Research Article

A Material Religion Approach to the *Dargah* of Sadal Baba in Pune

Deepra Dandekar
Department of South Asian History, South Asia Institute,
Heidelberg University, Germany
Email: deepradandekar@gmail.com/ deepra.dandekar@sai-uni-heidelberg.de

This article takes a material religion approach to the *dargah* of the Sufi Shah Daval or Sadal Baba, located on the Mula-Mutha river at Yerawada in Pune. In this article I explore how Sadal Baba and his *dargah* are produced through material elements encountered at the shrine that reconstitute the experience of the *dargah*, its miracles, hagiography, rituals, and legends. I argue that religious power at Sadal Baba *dargah* are exerted through its material restructuring, with the historical development of the *dargah*'s sacredness comprising an embroiled process of negotiation that produces it as a pristine and independent cosmos. This negotiated process of becoming, I argue, distinguishes Yerawada as a separate important place that is simultaneously linked to Pune, and Pune's history of Sufism.

dargah, Pune, Sufi, miracle, religion

Introduction

The *dargah* of Shah Daval Baba is located on the riverbanks of the Mula-Mutha on the outskirts of Pune at Yerawada. While the Sufi is referred to on the *dargah* noticeboards as Shahdaval Baba, he is more popular by the shortened version of his name, Sadal Baba (henceforth).[1] In this article, I take a material religion approach to the Sadal Baba *dargah* analysing how the *dargah* courtyard, grave-shrine, noticeboards, ritual objects, and *dargah* marketplace restructure it as a religious cosmos, that serves to place-make Yerawada (where the *dargah* is located) as a miraculous part of Pune city and its history of Islam.

My interest in material religion stems from critical approaches to what has been considered an overemphasis on spiritual aspects in the study of religion (Pintchman and Dempsey 2015:1-13).[2] My interest has also been bolstered by an enduring attentiveness to the field of ritual studies, and Indian archaeology that has always been rooted in the study of the materiality and its non-human agency. S. Brent Plate (2015: 1-8), while outlining the material religion approach, reflects on how "religious traditions themselves originate and survive through bodily engagements with the material elements of the world" (p. 3), wherein materiality constitutes a resource for thinking and believing, for practices, and for the restructuring and disciplining of religious spaces, objects, and bodies. He (ibid: 4) demarcates the five important key components of material religion as:

> (1) an investigation of the interactions between human bodies and physical objects, both natural and human-made; (2) with much of the interaction taking place through sense perception; (3) in special specified spaces and times; (4) … to

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[1] I thank the *dargah* custodians of Sadal Baba (*mujawar*s) for supporting me in my research, carried out in 2013).
[2] See Flueckiger (2020) for an exhaustive review of literature on material religion in India, complemented by a fascinating exploration of Hindu religious sites, rituals, vows, and deities.

orient, and sometimes disorient, communities and individuals; (5) toward the formal strictures and structures of religious traditions.

Plate includes rituals in the first component, explaining how it is important for people to touch sacred objects, hear instruments, chant, ingest food or fast, and as part of the second component participate in sensory experiences that exert religious power over the physical body. The third component includes temporal rituals that separate time, providing devotees with tradition and memory that act as resources. The fourth component, linked to the first three, explores how rituals, objects, bodies, time, and space, produce community identity. While memory and identity can indeed be disoriented by dislocation and crisis, the experience of dislocation too passes into the history and heritage-making of a religious community, once it reunites, restrengthens, and restructures itself. The fifth component is more complex, emphasizing immersion into material religion as a way of engaging with necessary discipline, rules and protocol. This immersion enables collective participation in rituals and public devotional activities, while renewing devotion as a public phenomenon (Novetzke 2019). The material religion approach thus inverts normative notions of how categories give rise to the material form by suggesting its opposite: that it is materiality that embeds the formation of religion as a category of experience, belief, and analysis. I argue likewise, locating the power ascribed to Sufism at Sadal Baba—often described as spiritual, transcendental, and mystical— as a product of the *dargah*'s reconstructed physical site (cf. Ephrat et al. 2022).
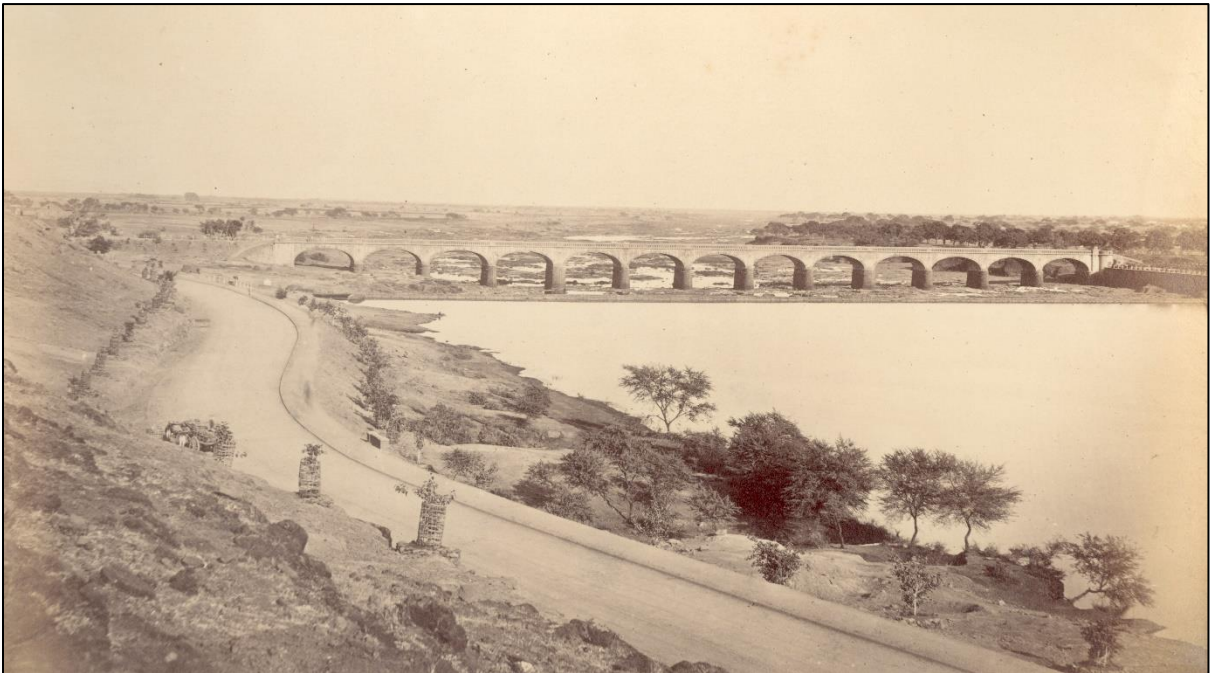

Image 1.1: "View of the FitzGerald Bridge (Bund Garden Bridge) over the Moola-Moota at Poona in India – Around 1875" (Image Source: Leiden University Library, KITLV, image 100085 Collection page Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian & Caribbean Images [KITLV] / Wikimedia Commons).

This article explores how material religiosity at the Sadal Baba *dargah* is composed of the following elements: shrine archaeology and the archaeology of modern public spaces, the bodies of people that invest the *dargah* with sacredness—*mujawar*s and devotees, *dargah* rituals and ritual objects, and the *dargah* noticeboards and adjoining marketplaces that restructure shrine publics. I have adopted a cascading model of analysis, starting with how Yerawada and the Sadal Baba hill are represented in legends as a combination of miraculous and material entities. I progress to the discursive production of Sadal Baba as a Sufi through his noticeboard hagiography and *shizra* (Sufi genealogy), and discuss the *dargah* courtyard as a space that is restructured by *mujawar*s through noticeboards. Following an exposition on

Sadal Baba's oral narratives recounted by devotees, and *dargah* rituals, I end this article with a focus on ritual objects and their afterlife at the shrine, along with their imbrication in the *dargah*'s miracle-material economy. I conclude by arguing that Islam in Pune, represented by *dargah*s, present devotees with an experiential prehistory of present-day Pune's Hindu Brahminical and Peshwa identity. The material-miracles of the Sadal Baba *dargah* reclaim the experience of a pristine time when the Deccan region and Pune were Sufi. Despite the diversity of materialities explored in this article that make the Sadal Baba *dargah*—noticeboards, graves and grave coverings, and ritual objects like wish threads along with the marketplaces where they are sold—these materialities are mutually entangled by their pertinence to the Sadal Baba *dargah* as one cohesive and dynamic religious unit.
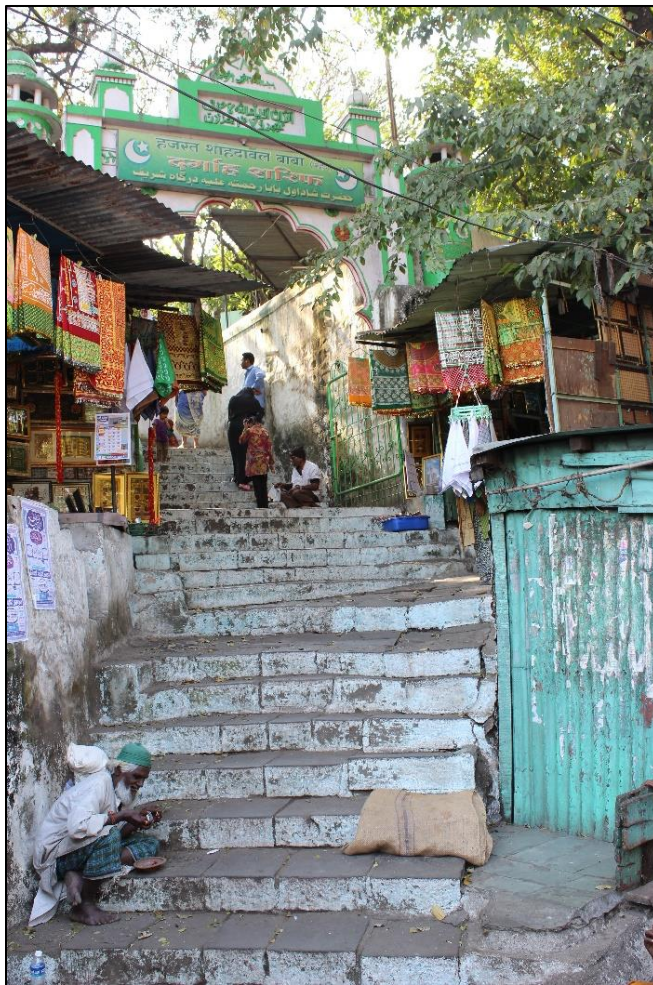
The Sadal Baba Hill

Image 1.2: The staircase from the Deccan College Road that goes up to the Sadal Baba *dargah*. Image source: author.

Though the Sadal Baba *dargah* is known as an old and precolonial shrine, not much information about its modern history is available from British records, except for a small excerpt in the Poona volume of the Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency Vol. XVIII (1885: 268) that refers to the picturesque sight over the countryside from over the FitzGerald Bridge when facing the Mula-Mutha River (seen above in image 1.1) that describes the *dargah* as a general part of Yerawada's landscape across the river from Pune: "From the FitzGerald bridge looking west is one of the prettiest views in Poona. On the right, about 150 yards from, the river, a rocky flat-topped hill rises about 150 feet above the bank and stretches about 300 yards west gradually falling to a small river-bank tomb."

While describing Sadal Baba's location exactly, the Gazetteer does not mention the *dargah*'s name and instead describes another *dargah* outside Pune (ibid: 142) as Shah Daval *dargah* (ibid: 164). While a closer perusal of the area does indeed reveal the presence of a *dargah*, that *dargah* is said to belong to the Sufi Hazrat Sayyad Lal Shah and bears no resemblance to the Sadal Baba *dargah* in Pune. Some of my interlocutors were of the opinion that the Sadal Baba *dargah* grew popular only later, after the area across the FitzGerald Bridge (built in 1867) was 'developed' by the British. Before that, they said, it was just a small hill with a shrine on top. Yerawada rose to prominence with the construction of the bridge that linked the cantonment and colonial institutions of Pune with the eastern side of the city. The eastern side became known for its cantonment institutions: Bombay Sappers, Kirkee cantonment market and railway station, an army airfield at Lohegaon, and the Armament Factory at Holkar Bridge that joined Yerawada with Kirkee, making space for cemeteries for soldiers and cantonment staff, churches, the

Mental Hospital, the Central Prison, the Beggar's Home, industrial and professional training schools and messes, staff quarters, the Deccan College, and the Golf Course. Populations catering to colonial institutions across the FitzGerald Bridge migrated to Yerawada and settled in surrounding villages that served to connect the trans-Mula-Mutha area with Pune. Being largely unconcerned with caste rules, cantonments and colonial institutions employed Muslims (Cf. Green [2009]) and persons from 'lower-caste' backgrounds quite easily, and these communities were, comparatively speaking, loyal to the British, in contrast to Pune's Brahmins and Hindus who smarted from the Peshwa's defeat in 1818. The expansion towards Yerawada harbingered by the construction of the FitzGerald Bridge increased Sadal Baba's popularity, though the *dargah* did already exist.

Image 1.3: Everyday life in the Sadal Baba courtyard. The air conditioning unit is visible. Image source: author.

According to one *mujawar* interlocutor, though the Sadal Baba *dargah* was next to the Mula-Mutha river, it was always on top of a hill, which seemed small only due to the road elevation in front. Despite the road, one still had to climb quite a bit to reach the *dargah* (image 1.2). According to my interlocutor, it was common for *dargah*s like Sadal Baba to be located on hilltops, as they encompassed zones of Sufi withdrawal and meditation (*chilla*). Predictably, Sufis chose their favourite *chilla*s as final resting places. According to my *mujawar* interlocuter, Sadal Baba was still miraculously alive inside his grave, making the grave itself alive—the grave shook and shed tears whenever a calamity befell local devotees. In earlier times, Baba's grave, flanked by the grave of a female family member (said to be his mother) was housed in an open-air enclosure, surrounded by arches linked by a cement grill. However this arrangement was later restructured by *mujawar*s who filled spaces between the arches with brickwork and built a dome on top. Though the brickwork and dome were meant to protect the grave, the repairs made Baba unhappy. He repeatedly visited *mujawar*s in dreams, telling them that his sanctum was dark and claustrophobic. Then, *mujawar*s noticed that the grave had started weeping—a condensation of sandalwood water appearing regularly on its surface. While some dismissed this 'weeping' as the capillary action of water from the nearby river, others noted that the *dargah* was too high above ground level for such capillary action. Furthermore, this 'capillary action' was non-uniform—other spots in the rest of the *dargah* remained dry. Also, the water smelled of sandalwood, and the shaking and weeping only took place at select moments when Baba wanted to communicate his distress. Soon after the dreams, there was an earthquake-like shaking near the grave-shrine that was not experienced elsewhere inside the *dargah*. So, the *mujawar*s decided to act fast; they fixed an air conditioning unit for the sanctum, some electric lights, and a grilled window for ventilation (as seen in image 1.3). However, in case of impending calamities, *mujawar*s said, they still felt Baba's shaking and weeping. One *mujawar* recounted how Baba had shook and wept on the evening before the Panshet dam collapsed in Pune in
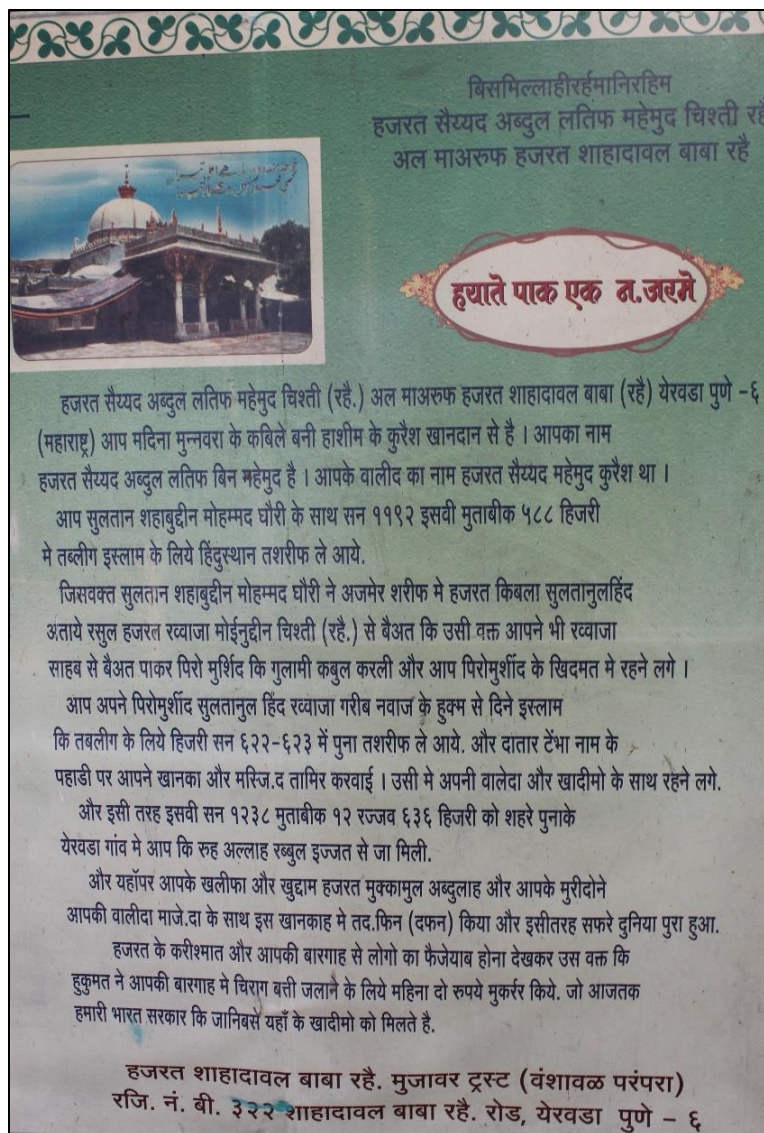
बिसमिल्लाहीर्रहमानिरहिम
हजरत सैय्यद अब्दुल लतिफ महेमुद चिश्ती रहै
अल माअरूफ हजरत शाहादावल बाबा रहै

हयाते पाक एक द.जरमे

हजरत सैय्यद अब्दुल लतिफ महेमुद चिश्ती (रहै.) अल माअरूफ हजरत शाहादावल बाबा (रहै) येरवडा पुणे -६ (महाराष्ट्र) आप मदिना मुन्नवरा के कबिले बनी हाशीम के कुरैश खानदान से है । आपका नाम हजरत सैय्यद अब्दुल लतिफ बिन महेमुद है । आपके वालीद का नाम हजरत सैय्यद महेमुद कुरैश था ।

आप सुलतान शहाबुद्दीन मोहम्मद घौरी के साथ सन ११९२ इसवी मुताबीक ५८८ हिजरी मे तब्लीग इस्लाम के लिये हिंदुस्थान तशरीफ ले आये.

जिसवक्त सुलतान शहाबुद्दीन मोहम्मद घौरी ने अजमेर शरीफ मे हजरत किबला सुलतानुलहिंद अंताये रसुल हजरत ख्वाजा मोईनुद्दीन चिश्ती (रहै.) से बैअत कि उसी वक्त आपने भी ख्वाजा साहब से बैअत पाकर पिरो मुशिद कि गुलामी कबुल करली और आप पिरोमुर्शिद के खिदमत मे रहने लगे ।

आप अपने पिरोमुर्शिद सुलतानुल हिंद ख्वाजा गरीब नवाज के हुक्म से दिने इस्लाम कि तबलीग के लिये हिजरी सन ६२२-६२३ में पुना तशरीफ ले आये. और दातार टेंबा नाम के पहाडी पर आपने खानका और मस्जि.द तामिर करवाई । उसी मे अपनी वालेदा और खादीमों के साथ रहने लगे ।

और इसी तरह इसवी सन १२३८ मुताबीक १२ रज्जव ६३६ हिजरी को शहरे पुनाके येरवडा गांव मे आप कि रुह अल्लाह रब्बुल इज्जत से जा मिली.

और यहांपर आपके खलीफा और खुद्दाम हजरत मुक्कामुल अब्दुलाह और आपके मुरीदोने आपकी वालीदा माजे.दा के साथ इस खानकाह मे तद.फिन (दफन) किया और इसीतरह सफरे दुनिया पुरा हुआ.

हजरत के करीश्मात और आपकी बारगाह से लोगो का फैजेयाब होना देखकर उस वक्त कि हुकुमत ने आपकी बारगाह मे चिराग बती जलाने के लिये महिना दो रुपये मुकर्रर किये. जो आजतक हमारी भारत सरकार कि जानिबसे यहाँ के खादीमो को मिलते है.

हजरत शाहादावल बाबा रहै. मुजावर ट्रस्ट (वंशावळ परंपरा)
रजि. नं. बी. ३२२ शाहादावल बाबा रहै. रोड, येरवडा पुणे – ६

Image 1.4: Sadal Baba's noticeboard hagiography. Image source: author.

1961.[3] Since Pune was a low-lying city, it was easily submerged. Yerawada however remained dry, and many people in the area rushed over the bridge to shelter at the *dargah*. Due to Baba's presence in the grave and his miracle, it was said that the *dargah* hill's altitude also 'grew', preventing flood waters from touching the *dargah*.

According to my *mujawar* interlocutor, Sadal Baba's miracles of providing the public protection in the floods proved his loyalty and belonging to Pune and its people. While the grave's periodic shaking, the water condensation on the grave, and the hill's steepening could be described as material or physical phenomena, these were experienced as miracles that linked Yerawada to Pune. Yerawada's growth and Sadal Baba's popularity was thus linked quite centrally to the FitzGerald Bridge that place-made Yerawada as a Sufi extension of Pune. If one were to link material religion at Sadal Baba with Plate's (2015: 4) five components, the transformation of the Sadal Baba *dargah* with the construction of the FitzGerald Bridge, resonates with the first and fourth component of rupture that reformulates memory, identity, and heritage through crisis, that leads to *dargah* making and the production of sacredness.

The Sadal Baba Noticeboards

Sadal Baba was somewhat of a mysterious figure, buried alongside a lady companion said to be his mother. His hagiography is publicized through a bi-scriptural noticeboard at the *dargah* that is signed by the *dargah mujawar* trust. The noticeboard uses both Devanagari and Nastalik and presents readers with a mixed Marathi-Urdu/ Dakhini register (seen in image 1.4 and 1.5). A paraphrased translation of the noticeboard hagiography is as follows:

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[3] See "July 12, 1961…" *Sakal Times* (02.04.2016): https://web.archive.org/web/20160401193748/http://www.sakaltimes.com/NewsDetails.aspx?NewsId=5671671830883101811&SectionId=5171561142064258099&SectionName=Pune&NewsDate=20100711&NewsTitle=July%2012,%201961... (accessed 08.04.2024).

Hazrat Sayyad Abdul Latif Mehmood Chishti, al-Maroof Hazrat Shahdaval Baba, Yerawada, Pune (son of Hazrat Sayyad Mehmood Quraish) belonged to the Banu Hashim clan and the Quraish tribe that hailed from Madina Munawara. Shahdaval Baba arrived in India to spread the message of Islam, accompanying Sultan Shahabuddin Mohammad Ghori in 1192 AD. After arriving in India, Sultan Mohammad Ghori took ritual initiation into the Chishti *tariqa* at Ajmer from the Sufi Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti. Shahdaval Baba also took initiation from Moinuddin Chishti at the same time and started serving the latter. Following his master Khwaja Gharib Nawaz's commands, Shahdaval Baba subsequently set off for Pune, to spread the message of Islam in the year 1225 or 1226 AD. After coming to the Pune region, he set up his own Sufi *khanqah* (school) and a mosque on a hillock known as Datar Tembha,

Image 1.5: Sadal Baba's lineage, genealogy, or *shizra*, again placed on a noticeboard at the *dargah*. Image source: author.

where he stayed with his parents and retainers. He passed away in Yerawada in 1238. Subsequently, it was also here that Shahdaval Baba's deputy Hazrat Mukammul Abdullah, along with his other students and retainers posthumously interred his mother. Appreciating and recognizing the miracles of the *dargah*, the rulers of Pune provided the *dargah* with an endowment of 2 rupees every month to keep the *dargah* lamp burning in perpetuity. This payment has been continued by our Indian government, and is made payable to *dargah mujawar*s.
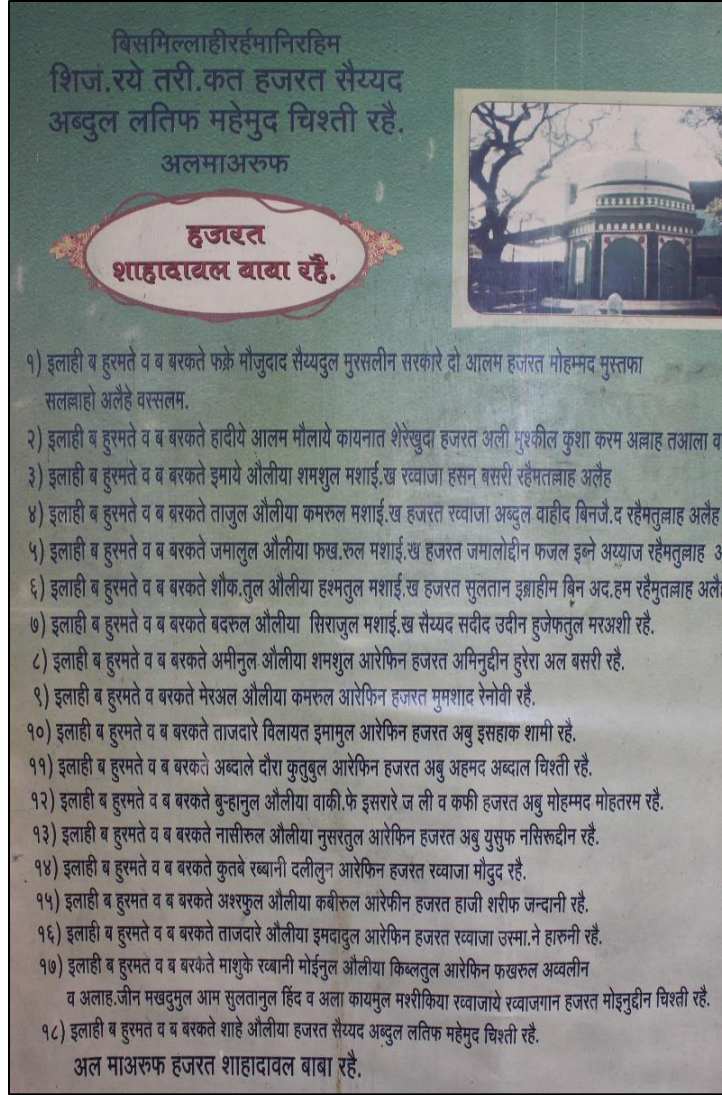
There is a photograph of a *dargah* inserted at the top left corner of image 1.4, which, however, is not of the Sadal Baba *dargah* in Pune, but of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti's *dargah* in Ajmer. This insertion draws a direct connecting line between Sadal Baba and the Chishti *tariqa* (Begg 1960) in North India. Sadal Baba's noticeboard hagiography seeks to further construct a narrative overlap between his arrival, Moinuddin Chishti's arrival (who founded the Chishti *tariqa* in 1193), and Mohammad Ghori's arrival in India 1191/ 1192. Taken literally, the hagiography allows us to imagine that Chishti, Ghori, and Sadal Baba arrived together— mythological parallels that serve to produce Sadal Baba as an important *ghazi* or warrior Sufi (Eaton 1978), and a Sayyid who descended from the Prophet Mohammad's family. Again, if

the hagiography be taken literally, it is likely that Sadal Baba was already a Sufi before setting off for India even if he additionally joined the Chishti *tariqa* in India.

Image 1.6: The lamp burning in perpetuity. Image source: author.

Sadal Baba's hagiography is accompanied by another noticeboard that provides readers with his genealogy or *shizra* (image 1.5), and there is another photograph in the right corner of this noticeboard that depicts the *dargah* at Yerawada. The *shizra* legitimizes Baba's Islamic life— a holy birth, childhood and youth spent in Medina, and later, a military career in Afghanistan and Ajmer before sojourning to the Deccan—before Allaudin Khilji arrival in 1308. The only recognizable names in the *shizra* are the 1st, 17th, and 18th: the Prophet Mohammad is the first, Moinuddin Chishti is the 17th, and Sadal Baba— the last—is 18th. My *mujawar* interlocutors were unsure of the *shizra*'s original source, saying that they had transmitted it faithfully over the years, and corroborated it with Moinuddin Chishti's widely-available *shizra*. The *mujawar*s lamented that Sadal Baba's *shizra* ended with him. Baba surely had other abodes in the Deccan, other *murid*s and *khalifa*s. For example, who was Hazrat Mukammul Abdullah, his *khalifa* mentioned in the noticeboard, who interred Baba's mother next to him? What happened to Baba's other family members at Datar Tembha? The first generation of Baba's *mujawar*s had been neglectful about providing enough information about Baba's descendants. Some *mujawar*s felt that Datar Tembha was itself another name for the Yerawada hillock, but there is no documentary evidence of Yerawada ever being known as Datar Tembha in British records.

*Dargah mujawar*s were seeking legitimacy for the Sadal Baba *dargah* in Pune's by emphasizing the government's endowment of 2 rupees paid to the shrine that kept Baba's lamp burning in perpetuity (image 1.6). Apart from the uncertainty of when the rupee first came to be used in the Marathi region, Baba's ratification by local kings from Pune legitimized his claim over Pune. Two historians of the Yadava period, Altekar (1960) and Mahalingam (1957) outline the 1190s to have been a period of political upheaval in the Deccan, with the Yadavas assuming control over the present-day Marathi region. The *dargah*'s noticeboard hagiography perhaps implies that Baba was recognized by the Yadava Kings who made temple donations in the same period (Cf. Novetzke 2016: 93-94, Lorenzen 1972: 119). Moreover, the continuation of this endowment

endorses Baba's authority as the place-maker of Yerawada and Pune, indicated by the intimacy with which the noticeboard describes the endowment that was continued by "our" Indian government. I interviewed a local historian about Sadal Baba *dargah* architecture from the Maratha History Museum (Deccan College). The historian, a widely-read scholar, was, however, ambivalent about sharing their opinion with me, and directed me to read M.S. Mate's (1959) classic on Maratha Architecture instead. Yet, as I pressed them for comment, and promised to only quote them anonymously, the historian identified the architecture of the *dargah*, evident especially from the mosque inside the *dargah* campus (image 1.7), as an example of 18th century Peshwa architecture. The historian conjectured that the *dargah* was possibly a later addition or appropriation of preexisting Peshwa ruins at the site. Notwithstanding appropriation, I believe the historian's diagnosis of the *dargah*'s architecture as Peshwa is accurate. There is enough scholarship by now on the overlaps between Maratha and Mughal architecture (Sohoni 2018, 2023), and this overlap (image 1.7) can perhaps explain the overlap between the Pune Kings and the endowments made to the Sadal Baba *dargah*.
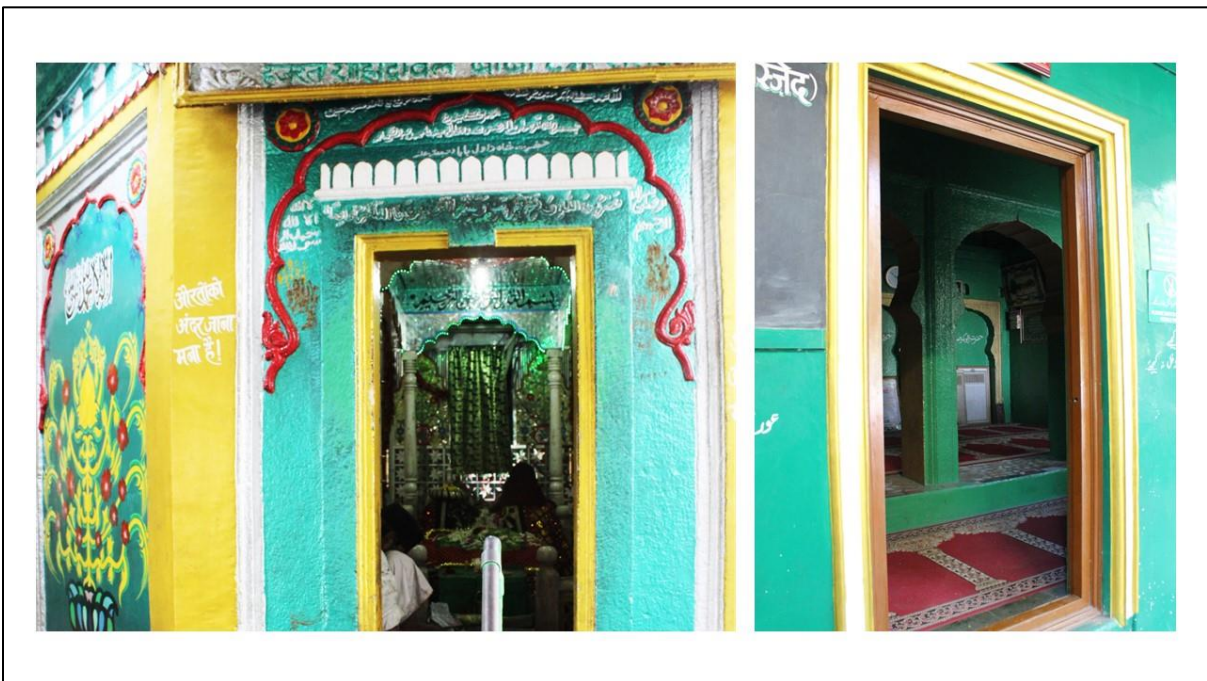

Image 1.7: Peshwa architecture of the Sadal Baba *dargah* and mosque. Image source: author.

There is a miracle story connected to the lamp that is endowed by the government. It is said that whoever applies its soot to their eyes is healed and protected from eye problems and blindness. While this miracle is not explicitly mentioned in the noticeboard hagiography, it is prominently featured in Sadal Baba's oral narratives that describe his miracles at the *dargah*. Again, the materiality of soot that may soothe the eyes is transformed into a miracle at Sadal Baba, producing the lamp as miraculous too. The noticeboard narrative of the lamp, endowed by the kings of Pune and later by the British and the Maharashtra-state, legitimises the *dargah* as an officially recognised space of miracles. Baba's life story and *shizra* on the noticeboard produces the noticeboard as a source of combined spiritual and material authority, accessible to both Muslim and Hindu devotees. Its message can be read as a somewhat teleological enterprise: the proof of the *dargah*'s sacredness does not lie in its unquestioned acceptance. The message is more interested in convincing potential devotees of the *dargah*'s promised miracles. The *dargah* noticeboard thus invites non-believers to sample the *dargah* and its rituals as a sensory and material experiment. The miraculous boons conferred on them by the Sufi are thus considered a reward for having undertaken the sensory experiment. Confirming the truth borne from evidence, thus demands a 'test' followed by reward. The noticeboards

and *dargah* architecture thus function as a material link to a sensorium of miracle, established between *dargah* devotees, its sacredness of space enabled by *mujawar*s, and Sadal Baba.

Structuring Segregated Spaces

Image 1.8: The Sadal Baba *dargah* courtyard: a pristine and peaceful Muslim village, where devotees sit peacefully by the trees. Image source: author.

This section continues with the ongoing discussion about the importance of Sadal Baba's noticeboards signed by the *dargah mujawar* trust, to explore how a myriad other noticeboards inside the *dargah* courtyard demonstrate the *mujawar*s' assertion of institutional power as gatekeepers that safeguarded the *dargah*'s Sufi Islamic nature. The inner space of the Sadal Baba *dargah*—its central courtyard—gives visitors the impression of a pristine, peaceful village, dating to an antiquated period—sleepy, calm, and otherworldly—far-removed from the hustle and bustle of the Deccan College Road (image 1.8). The *dargah* courtyard is said to sensorily resemble a time outside time, where *mujawar*s and devotees (say they) feel safe, calm, protected, and meditative. On the other hand, the *dargah*'s courtyard space is also intensely segregated, with only men having access to Sadal Baba's inner sanctum. This is despite of the fact that a woman, Sadal Baba's mother, is buried alongside him. While the presence of a woman's grave usually functions as a precondition for women's entry into the shrine's sanctum, this is not the case at Sadal Baba. Sadal Baba's sanctum is a masculine space of power demarcated as sacred and separate, a special place. The quotidian space of the courtyard extends outwards from this sacred core, and is meant for women and casual visitors—'outsiders'. This quotidian courtyard is also mediated and intensely cordoned off by instructional noticeboards that seek to discipline women and unbelievers by providing them with precautionary information.

The central courtyard of the *dargah* (left photograph of image 1.8) is relatively small and encircled by a protective wall running along the edges on top of the hill. The sanctum lies slightly off-centre to the left, to back of the courtyard, flanked by a mosque in front (right photograph of image 1.7), and the lamp (image 1.6) that is in front of the sanctum entrance. The sanctum entrance does not face the *dargah*'s entrance from the Deccan College Road (image 1.2), but faces the river at the back. There are some old trees in the courtyard and these trees, it is said, were once part of a large forest on top of the densely forested hill during

Sadal Baba's time that sheltered him from the elements. There are temporary sheds and rooms for *mujawar*s and devotees lining the encircling walls that are used for cooking benedictory meals (*kandoori*). Whenever there is a *kandoori* at the *dargah*, it is common for organizers to feed everyone present at the shrine, especially the destitute. Since *kandoori*s are organized nearly every day by some of the devotees whose wishes have been fulfilled, the destitute at the *dargah* are regularly fed. The central *dargah* courtyard consists of a small graveyard, and some of the graves belong to the earlier generations of *mujawar*s.

Image 1.9: Sadal Baba *dargah* noticeboards. Image source: author.

One of the most distinguishing features of the *dargah* courtyard is its intense demarcation by instructional noticeboards that mostly target women and casual visitors—those who may *not* be knowledgeable about *dargah* protocol and appropriate behaviour at the shrine—activities that were forbidden (image 1.9). Unfortunately, I do not possess high-resolution photographs of all these noticeboards—a sizable number. I can however provide some translated examples here. The notice on the top left corner of image 1.9 is brief. It says: "This place is meant for women to pray." The bottom left notice in image 1.9 says: "Please show respect for the *dargah*, the *dargah* graveyard, and mosque. Please do not wear shoes when walking inside these holy spaces." There is a brief missive at the entrance of Sadal Baba's main sanctum (left photograph in image 1.7) that says: "Women are forbidden from entering." The central photograph of image 1.9 has two inscriptions on the two separate entrance pillars, located at the mouth of the staircase coming from the Deccan College Road. The first one closer to the camera says: "It is forbidden for couples to sit here." The second one has two separate instructions: "Do not come here in a drunken state", and "Do not wear shoes when coming up the stairs." There are a plethora of other noticeboards pinned on to the *dargah*'s inside walls and spaces, including tree trunks. A faintly visible notice on the left side of image 1.8 says: "It is forbidden to sit on the graves". An instruction on a green pillar far in the background in the right photograph of the same image 1.8 says: "It is forbidden to sleep here." The more detailed notice on the right corner of image 1.9 reiterates: "This is a space for women to pray; a place they can use to introspect on the Quran. Please do not sit here and gossip about personal matters. This place is only for prayer. Please do not bring small children inside. Please keep the place pure and clean." I argue that these noticeboards reconstitute the *dargah*'s materiality that cordon-off, define, and produce the grave-shrine's sacredness. They not only produce Sadal Baba as a

sacred figure, but also reiterate the power of *mujawar*s as the *dargah*'s boundary-setters for outsiders and visitors. These boundaries inform people of what is considered 'wrong' and un-Islamic by *mujawar*s, further creating a hierarchy between those who know how to behave inside the *dargah*, and those who do not: men, Muslims, and devotees versus women, unbelievers, and casual visitors. Sadal Baba noticeboards act as double-edged instrument, mostly read by casual visitors at the shrine—outsiders, who do not want to get into trouble with the *dargah* administration—visitors who accept their pre-identification by *mujawar*s as outsiders. Strongly aimed at women, these notices pejoratively locate the status of *dargah* veneration in women's lives—not as places of prayer—but as places of reprieve from household chores. Similarly, for romantic couples who may want to escape surveillance, or for non-Muslim visitors, these instructions caution them not to disrespect and disrupt the Islamic nature of the shrine. Pre-identifying what shrine misuse constitutes, therefore allows *mujawar*s to pre-emptively identify people as shrine misusers. As one *mujawar* put it, people misused the *dargah* by treating it like a public garden, coming in to drink and feast, conducting clandestine romantic trysts here, or wandering in for afternoon naps, and to idly chat with friends. Seeing how many notices targeted women, I asked one *mujawar* whether women could enter the sanctum in earlier times. In those days, the shrine was open, he said, and so, the question did not arise. The decision to build an enclosed sanctum was meant to protect the grave-shrine from the elements, from possible and pre-identified miscreants, and to protect the donation box that was government property.

There is no uniformity in the way that noticeboards are accessed at the Sadal Baba *dargah*. Hardly read by devotees who are regular visitors, they are, on the other hand, important and frequently read by new visitors. Many visitors (like me) in their initial visits to Sadal Baba consider these noticeboards to contain important rules and information that they are meant to know and adhere to. They automatically become the target audience of the noticeboards that pre-delineates them as 'outsiders' to the *dargah*'s ecosystem. This automatic becoming, or the imbibing of the outsider status is aimed at facilitating learning, and ultimately seeking inclusion within that same ecosystem—to become one of those, who, with time, are to be considered insiders—after internalising *dargah* rules. At the core of the instructions is the production of the *dargah* as a powerful and miraculous Sufi Islamic space that predates and counters Pune's identification as singularly Hindu-Brahmin, and a Peshwa bastion. *Mujawar*s set their own boundaries within the *dargah*'s space by erecting noticeboards that invert the mainstream version of Pune's history—recreate the *dargah* as the prehistory of the Hindu identity, a pristine space that is sensorily experienced by immersing oneself into Sadal Baba's own time—sensing and enjoying the shade of the same trees in the *dargah* courtyard that once sheltered Sadal Baba. But all this had to be enjoyed within the limits of *dargah* rules set by *mujawar*s.

The 'Bag-and-Shovel' Ritual

Sadal Baba's *dargah* ritual is called the *jholi-phavda* ritual, loosely translated by me as the 'bag-and-shovel' ritual, and the ritual is an important site of material-miracle transformation. In her recent book on material religion, Flueckiger (2020: 17) asks us to introspect on the potential of materiality that is transformed through ritual—analysing rituals as agents of transformation. Using Flueckiger's analysis, and citing Plate's first key component of material religion (2015: 4): investigating interactions between humans and objects; I explore how the *jholi-phavda* ritual is entangled with the bodies of Sadal Baba's Hindu devotees, the space of Yerawada, and the Sadal Baba hill where the *dargah* is located. As *mujawar*s were vague about the ritual, I will in this section, use an account of the same collected from a Sadal Baba devotee living in Yerawada (Mr. Sadanand [name changed]).

Explaining the legend behind the *jholi-phavda* ritual first, Mr. Sadanand said that he saw the ritual as central to the building of the Sadal Baba *dargah*. Dated to a time when the hillock was called Datar Tembha (see discussion about the *dargah* noticeboard above), the legend is as follows: Sadal Baba came to Pune from Arabia during King Shivaji's reign and took up residence in the forested hill of Yerawada called Datar Tembha. Although the place was a jungle, full of wild animals, he found it peaceful, and chose it as his resting place (his *chilla* that doubled up as his *samadhi*). But being a Sufi, Baba already miraculously knew the date and time of his death beforehand, and thus wanted to prepare his grave in advance. Preparing the grave however required construction; and construction required funds and labour. So, Baba tied his handkerchief (*rumaal*), that he had used to wipe his sweat into a bag (*jholi*), looped the bag over the end of the shovel (*phavda*) used to dig his grave. Slinging his bag-and-shovel contraption over one shoulder, he went down into Yerawada to collect alms and mobilise labour. The locals of Yerawada supported Baba for the next 40 days to finish preparing his grave. These locals were Baba's first devotees who did not convert to Islam but nevertheless remained loyal to Baba, giving him his first *mitti* (burial soil) after his death. Baba's other students and family members came rushing to Yerawada after hearing of his death. They later built the *dargah* structure, and this came to be endowed by the government, and recognized as a sacred space of miracles. *Jholi-phavda* was thus an extension of Sadal Baba's own home making at Datar Tembha, and the beginning of the *dargah*'s building that entangled his Hindu devotees in Yerawada as part of it.

According to Mr. Sadanand, the *jholi-phavda* ritual was undertaken by all those among Baba's devotees who had once faced or continued to face life challenges, with many undertaking the ritual once or twice a year as a precautionary measure even after their problems were resolved, and their wishes were fulfilled. The *jholi-phavda* ritual thus continued as tradition among local families. The contraption was made by tying the four corners of a square cloth into a pouch, looped over the wooden handle of a small shovel. Devotees, with their *jholi-phavda* begged for alms in five neighbourhood homes every day for a ritual period of 40 days—a ritualised mimesis of Sadal Baba's 40 day grave-preparation activity (cf. Werbner 2022, also cf. Taussig 1993 for mimesis and ritual). During this time, devotees subsisted on the food they received, or the food they bought with the money they received as alms. But this food had to be finished every day— no hoarding allowed. After 40 days, the devotee organised a benediction *kandoori* (feast) at the *dargah* in praise of Sadal Baba, where everyone was fed. According to Mr. Sadanand, the *jholi-phavda* ritual and the ritual objects associated with it, the cloth bag and the shovel, evoked an important imagery: the shovel was imagined as a weapon that had the potential of burying life problems into the ground. While devotees did not actually dig the ground with the shovel, the bag-and-shovel ritual mimetically represented Baba's shrine-making activity, remembered as legend, emulating which, was said to have the power of circumventing their difficulties in the present. While the *jholi* materially manifested Baba's labour and suffering, it also represented the suffering of devotees. The ritual was a way in which the Hindu community of devotees around Sadal Baba were in continuation of the initial community that Sadal Baba had formed in Yerawada, when he had decided to go to the village and beg for alms and support. To cite Plate's (2015: 4) fifth component of material religion here, the ritual provided devotees with a specific material structure and tradition that provided their community life with heritage, surrounding Sadal Baba and his *dargah*.

I interviewed Mr. Sadanand (Hindu Maratha by caste) at his residence in one of the labyrinthine alleys of Yerawada. He claimed to be the 18th or 19th generation descendant of an ancestor who was once among Sadal Baba's first devotees. Claiming to be an original inhabitant of Yerawada, Mr. Sadanand was candid, but wanted to remain anonymous, refusing to allow me to even photograph his *jholi-phavda* contraption that was resting in a corner of the room where I interviewed him. According to Mr. Sadanand, the dates of the noticeboard hagiography at the

dargah were false, as many in Yerawada would attest to Sadal Baba having arrived during King Shivaji's reign (mid-17th century). While Shivaji's reign is considered culturally axiomatic in Maharashtra (Jasper 2003), indicating a period of monarchical justice that is akin to *Ram Rajya*, Mr. Sadanand's Shivaji hypothesis corroborates the *dargah*'s Peshwa style architecture.

As evident from Mr. Sadanand's story, there were separate Hindu and Muslim claims over Sadal Baba. The *jholi-phavda* ritual produced a special variety of Sufi-*murid* relationship between Sadal Baba and his Hindu devotees that did not entail their conversion to Islam (see Dahnhardt 2002). However, when asked about the ritual, Sadal Baba *dargah mujawar*s mostly remained silent or vague about this special relationship, saying that it is up to Sadal Baba to make such relationships. While the *jholi-phavda* ritual indicated the Hindu devotee's closeness to Baba that transcended religious difference, the ritual also produced Yerawada as a secular and diverse Hindu and Muslim space where Hindus protected the Sufi, and were in turn protected by the Sufi. The *dargah* could be read as a ritual zone of miracle-material transfer, reflecting the symbiotic transfer between Hindu devotees and the Sufi, between *dargah* devotees and newcomers, between the inner sanctum and the quotidian courtyard, and between men and women. On the other hand, the noticeboard hagiography and *shizra* (image 1.3 and image 1.4) privileged the Sufi-Muslim style of bond-making through initiation into a *tariqa* (cf. Green 2012). These overlapping, divergent Hindu-Muslim, devotee-*mujawar* claims produced the Sadal Baba *dargah*'s segregated space as a negotiated meeting point. The internal segregation of the *dargah* space can perhaps be read to represent the tensions of these diverging claims and its simultaneous amelioration, with the temporal context of this negotiation being projected into a pristine and peaceful past, where similar negotiations did not produce conflict, and were peaceful.

Wish-Threads: Assemblages of Power

This last section discusses wish-threads that devotees tie to the large grills situated in front of the *mujawar* graves, in the *dargah* courtyard (image 1.3, left photograph in image 1.8, and lower photograph in image 1.10). According to some devotees, the excessive presence of wish-threads on the grills filled them with an anxiety mixed with hope about their own wishes. After all, there were so many wish-threads on the grills, and so, Sadal Baba must have the capacity of fulfilling everyone's wishes. But then, there were also anxieties: would Baba have the time to fulfil everyone's wishes? Also, some of the wish-threads looked old and mouldy—it showed that Baba had not fulfilled every wish. These were thus considered inauspicious—a marker of unfulfilled wishes. But *mujawar*s also consoled devotees—those who had tied wish-threads were also supposed to return to the *dargah* to untie them once the wish was fulfilled—so, the wish-threads looked mouldy only because they had not been properly untied as yet—and not because Baba had not fulfilled their wishes. And yet, the untying process was difficult since the grills grew crowded with thousands of wish-threads on them. It became impossible for people to recognize their own wish-threads after some time. While some devotees did not return to the *dargah* because they grew busy, or forgot having tied wish threads, other devotees could simply not find their own wish-threads. *Mujawar*s in interviews said that it was left to them to untie these old wish-threads that no-one had untied, even though they knew it was not entirely proper for them to untie other people's wish-threads—lest they undid the wish. They said they untied the wish-threads as they considered the wishes fulfilled; they had faith in Baba. Besides, untying the wish-threads had a utilitarian purpose; it made space for the tying of new wish-threads. The zone of transfer between the embroiled material-miracle domain discussed in the context of the *jholi-phavda* thus also included the bright-red wish-threads that are sold as part of *dargah* ritual paraphernalia at shops outside (upper photograph of image 1.10). While ritual objects like wish threads were considered secular while they were in the market, their worth predicated on the value of their raw material, they were simultaneously imbued with a

ready-to-'become' charge in their unused state. Theorizing the material vitality of objects, Bennett (2010: x) argues that objects "form alliances with other bodies", acquiring "a separate force that can enter and animate a physical body" (ibid: xiii). Similarly, Anna Bigelow, in an anthology about how Islamic history can be read anew by exploring the genealogy of objects from the Muslim world (2021: 2), interprets objects as an orientation:

> Embracing the power of the particular, each contribution is the story of an object that shapes and is shaped by the world it inhabits on multiple levels, from the personal to the political, the social to the spiritual, the commodified to the aestheticized. These Islamic objects are not necessarily, or ever only, materialized theologies. Rather, taken together, they demonstrate how Islamic objects help us to understand material religion in general and how Islamic epistemes help us understand the things that permeate and activate our worlds.

Image 1.10: Shops outside the Sadal Baba dargah and wish-threads inside the *dargah* courtyard (Image Source: author)

In themselves, neither wish-threads, nor the *jholi* or *phavda* were ritual objects. But they were everyday objects produced into an assemblage and ritually deployed, after which they came to perform religious associations between the devotee, the *dargah* space, *mujawar*s, and Sadal Baba. On the other hand, Baba's Muslim-ness and the *dargah*'s Islamic sanctity that the *mujawar*s guarded so zealously was accepted by Baba's Hindu devotees. Since they did not need to convert to Islam to experience Baba's miracles, undertake the *jholi-phavda* ritual, or tie/ untie wish-threads at the *dargah*, their relationship with Baba remained outside the boundary of religious difference. While cross-religious overlaps may be seen as complicating the relationship between devotion, miracle, ritual objects, and religion at the *dargah*, these overlaps are important, functioning to protect Sadal Baba and his devotees from religious polarization—protecting Sadal Baba from being targeted—and protecting Baba's Hindu devotees from being converted to Islam.

Using Plate's summary (2015), I argue that wish-threads sold at *dargah* shops that are later tied to the grills in the *dargah* courtyard, inhabit an arc of 'becoming'. While shops may have constituted their starting point as fresh and colourful strings, where they were as yet inanimate and constituted secular raw materials, they were simultaneously defined by an inner instability marked by the potential to become transformed into wishes in the course of ritual deployment and 'enlivening' (cf. Flueckiger 2020). Once ritually deployed, they acquired an agential lifeforce, materializing wishes, prayers, or even curses. Wish-threads, once tied, never returned to their original state. Instead, they became 'fleshy' and 'lively' till the wishes they manifested were fulfilled, or until the time came for them to be untied. Once the wish was fulfilled, wish-threads automatically 'died' and became lifeless as debris, without any potential left.

Pointing to the wish-threads I was photographing, a devotee told me that wish-threads, if unfulfilled, also resisted being untied. They wriggled, or emitted small electrical-like vibrations that indicated 'liveliness'. *Mujawar*s too, she said, did not untie the 'lively' ones. Also, some people did not like their wish-threads to be untied by others. So, they put padlocks on their wish-threads, to recognize them later. As we sat eating lunch one afternoon, she told me that Sadal Baba's grills were like the world, the painful *duniya* that everyone had to endure. Till the time of death, the poor wish-threads also continued to wriggle, struggling in overcrowded conditions. They lost their identities in a crowd, abandoned by their makers—humans who had 'enlivened' them by wishing with them, and tying them to the grill. Thereafter, they were out there in the world, enduring their miserable destiny, with no reprieve until God came along to save them—Sadal Baba who redeemed them by fulfilling the wish. She told me that her own life was like a wish-thread too (translation mine):

> This is my home. I will continue to live here at Baba's feet till my journey ends. I am like one of those many wish-threads on that grill that refuses to die and wriggles on. One day, that time will come! One day, I will die under one of these trees, and one of my children or grandchildren, or one of the *mujawar*s, who are also like my children, will untie my wish-thread from the grill, and throw it away into the river.

As Kajri Jain (2007) writes, when describing the many posters of different Hindu deities that are exchanged and circulated in the public domain and market as *bazaar* art, these subversive and agential assemblages have a libidinous quality that attracts the gaze, demonstrating their potential to acquire new stories—each entangled with the power of truth. One may experience the pleasure of this gazing in the top photograph of image 1.10. In a shop owned by one of the *mujawar*s on Deccan College Road replete with ritual objects, wish-threads as bright red objects that hold the potential of 'becoming' wishes, attract the gaze. Apart from other useful items like skull caps, and handkerchiefs to cover the head when entering Baba's sanctum (or to make *jholi*s), *mujawar* shops also sell 'gift items' consisting of framed pictures, table-frame photos of Sadal Baba's grave, Urdu-language calendars, and wall clocks. There are additionally, cheaply-printed prayer booklets, small cosmetics, and trinkets on display. The used-up wish-threads seen in the bottom photograph of image 1.10, demonstrates how these new and bright objects undergo a radical ritual transformation. Compared to how fresh they look in the shop, wish-threads on the grill look ragged and matted, hanging there like bedraggled festoons, and cobwebs. While the above photograph of image 1.10 attracts the sensually-interested gaze, the lower photograph of image 1.10 attracts the ghoulish gaze. While some wish-threads are accompanied by padlocks indicating their robust, determined nature—not to be easily undone, others with green bangles attached, convey the plaintive feminine plea of helpless and unfulfilled desire (cf. Taneja 2017).

When I asked a *mujawar* shopkeeper if wish-threads really turned into wishes once ritually tied upstairs at the *dargah*, he smiled and shrugged. It depended on what one believed in, he said,

and corrected himself—it depended on what one experienced—the only basis of true belief. Every other form of belief, he said, was blind. In the increasingly rationalist public domain of Maharashtra (Quack 2012), the proof of the pudding lay, not in blind acceptance, but in testing and experimenting with it. The experience of miracle turned the miracle into truth, and evidence for truth, that had the power of soldering the devotee's faith. The economy of ritual objects that inhabited an 'arc of becoming' were catalysed by rituals that transformed them into miracles. The shops, physical banal entities in themselves like wish-threads, shovels, and cloth bags, were appended to an economy of miracles. They were part of a continuum between Sadal Baba, *dargah mujawar*s, devotees, Yerawada, and the Sufi prehistory of Pune.

Conclusion

This article explores material religion at the Sadal Baba *dargah* in Pune, composed of its public spaces and noticeboards, *mujawar*s and devotees invested in the *dargah*'s sacredness, *dargah* rituals and *dargah* markets that restructure the shrine as one dynamic whole. I would end this article by drawing attention to two overarching themes: first, *dargah mujawar*s try to preserve the Muslim identity of the *dargah*. On the other hand, they also invite a privileged section of society—Hindu men into the sanctum—producing and pre-identifying Hindu women and all women as miscreants. This simultaneous cordoning-off and inviting process that functions in tandem, produces power and hierarchy between those who experience Sadal Baba physically (men) and those who experience Baba spiritually (women). And these two deliberately produced halves construct a complex whole through layers of mediation between them (Hayden 2022).

Secondly, the stress on preserving the *dargah*'s Islamic heritage can be seen in the larger interest of preserving Yerawada's and Pune's Sufi Islamic history, predating the Peshwas—a pristine environment where layers of complex mediation between Hindus and Muslims took place in an atmosphere of peace and cordiality. That the Sufi Islamic history of Yerawada and its power to wield miracles at Sadal Baba is additionally recognized by the government who continues to endow the *dargah*, is stressed by *mujawar*s. Experienced in terms of the *dargah*'s pristine tranquillity, shaded by old trees, the experience of Pune's Muslim prehistory provides devotees with an alternative experience of inter-religious negotiation, preserved at Yerawada. Sensory immersion within the *dargah*'s atmosphere reconstitutes both the material and miracle, encompassed in the link between Yerawada and Pune, exemplified by how the fleeing people of Pune took shelter at the *dargah* during the 1961 floods. In this light, the *dargah* noticeboard instructions for those pre-identified as 'outsiders' and 'misusers' can perhaps be framed more metaphorically: more than their missives, these instructions prohibit visitors from forgetting the sacredness and link between Yerawada and Pune's Sufi-Islamic history—lively, strong—capable of generating miracles and providing proof of it.

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