they attract Muslim as well as Hindu visitors. Whereas this practice might go back to the very beginnings of the worship of Ghazi Miyan (cf. v. Schwerin 1984), this intermingling is especially relevant today. At a time when Muslims and Hindus seem to be pushed into new rivalries for political reasons they exercise their religions in peaceful co-existence at this place. The return to more conservative interpretations of religion often driven by the need of distinction (cf. v. Schwerin 1984, 159) is not evident in the area of Ghazi Miyan. As a

matter of fact the visitors did not care at all about the presence of the other religion at the two shrines. The mutual adaptation of certain rituals rather shows openness and mutual respect. Visitors, no matter if Hindu or Muslim, share the same wishes and aspirations when visiting the shrine. Both groups of visitors belong to the economically lower strata of society and this similarity concerning life situations might also contribute to harmony as was evident for example in the non-participation of Muslim weavers living in this area in communal riots in the 1990s amongst the weavers in Varanasi (Showeb 1994 in Singh 2013, 153). Pandey (1990) cited in Visuvalingam and Chalier-Visuvalingam (2003, 96-97) even interprets such Hindu-Muslim unities as a form of “*agency of the subaltern castes*” in organising resistance against the British during colonial times. Visuvalingam and Chalier Visuvalingam (2003, 97 and 113) in contrast prefer the perspective of the Ghazi Miyan cult as an example for successful Islamic proselytism facilitated through the common occupation of former Hindu (architectural) structures and ground. V. Schwerin (1984, 158) suggests that the worship of Ghazi Miyan “*had been integrated in an already existing religious framework*”, as both sites in Bahraich and in Varanasi were already perceived as sacred spaces before.

The scientific literature and the empirical findings show that the Ghazi Miyan area as a multi-religious sacred site is a product of a long historical process, shaped by negotiation and occupation and today’s religious everyday life. As an originally Hindu-place which was subsequently taken by Muslims, the inhabitants and visitors of the places managed to find a mode of behaviour which allows all stakeholders to jointly realise their religious beliefs. The opportunity for community which is offered and the shared experience of worshipping Ghazi Miyan is obviously a more important aspect than the emphasis on religious differences. Visitors not merely receive and consume the multi-religious spirit of the place in a passive way but actively shape it through their actions. The learning and exchange of previously estranged rituals and the usage of non-traditional devotional items creates a space which differs significantly from other religious sites which do not allow such kind of togetherness. The religion-based acculturation process lead to practices and rituals which can be considered as syncretic as certain beliefs and rituals were adopted by both sides. Still, all the visitors clearly considered themselves either as Hindus or as Muslims. The worship of Ghazi Miyan therefore does not result in a change in religious identity, although the pure religious doctrine of their religions might suggest otherwise.

The sacred space of Ghazi Miyan holds significant meaning for individuals. They experience community with people who share a similar reality and at the same time have - on an individual level - the opportunity to contribute to their own and their family’s well-being. This aspect was especially important to nearly all of the interviewees. Therefore the shrines evolve into sites perceived as a compensation for the otherwise limited opportunities for social and economic uplift.

6 The accumulation of meaning in an immobile place

The objective of this paper was to analyse how the process of place-making and the shaping of religious identities takes place in the area Alai Pura, at the two shrines Ghazi Miyan and Alvi Shahid. It was pointed out how the historical background of the place, but

more importantly the joint practice of religious rituals among Muslim and Hindus both lead to the emergence of a multi-religious space. It can be assumed that the similar social status, the shared beliefs and aspirations outweigh religious doctrines and therefore contribute to the peaceful togetherness.

Looking at the constitution of shrines and sacred places reflects the complexity of everyday life in a society characterised by diversity and difference and points at the ways how these contradictions and possible tensions are solved in everyday life by ordinary people. The case of the Ghazi Miyan area is an exciting case of place-making in the context of multi-religiousness and syncretism in Varanasi (Fig. 6.5). It surely offers huge potential for further research, for example concerning the relationship of Ghazi Miyan to the other shrines in the area that were not considered in detail in this paper.

It remains to be seen how such places of unity will develop in future in the face of Hindu nationalistic tendencies rising in Indian society. The common identification as worshippers of Ghazi Miyan and members of a “lower caste” is the dominating influence on the community of Alai Pura. On this scale, it defuses the sharpening of religious and cultural differences between Hindus and Muslims.

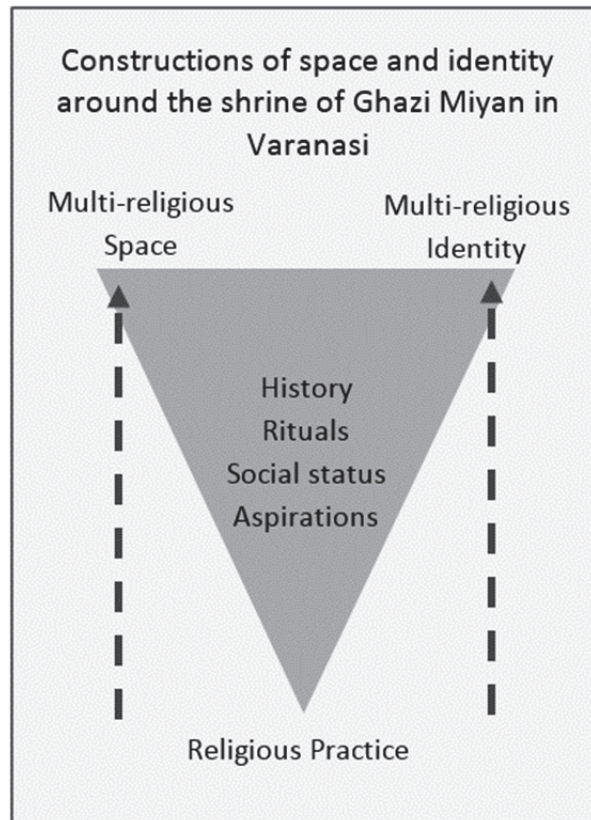


Fig. 6.5: Construction of religious space and identity around the shrine of Ghazi Miyan: The history of the area and the shared social status, rituals and aspirations of the visitors lead to the emergence of a multi-religious space (Source: own design, based on Lossau 2015, 73)

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