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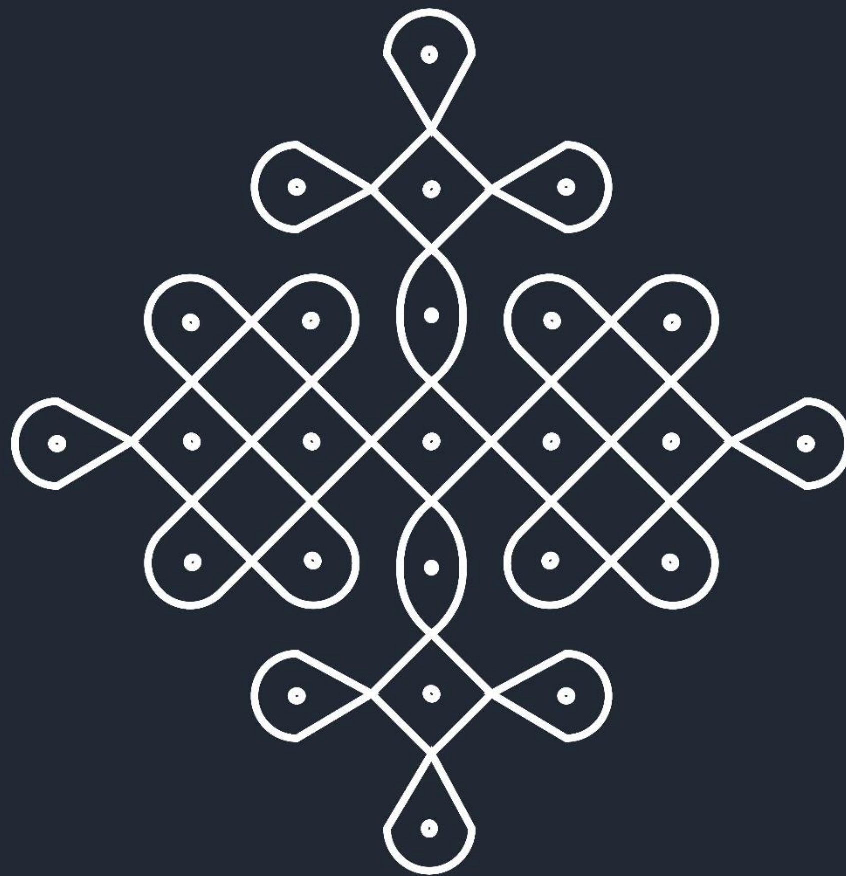

Material Religion, Assemblage, and the Agency of Things in South Asia

Guest edited by Leah Elizabeth Comeau

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Preface

Materiality

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It gives me great pleasure to present our readers with the December 2024 issue of *Nidān: International Journal of Indian Studies* (volume 9) that, as usual, brings forth new scholarly interventions in the academic field of South Asian Studies. Titled *Material Religion, Assemblage, and the Agency of Things in South Asia*, this special issue, as outlined by our guest editor Leah Elizabeth Comeau in her introduction, emerged out of a successful panel on material religion at the Annual Conference on South Asia in Madison, in October 2023. Comeau (both in her *Introduction* titled *Material Religion, Assemblage, and The Agency of Things in South Asia*, and in her article in this volume titled *Material Religion and the Edges of Assemblage at a South Indian Beach Festival*) and Harini Kumar (in her *Afterword* titled *An Eiffel Tower at Nagore: Spectacular Assemblages*) demonstrate how the material religion approach introduces new insights to the study of religion in South Asia. In terms of my own understanding, the material religion approach also has strong epistemic roots in ritual studies (cf. Stephenson [2015] for an overview) and the study of Indian archaeology (one of my parent disciplines). The culmination encompassed by material religion thus also expands the scope of ritual studies and archaeology to include within its purview shrines and worship practices that are beyond Hinduism, and located in the contemporary. This produces the 'material turn' as very dynamic, and wider in range than hitherto afforded by archaeology and ritual studies—especially in light of scholarly debates on whether popular vernacular practices could be considered 'ritual' at all—and whether or not including all forms of materiality would ultimately whittle away the scholarly erudition of ritual studies. While criticism of how religious studies was too preoccupied with the spiritual and intellectual domain resulted in growing interest in material religion, ritual studies and archaeology on the other hand have also broadened themselves to refocus on everyday objects, assemblages, and spaces.

Indian archaeology has always had robust interest in materiality—sculpture, architecture, art, excavated material culture, and the physical/ material/ and even chemical forms of everyday objects like coins, daily artifacts, and pottery. It is not simply the presence of materiality within an assemblage that becomes important, but it is the meaning that presence acquires based on its situatedness, or as archaeologists would say, its stratigraphy, that provides materiality with meaning, and also agency and power—an assemblage within which material, non-human/ animal, as well as humans—through mutual association—come to inhabit a negotiated matrix of influence. Comeau's article in this volume, with many images, focuses on exactly such an assemblage that collectively produces the Masi Magam beach festival in Pondicherry. Kumar's article, similarly, among other themes, also with many images, takes the same approach, when exploring the tableaux procession of the Nagore *dargah* during the Sufi's *urs* in South India. Mocko's article in this volume explores the celebration of human-non-human/ human-plant marriages that are part of everyday sociality, especially within the feminine world, among Hindu families in India and Nepal. Patel's article, through its analysis of *manasi*, powerfully challenges the binary between material forms of worship and its spiritual/ imagined/ visualised form. Patel provocatively asks us to identity the locus of materiality in worship: in the mind that is embedded in the material world, or in the world of which the mind is a material part. In my article (my first publication using the material religion approach for which I must thank

Comeau), I have, with the help of photographic images, highlighted the importance of noticeboards, ritual objects, and public spaces at the *dargah* of Sadal Baba in Pune that produce a singular religious experience for visitors and devotees.

As expected, we also have our usual battery of interesting book reviews this time that begin with Gautam Pemmaraju's exposition of Ole Birk Laurson's *Anarchy of Chaos* that outlines the interwar years and activities of the revolutionary M.P.T. Acharya in Germany. This is followed by Heinz Werner Wessler's review of Martin Christof-Füchsle and Razak Khan's volume, *Nodes of Translation* that also explores literary interactions between India and Germany from the interwar years. Sabina Kazmi provides us a review of Sutapa Dutta and Shivangini Tandon's volume *Making the 'Woman'* that explores how gender was recast in the historical and literary records of the 18th and 19th centuries in India. Mithilesh Kumar reviews Sadan Jha's *Social City* to outline the heuristic importance of intersections that negotiate interactions between urban history, caste, vernacular markets, a subaltern and transient labour force, and migration. And again, marrying a 'material' approach to urban history, Amol Saghar reviews Shama Mitra Chenoy's translated-edited book *Delhi and Its Environs Before 1857* by Ramji Das that provides readers with a history of Delhi, written from the perspective of its historic structures—made all the more piquant by the British destruction of these structures after the revolt 1857. Last but not the least, this volume contains my own review of Amrita Datta's *Stories of the Indian Migrant Communities in Germany*, a monograph that takes a bottom-up approach to the negotiated experiences and migration narratives of mostly elite Indians, produced as subaltern and unfree, by intersecting processes of modern international politics.

Apart from this usual fare, this volume contains an obituary of T.S. Rukmani penned by Professor Pratap Kumar Penumala. We lost Professor Rukmani in 2024, and this loss was not limited to the academic domain alone. For *Nidān*, this loss was also personal. As outlined earlier by Professor Penumala (2023: 7), Professor Rukmani herself once edited *Nidān* between 1993 and 1995. While the journal's editorship was henceforth spearheaded by Professor Penumala, subsequently inherited by me in 2021, Professor Rukmani remained an esteemed member of the journal's editorial board. She wrote me kind emails on two separate occasions, congratulating me on *Nidān*'s progress. Though I never knew Professor Rukmani personally, being associated with her heritage through *Nidān* is indeed an honour. Professor Rukmani's position in the *Nidān* editorial board has been assumed by Professor Leah Elizabeth Comeau, who has also guest edited this present special issue. The *Nidān* family extends its warm welcome to her.

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Introduction

Material Religion, Assemblage, and The Agency of Things in South Asia

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This special issue is the product of our collective experiment with materials that are assembled, imagined, and agentive in the context of South Asian religions. Our first meeting was around a table at the Annual Conference on South Asia in Madison in 2023. The initial aim of the panel was to consider the theoretical impact of material agency on our respective subfields in South Asian Religious Studies. We also used a capsule bibliography to launch the work and to establish a spirited coherence between the articles (Bennett [2010], Pintchman and Dempsey [2016], Flueckiger [2021], and Jain [2021]). Over the past year, we have benefited from feedback and reviews from conference audience members, colleagues who generously and sometimes anonymously encouraged individual articles, our small army of peer reviewers, and the intellectual intimacies that flow through the warm backchannels of WhatsApp. In addition, each author undertook steady periods of research and reflection in order to present and to voice an interpretation of material studies that 'worked' for their specific areas of expertise. It was a privilege to work alongside this group of scholars and I am especially pleased that the articles and afterword offer readers diversity in region, religion, and disciplinary alliances.

In my own writing and teaching I am loath to turn in my whole toolbox to chase one analytical frame. My interest in new materialism (Hazard 2019) and frameworks that raise the profile of non-humans to the role of social actors is driven by multiple factors. First, I have been writing about the use of flowers and their characteristics as ephemeral organic materials in South Indian religious practices for the past two years. During this time, my thinking has swung like a pendulum between the people—farmers, priests, weavers—and the flowers—in buds, blossoms, and rot. Ascribing agency and thus varying degrees of power to flowers allows me to linger outside temple walls and to credit devotional aesthetics not only to the demands of *darshan* but also to the climate, fashion trends, and labour practices among other things, of South India. In a much broader sense, beyond the scope of the book manuscript, the material turn is one platform of many where scholars can draw attention to the two-faced global crisis of depleted and hoarded resources. My approach to materiality, for example, is continuously haunted by Bennett's distinction between materiality and materialism. Bennett explains that "American materialism, which requires buying ever-increasing numbers of products purchased in ever-shorter cycles, is *anti*materiality. The sheer volume of commodities and the hyperconsumptive necessity of junking them to make room for new ones, conceals the vitality of matter" (Bennett 2010: 5). This junking—the junking of things, the junking of the earth, the junking of people—is a place where my thoughts linger and where the momentum of new materialism as of yet stalls out.

Returning to the focus of this issue, assemblage and the placement of material religion lenses on ethnographic sites and devotional practices has proven to be nonetheless a fruitful opportunity to walk, not run, through a guided meditation or a processional caravan.

The first article by Deepra Dandekar interrogates the transformative power of various ritual objects and the spatially defined relationships that occur at the *dargah* of the Sufi Sadal Baba in Pune, a site largely inhabited by Hindu devotees. A chorus of sign boards tells newcomers

how to behave and limits the privileges of women. The bag-and-shovel ritual both preserves local Islamic history and continues to enliven the devotion of Hindus who are attracted to the Sufi saint. Keeping true to the unevenness of assemblage, Dandekar's description of powerful memories and miraculous transformations concludes with the tying and untying of red wish threads, some of which possess the ability to resist their own untying. In all, readers are led through a variety of material processes that communicate the vibrancy of the Sufi saint as well as uphold hierarchies of power and access at the sacred site.

In the second article, Anne Mocko brings her expertise in ritual studies to bear on the tradition of *tulsi vivaha*, a wedding ritual that is entirely staged by people but that features a basil plant as the well-dressed bride. Drawing on these plant-centred weddings, as well as examples of nuptials with fossils, fruit, frogs, and dogs, Mocko demonstrates that these non-human actors are not imagined to be long-term marriage partners. Rather, they are critical sites for rethinking and expanding the possibilities of the world, allowing devotees to bring divine presences into their midst or troubled families to resolve their very human problems. With her eye trained on assembled materials for this special issue and the potential agency that they exert, Mocko guides the reader through an elevated reading of what humans do with their rituals, how rituals act upon devotees, *as well as* what 'thing power' the non-human actors contribute to shaping and enlivening human realities.

In the third article, Iva Patel proposes bhakti assemblage as a new concept that promotes engagement with the interplay between humans and objects across physical and imagined realms that is cultivated through cognitive practices. In particular, Patel focuses on devotional visualization called *manasi* which is a practice of cognitive engagement with the divine that is collapsed with the physical realm of the devotee. For example, a devotee can painstakingly build a temple in his imagination that rivals a stone temple built by a king or burn his finger on a hot food offering that he prepares in his mind. Using examples of *manasi* as practiced in three bhakti traditions, Swaminarayan, Pushtimarg, and Gaudiya, Patel illustrates how devotees draw on well-established conventions, their own creativity, and deep wells of personal emotion in order to assemble, admire, and be affected by devotional materials–be they spectacular or mundane–in their minds.

In the fourth article, my contribution to this special issue attributes agency and vitality to humans, organic and inorganic materials, and a festival event that takes place at a beach in Pondicherry, South India. I begin with the decorated procession cart of a Hindu goddess, and then follow her through the contexts of both the planned schedule of the procession and the spontaneous responses to unplanned events and conditions of the day. By redistributing agentive power to human and non-human material actants that inhabit the festival, I thus propose the dissolution of any real or perceived duality between spiritual devotees and the material world. I also explore the role of the author in establishing the edges of ad hoc collectives at religious events through observation and writing while somehow also being subject to the destabilizing and porous nature of the very same assemblage. I demonstrate that the open wholes of assemblages aid in disrupting the exaggerated stability or the neat 'containability' of religious life.

Finally in the Afterword to the special issue, Harini Kumar presents two expressions of South Asian Islam; first, in the festive LED-lit tableaus that process annually behind a chariot transporting a sacred vessel from Nagapattinam to Nagore in Tamil Nadu and second, the instalment of a Nagore saint in a Hindu temple in Brooklyn, New York. Kumar applies the fluid, unifying, and disruptive characteristics of assemblage to disband Hindu-Muslim binaries in these contexts where both Muslims and Hindus are co-mingling authoritative participants. Kumar also shows how material religion fortifies the very efficacy of ritual and festival events

and calls on us to continue to develop analytical tools that attend to the more-than-human things that undoubtedly populate religious life while also justly holding accountable the role and real limits of human actors.

Collectively, this special issue is composed of models and proposals for framing materiality in partnership with methodologies in religion, anthropology, literature, and history all with the humble goal of understanding religion through objects. We invite readers to read, question, and share our writing—untying a few lively wish-threads in the process.

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Afterword

An Eiffel Tower at Nagore: Material Religion and Spectacular Assemblages at a South Indian Sufi Shrine

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Sometime in the mid-nineties, when I was a nine-year-old girl, my mother took me to the 'Hindu Hall', a Hindu temple in Gaborone, Botswana (where we then lived) to witness a miracle: the idol of Ganesha, the elephant-faced god, was drinking milk. What I did not know then, was that Hindus all over the world were also rushing to their local temples to witness this miracle. When we reached the temple premises, I was shoved to the front with all the other children. Soon enough, the head priest's wife handed me a spoonful of milk and gripped my hand steadily under the trunk of the Ganesha idol as I watched the liquid disappear slowly. I don't remember much else except for the cacophony and crowds that day. My atheist father later joked that the priest's wife probably tilted my hand at a particular angle so that the milk would dribble off the spoon, giving the illusion that the idol was *actually* drinking milk. "Ingenious!" he guffawed.

Almost twenty years later, as I gravitated toward the study of religion as a graduate student, I came to realise that not only were there varying explanations given for this particular event, including analyses of the political and ideological actors purportedly orchestrating this 'miracle' behind the scenes, but scholars from different fields more broadly were asking ontological and epistemological questions about reality, rationality, the imagination, human-nonhuman relations, materiality, and the agency of nonhuman things in the world as they relate to religion. Indeed, the agency of idols (*murti*s) and other religious objects have been topics of study within Hinduism (Flueckiger 2020). A more productive question, then, is not whether Ganesha idols across the world *actually* drank milk. Rather, in asking how and why sacred objects come to have agency (or are imbued with agency), and why the materiality of the sacred and the mundane come to matter for people, we open ourselves up to a much broader field of questions about material culture, assemblages, relations between humans, objects, and gods, and the political and ideological stakes attached to them.

The articles in this special issue populate the study of material religion from four distinct empirical contexts within South Asia: the intermingling of different materialities at a Sufi *dargah* in Pune, Maharashtra; multispecies marriage rituals between non-humans; a form of worship—"bhakti assemblage"—that harnesses the capacities of imagination and visualisation; and a procession of deities and things in a south Indian beach festival. They take seriously the analytical and conceptual promise of "assemblage" through an attention to the efficacy and agentive capacity of material objects in devotional contexts. In turn, they push the limits of material agency, that is, they each ponder, among other questions, *where* agency is located and what the intermingling of various ritual and non-ritual objects can tell us about materiality more broadly. To attribute agency to things other than the human (the divine, sacred geographies, objects, supernatural beings) is not to completely displace the human, but as Leah Comeau (this issue) puts it, "to shift away from human-centred theories of action." Such an argument speaks to scholarship in recent decades that have sought to de-centre the human and the fixation on belief in the study of religion.

For example, anthropologist Mayanthi Fernando has recently argued for an anthropology of "nonsecular, multispecies worlds," especially given urgent conversations around the Anthropocene and the inherent secularity in the artificial separation between humanity and nature: "Posthumanist scholarship—multispecies studies, the ontological turn, new animism studies, and certain trends in science and technology studies—now understands humans as always already in relation to nonhumans" (2022: 568). Although such scholarship recognises the agency of nonhumans, Fernando argues that it is still reluctant to extend that recognition to "gods, spirits, and other supernatural entities" (ibid).

In the field of religious studies, scholarship stemming from the 'material turn' has paid close attention to the life of things: "The artifacts, spaces, foods, drinks, sounds, images, smells, tools, infrastructure, plants, animals, insects, bacteria, rivers, oceans, geology, and weather that form the natural and social worlds in which humans exist are teeming sources of agency" (Morgan 2022). Specifically, scholars of South Asian material culture have explored the communicative and haptic potentials of inscriptions, architecture, and objects, providing new theorisations of sensory life in the region (Flood 2009, Elias 2012, Comeau 2019, Venkatesan 2019). In her edited volume on Islamic materiality, Anna Bigelow further suggests that "humans and things are assemblages comprised of physical matter, sensory experiences, and spiritual sensibilities situated within sympathetic alliances of political, economic, and social structures" (2021: 9).

As a conceptual framework for my own research on everyday Islam in Tamil-speaking south India, 'assemblage' deprivileges binary oppositions between Hindu and Muslim, sacred and profane, religious and secular, and Islamic and un-Islamic. I also find it a useful alternative to 'syncretism', 'hybridity', and 'pluralism', concepts that have often been used to describe Muslim shrines in India but are beset by various theoretical impasses.[1] Such concepts also do not address the co-mingling of overtly sacred and decidedly non-sacred things within a shared space. At the same time, as Leah Comeau (this issue) rightly points out, "…the characteristic eclecticism and unevenness of assemblages, however, run the risk of including anything or everything—a conceptual death by diffusion." While there is no perfect conceptual solution, I find particularly helpful queer theorist Jasbir Puar's explication of an assemblage as that which "allow us to attune to movements, intensities, emotions, energies, affectivities, and textures as they inhabit events, spatiality, and corporealities" (Puar 2005: 128). Following Puar, by asking what assemblages *do* and not simply what they *are*, we begin to see their capacious quality.

Let us take the example of wish-threads that Deepra Dandekar (this issue) analyses as an assemblage of power. Tied to the grill gates of Pune's Sadal Baba *dargah* by ardent devotees seeking the saint's blessings, these wish-threads "acquired an agentive lifeforce" brimming with unrealised potential, a liveliness and 'wriggliness', until a wish was fulfilled (or not). Dandekar's analysis makes clear that agency is not unique to humans alone.[2] Objects like wish-threads too have a life of their own as they move in and out of everyday spaces of commerce and ritual, and jostle with *dargah* noticeboards, the marketplace, and the grave-shrine of the saint. Taken together, it is this assemblage (and not any one individual component) that enables Dandekar's interlocutors to experience Pune's Islamic prehistory that is hidden in plain sight.

Leah Comeau's paper too is attentive to the liveliness of material objects through the author's ethnographic witnessing of the Masi Magam festival in Pondicherry, south India. The sheer

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[1] Not least the persistence of the age-old trope of traditions as static and unchanging over time until they encounter one another.
[2] See Hazard (2013) for a discussion of how agency, new materialism, and assemblage are connected concepts.

eclecticism of overlapping assemblages takes centre stage: it is not just the goddess who is a member-actant, but also the electric parasol, and together they thrive in this symbiotic relationship. Comeau ultimately turns the gaze upon her writerly persona as she is herself doing assemblage work in parsing through the diversity of things that she has observed. What is exciting about Comeau's autoethnographic flashes is that the writing seems to mimic the very concept that she harnesses for her analysis.

Anne Mocko's exploration of *tulsi vivaha*, a folk wedding ritual not between two humans but between non-human brides and grooms, considers the more-than-symbolic work that such weddings do in Hindu communities. Sacred basil plants (and in other instances, fruits, trees, and animals) participate in interspecies meaning-making practices as they are married to the divine groom (Vishnu or Krishna physically represented in the form of a statue). The Tulsi plant is also an agent here, "not entirely a bride" but "not merely a plant." These ritual assemblages of divine grooms, sacred plants, and astrological justifications take us beyond simplistic understandings of human-nonhuman relations and toward what Mayanthi Fernando refers to as "nonsecular multispecies worlds where humans, animals, and gods co-constitute mutual webs of care and commitment" (Fernando 2022: 569).

While the three articles discussed so far explore material agency directly, we learn from Iva Patel that agency need not be tied to material objects at all. By employing the innovative concept of "bhakti assemblage," Patel shows how "materials pulsate with meanings even in their non-material existence." Such an assemblage pulls together material objects, non-physical existence, the devotee, and the invisible to achieve a cognitive union with the divine through the devotional notion of *manasi.* At the same time, it is also the case that imaginative capacities can affect the material world, including one's own body and how one is changed by a devotional encounter.

In addition to these insightful provocations, I add my own in the spirit of addressing what work assemblages do for social, religious, and political life. I consider two related assemblages: first, the spectacular tableaux that are part of an annual procession at the south Indian saint-shrine of Shahul Hamid, and second, an idol of Shahul Hamid (also known as Naguran Swami to his Hindu devotees) located in a Hindu temple in Brooklyn, New York. Much like Leah Comeau's exploration of the decorated procession where "things that are not overtly or exclusively sacred materials" can rub shoulders with deities, my two examples attend to the co-mingling of various human, saintly, non-human, and material things across time and space, each with their own agentive possibilities.

The Nagore *dargah* is a Sufi shrine located in the coastal southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The shrine contains the tomb of the 16th century Muslim saint, Shahul Hamid, and attracts millions of visitors annually from across the world. Although supplicants visit the shrine throughout the year, they are especially keen to witness the *urs* or *kanturi*, a fourteen-day festival marking the death anniversary of the saint. The procession of a decorated chariot (*kudu* in Tamil, meaning nest or cocoon) is an important aspect of such shrine festivals in southern India and across the subcontinent and the diaspora. Typically, the chariot is taken on parade through the streets of a town but for the Nagore festival, the chariot travels from the neighbouring town of Nagapattinam, taking several hours to make the 7-kilometre journey. Wooden planks form the skeleton of the multi-tiered chariot, designed in the shape of pyramid, and the whole structure sits on four iron wheels that are used to propel the chariot through the streets on the ninth night of the festival.[3] The chariot is referred to as the *santhanakudu* since

[3] It is generally acknowledged that the shrine chariot bears resemblance to the chariot in south Indian temple festivals known as the 'car festival' or *ter* in Tamil. One key difference is that the temple chariot contains a deity, while a *dargah* chariot does not. The chariot festival is also common among Roman

its primary ritual function is to carry a vessel of sandalwood paste (*santhanam*) to the Nagore *dargah* so that the tomb of Shahul Hamid can be anointed with the paste as per the age-old custom.

While the chariot is the ritual focal point and leads the procession, several other tableaux follow behind. Every year, different groups of adolescent boys gather funds to create new tableaux for the procession.[4] In addition, drummers and other musicians (such as *shehnai* players) provide the traveling sonic atmosphere for these floats.[5] These numerous and sensational art, light, and sound displays aptly characterise the heterogenous and fragmented nature of an assemblage. While some objects in the procession are recognisable, such as a miniature Nagore *dargah*, others are more abstract and not directly tied to the ritual life of the shrine (image 5.1). Throughout this nighttime procession, the viewer is confronted with an assemblage of dazzling visual, textual, and cultural referents that are open to interpretation. In their material abstraction (of form and content), they produce a spectacle of mobile objects competing against each other in size, design, and innovative graphics as they amble down the street toward Nagore.

Image 5.1: Abstract assemblages in procession towards Nagore from Nagapattinam. Image source: author

Such assemblages compel us to ask different questions of sites that have been studied primarily through the lens of ritual, supplication, and religious economy. This is not an argument for reinscribing the sacred-secular dualism, but an invitation to consider the how the assemblages I have just described disrupt, co-exist, or sit in uneasy tension with the more familiar "aesthetic formations" (Meyer 2009) in the Nagore shrine. Each year, the tableaux are grander, and infused with the latest technologies such as LED lights, graphic displays, and

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Catholic communities in Tamil Nadu, where carved images of Mary and Christ are the focal point. *Kudus* in Tamil shrines are similar to the *ta'ziyah* or *taboot* in Muhurram festivals across the world, particularly in Southeast Asia and the Caribbean (Sohoni and Tschacher 2021).

[4] That these are adolescent boys is evident from the names of some of the tableaux: 'Youngster Boys', 'Stunner Guyz', 'Handsome Guyz', and 'Junior Guyz'. I was also told by the chariot builder that the new creations that year were the work of young boys from the community.

[5] Traditionally, it is the *parai* drum and drummers from the *paraiyar* caste (formerly 'untouchables' now known as Dalits) who accompanies the *kudu*.

new designs. Many regular supplicants complain that the addition of new objects to the procession that have nothing to do with the devotional and ritual aspects of the *dargah* is a form of degradation. Some people have stopped going to Nagore for the *urs* due to this reason as well as what they perceive to be the over-commercialisation of the shrine. Nonetheless, such tableaux are here to stay and provide an alternate mode of engagement with the *urs*. Their unpredictability (in contrast to long-standing rituals that take place each year) is aptly captured in Kajri Jain's explication of what assemblages do: "Assemblages are not reducible to the properties of their individual components or to any particular level or scale at which these parts are specified…They are decomposable, available for redistributions and interactions with other assemblages that might activate capacities and tendencies in these parts that have not yet been exercised…" (Jain 2021: 11-12).

For example, in image 5.2, we encounter a recognisable object, the Eiffel Tower, in scintillating gold LED lights. To the right of the Eiffel tower is another recognisable visual for those familiar with South Asian history: a profile of Tipu Sultan, an 18th Indian Muslim ruler who in recent years has been a target of India's ruling party. This tableaux is built in the shape of a mosque or shrine, with a bulbous dome flanked by two crescent shaped moons and three-tiered minarets, all in continuously changing psychedelic colours. The image on the LED screen rapidly alternates between Tipu Sultan, the Ka'ba, a minaret from the Nagore *dargah*, and a running text: "King of Nagoor." As these two assemblages (the Eiffel tower and Tipu Sultan) spontaneously emerge side by side during the procession, they form yet another assemblage: "they are ad hoc, open-ended, and processual, always bearing the potential to disassemble and reassemble in different formations with different neighboring elements" (Hazard 2013: 65).

Image 5.2: Eiffel Tower assemblage in procession towards Nagore from Nagapattinam. Image source: author.

By briefly plugging into one another, this new assemblage of visuality, kingship, Islamic motifs, translocal and global invocations might lead us to ask: what is an Eiffel tower replica doing at South Indian shrine festival? What is the significance of Tipu Sultan and why has he been given

the title "King of Nagoor" when he is usually referred to as "Tiger of Mysore?"[6] Is he present at the procession as a figure of resistance for a younger generation of Muslims? Are the different elements of the procession a way for different groups to lay claim on the festival?

My purpose in thinking through these questions is not to ascertain intent, but I see such assemblages as having three closely related effects: first, they stand alongside and in contrast to the hierarchical structure of the Nagore *dargah* where lineage, descent, and tradition matter a great deal; second, these new aesthetic forms call upon the viewer to respond to them within the same time-space of the chariot and *santhankudu* ritual. While the *santhankudu* chariot is ritually important for the *urs*, the other tableaux present a spectacle of alternative intensities that are interspersed with the more familiar and coherent tradition of the *urs*; and third, these assemblages mediate one's sensory experience of the *urs* in unexpected ways. By evoking awe and intrigue usually reserved for moments of ritual excess within the *dargah*, the Eiffel Tower-Tipu Sultan assemblage provides a different space for viewers to direct their gaze and energies.[7] Such an assemblage, to borrow from Tapati Guha-Thakurta's analysis of Durga Puja *pandals* in Kolkata, does not erase or supersede the religious but "reinvents it within new frames of spectatorship and pitches it into a new zone of wonder and reverence" (2015: 217). While long-standing rituals such as the *santhanakudu* continue to remain central to the *urs*, they take place amidst an annually shifting terrain of public performance and displays of creative energies.

Image 5.3: Tableaux enroute to Nagore during the annual *urs* celebrations. Image source: author

Let us now move from the shores of south India to northeastern United States. The second assemblage I would like to consider is an idol of the Nagore saint, Shahul Hamid, found in a

[6] The makers of these tableaux might be drawing upon Tipu Sultan's documented connections to France (see Martin 2014 and Simmons 2019), or perhaps the coming together of these two particular tableaux was an unexpected encounter.

[7] The Khalifa (spiritual head) of Nagore, akin to a head priest, performs the sandalwood anointment ceremony inside the room containing the tomb of Shahul Hamid. It is said that he momentarily loses his ability to walk because of a spiritual experience he has in the room and therefore has to be carried out.

Hindu temple in Brooklyn, New York. The Shri Maha Kali Devi Mandir, established by the Indo-Guyanese immigrant community in 1998, is primarily a temple dedicated to goddesses Kali (worshipped in north India) and Mariamman (worshipped in south India). At this temple, Shahul Hamid, alias Naguran Swami, is worshipped alongside other Hindu deities (image 5.4) primarily by Indo-Guyanese people who have Indian, and specifically Tamil heritage.[8] I will focus here only on the images available on the temple's website.

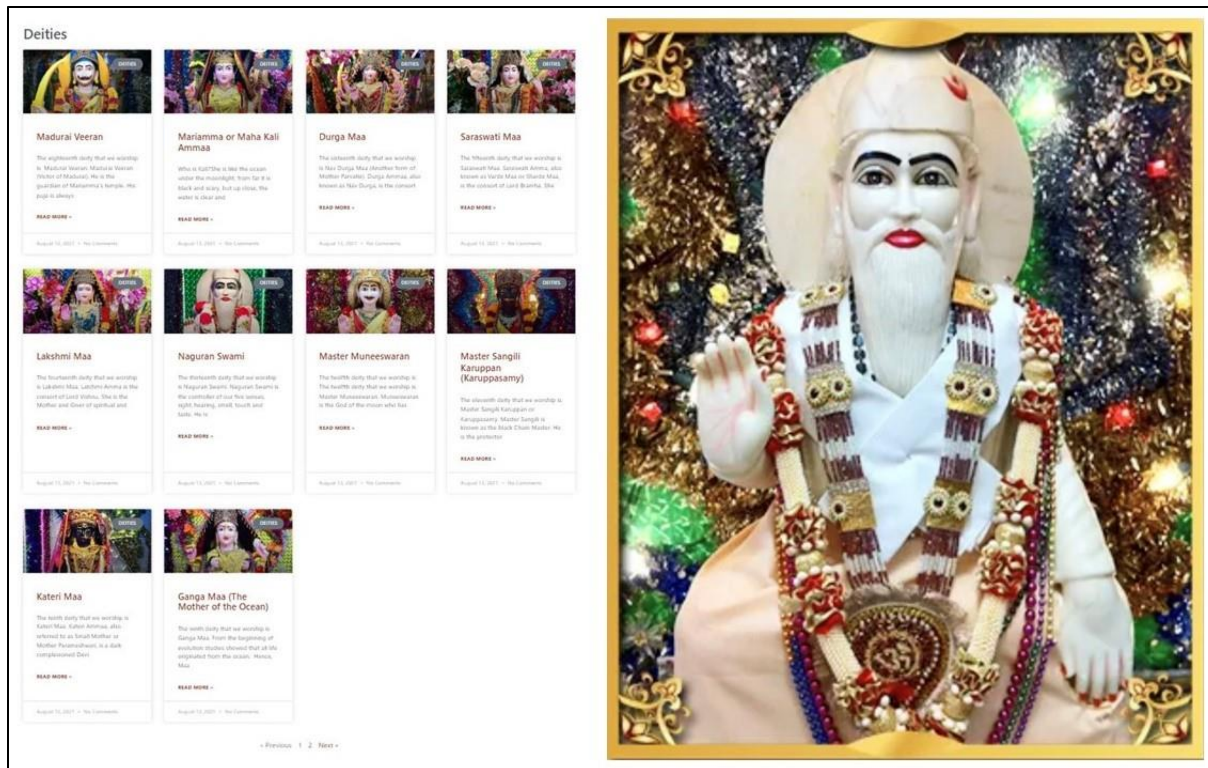

Image 5.4: Image of Naguran Swami on the Shri Maha Kali Devi Mandir website along with other Hindu deities. Image source: author.

In image 5.4, we see Naguran Swami alongside a range of subaltern Tamil deities such as Madurai Veeran and Master Sangili Karuppan, as well as Hindu deities that are more familiar to diasporic Hindus, namely Lakshmi *maa* and Saraswati *maa*. Each image is accompanied by a description on the website. Although Muslim saints are found in paintings and photographs, it is unusual for a Muslim saint in South Asia to be given a physical, sculptural form. Further, he is emplaced within a self-described Hindu temple. The image itself is an arresting assemblage. The figure of Naguran Swami seems to have the likeness of Guru Nanak (founder of the Sikh tradition) or Shirdi Sai Baba (an early 20th century saint with ambiguous religious origins). Crafted in an off-white colour (it is unclear whether the material is stone, plaster, or something else), he sits with his legs folded, his right arm sculpted in a 'blessing' pose while his left arm rests on his knee. He wears several garlands, with the most prominent one attached to an *Om* pendant, indicating his importance for Hindu worshippers. His fingernails and lips are painted red, and he sports a long white beard typical of saints, fakirs, and godmen. The background is a colourful cacophony of shiny streamers, the light bouncing off four distinct points in the photograph. Below the photograph is the following text:

[8] Shahul Hamid's transoceanic mobility is directly tied to the 19th century wherein laborers from various parts of India were brought by British colonial officials in to work on sugar plantations in the Caribbean. Practices at the Brooklyn temple are therefore deeply intertwined with histories of indenture, colonialism, and migration.

> The thirteenth deity that we worship is Naguran Swami. Naguran Swami is the controller of our five senses, sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste. He is the remover of sickness and the Giver of inner strength. Naguran Swami also brought peace between Hindus and Muslims in India. Legends says – He fought alongside Mother Kali in the war against the demons. For this reason, whenever Mariamma's poosai is performed obeisance is paid on to Him as well.

How do we understand this assemblage of image, text, Hindu-Muslim referents, the transoceanic mobility of Shahul Hamid/ Naguran Swami, and the longer histories of indenture and mobility? I hesitate to read this idol of Naguran Swami as the 'hinduization' of Shahul Hamid since he has always existed in relation to Hindu kings, patrons, and devotees (Saheb 2014), and is clearly recognised as a Muslim saint in the above text that describes his efficacy and import for worshippers. Giving him a physical form and embedding the idol among other Hindu idols is less a move toward hinduizing Shahul Hamid, and more to do with legibility for Hindu devotees who are familiar with the practice of *darshan*, of seeing and being seen by the deity (Eck 1985).

In her study of monumental statues in India, Kajri Jain argues that "The assemblage is a powerful concept for thinking about images because of its open-ended capacity to work historically across multiple registers of analysis that are not ultimately or exclusively a matter of human culture, spirit, or will, even as human intent remains crucial" (2021: 12). The "open-ended capacity" of Naguran Swami's image is one that is not simply about a Muslim saint *becoming* a Hindu deity, but its potential to speak to multiple subjects and histories at once. Such assemblages complicate dominant discourses around Sufi ritual, Hindu deities, and shared Hindu-Muslim customs, revealing a far more heterogenous and overlapping terrain of religious patronage, place-making, and material culture. One could say that Shahul Hamid's transoceanic fame has been kept alive and honoured for centuries in part due to the changing material culture at different sites where he is venerated. Such practices of material religion can expand and contract, bring in new objects, introduce elements of play and performance, and bolster the religious efficacy of a festival or an idol.

As all the papers in this special issue show us, the study of material religion continues to be a vital arena to explore the interplay of humans, things, animals, gods, saints, nature, and more. To be sure, such assemblages were always in place, but have often taken a backseat in human-centric analyses of religious life. To decentre the human is also a lesson in intellectual humility, to acknowledge our limitations to completely 'know' the efficacy of objects and the unknown, while keeping our curiosity alive. At the same time, any exploration of power should seriously consider the role of human actors in order to avoid the all-too-easy displacement of human intent (especially that which disables plural and egalitarian approaches) onto the invisible, the divine, or objects. This cautionary note notwithstanding, the agentive capacities of more-than-human things deserve our attention, not least because they provide a window into new religious formations and practices, and in turn, enable us, scholars, to innovate robust conceptual tools to apprehend such phenomena.

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Obituary

Obituary of Professor Trichur Subramaniam Rukmani
June 29, 1930 – November 24, 2024

Professor Pratap Kumar Penumala (Emeritus)
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Image: Author's Collection

An extraordinary soul, Trichur Subramaniam Rukmani has passed on after an equally extraordinary journey at the age of 94. Born in a small village in the Palakkad district of Kerala called Nemmara Old Village on the 29th of June, 1930, T.S. Rukmani pursued an intellectual life beginning her studies in Sanskrit, Mathematics and Economics. This constituted a breakthrough at the time, as these disciplines were traditionally considered the domain of men, wielded in a manner that was patriarchal.

T.S. Rukmani received a gold medal for her B.A. at the University of Delhi in 1952, and the award was presented by none other than S. Radhakrishnan, the then Vice President of a newly independent India. She thereafter continued to pursue her advanced studies in the field of Sanskrit and received an M.A. in 1954, a Ph.D in 1958, and a D.Litt in 1991 from the University of Delhi. Hers was the first D.Litt that was awarded by the Department of Sanskrit.

She began her academic career at the Indraprastha College, Delhi (1964-81), and became the Principal of Miranda College, her *alma mater*, staying in that position between 1982 and 93. After retiring from there, she moved to the University of Durban-Westville, South Africa, where she served as the Head of the Department of Hindu Studies and Indian Philosophy (1993-95). She later became the Chair of Hindu Studies at the Department of Religion in Concordia University, Montreal, Canada (1996-2012).

During a period of more than 60 years of intense intellectual work, T.S. Rukmani produced voluminous scholarly works, apart from reading stimulating academic papers at scores of national and international conferences. She served in many honorary capacities, held prestigious fellowships and guest lectureships at various distinguished academic institutions around the world, such as the Oxford University. For her scholarship, she was rightfully honoured with numerous awards in the field of Sanskrit studies, such as DANAM/ Taksha Institute Abhinavagupta Award for Sustained Achievement in Indic Philosophy (2009), Hind Rattan Award by NRI organizations in India, (2009), the Shivadasani Fellowship of the Oxford

Centre for Hindu Studies, UK (2006), and a Concordia University Certificate in recognition of contributions to Concordia University (2003). She was awarded an honorary doctorate (D.Litt/ Vidyavacaspati) by the Silpakorn University of Thailand in 2015 at the 16th World Sanskrit Conference. T.S. Rukmani was a prolific author, who produced a number of monographs and edited volumes in addition to a number of scholarly articles published in reputed international journals.

Of significance in her academic work is her outstanding contribution to Yoga studies. Her scholarly works, *Yogasutrabhashyavivarana,* published in two volumes (2001), *Yogasutras of Patanjali with The Commentary of Vyasa* (2001), and *Yogavarttika of Vijnanabhikshu* in four volumes (1981-1989), make her a leading exponent of Yoga philosophy. Her scholarship on the Bhagavata Purana, and the Advaita Vedanta of Adi Shankaracharya certainly illustrates her broader understanding of Hindu theology and philosophy.

In the midst of such a busy scholarly life, Prof. T.S. Rukmani was a generous, gentle and caring human being, who nurtured a host of students from around the world who to this day look up to her as an example and role model for their life and work. Her academic colleagues around the world consider her one of the greatest minds who inspired generations of scholars and researchers. Her academic life was fruitfully complemented by her broader interests in Indian classical dance, music and other fine arts. She was a loving wife, caring mother, and grandmother. She leaves behind her beloved soulmate, S. Rajamani (Retd. Wing Commander in the Indian Air Force), whom she always fondly called ‘Kanna’ (dear), her son, Ravi (an aerospace engineer), a daughter-in-law, Meera (author), a daughter Parvati (psychiatrist), two granddaughters, Jaya and Abhaya, as well as her many devoted students, intellectuals and scholars around the world.

Despite all her achievements, she remained a humble human being, conducted herself with dignity, integrity, and grace, always infusing those she met with confidence, courage and candour. Though she blended with those considered high and mighty in society, she also remained connected to the less fortunate. She debated and argued with her colleagues in every scholarly meeting with grace and courtesy and had an uncanny gentleness to her when offering criticism and appreciation to a colleague’s point of view. She moved among scholars of great repute with ease, dignity and confidence. Whether she spoke or sat quietly, her presence in a conference was always keenly felt.

For all these great qualities and contributions to human society, Professor Rukmani, we owe you a great debt of gratitude. The time for you to leave us has come. Your departure has made us poorer and rendered us devoid of a matriarch. Have you become a brilliant star somewhere in the universe? Have you returned to our world in another incarnation? Or, have you become one with the Universal Soul? We may never know where you have gone! But wherever you are, whatever you have become, we offer you with gratitude our most sincere appreciation for sharing your life with us and enriching us that much more.

“puṣpāñjaliṃ samarpayāmaḥ”

पुष्पाञ्जलिं समर्पयामः

Om tat sat

ॐम् तत् सत्

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Research Article

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

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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

[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).

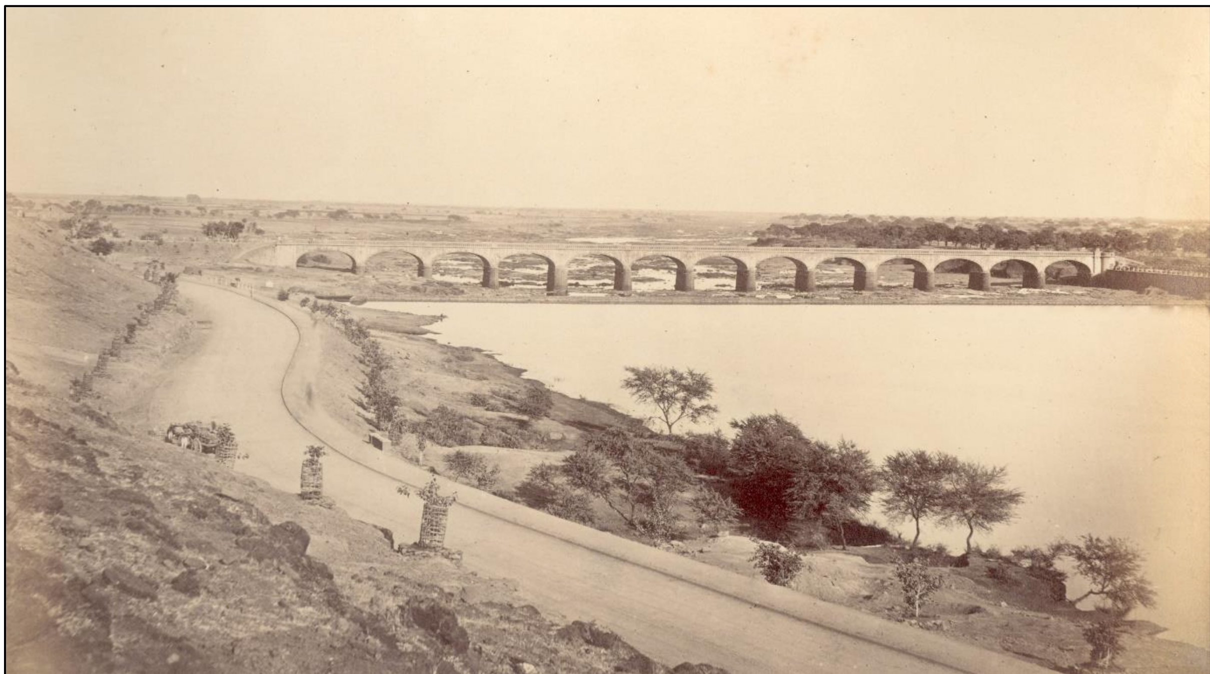

Image 1.1: "View of the FitzGerald Bridge (Bund Garden Bridge) over the Moola-Moota at Poona in India – Around 1875" (Image Source: Leiden University Library, KITLV, image 100085 Collection page Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian & Caribbean Images [KITLV] / Wikimedia Commons).

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

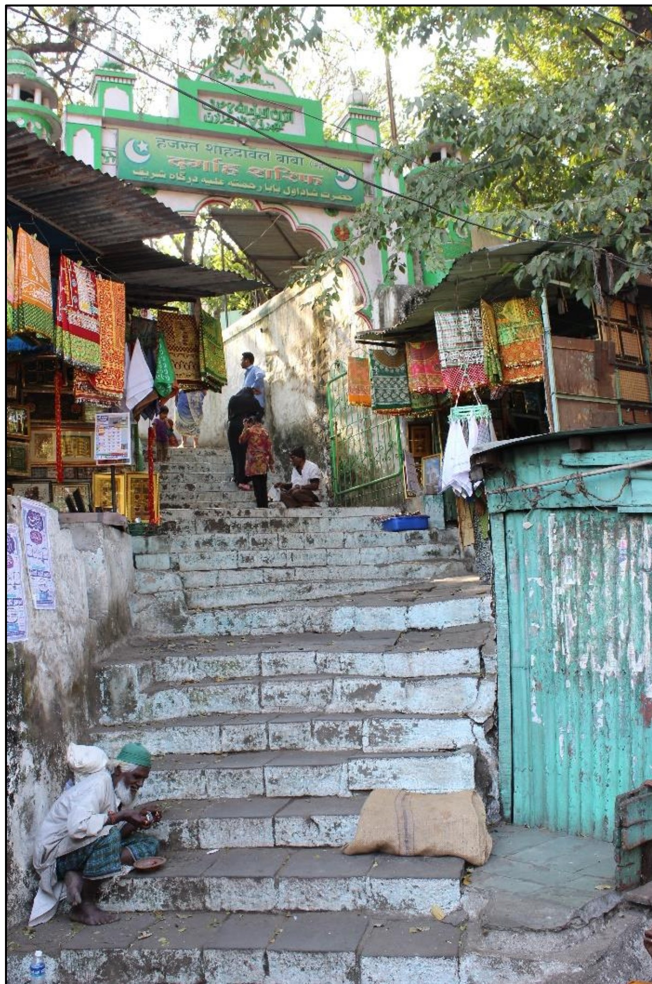

Image 1.2: The staircase from the Deccan College Road that goes up to the Sadal Baba *dargah*. Image source: author.

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

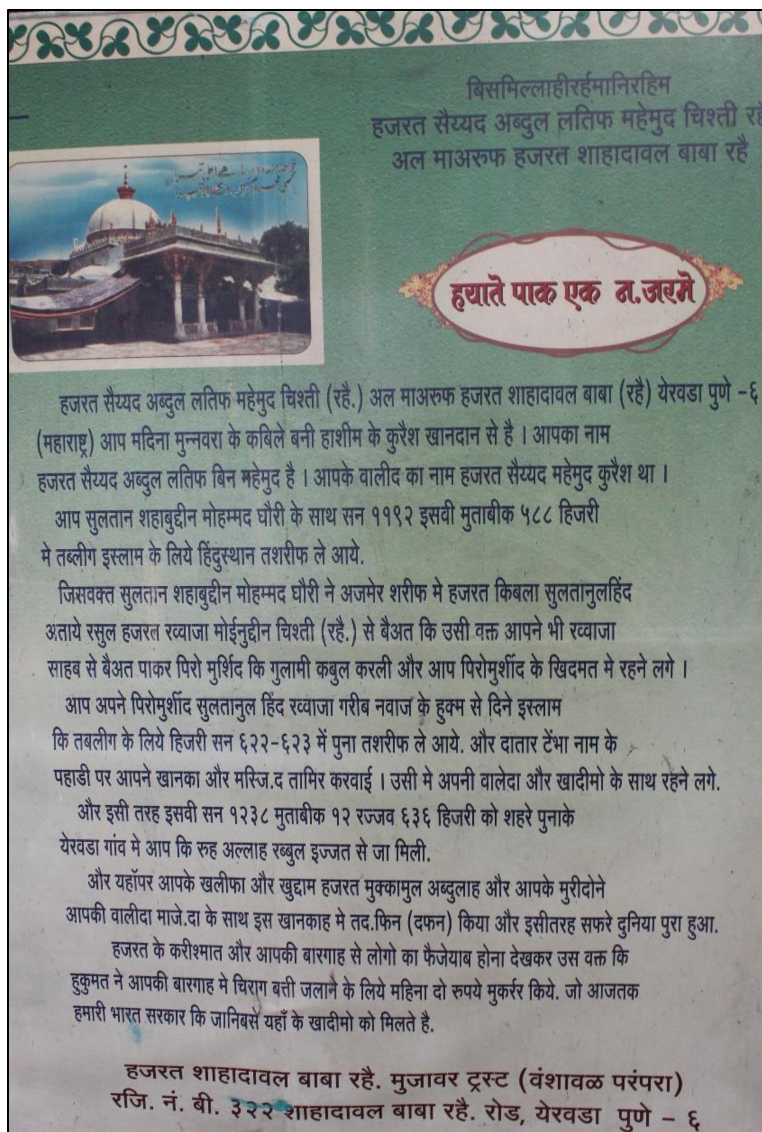

Image 1.4: Sadal Baba's noticeboard hagiography. Image source: author.

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.sakaaltimes.com/NewsDetails.aspx?NewsId=5671671830883101811&SectionId=5171561142064258099&SectionName=Pune&NewsDate=20100711&NewsTitle=July%2012,%201961... (accessed 08.04.2024).

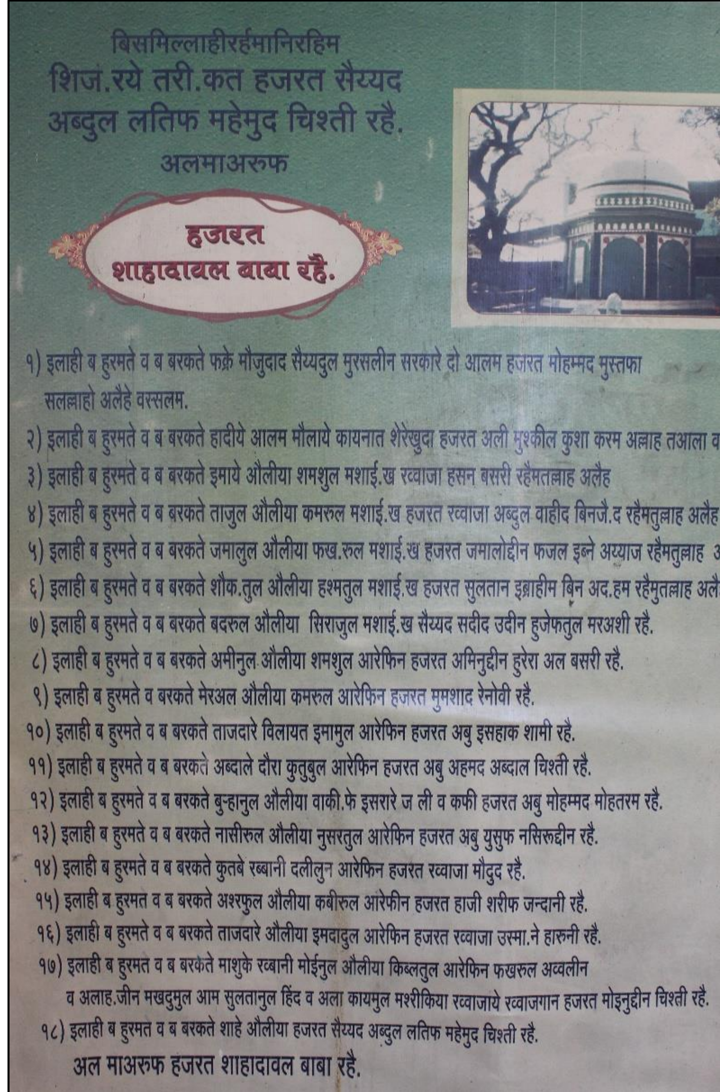

Image 1.5: Sadal Baba's lineage, genealogy, or *shizra*, again placed on a noticeboard at the *dargah*. Image source: author.

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, 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*.

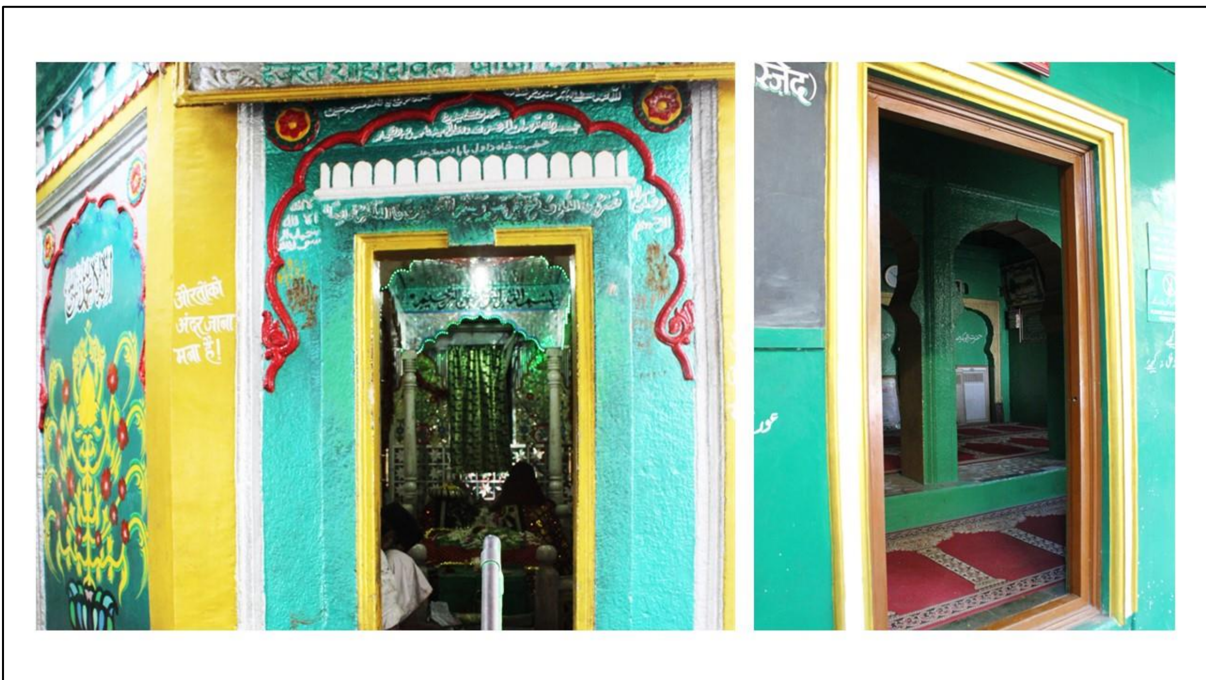

Image 1.7: Peshwa architecture of the Sadal Baba *dargah* and mosque. Image source: author.

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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Research Article

The Puzzle of Basil Brides and Canine Grooms: On the Material Assemblage of Hindu Folk Rituals, and the Agency of Non-humans

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This paper begins by looking at the tradition of *tulsi vivaha* (the wedding for a Basil plant), to ask what happens in rituals where basil plants are cast as brides. The analysis then widens out to compare *tulsi vivaha* to other types of Hindu folk weddings in which the bride or groom is non-human: a canine or a tree or a fruit or a frog. In each of these cases, the human participants are deploying the ritual idiom of human weddings for what must be entirely different purposes. I argue that the theoretical categories of assemblage and materiality have the capacity to open up new avenues for analysing these kinds of rituals, to better capture the deep and complex humanness of the people who stage them and to invite into the picture the non-human beings being married.

ritual, agency, Hinduism, folk, tradition

Introduction

This paper starts by asking: What is happening in a ritual that cannot be what it purports to be? Across South Asia and the Hindu diaspora, we find a range of traditions in which people stage wedding rituals in ways that feature surprising participants. In these assorted folk traditions, people perform the familiar gestures of a Hindu wedding—they set up bamboo canopies, they ornament brides in red saris and *sindhur* (vermillion), they drape grooms in garlands—but they direct those ritual gestures toward a bride or a groom who is not a person. Instead, these rituals feature a plant, a tree, a fruit, a statue, or an animal in the ritual role of a bride or groom. Basil brides can be joined to fossil grooms; *bel*-fruit (wood apple) grooms can be married to child-brides; divorced or astrologically blighted humans can be linked to trees or dogs. These are all brides and grooms that cannot (for a variety of reasons) reasonably get married, in a conventional human sense, and so the gestures of the ritual are not doing what they normally do when the participants are humans. If a wedding, on its face, purports to create a marriage, these assorted folk-rituals are manifestly doing something else.

When Hindus conduct a folk wedding-ritual for a non-human bride or groom (whether a basil plant or a *bel* fruit or a frog), they must in some sense be treating that bride or groom *as if* they were a person, in a ritual that acts *as if* it were creating a marriage. This 'as-if' stance was entirely lost on the people who first documented these folk-weddings: India's British colonisers took *tulsi*-weddings and other related phenomena quite literally (and ungenerously). They assumed that if Hindus held rituals for non-human brides and grooms, it must mean that they were incapable of accurately discerning reality. Perhaps Hindus simply could not recognise distinctions between humans and non-humans—or between suitable marriage-partners and unsuitable marriage-partners. When James Frazer wrote in a derisive throwaway comment in *The Golden Bough* (1922: 9) that "the custom of physically marrying men and women to trees

is still practised in India and other parts of the East," he seems to have thought that infantile non-Europeans were simply unable to tell the difference between marrying a tree and marrying a person. But one cannot responsibly start from such an ungenerous premise. There are not and never have been any humans, at any point in time or space, who would be unable to ascertain that there are meaningful differences between a banana tree and a human bride. All humans can see that plants and animals are not identical to people. If some Hindus perform folk-weddings for non-human participants, it cannot be that they are making a mistake.

Yet it does not necessarily follow either that the people who stage folk weddings for non-human participants share a sharp, binary distinction between human and animal, or living and non-living. It can be the case the ritual participants both know the difference between people and plants—and see the weddings they stage as meaningful, real, and substantive rather than symbolic. It seems likely that Hindu folk-weddings are somehow both less-than and much more-than a human-to-human wedding. Non-human brides and grooms enter into temporary situations that are something other than a lasting human kinship bond, and in so doing, they would seem to reach outward into many other registers of meaning.

In order to try to capture the ranges of available meaning in rituals such as a basil wedding, and the complex ways that humans and non-humans co-create those meanings in these rituals, it will be useful to look at them through the analytic lens of assemblage theory. An assemblage, in Jane Bennett's framing, is an accumulation of "lively and vibrant matter" (Bennett 2010: 1)—a coming-together of living and non-living, human and non-human, in messy and mutually creative ways. The lively, vibrant matter of an assemblage is not always cooperative, though; instead it often carries a certain "material recalcitrance" (ibid) that can push back against the aims and intentions of the involved humans. A basil bride might not be able to walk or talk, but she can still participate in complicated ways in the ritual of her wedding. Like all objects in rituals, she "do[es] not function simply as passive repositor[y] of cultural meanings; instead, [she] may actively shape meaning, human activity, and social relations" (Pintchman & Dempsey 2015: 4-5). As we examine a range of examples in the pages to follow, from basil weddings to *bel*-fruit weddings to dog-weddings, we will look for the ways that the human participants are doing thoughtful, deeply human work, and we will discover some ways that their non-humans collaborators participate in a messy, shared process of collective meaning-making.

Basil Brides

The first example we will consider, to understand Hindu folk-weddings featuring non-human brides and grooms, is the tradition of *tulsi vivaha*: the wedding for a basil plant. This wedding joins the goddess Tulsi (in the body of her namesake basil plant) to her divine groom, Krishna/Vishnu, and it is performed by Hindu devotees from Gujarat to Odisha, and from Karnataka to Nepal. The ritual is typically staged annually in the autumn toward the end of the holy month of Kartik, most commonly on the twelfth day of the bright half or *shukla paksha* (which is to say, about a week after the celebration of the Chhath Puja, and about two weeks after Diwali). Tulsi weddings can sometimes be staged on a grand scale, e.g. Walters (2022: 96-97) describes a community-wide *tulsi vivaha* tradition in Saurashtra that involves invitations and processions between two full-scale temples. More often, however, *tulsi* weddings are celebrated at home as domestic rituals. As an annual observance, the *tulsi vivaha* serves both as a routinised reminder of the love between Hindu gods and goddesses, and as a starting-point for the main auspicious wedding season for human beings.

To celebrate *tulsi vivaha*, the ritual's organisers (normally the members of a household) will set up a wedding between a potted sacred-basil (*tulsi*) plant as the bride and a small metal

statue or a *shaligram* as the groom.[1] The bride is identified as the goddess Tulsi, while the groom is variously identified as Krishna or Vishnu.[2] Unlike her groom, Tulsi is not a deity who enjoys a robust mythology or an elaborate independent ritual life outside of this particular ritual; while her plant-form is often cultivated in domestic or temple spaces, and plays an important role in *ayurveda* medicines*,* this annual wedding is Tulsi's main opportunity to take centre stage. A family celebrating *tulsi vivaha* will generally begin by assembling a wedding-space in a courtyard or common room of their home. The space might be created around where the household's potted *tulsi* basil plant already grows, or the family might carry the 'bride' in her pot into the space. The women of the house might adorn the floor with *rangoli* and hang a cloth canopy to form a wedding *mandap* (pavilion)*.* Then the family will begin to prepare the bride for her wedding: just as they might fuss over a human bride, the participants in the *tulsi vivaha* will lovingly dress and decorate the basil plant, daubing her pot with vermillion (Walters 2022: 96):

> The bride, Tulsi, is clothed in a sari and draped with flower garlands and other ornaments (depending on the status and resources of the family). In some cases, a human face made from paper, wood, or metal may be attached to the crown of the tulsi plant so as to better facilitate decorating with *tikkas, bindi*, and earrings. [Care is taken] so that the weight of numerous decorations and miniature clothing does not accidentally damage a smaller or more fragile tulsi…

The groom, too, is prepared. He might be wrapped in a *dhoti* (a long loincloth), adorned with a turban, or draped with a garland around his neck, and he is often ritually bathed before meeting his bride (ibid). A basil wedding is accorded all the major features of a local or family iteration of a Hindu human wedding. The bride and groom might be offered gifts of clothing and jewellery; their wedding-site might be decorated with *rangoli* designs; the human participants might sing the traditional songs they learned from human weddings (Pintchman 2005: 130). There might be banana leaves, sugar cane, and flowers (playing the part of ordinary wedding-plants rather than participants); there may be *diyo*s (earthen lamps), incense, and bhajans (devotional music). Different *vivaha*s might end up being more or less elaborated, depending variously upon the affluence and enthusiasm (or not) of the hosting family; some households might devote only a handful of participants and hours to the divine wedding, while others might end up staging major events.

In most parts of South Asia, the annual ritual of *tulsi vivaha* is a standalone observance, complete in itself. In Varanasi, however, as Tracy Pintchman (2005) documents, the wedding of the basil-bride is woven into a broader ritual cycle that occupies the entire month of Kartik, during which time women gather every morning for several consecutive weeks of devotional rituals for Krishna. Each morning groups of women meet on the banks of the Ganges to sing songs, tell stories, and make temporary clay figurines that help dramatise Krishna's life. They begin with Krishna as a baby: waking him in the morning and feeding and bathing him. Then later, they celebrate his coming-of-age in a ceremony that invests him with his sacred thread. Once Krishna has been narrated into adulthood, the women begin to prepare to marry him off. They divide into groups of mothers and aunties to negotiate the match, and they jokingly argue

[1] A *shaligram* is an ammonite fossil from the Himalayas, commonly worshipped as an abstract self-emergent form of a deity (most commonly a god, but sometimes a goddess).

[2] Both the concrete form and the identity of the groom can vary (whether regionally, or between households, or even between observers explaining the same ritual), with easy slippage between Krishna and Vishnu because the former is an avatar of the latter. The bride is always identified as Tulsi, however, and she is always present as a living plant.

with one another over the dowry (Pintchman 2005: 136). Then on the day appointed for the wedding itself (ibid: 136-137):

> [t]he bride, a potted Tulsi plant with abundant foliage, is brought to the circle, dressed in a red cloth that functions as her wedding sari, and adorned with tinsel, small mirrors, and other decorations. The groom, represented here by a brass image, is also brought to the *puja* circle, massaged with mustard oil and turmeric, bathed in Ganges water, and dressed in finery. Participants place sweets and gifts before the bride and groom and display dowry offerings, including saris, pots and pans, and jewelry. They also engage in a raucous round of verbally abusive and often sexually crude songs (*gali*) as they would at a human marriage.
>
> … [A] pundit comes to the *puja* circle only long enough to perform his part and collect the dowry items as *dana*, while participants recite the seven marriage vows on behalf of the couple while circling a yellow cloth above their heads, symbolically marking the couple's circumambulation around the wedding fire. Then participants sprinkle *sindur* on the bride's 'head' to mark her new married status, throw puffed rice at the newlywed couple, and offer them yogurt sweetened with brown sugar, a mixture traditionally eaten by bride and groom.

Pintchman further notes that at the end of the main wedding, "in both 1997 and 1998, a food fight broke out" between the ritual participants she was observing: "women started chasing each other… laughing boisterously and clearly enjoying themselves a great deal" (ibid: 137). This silly and rambunctious ending to the ritual suggests that just because *tulsi vivaha* is a meaningful ritual, it does not have to be a solemn or even dignified occasion. The playfulness that Pintchman (2005) describes in her analysis is potentially an important part of *tulsi vivaha.* While Walters's (2022) describes the tradition in much more solemn terms, the basil-wedding that I myself attended during my fieldwork was quite whimsical and fun. Perhaps there is some intrinsic silliness to staging a wedding for a plant? Certainly it offers an opportunity for fun-serious ritual play.

In fall of 2009, I was living with a Hindu family just outside Kathmandu, Nepal. The family matriarch, Susmita (pseudonymised), had tasked me that morning to make small-scale flower-garlands: she handed me a needle and thread, and told me to pick enough marigolds from the garden to make two small flower necklaces or *mala*s and a medium-length straight garland string. Once I had finished, I joined Susmita near her home-shrine (a one-room stand-alone brick structure where she performed elaborate daily pujas to a range of deities). The household's *tulsi*-plant, in her everyday, ordinary terracotta pot, had been pulled into a place of prominence near the temple. Susmita had laid out a range of ritual implements (wicks and oil-lamps, water pots, dishes of fruit), and she was in the process of lovingly washing her metal Krishna-statue, which we would use for the groom. Once Susmita had rubbed Krishna dry with the edge of her shawl, we began decorating the outside of Tulsi's pot with daubs of moistened vermillion powder. We found some long sticks and pushed them into the dirt in the pot, to create a frame over which we could drape a red mesh wedding canopy and my marigold garland. Susmita began carefully winding a strip of red cloth around the spindly Tulsi as her wedding sari. But Tulsi was not exactly looking her best. The previously robust basil plant had shrivelled in the week or two leading up to her wedding, and had dropped almost all of her leaves.[3] As we paused to behold the bride, Susmita's sister-in-law arrived for the wedding.

[3] Perhaps this is a problem of trying to perform *tulsi vivaha* in the foothills of the Himalayas? In lower-altitude India, the weather remains warm and damp overnight up until the early winter. But in Kathmandu, by the time the month of Kartik arrives, overnight temperatures have begun to drop

Taking one look at Tulsi, she declared, "*la, devi ta sukhisakhyo*!"—loosely, "Gosh, the Goddess has completely dried up already, huh!?" The three of us dissolved into helpless laughter.

After we had laughed about how disastrously shrivelled our poor goddess was, we still went ahead with the *vivaha*. We still, with playful solemnity (or perhaps solemn playfulness) presented the bride to her groom. We lit a *diyo*, we arranged some fruit, we sang a short song. We celebrated the surprising ways that divine power can express itself in the world, and I was able to see the striking Hindu truth that gods' and goddesses' divine 'lives' are deeply like and entwined with human lives—while still being elusively Other. I was also able to see that within the context of this particular *tulsi vivaha*, the materiality of the plant herself mattered. The plant had not obeyed the calendar date or the desires of the human ritual planners. She had followed her own rhythms: she had gone dormant in response to the weather, rather than making herself available for humans to manipulate her purely as they wished. In Jane Bennett's framing, Tulsi was not "ensouled," but she was still "lively" (Bennett 2010: xvii). She may not have been an agent in the proceedings, but (in the phrasing Bennett adopts from Bruno Latour) she was still an actant: as with other components in an assemblage, a basil bride "has efficacy, can do things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events" (ibid viii). Tulsi had the capacity to offer a divine presence—or not. She could 'play along', or she could reveal the artifice and the play of the ritual to the ritual's human actors.

Trees, Leaves, and Fruits

While Tulsi is the most widespread plant-bride in vernacular Hinduism, she is certainly not the only plant-bodied being to take part in a folk-wedding. In fact, there are several different examples of Hindu traditions where rituals are staged around plant-forms—whether leaves, trees, or fruits—that embody brides or grooms. In many of these cases, the plant-bodied bride or groom is actually a temporary form for a god or goddess entering into the world, in a form through which humans can engage with them, think with them, and be impacted by them.

Besides Tulsi, there is another plant-bride to be found in Bengal, encountered in the annual folk-tradition of building a 'banana-wife' or *kala bou*.[4] The 'banana-wife' is assembled on the seventh day of Navaratri,[5] by collecting a set of sacred leaves,[6] and tying them around the base of a young banana tree (which has had its root-ball bundled up so that it can be easily carried around). Once assembled, a *kala bou* is understood to represent goddess Durga herself. While in other parts of Hindu South Asia, Durga is honoured at Navaratri as a warrior fighting off the buffalo-demon Mahisha, in the Bengali *kala bou* she is also honoured as a shy bride and a beloved out-married daughter returning for a short visit to her affectionate natal home (Nicholas 2013: 43, 73). In her form as a banana-bride, Durga is often bathed in the Ganges river (in a ritual called *kala bou snan*),[7] and then wrapped in a cloth sari. Her leafy 'forehead' is decorated with red *sindur* powder to mark her as a wife, and she is carefully

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significantly and *tulsi* plants are frequently starting to go dormant. Photos of *tulsi vivaha* in India consistently feature lush, full bushes; in more mountainous Nepal the bride is often spindly and sparse.

[4] My thanks to Calynn Dowler for first drawing my attention to this parallel.

[5] The "Nine Nights" - also commonly celebrated as the "Ten Days" (Dussehra, Dasai).

[6] The *navapatrika*, or sacred nine leaves, that comprise the banana bride are a clear cognate to other regional Navaratri traditions. In Nepal, for example, people will gather five, seven, or nine leaves and place them at their home-altars in a bundle called *phulpati*. But the *phulpati* bundle is never directly anthropomorphised as Durga: it is not bathed, or considered to be a bride.

[7] See for example, for a very basic overview, "Kola Bou Puja 2020 Date, Rituals, Significance: Know More About Ceremonial Bathing of the Kala Bou, aka Banana Bride and her Transformation into a Goddess on Saptami During Durga Puja," (2020): https://ca.style.yahoo.com/kola-bou-puja-2020-date-094959208.html (accessed 23.05.2024).

placed next to the deity Ganesh, who is identified as her husband. While this ritual is not a folk-wedding per se (since the couple is apparently already married, and the wife is returning home to visit her family for the festival), the loving treatment of the banana tree offers an intriguing ritual that is parallel to *tulsi vivaha*: once again we find a plant-bodied goddess-bride ritually united with her statue-bodied god-husband, lovingly invoked by human devotees who want to lavish her with the intimate gestures of familial affection. Like Tulsi, *kala bou* gives human participants a way to think about divine lives and let those divine lives inhabit their human homes. But not all plant-partners are gods, and not all divine plant-partners ritually marry other gods. Indeed, not all folk-weddings featuring plant-bodied brides and grooms are primarily focused on the presences of divine beings. In fact, in some important examples, plant-bodied brides and grooms marry people—and the core purpose of these weddings are to frame and solve fundamentally human problems.

In the Kathmandu Valley, for example, among the ethnic Newar people there is an important lifecycle ritual in which a young girl marries a fruit. This 'mock-marriage' is called *ihi*, and is enacted through a wedding ceremony between the *bel* fruit (a wood apple) and a prepubescent girl—or more usually, it is conducted as a mass wedding between dozens of tiny brides and their even tinier grooms. The girls are most commonly aged five, seven, or nine (i.e., many years distant from their probable human wedding), yet they are dressed up as if they were adult women: clothed in all red, decked out in jewellery, and often heavily made up. Unlike the weddings of adult Newar women (which follow ritual patterns that are highly local and idiosyncratically Newar), the *ihi* ritual tends to follow the idioms of Sanskritic pan-Indian Hindu weddings, and include the *kanya-dan* and a Vedic fire-altar.[8] *Ihi* marks the little girls' first step into religious adulthood. During the two-day ritual, each bride sanctified by being variously anointed with water, milk, and *sindur* powder, are offered by her parents to god, who is in the form of her tiny fruit-groom.[9] Families snap photos as the tiny brides sit on a cloth on the ground with their even tinier *bel* fruit grooms (variously identified as the embodiments of Vishnu Narayana, Shiva, or Kubera/ Jambhala [Gellner 1991: 112]), and at the conclusion of the second day all the families celebrate with a large communal feast.

What is particularly interesting about the *ihi* ritual is that it is designed as a creative ritual solution to a thorny human social problem. In the patriarchal kinship structures of South Asia, women are deeply vulnerable to the possibility of widowhood. Most communities (especially high-caste communities) only allow women to marry once. While married to a living husband, a woman is auspicious and socially valued as a wife; if her husband predeceases her, however, she is left an inauspicious widow, blocked from remarrying and blocked from participation in some religious activities. Widowhood is a precarious state, a structurally vulnerable status where women might find themselves adrift from both their marital families and their birth families, made to feel burdensome or left to fend for themselves. Especially in earlier generations, when women married very young, a pre-teen widow in South Asia might suddenly find herself facing an entire adult life of struggle (Bennett 1983). But the ritual of *ihi* serves as somewhat of a 'vaccination' against this fate. Newar communities do not stigmatise women who lose their husbands as sharply as most other South Asian Hindu communities do. While there are some constraints on widows participating in religious auspicious or 'good-luck' rituals (Gellner 1992: 127), Newar families do not let widows drift away economically or socially in the

[8] Ritual fires in particular are familiar parts of high-caste Hindu weddings in most of the subcontinent, but they had *not* traditionally featured in most Newar weddings. This means that *ihi* is (perhaps counterintuitively) using wedding-idioms drawn from other communities' traditions, rather than miniaturising the adult versions of Newar weddings. (Gellner 1991:112)

[9] Some accounts of *ihi* insist that the *bel*-fruit is actually present not as the groom but as a witness to the wedding, and that the girl is instead marrying a bronze statue. (See for e.g. "Ihi Ceremony" (n.d.): https://www.bhaktapur.com/ihi-ceremony-the-mocking-marriage/, accessed 23.05.2024).

ways that Nepal's dominant ethnic groups tend to do (Galvin 2005; Bennett 1983). Nor do Newars place such intense restrictions on widows wanting to remarry. While middle-aged or elderly widows tend to be lightly discouraged from remarrying, young widows do not face the lifetime of precarity in Newar communities that might befall women from other Hindu ethnic groups (Gellner 1992: 204). After all, a woman who has lost her human husband is not truly a widow, so long as her family performed *ihi* for her. Because Newari girls are married off to god (in the form of a *bel* fruit) before they are ever married to a human groom, they are at least partially immunised against being widowed—because, after all, god never dies. *Ihi* thus plays with the ritual idioms of marriage—it is fun, and whimsical, and silly—but it also does deeply serious work, trying to address a profound human problem. When women's life-outcomes can be so deeply determined by the quality of the man she marries (and his longevity), it is perhaps blackly humorous for families to give their daughter the one groom who cannot let her down: a *bel* fruit. The tradition of *ihi* is in fact, though, only one example of a rich ritual repertoire in Hindu South Asia, in which marrying a plant has offered a solution to the manifold problems that can arise from trying to marry another person. There are actually a number of examples from several regions of India, in which human beings are ritually married to plants—but most of these Hindu plant/ human weddings involve not *bel* fruits, but full trees.

The tradition of staging a wedding that binds a person to a tree has a long and storied history in India. According to one early British source, it was reasonably common for people to marry trees if they were in the uncomfortable position of seeking an irregular marriage (Edwards 1922: 82-83):

> In the Punjab, for example, a Hindu cannot be legally married a third time. So, if he wishes to take a third wife, he is solemnly married first to a *babul* (*Acacia Arabica*) or to the *akh* plant (*Asclepia gigantea)*, so that the wife he subsequently marries is counted as his fourth, and the evil consequences of marrying a third time are thus avoided. The same practice is followed by Brahmans in Madras, who believe that a third marriage is very inauspicious, and that the bride will become a widow.
>
> Among various classes of Uriyas in Ganjam a bachelor who wishes to marry a widow, or a widower wishing to remarry, is obliged first to go through the ceremony of marrying a *sahada* tree (*Streblus asper*), which is afterwards cut down.
>
> In the Bombay Presidency it is a common custom for a man who has lost two wives to marry a *rui* (*Calotropis gigantea*) before he tempts fortune with a third helpmate; or again, a man whose poverty prevents his marrying a bride in the usual way, is similarly married to a *rui* and then to a widow; and as the re-marriage of a widow is, according to orthodox Hindu ideas, one of the most calamitous and undesirable transactions, the wedding of the pauper bridegroom has to be performed at dead of night under an old mango tree.

Alternatively, tree marriage could offer a solution for a crisis of astrological-charts (ibid 83):

> Very often, too, a Hindu bride is discovered by the priests to have been born under inauspicious planets, which may prove harmful to her spouse; and this danger is averted by marrying her first to a tree and afterwards to the bridegroom. Similarly in Oudh, if the ruling stars of the youth form a more powerful combination than those of his affianced bride, the difficulty is surmounted by solemnizing a marriage between the girl and a *pipal* tree (*Ficus religiosa*).

These different examples point to tree-marriage primarily as a strategy that was in place to circumvent the pressures of a relatively rigid and patriarchal kinship structure: a human bride

or groom could undertake to marry a plant-partner as a way to offload the problems of remarriage, or widow-marriage, or astrological conflicts onto the tree. Nor is this a tradition of India's deep past, simply shed in more modern times. Indeed, in 2007, mega-star Bollywood actor Aishwarya Rai was widely rumoured to have been ritually married to a tree, on the advice of an astrologer, as part of her preparation to wed fellow film star Abhishek Bachchan. Aishwarya Rai and her in-laws, the Bachchans justifiably expressed annoyance at the media-fascination with her tree-marriage story (and in fact publicly ridiculed the very idea of marrying a tree), especially because the narrative spread to take on the form of an exotic and titillating story, rather than as an acknowledgement of what is a current and normal, cosmopolitan practice. In fact, I happen to know a cosmopolitan family in Nepal who, just a few years prior to Aishwarya Rai's wedding, had had to incorporate an extra ritual step into the marriage ceremony of their daughter. This family had, as usual, taken the astrological charts of their daughter and her prospective husband to a professional astrologer for consultation prior to their wedding, before an assessment of their cosmic compatibility. Sometimes if a Hindu astrologer identifies a mismatch in charts between prospective marital partners, an additional puja is recommended, or the wearing of a particular type of coloured-stone, or jewellery is advised. But in this case, the daughter of the family had become engaged to an American man, and his *chinha* (astrological traits) were judged to carry heavy negative influences. It was recommended that prior to the main wedding, the prospective bride could marry a statue of a deity (to protect her from the negative impacts of her human groom), or that her fiancé could marry a *tulsi* plant. Rather than explain to their American future-son-in-law that he should marry a basil-plant, the family arranged a small private *puja* a few days before the wedding, in which they married their daughter first to a *shaligram*.

So far, then, we have seen two different kinds of folk weddings. Sometimes, the materials of the ritual are assembled to enact a divine presence: Tulsi is called into the family's midst through a basil plant to share her joyful union to her divine groom, Durga is invoked in a leaf-wrapped banana tree to take on a role in the family as a beloved out-married daughter. Each of these practices, through the materiality of the ritual, allows human participants to richly feel the immediate presence of their deities. But in other cases, people undertake to marry plants in order to solve their very human problems: *bel* fruits or trees step in as grooms and brides to creatively ameliorate the dangers of patriarchal kinship structures. In these human/ plant weddings, the plant is not designed to be the person's long-term spouse, or even to joyfully bring a sacred presence into their community. Instead, these plant-brides and -grooms serve primarily as a meditation on the messy difficulties of personhood. Essentially, the plant is designated to 'catch' the problems of human/ human marriages, and the logic of the ritual grants the plant agency. In the context of a folk-wedding, a plant is empowered to fix some of the vulnerability and unpredictability of human lives.

Frogs and Dogs

Up until this point, we have been considering folk weddings in which non-human participants are quite pliable: when people stage rituals with plants and fruits, leaves and trees, they can move and manipulate these 'brides' and 'grooms' as they wish. But there is another subset of Hindu folk-weddings which we should consider: rituals in which the non-human bride or groom is not a plant, but rather a non-human animal. This set of rituals opens up an interesting new space, because such rituals assemble participants that are far more capable of unpredictable

behaviours—far more likely to make their own decisions in ways that shift and shape the assemblage they have been drawn into.[10]

Sometimes, the animal participants in such rituals are small enough to stay relatively controlled by the human participants. In several regions of India, for example, there is a folk-response to drought that involves staging a wedding for frogs. This ritual is known as *manduka parinaya* in Karnataka, or *bhekuli biya* in Assam, and it is unusual among the traditions we have examined so far, in the sense that the bride and groom prepared for the event actually match each other in form, species, and the function they fulfil towards the event's purpose. In the case of this ritual, they are always both frogs (Shankar 2023 [internet resource], emphasis original):

> As dusk descended and the crowd gathered in anticipation, the main event was about to begin. The bride and groom were about to make their grand entrance for their sacred union. The bride was dressed to the nines, her attire resplendent and attracting attention from all. As the rituals unfolded, they exchanged wreaths, and red vermilion (*sindoor*) was gently applied. Echoes of wedding songs filled the air, infusing it with joy and celebration. The wedding ensued in full Indian, *Band Baaja Baaraat* style with a pompous celebration… Everything was like any typical wedding, save for one peculiar fact – **the bride and groom were not humans, but frogs!**

Further, like we have already seen for other Hindu folk-weddings (ibid),

> [t]he ritual of the frog wedding mirrors the traditions of a classic Indian wedding. A female frog is carefully chosen and prepared for her big day. Her skin is anointed with oil, following which she is left to rest for a while. Later, she's bathed in water and adorned in attire fit for the special occasion. Meanwhile, the groom frog arrives with much fanfare, with dance and celebration marking the joyous event. The wedding ceremony then takes place, followed by the release of the newlywed couple into a pond – a honeymoon to their natural abode.

Weddings for frogs raise several themes we have already encountered. Like *tulsi*-weddings, frog-weddings seem to be carefully designed to mimic local wedding customs, whether that means giving the bride a *mangala-sutra* to adorn her neck or a toe-ring to slide onto her webbed foot. But, like *bel* or tree weddings, the fundamental purpose of the frog wedding is to solve a deeply human problem. In this case, the problem being addressed through the ritual is not the difficulty of human marriage relationships, but the difficulty of living in uncertain climates, and worsening ecological conditions. With large proportions of the Indian subcontinent still reliant on subsistence farming, droughts (and floods) are matters of fundamental seriousness and constitute a community-wide danger. A frog wedding offers an option for relief in the face of helplessness. But do the people who perform a frog wedding 'believe' it will work? Possibly. But it seems more likely that most people approach it with more of an attitude that it 'can't hurt/ might help': most people prefer to respond to a dire problem in some way rather than do nothing. Perhaps a frog wedding would not bring rain—but the community might as well try something that will at least be fun and bring everyone together to think about their collective problem in a light-hearted way. Plus, on the off-chance that the ritual works too well, and brings so much rain that everything floods—as supposedly happened

[10] For more on animal agency and the lively messy boundaries between animal and human lives, see Radhika Govindrajan's excellent book *Animal Intimacies: Interspecies Relatedness in India's Central Himalayas* (University of Chicago Press, 2018).

in Bhopal in 2019—people always have the option to reverse the potent wedding-ritual's work by finding the married frogs and divorcing them (Singh 2019).

In addition to frog-weddings, we can also find ritual-problem-solving in the context of unorthodox weddings of people and dogs. Stories periodically show up in contemporary Indian news outlets regarding such cases where people stage weddings for a human being and their canine bride or groom. Dog-weddings resemble frog-weddings in that they are designed to address and repeal situations of misfortune, but whereas frog weddings are designed to rescue a whole community from the calamity of a drought, dog weddings appear designed to ameliorate or reverse more individualised problems faced by the central human participant. In Odisha, for instance, there is a tribal tradition among the Ho people that prescribes dog marriage as a solution for poor omens that surface in childhood. The local belief is that when a child's baby-teeth emerge in an irregular pattern, it is a sign that the child is in danger from evil spirits. For example, in 2009 (Dash 2009):

> An infant boy was married off to his neighbors' dog [to] stop the groom from being killed by wild animals, officials and witnesses said on Wednesday. Around 150 tribespeople performed the ritual recently in a hamlet in the state of Orissa's Jajpur district after the boy, who is under two years old, grew a tooth on his upper gum. The Munda tribe see such a growth in young children as a bad omen and believe it makes them prone to attacks by tigers and other animals. The tribal god will bless the child and ward off evil spirits after the marriage. The [baby-]groom, Sagula, was carried by his family in a procession to the village temple, where a priest solemnized the marriage between Sagula and his bride, Jyoti, by chanting Sanskrit hymns, a witness said. The dog belongs to the groom's neighbors and was set free to roam around the area after the ceremony. No dowry was exchanged, the witness said, and the boy will still be able to marry a human bride in the future without filing for divorce.

Other dog-weddings have been reported for children of the same tribal community, of both genders, from baby-hood up until late childhood. Such dog-weddings are designed to absorb and deflect the dangers of the unpredictable world around their child-participants.[11] But it is not only children who marry dogs. In 2007, an adult man named P. Selvakumar of Sivaganga district in Tamil Nadu decided to marry a dog in order to atone for a negative act of his past.[12] Selvakumar had stoned to death two mating dogs some fifteen years earlier, and hung their bodies from a tree. In the intervening years, he had suffered a variety of misfortunes, including partial paralysis and hearing-loss. On the advice of an astrologer, Selvakumar planned a dog-wedding in the hopes that if he married a dog and honoured her as though she were his wife, it would make up for his prior unethical act (Shekhar 2007):

> So Selvakumar got his relatives to find a stray bitch, which was [named Selvi], given a bath and draped in a saree. Selvakumar (33) and Selvi then marched in a procession to [a local Ganesh] temple where Selvakumar tied the *thaali* (*mangalsutra*) around the dog's neck. While the bridegroom and his relatives had a sumptuous meal, the bridal dog was given a bun.

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[11] See for example "Human-dog marriage continues in tribal Ho village in Odisha", *Orissa Post* (2023): https://www.orissapost.com/human-dog-marriage-continues-in-tribal-ho-village-in-odisha/ (accessed 24.05.2024).

[12] GC Shekhar (2007). "Man marries bitch to atone for his sin." *Hindustan Times*: https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/man-marries-bitch-to-atone-for-his-sin/story-uYodd2dmZ86jWtNJ1XL9KM.html (accessed 24.05.2024)

Another dog-wedding was held in Jharkand in 2014, when a young woman named Mangli Munda was married to a dog to resolve her astrological and spiritual problems. While Selvakumar appears to have planned his own wedding, Mangli Munda's dog-wedding appears to have been planned by her parents and other adults in her community, based on problems in her astrological chart. Apparently, when her parents went to arrange her marriage, their initial consultation with a local guru revealed that she had problems in her astrological chart. Her parents then sought council from the local village Panchayat committee, and took steps to arrange a dog-wedding to absorb their daughter's difficulties. They found a yellow-brown stray dog that they named Sheru. On the day appointed for the wedding, dozens of members of the community gathered, and Mangli was dressed in a white and red sari with a gauzy red and gold veil. Sheru the groom was garlanded and blessed with *tika* powder anointed on to his forehead, and then driven to the wedding in a hired automobile (Perez 2014).

> Treating the dog as they would a man, the locals decked him out in ceremonial tribal garments and danced alongside him to traditional drumming. "Apart from the fact that the groom is a dog, we followed all customs," said Munda's mother, Seema Devi. "We respect the dog as much as we would respect a normal groom." Around 70 members of Munda's village and family attended the ceremony, which elders said was the only way Munda would be able to enjoy a harmonious life, according to Barcroft. "We had to make sure that the evil spell is destroyed," said Munda's father, Sri Amnmunda. "And marrying a dog is the only way to get rid of the bad luck." Munda will now have to live with Sheru and raise him for the next few months, but luckily the marriage will not truly affect her love life because village customs say she is free to marry again without having to go through the hassle of a doggy divorce.

Like the child/ dog weddings of Odisha, the idiosyncratic dog-weddings of Selvakumar and Mangli Munda are designed to fix bad luck and negative spiritual influences. None of the dog weddings lock human participants into a long-term relationship with the dog; none of them block human participants from taking human partners in future marriage. What is particularly interesting about the wedding folk-rituals involving animal-brides or animal-grooms (whether dogs or frogs) is that the participants are much less predictable than the basil-brides or *bel*-fruit grooms discussed earlier in the article. There is very little that a plant can do to resist a situation—but a frog might hop away from the proceedings, while a dog might run away, fail to remain stationary, or in worst case scenarios, even bite its prospective bride or groom. A video of Mangali Munda's wedding shows her dog-groom, Sheru, being variously carried and herded around has emerged on YouTube;[13] he eventually flopped down on his side beside her, rather than sitting decorously through the ritual. A dog or a frog is a fuller participant in a ritual than a plant is: an animal is, thus, less reliable and less pliable, and more likely to disregard the wishes of the human ritual planners.

When these cases of dog-weddings or frog-weddings get reported in Indian or international media, they are often offered up as wacky interest stories, showcasing the superstitiousness or the lack of sophistication of India's rural or tribal poor, meant for the entertainment of her educated urban elites. How 'ridiculous' it must be for someone to misapprehend whom to marry, these news-pieces suggest! But of course there is no one who thinks that a dog or a frog would make a good spouse. On the other hand, it is equally obvious that the organisers and participants of these rituals come to the ritual from a space that has a richer-than-literal understanding of what is happening. They must necessarily understand the nature of the materials they are assembling, and they must also be purposefully allowing those materials to

[13] See "Woman Marries Dog in Traditional Ceremony in India", (2014). *Truly-Channel, YouTube*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EcyDb3w5PLQ (accessed 24.05.2024).

act on their lives in complicated ways. They must be thinking along with the ritual, doing along with the ritual, playing alongside with the ritual… and perhaps letting the ritual play with them.

Conclusion: Assemblage and Agency

Up until now, in my work seeking to understand rituals (Mocko 2016), I have always made a point to examine what people do with the rituals they perform—how they use it to think, organise experiences, construct and contest social identities, and reshape their worlds. This lens offers valuable insights into Hindu folk-weddings for non-humans, prompting us to view human participants and ritual actors as purposeful and strategic actors. From this perspective, we might ask: What strategies or purposes are served by a non-literal wedding? How do rituals like marrying a basil bride or a canine groom enable people to negotiate their social identities or reflect theologically on their worlds?

However, this anthropocentric approach also has its limits. By centring human agency and relegating non-humans to passive roles, it risks obscuring a more nuanced understanding of agency, particularly in the Indian context. Indian philosophical and theological traditions have long embraced a more fluid and interconnected view of existence (see e.g. Kachru 2021), and most traditional Indic thought-worlds resist rigid distinctions between human agents and inert non-human objects. Instead, the traditions of India would teach us that the world operates on a continuum where even minutest matter possesses some degree of agency, and where all living beings—including plants, animals, and gods—exist in dynamic, ethically inflected relationality. Traditionally (Nicholas 2013: 31),

> Hindus do not draw a sharp line between a material and a spiritual body, or between humans and gods. There are humans who should be worshipped as gods, such as one's parents or one's guru. Gods have bodies and bodily lives, and bringing them near for worship is as natural as worshipping one's parents when they are present; both are *pujaniya*, 'worthy of worship.'"

To analyse these rituals through a Eurocentric lens of human dominance over inert objects is to miss the profound fluidity and participatory capacity attributed to non-human entities in Indic traditions. But we can start to better capture such a fluid, participatory capacity for a range of participants by viewing rituals as assemblages. An assemblage, as Kajri Jain describes it, is "a set of working links that takes on a certain consistency, coherence, and durability but does not form an organic whole or a closed structure" (Jain 2021: 11). Such a perspective invites us to consider the "thing power" of the non-human participants—the plants, statues, and other entities that, while not ensouled, may still possess a liveliness of their own. By extending agency beyond the human participants in a ritual, we can take seriously the idea that a basil plant might be not entirely a bride, but also not merely a plant.

In other words, viewing ritual as an assemblage allows for a more distributive agency, where the objects and substances involved are not simply tools of human intention but active collaborators capable of shaping realities. This framing shifts our understanding: it is not only that people do things with rituals, but also that rituals do things with people. Basil-brides, *bel*-fruit grooms, and newly married frogs are not inert symbols; they are active participants in remaking and enlivening the world. Together, they challenge us to rethink the boundaries of agency and the vibrant possibilities inherent to ritual life.

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Research Article

With and Within Mind: Visualising (With) Materiality in *Bhakti* Practices

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How does materiality matter and function in the absence of its physical existence? This question guides my textual study of structured devotional visualisation, called *manasi* (with and within the mind). In Hindu *bhakti* (devotion), *manasi* is a highly creative yet structured process of imagining and visualising—of creating with thoughts and beholding in mind—interactions with objects, humans, and deities. It involves engaging with materiality *within* for effects experienced cognitively and viscerally as wholly real, often to access a metaphysical reality within the mind and therein experience singular cognitive engagement with the divine. Drawing on Hindu discourses on *manasi*, I argue that materials pulsate with meanings even in their non-material existence, as in the form of a thought, because of the complex devotional-discursive contexts within which devotees, materials, and material engagements are embedded. I propose a conception of matter that emphasises the interplay of materiality and non-materiality of humans and objects as both become inter-relationally meaningful through thoughts structured by theological-practical knowledge. Simultaneously, I propose to consider a network of affects, a *bhakti* assemblage, to identify the contexts that shape devotional desires for cognitive engagements with matter.

visualisation, bhakti, manasi, vibrancy, assemblage, materiality, Vaishnava, Swaminarayan

Introduction: The Non-material Material

The *bhakti* oeuvre abounds in stories, songs, and sermons in which both the devotee and the deity treat materially unreal matter—that which is imagined but does not exist physically—as real and transformative. Take the following two stories as examples. The first is of a poor Brahmin, retold from the *Brahmavaivarta Purana* in the Gaudiya teacher Bhaktivedanta Swami's summary of the *Bhaktirasamritasindhu*, a key sectarian text describing aspects of pure devotion. This devotee would first fix his mind on Vishnu's embodied form through yoga and then imagine serving him by adorning him in expensive clothing,[1] cleaning the deity's temple, and so forth. Once, the devotee made a rice, milk, and sugar pudding in his mind and decided to check its temperature before offering it to Vishnu. No sooner had he imagined touching the freshly prepared pudding than he *felt* his finger burn. This visceral experience abruptly stopped his visualisation. Although his actions of preparing the sweet rice and checking its temperature were cognitive, the burn on his finger was perceived as real.[2] The pudding's material unreal-ness is rendered irrelevant in this story because, following the devotional treatment of the imagined pudding, it has the capacity to cause discernible effects on the devotee's physical body. Bhaktivedanta Swami (1970: 93-94) narrates this story to

[1] Bhaktivedanta Swami nominally replaces Vishnu with Krishna in his retelling of this story.
[2] Sukanya Sarbadhikary (2015: 102-103) notes similar anecdotes popular among her Gaudiya Vaishnava interlocuters.

emphasise a view from the *Padma Purana* that by constantly serving God through the mind, with objects similarly produced in the mind, some devotees have attained God's direct vision even though God is unattainable by words or mind (Haberman 2003: 59). Within his didactic, a sincere devotional cognitive engagement with God, although through ordinary matter, is potentially powerful to gain the highly desirable goal of experiencing God. For my purposes in this article, this story also shows a devotional understanding of materiality: even as imagined, it enables Hindu devotees to have a visceral experience of God.

The second story is of Pusal (also Pucal/ Pucalar) from the 12th century Tamil text, the *Periya Puranam*, which encompasses a lyrical account of Shiva's 63 exemplary devotees. Pusal, although not wealthy, greatly wished to build a place of worship that would also serve other devotees. He tried to gather necessary funds and resources, but when that failed, he decided to build this place with his thoughts instead. In his mind, he sought the right builders and artisans, and procured the materials and tools that were needed for construction. Still within his mind, he "lovingly, attentively" laid down the foundation and, "working steadily, not even closing his eyes at night," he built a precisely designed temple (Shulman 2012: 4). From the plinth and its moulding to the towering spire, he built the structure with his thoughts, painted it white, and situated it in a complex where he also dug a well and built a water tank, smaller shrines, and an outer wall to surround the complex. With the construction complete, he set a day for the consecration ritual to establish Shiva in the temple. What happens next in the story constitutes an important detail that formulates the devotional logic for imagination-based worship. It so happened that while Pusal was building a temple in his mind, a Pallava king was building Shiva a grand physical stone temple, with the consecration date overlapping with that for Pusal's mentally-constructed temple. Shiva, then, appeared in the king's dream to inform him that since he would be busy that day, the king should postpone his consecration ceremony. Shiva said to the king: "I have to enter into the magnificent temple that a certain Pucal from Ninravur, a man who loves me, has thoughtfully built over many days" (ibid: 5). Entering Pusal's temple, Shiva accepted all of his offerings. Shiva, thus, acknowledged the devotee's temple that was made from his thoughts as real and worthy, prioritising it over the Pallava king's stone temple. Tamil devotional retellings of this story regard Pusal's thought-temple to be "incomparably better" than the king's physical temple even though Shiva resides in both temples (ibid: 7). Pusal's construction of the temple *within*—or rather, the process that led to the transformation of his interiority into a temple—is efficacious through its disciplined, meticulous, yet creative effort, guided by a trained awareness of knowledge as opposed to mere "external…discursive knowing" (ibid: 6). David Shulman's analysis of this story indicates that Pusal is considered exemplary in the *Periya Puranam* and in its later retellings precisely for his complex thought-work. Both of these examples show the devotional emphasis on considering mental creations as real and as well as the effects of engaging with them. After all, the deities also regard these creations as real. Shulman (2012) references Pusal's story as an entry-point for tracing the intellectual histories of terms and practices that collectively demonstrate imagination as a nested concept in the trajectory of South Asian philosophical literature. Through textual analysis, he demonstrates discursive contexts that produce imagination as normative, making "mind-born" material creations like Pusal's temple possible and real in South Asian perspectives (ibid: 3).

I draw on Shulman's study and that of others that explore classical Indian conceptions of imagination (Timalsina 2013, 2015; Ram-Prasad 2020) to discuss devotional engagements with materiality *within*, for its effects that are cognitively and viscerally experienced as wholly real. As such, this article is a study of materiality in devotional visualisation, called *manasi*, with both materiality and visualisation being approached analytically as two, among other, interdependent aspects of what I propose we consider a *bhakti* assemblage. Through this consideration of an affectively formed and sustained network of discrete elements, I emphasise

the interplay of materiality and non-materiality of humans and objects as both become inter-relationally meaningful through thoughts that are structured by knowledge. I examine the perception of and engagement with materiality in *manasi* as a practice relevant across three *bhakti* traditions: the Swaminarayan tradition, wherein *manasi* is one, albeit a required practice of mentally associating with God; and the Pushtimarg and Gaudiya traditions, wherein *manasi* is the highest way of serving God and the only way of accessing God's presence and proximity. I do not ground my discussion in analysing any specific object but on the phenomenon of engaging with objects as part of *manasi* itself to show patterns of perceiving matter in *bhakti*. Afterall, the material content of *manasi* is irrelevant within these traditions in most cases. Their didactics emphasise the association formed between matter, regardless of its mundanity, and the deity. As suggested by the above example of the devotee burning his finger in the milk pudding, the devotional attention on Krishna facilitated through the preparation of the food and the act of checking its temperature, i.e., the material aspects of the food, makes the imagined matter real and the story didactic. Even if we substituted the pudding with another object, the story would retain its didactic utility for Krishna devotees, provided the object were to continue to serve as a conduit of imagining and experiencing their interaction with the deity. Attending to cognitive engagements with matter, I argue that materials pulsate with meaning even in their non-material existence in the form of a thought because of the complex devotional and discursive contexts within which devotees, materials, and material engagements are individually and collectively embedded. Guided by sectarian didactics, liberative goals, and histories of devotional practices, devotees engage with matter both intentionally and specifically. They acknowledge or seek the presence of matter even when or, in some cases, especially when it is imagined and sensorially imperceptible. Moreover, drawing on discursive contexts of visualisation and pure, sincere, or exemplary devotion—such as the didactic narrations of the two stories referenced earlier—devotees desire to be affected or, in other words, be transformed by their meaningful, intentional cognitive encounters with matter. Such relationship with matter suggests that devotees acknowledge materiality's vibrancy despite its physical absence.

In the following sections, I first discuss the meanings of *manasi* and then the theoretical concepts of material vibrancy and *bhakti* assemblage that guide my analytical approach to examining materiality in *manasi*. Next, I discuss the practice of *manasi* and the *bhakti* logic of cognitively engaging with materiality in the three traditions mentioned above to illustrate overlapping devotional conceptions of matter. I conclude this article by reflecting on the productive promise of mapping *bhakti* assemblages to further understand the logics and outcomes of cognitive devotional engagements with and through matter.

***Manasi* as Real and Transformative**

Manasi is a devotional concept that means "with or within the mind (*manas*)." As a practice, it refers to imagination or visualisation as a mode of contemplation that constitutes a fundamental aspect of devotional praxis within several Hindu traditions. It is a cognitive-devotional practice among others, that includes *smruti*[3] or, relatedly, *smarana* and *sumirana*,[4] and *chintana*.[5] *Smruti* specifically, and *chintana* in some contexts, involve engaging with the living embodiment of the transcendent through memory rather than imagination based on applied knowledge.[6] Nevertheless, these cognitive practices all involve active and planned mental

[3] *Smriti*: reminiscing.

[4] Remembrance: meditation by repetition of recalling name or qualities of God or guru.

[5] Mental repetition: contemplation.

[6] I engage with *smruti* and *chintana* as prescribed and practiced within the Swaminarayan tradition in my current book-length project, *Thinking Matters: Mind, Senses, and Selfhood in Swaminarayan Bhakti Assemblages*. Expanding on my dissertation (2020) on this topic, I also discuss structured thinking

interactions with materiality, whether these be objects, spaces, human bodies, or the embodied forms of the divine. Called *manasa* in Sanskrit literature, *manasi* within Yoga, Tantra, and other Hindu practices requires an active use of the creative and intellectual domain, the *manas*, (Timalsina 2013, Smith 2019, Ram-Prasad 2020). Religious imagination is a mental action and even a ritual of sorts, something that is systematically done and for its capacity to transform an individual's knowledge and experience of an object, a deity, a concept, or their mind, self, plane of existence, or material existence itself (Timalsina 2015: 32-36).[7] *Manasa or manasi* inevitably entails visualising conceptual or metaphysical realities as concrete material forms to perceive a cognised element—such as God or cosmic realms—within oneself in recognisable material forms—such as a human-like form, *mandalas* (meaningfully patterned sketches), temples, or geographical spaces. Likewise, it also entails imaginatively engaging with ubiquitous material forms like a *mandala* sketch or dirt to perceive them as something significantly more. Pushtimarg and Gaudiya Krishna devotees routinely seek to interact with ordinary things, albeit in the theologically significant Braj, to gain access to a realm where the divine is present, visible, and interactive (Haberman 1994: 53). The Bengali Vaishnavas interact with Chaitanya's birthplace, Nabadwip in West Bengal, to create and access within themselves a Vrindavan, the otherworldly divine playground of Radha and Krishna (Sarbadhikary 2015). These devotees interact with physical matter, such as the land of Nabadwip, with an investment of emotions and imagination that are shaped by theological beliefs, resultantly perceiving the land as its sensorially unavailable counterpart—the transcendental Vrindavan (Haberman 1994: 169-170). The latter, typically imperceptible through human senses, is potentially perceptible, but only through imaginative devotional engagement with relevant matter.

Manasi as a *bhakti* practice is thus inherently creative but it is also located within the bounds of theological knowledge. In other words, Krishna devotees are highly creative in their mental interactions with him, but they would also not take creative liberties and visualise Krishna as a formless entity. Doing so would contradict discursive knowledge about Krishna as a being with a form, resulting in an engagement with an entity that is essentially not Krishna. In the logics of *bhakti*, therefore, *manasi* is imaginative, yet not make-believe, fantastical or revelling in the unreal in an effort to make the unreal real. It is a means of experiencing direct engagement with God, whose presence is actualised within the mind through sustained thought-work comprising, among other thoughts, reflections about God's attributes and God's grace. Moreover, imaginative acts involving God are also regarded as real because of the belief that what is created cognitively comes into being in the mind, resulting in real experiences (see Timalsina 2015; Smith 2019). Theologically, significant texts like the *Bhagavata Purana* (11.27.12, 15)—and also the *Vachanamrut*, in the case of the Swaminarayan tradition (Vachanamrut Gadhadha 1. 68),—list *manomaya* or mental as one of the eight forms into which God enters and resides, and from within which accepts mental material offerings.[8]

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about, due to, and despite the animating aspect of materiality to sustain cognitive engagement with manifest God or living embodiments of God.

[7] For a detailed analysis of examples from Tantrism on the material creation of the conceptual and the transformation of one's experiences through mental ritualistic practices, see Timalsina (2015: 41-111; 125-141).

[8] The *Vachanamrut* is a compilation of philosophical and spiritual discussions between Swaminarayan (1781-1830), the eponymous founder of Swaminarayan Hinduism, and his disciples, who revered him as God. In the above cited sermon, Swaminarayan accepts the eight forms listed in the *Bhagavata*—stone, wood, metal, pastes (or earth or sandalwood), engraved or drawn, sand, gems, and mental—but adds one more: "In the same way, God also resides in the heart of the Sant", an eternally liberated being and the ideal devotee.

Material Vibrancy and Agency

As devotees visualise spaces and scenarios in which they participate and foster interactions with objects, places, persons, and deities, they also evoke, acknowledge, or create the vibrancy of the material forms, vibrancy here being a conceptual term from Jane Bennett's theory of materiality. Bennett conceives of the "vital materialism" theory as a "dogged resistance to anthropocentrism" (2010: xvi). She argues that materiality should be seen as affect, as the catalyst with "thing power," a "curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" on and within human bodies (ibid: xiii, 6). This "thing power" alludes to "liveliness" and "vibrancy" as intrinsic aspects of matter; they are independent, even a little, from their discursive, mechanistic, or divine creation, and from their effects on humans (ibid: xiii-ix). Bennett repeatedly argues that even inorganic matter has an intrinsic capacity to be vibrant, such as the free atoms in an iron rod that "quiver" when the rod is heated. The atoms would not move more, or less, upon external stimuli if they did not possess the capacity for vibrancy. Bennett posits that this vitality inherent within matter, the hint of liveliness that makes them actants, also makes possible a range of interactions between humans and materials. Joyce Flueckiger (2020) builds on Bennett's theory to acknowledge material agency, its capacity to "act, to cause an effect," (ibid: 12) and to attend to "what materiality does [to humans and deities] that may go beyond human intention, agency, and discourse" (ibid: 8). She does not dismiss the fact that these three aspects factor into people's material engagements. Instead, she seeks to understand everyday Hindu thinking and actions by examining the presence of materials in their lives. Through a series of examples from various Indian contexts, she demonstrates that materials have presence regardless of their external visibility and have effects often independent of human activity. For example, since South Indian wedding pendants or *talis*, should not typically be seen, are not only invisible but so is their "work". Despite this invisibility, they perform regional, caste, sectarian, and familial identities and create a woman's auspiciousness as a bride (Flueckiger 2020: 25-29). Flueckiger's other example of a stone-carved male figure in a posture of prostration on a path leading up to a Venkateshwara temple in Andhra Pradesh shows how pilgrims to the temple interact with the stone figure, and even prostrate themselves alongside it, without knowing whom the statue represents or why it is there (ibid: 2-3). In Bennett's and Flueckiger's views, materials have agency because they can make others do something; they have the capacity to cause an effect.

I draw especially on Flueckiger's methodology of ascertaining an 'Indian theory of materiality' by examining Indian phenomena, such as what Indians say and do in accordance with their knowledge that materials can cause effects. I, therefore, specifically take note of materials that appear in the cognitive, discursive, and practical contexts of *manasi* to discuss a Hindu devotional conception of materiality that extends Flueckiger's theoretical work.[9] In accounting for cognitive *bhakti* ways of engaging with materiality, I attend to the profound transformative potential of even mundane matter when treated within structured thought exercises. Dirt, pebbles, leaves, streams, cots, flutes, foods, streets, and other material forms, all contain Bennett's material vitality. They can be affected and will have effect on other material forms that are in their close proximity. However, in the religious milieu, they are also 'lively' in particular ways. Devotional attention to them animates their materiality by reinforcing or conferring on them certain high-value meanings. For example, the ways in which Krishna devotees engage with the flute through rhetorics, emotions, art, and performance reinforces

[9] Leah Comeau (2020, 2022) makes a methodological case in her studies of Tamil religious sensibilities to see texts as a context for examining relationships between humans, things, and the material world because they have embedded within them "sensory experiences and objects—the mainstays of material analysis" (2022: 436). Such an approach to texts and materiality enables her to trace the movement of religious beliefs and practices between traditions, texts, private religious domains, and public spaces.

their evaluation of the flute as an object that is dear and in close physical proximity to Krishna, and, therefore, significant for devotional practice. The devotees desire to be affected by thinking about the flute and its sounds in the flute's association with Krishna.[10] In turn, even a generic flute becomes vibrant for Krishna devotees, but in specific ways. The flute becomes differently animated than it may have been in another context and, therefore, it causes the Krishna devotee to become animated differently and specifically. Within the contexts of devotional imagination, affectively connected humans and objects have an effect on the deity as well, as can be seen in the following example. In Gujarati religious songs, one finds reference to an anecdote of Krishna's cow-maiden devotees, the *gopi*, going door-to-door with their pots of dairy, and telling everyone that they are selling Krishna, the flute-bearer. The 15th century Gujarati Vaishnava poet Narsinh Mehta writes (Rajyaguru 2010: 144-145):

> The naive cow-maiden has gone off to sell God,
> stuffing the lord of sixteen thousand *gopi* into her small pot;
> that cowherd's woman sells the lord of those without a lord,
> calling out in each lane, "Come buy *Murari*, the flute bearer!"
> The other women of Vraj ask, "What's inside? We hear a melodious flute."
> On lowering the pots and looking inside, they faint.[11]

So engrossed are the *gopi* in their imaginative interaction with Krishna that they perceive him even in matter. They see Krishna in their milk and curd pots, so when out selling dairy, instead of calling out to women to buy milk and curd, they ask them to come and buy Krishna. Krishna, presumably moved—affected—by their devotional attention on him, is compelled to manifest within these earthen pots, turning the *gopi's* cognitive activity into a perceivable reality. The women who come out to buy the dairy hear his flute and, upon looking inside the pots, see him. The transformed dairy stuns the buyers, rendering them unconscious. In Narsinh Mehta's song, the *gopi's* sustained cognitive interactions with Krishna transform their sensory perception of the material world, including the dairy they sell, and cause the dairy and Krishna to be affected.[12] My approach to matter alludes to a similar agency of thought and matter—the capacity of thought to produce effects within the material and the divine world, a transformation that is sometimes independent of human activity. At the same time, my approach does not

[10] While Dimock and Levertov (1967) discuss a collection of songs from Bengal on the theme of devotional adoration for Krishna's flute, Hawley (1981) discusses the devotional rhetoric around the flute's capacity to agitate the *gopi* in the annual "Theft of the Flute" play in Vrindavan. Shukla-Bhatt (2015: 49-69; 139-141) also discusses songs from Gujarat to demonstrate the effect of Krishna's flute on the *gopi* in poetic imagination.

[11] All translations in this article are mine unless otherwise stated.
Narbheram (1768-1852) writes a similar song where the speaker wonders: "Odha (Uddhava), what has happened to the women of Vraj that they're out selling the flute-bearer?" (Rajyaguru 2010: 135). The Swaminarayan poet Nishkulanand Swami (1777-1848) also refers to this story in his lyric text, the *Hrudayprakash* or 'Enlightening the Mind-Heart' (10, 10.23), when instructing his audience about becoming a devotee. In his example, the *gopi* model perfects dispassion that has resulted from intense affection for God alone, as opposed to affection for God shared with that for the material world. They love God exclusively and with all of their senses while losing their sense of their bodily self:

> Like the cow-maidens,
> who forget their body-sense while selling milk,
> forgetting to sell milk products,
> they say "Women, come take Krishna.

For a visual rendering of the sight of a flute-bearing Krishna in *gopi*'s pots, see the following production of Narsinh Mehta's song: Soor Mandir, "Bhodi Re Bharvaran Hari ne, Hemant Chauhan Prabhatiya": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mBGuHU0igpI (accessed, 08.08.2023).

[12] See Shukla-Bhatt (2015: 65-66) for a discussion of this song, in which she sees the meeting of *bhakti* and *lila*, of a devotee's devotion and a deity's divine action.

displace human intentions and desires to regulate how they are affected by others and how they affect others. Hindu devotee-practitioners encompass the epistemological locus of my study as I consider the following: the vibrancy of the embodied selves and other material forms as they act upon each other in and through imagined or visualised interactions; and the inevitable, albeit often desired and planned, transformation as the result of multiple vibrant forms interacting in imagination.

A *Bhakti* Assemblage

An assemblage, a theoretically conceived model of interaction between affectively associated entities, is useful here to understand what accounts for different potentially-vibrant forms coming close enough to each other to interact and cause mutual effects as well as fluctuations in the vibrancy potential of an object or a body, or even a deity. For Bennett (2010: 25-38), an assemblage is an ad hoc fluctuating network of interactions without any permanently fixed defining features. It is dynamic but can appear stable while its constituents remain in proximity to one another. In *bhakti* traditions, *manasi* requires an interplay of physical and visualised matter, discourses of *bhakti*, and investments of logic and emotion in mental praxis (*sadhana*) to produce desired streams of consciousness. Devotees observe their mental creations as a bystander or experience themselves participating in their visualised interactions, but they strive and train to be affected by their imagined encounters. In interrogating contexts that shape these desires and cause devotees to be affected, I propose to consider an assemblage of *bhakti*, an open-ended yet identifiable formation of discrete, unrelated, entities that coalesce together through a mutually effecting relationship. A *bhakti* assemblage—and arguably there are many *bhakti* assemblages—is a specific network of relations of mutual effect between specific objects, humans, devotional prescriptions, personal goals, discursive histories, practices, the ubiquity of everyday life, and the presence of deities or God in stories and in imagination, among other variables. It is a specific articulation of two or more of these components. Although ad hoc and dynamic, it, nonetheless, is less fluctuating and more stable owing to the intentional investments in the devotional self and in relevant matters of knowledge, emotion, discourse, and practice. A *bhakti* assemblage reflects what (deities, practices, or beliefs) affects whom (devotees, other individuals, institutions, or even deities) within the collective, how it is able to cause these effects, and how individuals determine ways in which, and the degree to which they are affected through their relationships.

Additionally, components of an assemblage do not act uniformly on all the other components of this affective network. Vibrancy, or rather the potential to cause and experience effects, is based on the objects' and the individuals' particular location within the assemblage. All constituents of the assemblage are inherently vibrant due to their affective associations, which underlies their being part of it. But they are vibrant in different and specific ways. Continual assessment and re-affirmation of their vibrancy is based on devotees' continued affective investment in the assemblage. Attention or lack thereof, through use, disuse, emphasis, or de-emphasis, would maintain, increase, or decrease the vibrancy of an individual themself (how they invest in or divest from their identity, convictions, and practice), and of texts (discourse), materials, practices, and human or divine entities. Some aspects of a *bhakti* assemblage, such as the continued circulation and use of certain stories and songs within devotional practice, the reminders of the devotional logics of engaging with certain objects, although ordinary, in certain required ways, and the sustained desire to retain the mind in God's service, produce mutual effect between individuals and materials even when the two interact in an imaginary realm.

Manasi and Materiality in *Bhakti* Traditions

The three sectarian *bhakti* perspectives discussed below show the traditions' emphasis on cognitive encounters with matter for three reasons: (1) Their philosophical valuation of materiality as a source of attachment and ontological identification with the material world full of objects, persons, and places. While there's the risk of developing desire for matter and becoming further mired in material existence, material engagements are unavoidable, nonetheless. Therefore, devotees seek to engage with matter in relation to divine figures to change the effects matter can have on them. (2) Although physical matter serves as an ideal starting point for devotional imagination, or functions as a necessary tool for the conception of, and to gain access to a transcendental reality, it is also unreliable. In addition to the risk of attachment, like Pusal, Parvatbhai, or the poor brahmin, a devotee may not always have access to physical matter or the ability to perform physical tasks. (3) The strongest argument for mental engagement with materiality over singularly physical ones comes from the *bhakti* traditions' emphasis on transforming a devotee's interiority from a space of material enjoyment to one of exclusively devotional enjoyment.

In Swaminarayan Practice

Within the Swaminarayan liberative praxis, gaining control over one's mind so that it remains continuously focussed on God's form is the "most difficult of all endeavours" and the "greatest of all spiritual attainments" (Vachanamrut Gadhadha 1.1). Such control over one's mind and, in turn, an unceasing, exclusive focus on God is possible only through continual engagement in acts of sincere devotion (Vachanamrut Gadhadha 2.63). *Manasi puja* or mental offering constitutes an essential devotional practice, along with *smruti* (reminiscing), that keeps the devotee's mind occupied with God rather than with the material world even through cognitive engagement with materiality. Ideally, Swaminarayan devotees do *manasi* five times a day to mentally offer devotion to Swaminarayan amidst their daily routine in an effort to focus their mind and attention on him at all times.[13] In doing so, they also seek to associate various forms of matter, including some from their daily life, with God. Moreover, as the sectarian poet Nishkulanand Swami writes in his lyric-text *Hrudayaprakash* (Enlightening the Mind-Heart), a devotee must (re-)conceptualise materiality to always perceive it in relation to God—in terms of its proximity, association, or contact with God. Only then does materiality become a source of devotional joy. Otherwise, it remains a fundamental source of suffering. The poet states that devotees find delight in this mental exercise due to the opportunity it presents them to focus on God by changing their perception of matter.

> There are seven types of metals,
> which appear in countless forms;
> when remembered for their contact with God
> they become sources of all kinds of joy (14.26).
>
> Be they gems, jewellery, utensils,
> or countless tools, or weapons,
> if these objects remind you of God
> then instantly they become joy-giving (14.27).
>
> Speech, touch, form,
> taste, and smell, too,

[13] "Mansi": https://www.baps.org/Spiritual-Living/Hindu-Practices/Meditation/Mansi.aspx
"Mansi Pooja." https://www.swaminarayan.faith/articles/mansi-pooja (accessed, 12.02.2024).

> with God’s contact, are joyous;
> without it, a source of suffering (15.28).

The poet argues in this text that sensory encounters with even mundane matter become a way to ensure devotionally desirable outcomes if it is perceived solely in terms of its relationship to God. These outcomes include engendering God and devotional joy within, changing sensory inclinations toward the material world to eventually result in dispassionate involvement in it, and transforming the interior space—'enlightening the heart’ (*hrudaya prakash*)—with God’s presence. Devotees who perceive matter only in reference to God certainly engage with objects but are neither attached to nor dependent on them, even for devotional services (Vachanamrut Loya 10). In other words, sensory interactions with objects do not cease within *bhakti* practice. Objects get cognitively processed differently such that they are thought of only in their association with God and are not desired for material enjoyment. *Manasi* becomes a way to enable this association between objects and God. Swaminarayan begins his sermon dated 22.10.1828 (Vachanamrut Gadhadha 3.23) by saying that “a devotee of God daily performs the *manasi puja* of God”, and further provides details of a template for *manasi puja*. Devotees should visualise God being seated in a space, appropriate for the imagined or external weather, wearing the clothes of one’s liking that, too, are weather-suitable. They should visualize offering incense, oil lamps, and other objects as appropriate to the season and for God, as well as offering foods of personal preference; “even if God does not like such foods…one should still visualize only those items that are relished by oneself.” Swaminarayan elaborates on the seasonally relevant details to visualise in *manasi* (ibid). For example, in summer:

> First, bathe God with clean, cool, fragrant, pure water. Next, offer a washed, white *khes*[14] of beautiful thin and sturdy weave to wear. After seating God on a beautiful seat, apply fragrant sandalwood from the Malay mountains, which has been collected in a bowl after forming it into a paste, on God’s body. One should smear it on his forehead and observe [the forehead] closely. Then smear his hands observe them closely…Then, one should apply beautiful *kumkum* (vermillion powder) on his lotus-like feet and on the soles of his lotus-like feet. These, too, should be observed. After that, garlands of fragrant flowers such as *mogra*, *chameli*, *champa*, and roses, and various ornaments made of flowers, such as a cap, armlets, and wristlets should be offered…Then one should embrace God once, or twice, or more according to the degree of one’s love…The sandalwood paste and *kumkum* on God’s body may stick to one’s own body from embracing God and touching God’s lotus feet to one’s own chest and head. The flowers from the garland may also leave imprints on one’s body. All of this should be visualized; meaning, one should feel: “sandalwood paste, *kumkum,* and garlands consecrated by God have touched my body!”

Swaminarayan concludes his sermon with an instruction: “Therefore, whoever has heard this talk should internalise it and perform the *manasi puja* of God daily” (ibid). The emphasis here, as we have seen previously in Shulman’s analysis of Pusal’s story, is on internalising sectarian knowledge, the logics for why and how to do this practice, to guide, through perfect intuition, ideal mental offerings and realise their benefits within. Visualisation in Swaminarayan’s sermon is a multi-sensory mental activity, meant to increase a devotee’s time spent with God and to enjoy this time. It also involves periodically pausing one’s actions to observe the divine recipient of this activity: God as adorned with sandalwood paste, flower ornaments, or dressed in a delicate fabric. Within Swaminarayan logics of devotional material engagement, to be

[14] A loose fabric draped over shoulders or used to cover the upper body.

affected by God-associated matter is to be affected by God, even if that matter is encountered in non-material forms. As devotees visualise touching and seeing God's body, they are asked to recognise the gravitas of this sensory, proximate interaction with God, as facilitated by imagined objects—of being touched in *manasi* by materials that have been in contact with God's visualised body. The "sandalwood paste, *kumkum,* and garlands consecrated by God" thus, become awe-generating—vibrant and lively and agentive—for a devotee, due to their contact with God, who is vibrant and agentive. Swaminarayan says in this sermon that through detailed *manasi*, a devotee increases love for God and accrues benefits to their embodied self (*jiva*). Love, a specific type of devotional attention on God and all things associated with God, appears essential in making *manasi* efficacious. When asked by a disciple who among the two devotees—one who worships with physical offerings or the other with mental ones—is superior, Swaminarayan replies (Vachanamrut Sarangpur 3):

> One who makes an offering with intense love, with extreme delight and hair-raising sentiments, and an emotional voice, whether physically or through *manasi puja*, is superior. Conversely, one who does *puja* with inferior thoughts and without delight or hair-raising sentiments borne of love, is making an inferior offering, whether physical or mental.

From this perspective, *manasi* is desirable and transformative only in the presence of intense love for God and when done a certain way, with mental-emotional sincerity. Additionally, when efficacious, *manasi* shapes the interiority of a devotee into a space in which devotional interactions take place regularly at first, and, eventually, at all times, with sustained practice. A devotionally trained mind becomes a temple of sorts, a site for devotional interactions with an interactive god. And, as the following example shows, the conceptual separation between the interior and exterior and the imagined and real dissolves for a devotee whose interiority is transformed. An early 19th century Swaminarayan devotee called Parvatbhai offered Swaminarayan lunch in *manasi* every day from his farm. Once, while doing so, an employee assumed that Parvatbhai had fallen asleep while ploughing the field, and so he shook the devotee. And, "from his apparently empty hands, curd rolled down on the plough as well as on the ground" (Swaminarayan Aksharpith 2009 [1979]: 72). The fellow farmer was surprised and when he asked Parvatbhai about the curd, the devotee replied that he was mentally offering *rotlo* (pearl millet bread) and curd to Swaminarayan when interrupted.[15] Parvatbhai's perfected *manasi* and transformed interiority rendered the question of which offering—physical or mental—was more real, irrelevant. His experience formed a prominent didactic message for the community on the efficacy of a sincerely imagined engagement with Swaminarayan through matter that is as ubiquitous as *rotlo* and curd.

<u>In Pushtimarg and Gaudiya Practice</u>

Manasi is the most significant devotional practice in the Pushtimarg and the Gaudiya (Bengali Vaishnava) traditions, wherein it refers to two sets of activities: the first is cognitive engagement with Krishna through the daily routine of waking him, feeding him meals, making garlands for him, having him play, and so on. The second is to philosophically understand the material

[15] This anecdote appears repeatedly in sectarian discussions of *manasi puja* and biographical sketches of Parvatbhai. "Nitya Puja: A Divine Experience, Part 1": https://www.baps.org/EnlighteningEssays/2019/Nitya-Puja---A-Divine-Experience-(Part-1)-15144.aspx (accessed, 12.02.2024). "Bhaktaraj Parvatbhai," *Satsang Reader Part 3* (Swaminarayan Aksharpith: Ahmedabad, 2009 [1979]): https://download.baps.org/books/SatsangReaderPart3-eng.pdf (accessed, 12.02.2024). "Shree Parvatbhai": https://www.swaminarayan.wales/our-sampraday/great-devotees/36-swaminarayan-sampraday/great-devotees/hari-bhaktos/72-shree-parvatbhai (accessed, 12,02.2024). Also see "Mansi Pooja." https://www.swaminarayan.faith/articles/mansi-pooja (accessed, 12.02.2024).

world as created from an attribute of Krishna—its beingness as truth (*sat*). In other words, the material world is real, and it is infused with Krishna; it is a sphere of Krishna's activity. This philosophical conception of materiality shapes the concept of devotional worship (*puja*) and service (*seva*). If the material world and, therefore, the matter of this world "is viewed as nothing but illusion, or consisting of elements (*anu*), then *seva* becomes a false drama", it becomes meaningless (Smith 2016: 131). Devotional service comprises the means not just to know but also to perceive the divinity in and through matter. In this logic, *manasi* is both imagination—creating scenarios in which one is waking up Krishna in his embodied form and so forth—and visualisation—perceiving the external and the metaphysical reality within oneself.[16]

Vallabha (c. 1479-1531), the founder-philosopher of the Pushtimarg tradition of Krishna devotion, calls the *manasi* way of offering service to God superior to any offering done through physical objects (Smith 2016). According to his *Siddhantamuktavali* (The Necklace of Correct Views), a principal text of this community, devotees first perform *tanu-vittaja-seva*, worship through physical body and material resources, to train their mind to remain focused internally on Krishna. Vallabha defines *seva* in this text as consciousness—the entirety of the mental corpus, called *antahkarana* (inner chamber) and comprising four related cognitive faculties—that is directed solely on Krishna's form, divine attributes, and divine actions (Smith 2016: 128-129). It is "the total immersion of the mind" on Krishna (ibid: 128). External objects only serve as aids in mental training. Once the mind is trained to remain continuously focused on Krishna, a devotee becomes eligible to receive Krishna's grace. Having attained the grace, a devotee is able to perform this mental service effectively. At this stage, the use of physical matter becomes unnecessary, although the devotee may use it because of its association with Krishna. The devotee's perception of physical matter also changes. What was before a representation, becomes equated in *manasi* with the devotional sense of that object—its beingness as an attribute of Krishna and an extension of Krishna's beingness (Haberman 1994: 169-170). The binary between the materially real form and the devotional essence of that object collapses; the act of imagining becomes an act of knowing that the object, person, interaction, or experience is real. In other words, imagining the offering of an apple to a visualised presence of Krishna comes to be experienced cognitively, emotionally, and sensorially as an act of offering Krishna himself an actual apple. Or, what before devotees would have perceived as a rock representing Krishna's footprint, they would now perceive as a footprint itself. Moreover, upon single-minded attention to Krishna, the god begins to interact with the devotee. He accepts the devotee's service and indicates to the devotee his likes and dislikes, further helping to refine the devotee's service of Krishna in *manasi* using appropriate objects.[17]

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[16] One popular Gujarati song that Pushtimarg devotees sing to practice their mental service includes a series of actions beginning with bathing Krishna in saffron-infused water from the Yamuna River, while rubbing his limbs with gentle hands and adoring him (*Yamuna Jalma kesar gholi lad ladavu Shyamala*). The song takes a devotee through the process of adorning Krishna with clothes and jewels and offering him a bowl of milk. The anonymous poet intersperses the description—the imagined content—with the devotional beholding and enjoying. For example, after imagining applying *kohl* in Krishna's eyes and before placing black beauty marks on his face to avert anyone's jealous "evil gaze" at Krishna's beautiful face, the narrator declares that "she" laughs at this and that and begins twirling in ecstasy. Presented as spontaneous actions, they indicate the devotional joy of a devotee engrossed in adoring and adorning her beloved in imagination. See Falguni Pathak's musical rendition of this song: "Yamuna Jal Ma Kesar (Manasi Seva)": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_0ko_dRq3go (accessed, 12.02.2024).

[17] I am grateful to Dr. Aditya Chaturvedi for sharing his insights on *manasi seva* in Pushtimarg texts and practice. He shares his research on the concept and the practice of physical devotional service in his dissertation titled "*Bhakti* is *Sevā*: A Genealogy of *Bhakti* in the Puṣṭimārga." (08.08.2024).

Different in practice from Pushtimarg, Gaudiya (Bengali) Vaishnavism nevertheless shares a similar conception of matter. Matter, or the material world, is created from Krishna's attributes, specifically his "extrinsic energy" (Chilcott 2015). It constitutes an aspect of Krishna's divine play and playground. However, individuals are prone to desiring the objects of the world and in pursuing those desires, they reinforce their identification with the material world. Gaudiya practice requires that the initial stage, the *Vaidhi bhakti*, entail a "reappraising" of objects as not worthy of mundane (non-devotional) desire. Gaudiya devotees internalise sectarian knowledge about material attachment and, in doing so, increase their capacity to prevent "theologically unwanted desires from arising and more efficiently weaken those that do." (ibid: 174). Once objects become undesirable for material pleasure, all subsequent use of materiality, such as musical instruments, becomes a devotional offering that can manifest events and emotions of a transcendental realm (Sarbadhikary 2015: 205). In the second, superior stage of Gaudiya practice (*Raganuga bhakti*), imagination enables devotees to empathise and emulate Radha and, thereby, attain the fruits of their devotional effort: Experiencing the transcendental abode of Krishna within the *manas*, the "mind-heart geography," (Sarbadhikary 2015) or, for some Bengali Vaishnavas, within the entirety of their body. In other words, they experience the emotional effects of their imagined interactions with and between Radha and Krishna in and on their body as if these were the effects of actual interactions in the transcendental realm (Haberman 1988, Holdrege 2015). Sukanya Sarbadhikary's Gaudiya interlocutors "assert that intense imagination often impacts the body, the cognized self transforming the physical self" (2015: 101). Like an insect, which, when consumed with fearful thoughts of the *kumor-poka* insect, turns into a *kumor poka*, "constant thought leads to physical transformation" of the devotees' body and their perception of physical space (ibid: 102). Through ritual imagination, the transcendental Vrindavan becomes superimposed onto the geographical Vrindavan, which devotees experience as the *manas*-Vrindavan—the sphere of Radha-Krishna's activities in the mind-heart space. This conception of conflated geography that devotees can navigate through their cognitive practice makes possible the scenarios where an event takes place in one realm—whether physical, cognitive, or metaphysical—but the effects are experienced in another. For example, Gaudiya devotees share an example of a practitioner, a *manjari*,[18] who imagined an event around the object of an anklet. In her imagination, the devotee noticed her lineage of *gurus* (spiritual guides) searching for an anklet that Radha had lost in a pond. The devotee joined her teachers and found the anklet. Pleased with her, Radha, from the devotee's cognitive realm of existence, graced the devotee by touching the anklet to her forehead. The result was an actual *tilak*, a marking, in the shape of the anklet drawn on the devotee's forehead. The devotee and her disciples regarded this experience so significantly that they changed the shape of the forehead marking for their spiritual lineage to reflect Radha's gracing of the *manjari* (Sarbadhikary 2015: 102).

The examples discussed in this article show that as a *bhakti* practice, "imagination is…not only embodied but also intensely affective" (Sarbadhikary 2015: 105). It makes obsolete boundaries between the sentient and the insentient, the material and the non-material, the imagined and the physical, and the imaginer and the content (experiences) of imagination. These examples show that in *bhakti* discourses, materiality is real and concrete, yet malleable; regardless of its physical or imagined form, it is as prone to being affected as it is prone to affecting other material forms, particularly humans. Lastly, they show how a devotee is

[18] The reference here is to a male devotee who, through systematic cognitive-emotional practice, imagines himself to be Radha's female handmaiden-friend and often presents himself as such in order to empathize with Radha and experience Radha's affective amorous or sexual encounters with Krishna. This practice is called *Manjari sadhana*, and the male and female devotees who perform it are called *manjari*, with a feminine name and pronoun (Sarbadhikary 2015: 87).

potentially affectively connected to all kinds of matter. However, the specifics of which devotee and which object, when, and how they became constituents of a particular *bhakti* assemblage would be determined by the deliberate, sustained attention a devotee gives to something specific in *manasi* despite other competing avenues for attention. As the Swaminarayan poet Nishkulanand Swami notes in the stanzas cited above, the specific type of devotional attention determines the affective contours of the *bhakti* assemblage and, therefore, the planes of mutual effects. Depending on how a devotee perceives gems or utensils, the object could specifically animate a devotee resulting in experiences of either joy or suffering, among other possible affective outcomes.

Conclusion: Reflections on *Bhakti* Assemblages

The interplay of humans and objects, physical and cognitive, discursive and symbolic seen in the examples discussed in this article happens within what the cultural theorist Lawrence Grossberg (1992: 398) calls a "mattering map", "a socially determined structure of affect, which defines things that do and can matter to those living within the map." This structure, called an articulation, is shaped and marked by (1) relationships of effect—how something matters and how it came to matter to whom—that have to be sustained through continual investments of energy, will, and emotion (concern, care, passion, so forth) (ibid: 81-82); and (2) the continual fluctuations in the energy, will, and emotion produced by everyday living for all who make up the map and the continual efforts individuals put into minimising or stabilising these fluctuations to reestablish the structure. An individual's location within a mattering map is predicated upon their identification of what matters to them and why it matters. A mattering map, therefore, also shows the production of an individual and a collective identity—or desires, in my study here—as it relates to this structure.

A *bhakti* assemblage is an example of an articulation that is at once personal and individual and also social and communal. As such, a *bhakti* assemblage primarily determines the effects of itself on individuals who are within it because of a shared, although of varying degrees, affective sensibility and an affective alliance among all constituents of the assemblage (ibid: 71-73, 82). The former is individually cultivated but collectively shared and reinforced. This sensibility determines what (in our case, deities, practices, or beliefs) affects those who are within the collective, in what manner they are affected, and by which logic the individuals determine how and to which extent they are affected.[19] The latter—the affective alliance—is a specific configuration of texts, practices, people, spaces, and objects in their relation to each other. Each element of an assemblage may be a part of multiple alliances wherein it simultaneously means and functions differently. Affective sensibility determines the strength of an alliance, and together they give shape and durability to an assemblage. Because imagination or visualisation are not bounded by the limitations of physical objects and bodies, a devotee's creative mental activity has profound implications on what comes to comprise, and what potentially could comprise and sustain the *bhakti* assemblages. The practice of devotional imagination opens up several investigative domains: about the types of ethical affective alliances that are possible between devotional bodies, other bodies, and animate or inanimate matter; the imagined material forms that are evoked through discourse; the conventional or interpretive physical material forms that appear on our landscapes following their discursive construction; and the specific or ambiguous meanings that materiality, devotional self-becoming(s) and, consequently, a *bhakti* assemblage can take on or lose. The potential makeup of a *bhakti* assemblage also indicates the productive promise of identifying

[19] Referring to the collective nature of visualization, Timalsina (2015: 28) reminds us that it is immensely creative but not individualistic or idiosyncratic; rather, it is shaped by well-established conventions and discourse.

and studying a *bhakti* assemblage as constituted by, among other elements, devotional imagination and visualisation. Mapping this assemblage, or in Grossberg's terms, identifying a mattering map, enables us to see and study the logics, affect, and effects that routinely escape our attention but determine what or who does and can matter to those within the assemblage. It further helps us to trace the ways in which the descriptions of the conceptual and the transcendental in devotional discourse become "products of and for visualization" (Haberman 1994: xiii). As demonstrated in this article, visualisation makes available comprehensible imagery for what is typically not visible or graspable. But it also results in the production of new material forms amid overlapping commitments, interests, and discourse. Our landscape is replete with material forms, including posters, artwork, *murti*s (deity idols), temples, *linga* (Shiva-symbol-idols), gardens, and assorted objects, that are the results of visualising the conceptual and rendering mental creations in comprehensible, perceptible forms, often through metonymic substitutions. That not all images of Krishna or Swaminarayan, or any other Hindu deity for that matter, are identical even within the same sect, nor their shrines, is one example of the potential of visualisation to create new material forms and different discourses related to these forms. A *bhakti* assemblage lets us see the factors and relations that determine the possibility and the specificity of these new forms. Investigating, as I do in this article, the particular type of devotional articulation that a *bhakti* assemblage is, contributes to the interdisciplinary studies on Hindu *bhakti* as located at the nexus of three factors: the invisible yet effecting cognitive actions, the visibly static yet potentially vibrant inanimate matter, and the discourse that builds or reinforces desires to create and be affected by visualised and physical matter.

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Research Article

Material Religion and the Edges of Assemblage at a South Indian Beach Festival

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In this article, I approach the study of South Asian religions, and the Masi Magam festival in particular, in a way that attributes agency and vitality not only to humans but also to material objects and environments. I apply the concept "assemblages," as deployed by political theorist and philosopher Jane Bennett and scholars of contemporary South Asian religions and cultures Jasbir Puar (2007), Joyce Flueckiger (2020), and Kajri Jain (2021) to shift away from human-centred theories of action, and to elevate the responsive, spontaneous flow of assemblages that occur in a religious festival. According to Bennett, such assemblages are ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts that can confound from within…assemblages are open-ended collectives with uneven topographies of power and certainly without a central governing head (2010: 20-25). The literal and conceptual assemblage considered in this article is the series of decorated procession deities at the Masi Magam Festival in Pondicherry, South India, and includes ornamental garments and flowers, which constitute in themselves assemblages of organic, plastic, and fabric materials, domestic animals, water- and fire-based rituals, a street market, and more. I propose and demonstrate that these material assemblages are not only the context for but also contributing agents in the formation of religious aesthetics and experiences.

material religion, assemblage, Tamil, festival, Hinduism, flowers

Introduction

In this article, I approach the study of South Asian religions and the devotional practices that occur during the Masi Magam Festival in particular, in a way that attributes agency and vitality not only to humans but also to material objects and environments. I apply the concept 'assemblage' to shift away from human-centred theories of action, and to elevate the responsive, spontaneous flow of assemblages in the context of a religious festival. American political theorist and philosopher Jane Bennett developed the assemblage concept from Deleuze and Guattari to capture these dynamic collectives along with Spinoza's associative bodies concept, that a body is continuously affecting and being affected by other bodies (Bennett 2010: 21, See Deleuze and Guattari 1987[2013]).[1] According to Bennett, such assemblages are ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts that can confound from within…assemblages are open-ended collectives with uneven topographies of power and certainly without a central governing head (2010: 20-25). The assemblage considered in this article begins with the procession deities decorated for the Masi Magam Festival in Pondicherry, South India. In this case study, I open with the processional deities wearing ornamental garments and flowers, which constitute in themselves assemblages of organic, plastic, and fabric materials. I then shift my focus to the structure of

[1] Bennett also agrees with Spinoza that everything is made of the same substance (2010: x), however, Bennett takes the position that all is not unified by a common spirit.

the procession and annual events that are planned to occur over the course of the day that include and react to searing summer temperatures, domestic animals, water- and fire-based rituals, sandy beach cliffs, street vendors, and the roaring engines of tractors and generators. I propose and demonstrate that these material assemblages are not only the context for but also the contributing agents to the formation of religious experiences. My approach to material religion draws from a framework offered by *The Jugaad Project*, a digital journal edited by Urmila Mohan, which asks, "how and why people use material interfaces/mediums, such as objects, bodies, spaces, and senses to connect the reality of their lives with ***beliefs*** of various kinds" and pays special attention to the historic and contingent nature of the contexts in which said connections and our scholarly analyses take place.[2]

Most broadly, I am interested in the role of materiality, material objects, and perception through the senses in expressions and experiences of the religious. In seeking new ways to study and to appreciate material religion, as well as to interrogate my own thoughts and positionality as a writer and as an object with limited agency myself, I find Bennett's concept of vibrant matter and use of assemblages to be a productive way to highlight the liveliness of material objects. In her book *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett proposes a philosophical project: to think slowly through the false presupposition that matter is inert, passive stuff, and that, in a contrastive binary, humans or "we" are agentive, living beings (2010: vii). Bennett uses "vitality" to mean the capacity of things to both impede or block humans' wills but also things' capacities to "act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own" (2010: viii). With this crediting of vibrant agency and action to nonhuman things, Bennett empowers us to dissolve limiting onto-theological binaries of life-matter, human-animal, organic-inorganic, among others (2010: x). In my article, I apply Bennett's methodology to theorise the event of Masi Magam, especially the procession of the deity, with an emphasis verging on overemphasis of the "agentic contributions of nonhuman forces (operating in nature, in the human body, and in human artifacts) in an attempt to counter the narcissistic reflex of human language and thought" (2010: xvi). At the end of this study, my elevated attention to the nonhuman material and decentring of humans at the festival that is certainly teeming with human agents, may leave readers dissatisfied; however, my aim is to tip the scales of our imaginations and perceptive lenses toward a deeper understanding of agentive materialities in religious contexts. Ultimately, with more practice framing and by critiquing the foundational environment in which religion takes place, these complex assemblages might speak back to their human counterparts with new theories of religion. This article and special issue are preliminary models and proposals for what understanding assemblages might draw out or gather together for scholars of South Asian religions.

Before diving into the case study of Masi Magam which takes place in South Asia, I would like to draw the reader's attention to Bennett's reflections on American materialism to clearly distinguish American materialism from *materiality* as it will be used as an analytical term in this article. Bennett explains that "American materialism, which requires buying ever-increasing numbers of products purchased in ever-shorter cycles, is *anti*materiality. The sheer volume of commodities and the hyperconsumptive necessity of junking them to make room for new ones, conceals the vitality of matter" (Bennett 2010: 5). I raise this point because there are many products for sale and in fact, a street market is a central activity of the Masi Magam festival. Consumption is certainly an aspect of how people interact with the beach-side festival. However, my focus is on the activities, interactions, and agency of the materials in their own right, not only as they are passive stuff gobbled up at great speed and volume by human

[2] See, "The Jugaad Project": https://www.thejugaadproject.pub/about-us (accessed, 28.08.2023).

attendees. As Bennett points out, hyper-consumption is in fact anti-materiality because it is a practice that does not consider the potential agency or force of material objects.

Assemblage in South Asia

Bennett's assemblages concept has already appeared in recent scholarship on materiality and culture in contemporary South Asia, especially in the work of Puar (2007), Flueckiger (2020), and Jain (2021). In her book *Material Acts in Everyday Hindu Worlds* anthropologist Joyce Flueckiger presents a wide array of "materials that have an effect that cause something to happen that may be beyond what a human creator of that material intended," and in her example of a cement devotee prostrating at the base of a temple footpath in the opening of her book, Flueckiger describes a material figure that "has been left to create its own effect without intervention of any ritual specialist" (Flueckiger 2020: 4). Utilising Bennett's concept of assemblage in the context of South Asian religious practice, Flueckiger shows that the prostrated figure is part of an active assemblage composed of the footpath location, *kunkumam* applied to cement, marigold garlands encircling it, passing pilgrims, and other people responding to the figure (ibid). In a similar vein, in her chapter on ornaments, Flueckiger shows that ornaments continue to act after the event of putting them on, again without the intervention of a ritual specialist. For example, a marriage necklace which is important in rituals that occur at a wedding is subsequently worn with only the chain, whether in gold or cord, visible around the back of a married woman's neck (Flueckiger 2020: 22-33). While the chain marks its wearer with her more general status of being married, the pendant on the front of the chain that indicates social and religious information about the couple's families is worn unseen under the blouse in day-to-day life. Bangles are another form of ornament that do social work for their adorned. As Flueckiger and other scholars of bodily aesthetics have established, "To be ornamented is to be complete, fully human" (Flueckiger 2020: 22, see also Mohan 2015, Packert 2010, and Dehejia 2009). Ornaments are not extra objects added to a woman's comportment but rather they are fortifying, constitutive, and protective of her complete self. As we will see, ornaments play an important role in the adornment of the gods and goddesses on display at the Masi Magam festival.

In her recent book *Gods in the Time of Democracy* about the massive statues that tower over Indian landscapes and give voice to an emerging aesthetico-political iconography (Jain 2021: 4 and 7), art historian Kajri Jain presents an assemblage with "its multiple scales and rhythms, complex spatiotemporal circuits, networks… as a set of processes, a parietal view that forces a certain coherence and sense on its own, but with the knowledge that it is selective and needs to be seen in conjunction with many other possible layers" (Jain 2021: 24-25). This new iconic form, super-sized statues of gods and national heroes, feeds on religious and secular powers, requires enormous resources in their creation and maintenance, and thus occupies both the collective and disconnected characteristics of an assemblage. Jain argues that assemblages make sense of that which can be seen, heard, and touched, and that which is intelligible (Jain 2021: 7). However, and significantly, Jain uses the same joined but uneven characteristics of assemblage to precisely break through the "sensible" to be heard (Jain 2021: 7). I find this to be an especially profound potential outcome of assemblage-centred analysis; one that is open not only to decentralised fissures but also to voices, forces, or experiences that seep through such cracks in what might be perceived to be hegemonic materialities. In her pathbreaking book *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (2007), queer theorist Jasbir Puar also deploys the concept assemblage as both a sense of a collective and of breaking off from it to engage with varied notions of record-keeping, archive, and documentation that when considered together work to undo what have become taken-for-granted anti-queer knowledge formations (Puar 2007: xxiii). Both Jain and Puar engage with the convergence yet impermanence of assemblage to propose multiple theoretical positions and to avoid the

overdetermination of one or more models of power, knowledge, or identity in contemporary South Asian religious and social landscapes. Puar thereby avoids the shortcomings of intersectionality, for example, which relies on multiple identities but each in terms with an exaggerated stability that “attempts to still and quell the perpetual motion of assemblages” (Puar 2007: 213).[3] Following Jain and Puar’s methods, I also utilise the notion of gathering together and powerful eclecticism to approach but not necessarily contain an experience of the beach festival.

Preparing for Procession

Image 4.1: Beach activity at the Masi Magam festival. March 2020. Photo by author

The Masi Magam Festival is an annual festival that takes place in the Tamil month Masi (mid-February to mid-March). For this festival, devotees gather at a body of water, a temple tank for example, to bathe and thereby wash away sins and past suffering, a religious practice with a historical record that dates back to the 11th century on Chennai’s Marina Beach.[4] In Pondicherry, a coastal town in Tamil South India, temple deities famously travel to the beach on grand procession vehicles, gather on the sandy ridge overlooking the crashing waves of the Bay of Bengal, and, carried by their priests, eventually make their way down to the ritual bath at the water’s edge. Devotees and tourists also crowd onto the beach to take their purifying dip in the ocean and receive blessings from the gods and goddesses.

[3] Puar writes, “Intersectionality demands the knowing, naming, and thus stabilizing of identity across space and time, relying on the logic of equivalence and analogy between various axes of identity and generating narratives of progress that deny the fictive and performative aspects of identification” (Puar 2007: 212).
[4] See Dehejia (2021: 14-17) for a short description of the Masi festival as it is celebrated in Chennai with a procession to Marina Beach and sea-bathing practices that have taken place since the days of the late 11th century emperor Kulottunga I.

I have attended this festival several times, but the following observations are based on photos and notes taken in March 2020. In the morning, I observed priests and temple staff at the goddess temple on its namesake Ellaiyamman Koil Street, a quiet residential street about half a mile from the Pondicherry (Puducherry) railway station, as they built and decorated the procession vehicles and conducted rituals to begin their travel to the beach. They were scheduled to assemble and leave between 6am and 8am.[5] They departed around 7:30 am and I met them at the beach in the late afternoon at around 3:30pm. When I arrived at the goddess temple the bulls who would pull the procession vehicle were already there, tied up at the post on the side of the temple. Eating, relaxed, they were waiting-to-be-called-to-work animals. A priest in the temple informed me that the flowers had already been delivered and assembled around the processional deity by a young flower designer in his twenties who came in the early morning from neighbouring Muthialpet. Once Ellaiyamman was dressed, the goddess, fully decorated with clothing, jewellery, and flowers, was kept inside the temple in a side room waiting to be loaded onto the cart closer to departure time. I was shown into this otherwise empty room and permitted to observe her ornamentation in detail. Her face, hands, feet, and sceptres were a shining bronze material. Her eyes and lips were subtly marked on her metal face, and a big deep-red mark of *kunkumam* was applied to her forehead. Moving upwards from Ellaiyamman’s face, she wore a side knot hairstyle in her black hair which was ornamented with diamond pendants and a gold crown. The goddess had on a bright orange sari skirt tied around her body, waist, and legs. She had red velvet short sleeves with forest green forearms, colours that expressed her power and life-giving vitality. In total she wielded four metal sceptres. In her left hand she held a lotus on a long stem-like rod, in her right hand she held a twisted sceptre with a parrot on top. Two more sceptres that were topped with a trident and a drum emerged from behind her shoulders. The goddess’s upper body was draped in concentric gold and white diamond costume jewellery. The outermost loop was a chain of gold coins. The shorter interior necklace featured a pendant in red and white stones with the centre resembling a target. Alternating red and white wavy rays encircled the jewellery like a sun. These two colours, red and white, are commonly painted in alternating stripes on temple walls in Tamil Nadu and indicate the complimentary heating and cooling powers of the goddess and god.

She wore round flower design pendants on each sleeve also in red and white stones. Initially, the ornaments were pinned into place, but they were also held flush to her body by a thin black thread crisscrossing her form. She wore anklets of white silver balls that looked like jasmine buds or pearls. By her right knee, a small bronze *murti* (idol) stood wrapped in a complimentary triad of colours, green, orange, and violet with a gold border. This figure, the portable one who would be bathed at the beach, was small enough that she was fully encircled with a string of fluttering pink oleander blossoms. The main goddess’s silhouette was traced with a mixture of thin and thick, solid and striped flower garlands. Around her head and crown, she was wearing a small string of yellow chrysanthemums followed by a colour-blocked stripe of white tuberose trumpets and velvety dark red cockscomb. The goddess's shoulder line was expanded with white tuberose, fragrant green herbs, yellow chrysanthemum, pink oleander, and a thick colour-blocked semicircle of yellow chrysanthemums alternating with pinks, reds, and violets. The final most exterior organic arch was made of dried *vettiver* roots (a plant known for its medicinal properties) wrapped with a few whip-arounds of pink, green, and yellow synthetic threads to tie the otherwise earth tone roots into the overall design of the seeming wall of flowers. This was how I first encountered the goddess on a stationary low stage inside an otherwise vacant temple. The sheen of the goddess’s dress kept catching my eye as I stepped

[5] I arranged permission to observe and photograph aspects of the temple’s morning activities in advance of the festival day, so they were expecting my presence, and they were very generous to answer questions that I had as they prepared for departure.

Image 4.2: View of the processional vehicle on the street before its departure from the temple. March 2020. Photo by author.

back into the street to check on the procession cart. The animals, cart, and priests had a long day ahead of them, as they planned to transport the goddess to the beach by bullock cart rather than by tractor which were louder, faster, and less likely to succumb to hunger and heat. First, the cart was loaded with hay to feed the bullocks. Parked further down the street there was another procession cart in the form of a tall elephant mount. A bystander explained that after the beach tour, the goddess would return to the temple and then ride through the neighbourhood streets at night starting at 8pm. For this procession, she rides on the elephant, he said, "like a king" and wears even more garlands and ornaments than her morning decorations. The goddess was secured to the beach-destined cart with ropes while seating for the humans was arranged in front. Only then were the bullocks decorated with flowers on their foreheads and hooked to the cart. Once in their harnesses, the animals came to life, whisking their tails and shifting their weight in anticipation of their assignment, thereby bringing new energy and small movements to the previously still assemblage. Led by a drummer and horn player on foot, the cart pulled away toward Gandhi Road on their route to Vaithikuppam Beach. It was an easy departure with a calm and pleasant gait. The cart would return by Bharathi Road at the end of the day.

Returning to the characteristics of an assemblage as an ad hoc grouping of diverse, vibrant materials with uneven topologies, I place the permeability and dynamic scale of assemblage into conversation with the goddess as member-actant dressed for the Masi Magam festival. My first proposal is to identify the goddess on her transportable platform as an assemblage. Her form was a grouping of various materials of metal, cloth, makeup, hair, flowers, and wood, and the way that they were held together whether through pins, woven thread, wrapped thread, or rope, was a record of the layering method used in their initial application. Although stable when stationary, the tall and heavy procession assemblages sway and jostle when in motion. Accessories like the fringe around parasols are designed to accentuate the lively

movement of the palanquin. Another aspect of the assemblage that I was particularly attuned to was the use of flowers and floral motifs. Flowers are a ubiquitous material used in Hindu rituals inside and outside of temple contexts (Comeau 2020). Flowers are also widely available and visible in everyday aspects of South Indian culture such as women's beauty practices like flower hair pieces, architectural features like decorative gate handles, and printed media like calendars and poster art. When flowers are used to ornament a procession deity, they are not used in isolation but rather in the delightful clamour of, as we have seen, hairstyles, metal and stone jewellery, a painted wooden pedestal, folds of silk clothing, *kunkumam* powder, and related pins and cords. Despite measures to stabilise the flowers, for example, under the stress of the hot sun and jostling, the blossoms shrink as they wilt, edges of the flower garlands pull loose, and they swing wildly like the parasol's fringe. Assemblage as a concept enables this flower-inclusive ornamentation practice to evolve over the course of the festival with and without the action of adjacent human agents.

My second related proposal is that the goddess, cart, priests, and bulls constitute an assemblage. Bennett's "throbbing confederation" (Bennett 2020: 23). The movement of the cart in response to a startled animal, a hole in the pavement, or a sideways slide on gravel-mixed sand, the ways in which energy dissipated from it as the humans and animals tired over the course of the day, and, significantly, the ways in which people brought energy to the cart in the form of devotees seeking blessings from the goddess all illustrate the uneven, energetic pulse that characterise vibrant matter.

Image 4.3: Devotees reaching for *prasad* from the procession vehicle at the Beach Festival. March 2020. Photo by author.

Finally, I offer a third proposal that engages with another aspect of Bennett's assemblage definition. Based on the highly temporal and highly uneven nature of assemblages, I propose the entire festival environment at the beach as an assemblage of which the goddess and her cart are one "member-actant" that joined into and then later broke away from the annual but temporary beach festival assemblage. Bennett explains, "Each member and proto-member of the assemblage has a certain vital force, but there is also an effectivity proper to the grouping

as such: an agency of the assemblage. And precisely because each member-actant maintains an energetic pulse slightly 'off' from that of the assemblage, an assemblage is never a stolid block but an open-ended collective, a 'non-totalizable sum'" (Bennett 2020: 24). Bennett concludes that an assemblage has a finite life span, a point that resonates especially well with the ephemeral qualities of organic flowers in the procession which have a considerably shorter life span than the goddess's metal jewellery or the bull who will expire long before the wooden vehicle. Holding these three proposals in paused consideration, I turn now to the material activity at the beach.

At the Beach

Image 4.4: Police overlooking the crowd at the Masi Magam festival. March 2020. Photo by author.

The road leading into the neighbourhood and down to the beach was in full festival mode and lined with tables and mats on the ground. Every surface, every square inch was topped off, bright, and colourful. There was costume jewellery, cut fruit, whole watermelons, fried snacks on floppy silver foil plates, fluorescent polyester flower arrangements, monochromatic western-style bouquets, balloons, beach balls that exclaimed 'I love you' while others lamented 'Missing you', plastic babies, plastic guns, clay banks and figurines, an All-for-10-rupees table, winnowing baskets, hot plates, and gas lighters. Some of the items were dropped into plastic bags while others were packed in squares of scrapped newspaper or sheets of banana leaf and then wrapped around and around with cheap white string that snapped apart when pulled. The folds were enough to hold the packet's shape. No knots were tied. And, the lines of thread crisscrossing the newsprint echoed the thin black stripes of strings that held the goddess's ornaments to her chest.

One block back from the beach the road was covered with consecutive multicoloured canvas canopies commonly used for family and community functions. Neighbours sat on cool concrete stoops sharing snacks. Between the market

Image 4.5: View of a goddess dressed in rainbow skirts at the Masi Magam festival. March 2020. Photo by author.

and sandy plaza where the procession vehicles park, there was a bouncy castle, ice cream carts, and carnival rides all powered by a thunderous army of generators guffing black smoke into the air. Finally approaching the beach and the enormous temporary structure stretching ahead of me, I saw the row of stalls delineated by basic cane frames and varied corrugated sheeting and each was filled with a celebratory procession vehicle distinctively assembled by a local temple. The environment was hot from the combination of crowded bodies, blazing camphor fire atop metal pedestals, sun overhead, and white light reflected from the sand, wet rocks, and ocean. A short line of old women was selling camphor from baskets. Their faces intimated that they were suffering in the heat like they were physically baking in the sun. In the next smaller display of flowers for sale, just three or four yellow chrysanthemums balanced on a cracked coconut showed visible wilt. People leaned on the edges of shade painted in thin stripes across low building walls. Some were watching festive bodies already bathing in the waves below.

It was about 4 o'clock in the afternoon. Scanning the crowd, I noticed a lot of vertical activity. People paused and turned for *darshan* then moved freely to their next destinations, successfully weaving between people, fencing, tall shifting flames, mounds of *kunkumam*, tall poles attached with bags of pink and blue cotton candy, and young vendors ringing bells to announce their sugary wares. Above me, the police watched us from standing cane towers. The first parked procession cart that I saw carried the *nalvar*, the four poet-saints of medieval Tamil Shaiva fame, standing in a row in front of the main deity. I have a photo of the same statues on the same cart and in the same first stall from a decade ago when I had my attention tuned in to the poet Manikkavacakar. This year the bronze poet was wearing a necklace made from rupee notes. It was good to see a familiar face and I wondered how many more I would

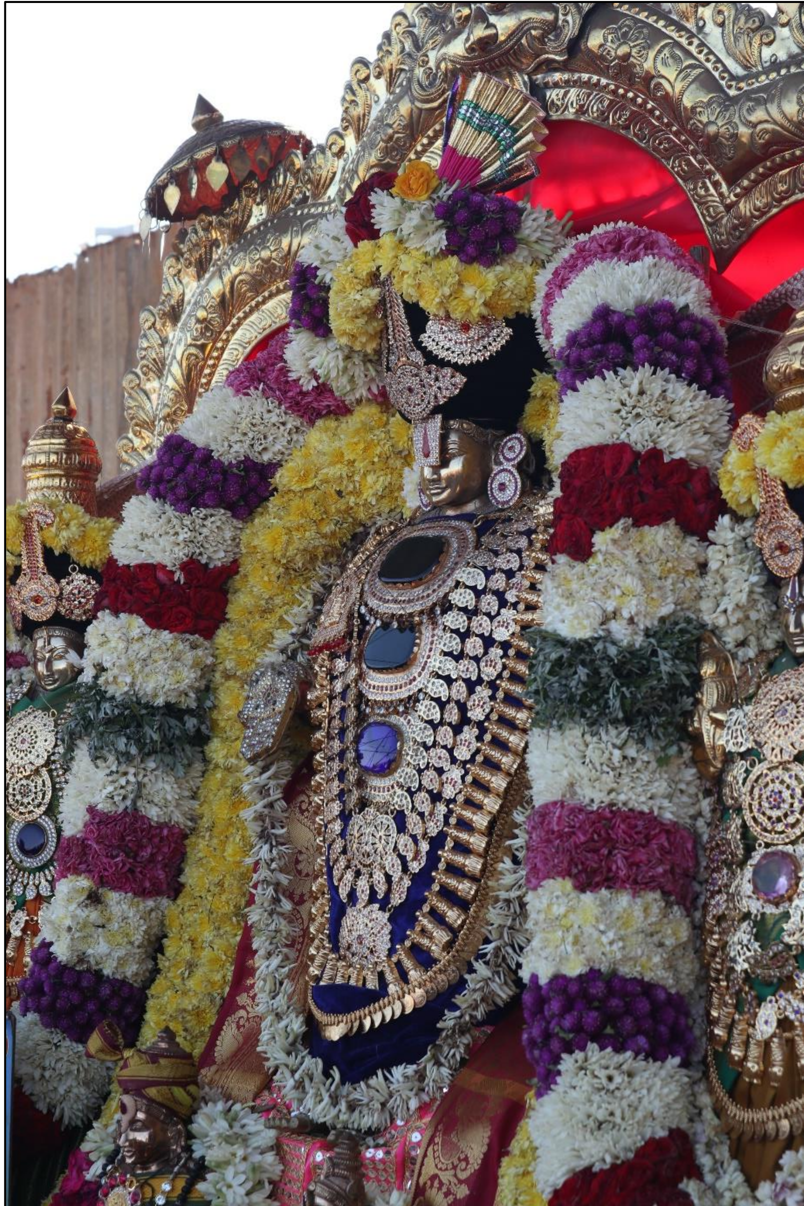

Image 4.6: Vishnu wearing gold and yellow ornaments at the Masi Magam festival. March 2020. Photo by author.

recognise. In the subsequent stalls, there were deities with bold, glittering colour stories. In one stall a goddess sat with knees bent atop a mound of cascading, tiered folds of sari skirts and thick bands of gold borders in a rainbow of colours. Her chest was wide and completely paved with gold jewellery. She was framed by two flower garlands that traced the outline of her form, expanding her presence with a floral radiance. The first garland was alternating white trumpet-shaped tuberose and colour blocks of red, pink, violet, or green. The outer garland was solid red in colour and made more voluminous in appearance by the fluttering texture of the oleander's petals. While stationed in the open-air stall, her human attendants had erected a backdrop composed of pink and red curtains and sprays of artificial red, white, and yellow lilies. Further down the line, Vishnu was seated with two consorts and wore the same style of multicoloured garland which traced the entire shoulders, crowns, and body lengths of the procession assemblage. However, all the reds that were worn in the previous goddess display were replaced with yellow chrysanthemums which played differently against the white tuberose and gold fabric borders of Vishnu's dress, including the fan-like folds accentuating the top of his crown. Vishnu's backdrop was a yellow-gold arch, and two small reflective metal parasols encircled with flat dangling plates. All three of their chests were paved in gold jewels except for three flat stones that laid flat down the centre of Vishnu's chest. Overhead, finally, the majestic golden impression was shaded by a red and green fabric parasol with wind-tossed fringe.

Yet another procession vehicle included a motorised parasol that splayed its sporadic fringe made from mixed organic and artificial flowers. It spun on the power of an audible but visually hidden generator that competed in volume with police announcements that were amplified over a loudspeaker, and that included a search for a missing girl wearing a pink dress. Here we can recognise human actants as vital materiality. The speaking police officer and the missing girl, as well as the bell-ringing candy vendors, are organic materials operating within

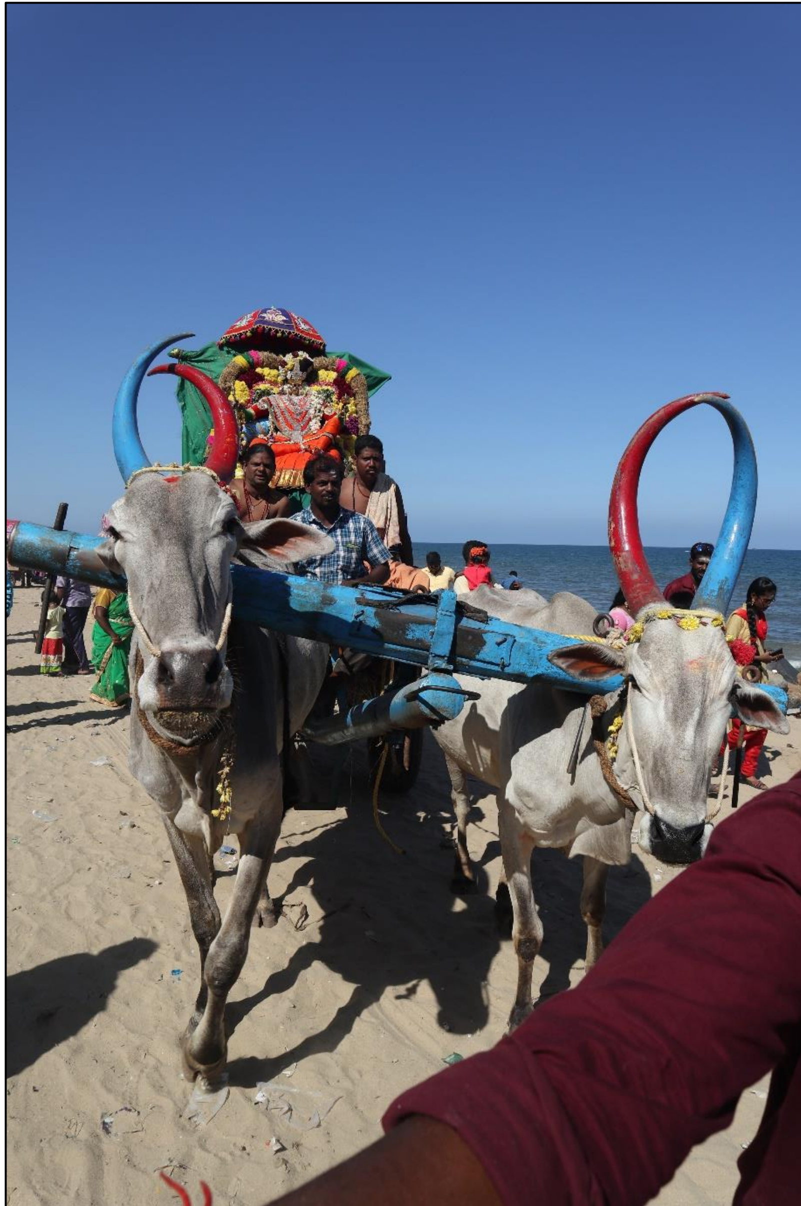

Image 4.7: View of the processional vehicle at the beach in the late afternoon. March 2020. Photo by author.

and contributing uneven impacts to the religious event. The sound of the police announcement, comparable to the roar of nearby engines, was one temporary component of the sensorium of the beach festival which was composed of a range of organic and inorganic materials *and*, in this case, the sounds that they made. This point about human power as thing power is worth drawing out a bit further using the example of heat. Heat at the festival came from the sun, from ritual fires lit and tended to by priests, and the crowd of human bodies. The human-inclusive sources of heat illustrate how the materialities of humans and nonhumans (i.e.: sun and fire) can be perceived and valued more horizontally (Bennett 2010: 10). I too was melting, and I had started compromising with myself to see just a few displays before turning back to the main road. Just one more. Just one more. Curious about that one. I took a few paces more through the crowd. That moment and that mindset was abruptly cut off when I saw and recognised the goddess riding toward me on her bullock cart, the same goddess that I had observed at her temple on Ellaiyammankoil Street. People crowded the slow-moving vehicle and reached out their hands to receive small pinches of flowers and blessings from the priest. The priest and his assistant recognised me, smiled, and waved. As they passed, the priest yelled over his shoulder that they would see me back at the temple at 8 o'clock. The bulls' yellow chrysanthemums had dried out and lay flattened into their fuzzy grey foreheads. In stark and transformative contrast to the tractors and amplified voices, the animal-powered cart was virtually silent. The animals were quiet but arguably some of the most hardworking actants expending energy in the procession. In a few short moments, the cart passed me with another big trailer in front of it. Both sets of wheels kicked up a lot of dust and sand. This hot burst of debris in the air took my breath away. I was able to regain my footing and draw in a clean breath of air in part because I was a full head taller than the rest of the crowd and though there were a lot of people there, the daytime crowd was not packed as it would be later. I felt seen and connected to the temple's contribution to the Masi Magam festival and I felt lucky, fortunate to have seen the goddess at the beach, like a top celebrity in

public. Even though I clearly went to the beach knowing that she was there and planned to actively seek her out, it felt nonetheless genuinely miraculous, surprising, and special that I did see her there. Ignoring my own copious handwritten notes, names and phone numbers, start times, addresses, and other evidence of premeditation and intensive planning that I had invested in this meeting, I recorded the sighting on the next clean page in my notebook with a dash "—amazing luck!!" Although the priest encouraged me to meet at the temple for the evening portion of the neighbourhood procession, I didn't make it. On the literal eve of what became a global lockdown, airports had begun to close, and my flight was cancelled earlier that day. I was worried and feeling the pressure to find another route home within the next 24 hours.

The unevenness of the assemblage concept enables us to gather and critically engage with a variety of dynamic and seemingly discordant materialities and agents as a whole religious experience. With this in mind, I now step aside from the events of my day at the beach festival to develop a few divergent, eclectic nodes of the assemblage that offer nudges and resemblances to the vitality of the procession deities, beginning with the motorised parasol that so enlivened one of the procession vehicles.

Electric Umbrella

The emergence of the mechanised parasol does not set off an immediate list of binaries that all procession vehicles must take up on one or the other side, such as tractor versus bull, modernity versus tradition, or electric technology versus stasis or manually propelled movements. Rather, from the perspective of assemblage theory, the electric umbrella contributes a welcome unevenness to the festival environment.

The parasol has long been a part of royal and divine iconography and is a common accessory for deities on procession who view their loyal devotees, tour sacred cities, or visit temple grounds. Many parasols were present at the beach. The whirling parasol was a new iteration rather than a departure from its peers. As I previously described, the bodies of deities are firmly secured to their pedestals or various chariots, however, there are other parts of the decor that bring intentional and vital movement to the sacred procession. Parasols, tassels, and fringe are some of those quintessential materials that bring swing, sway, bustle, and thus liveliness and jubilance to the divine presence and the devotees' experience of it. Thus, the electricity-powered parasol added a new directionality in its spin rather than swing but, from the perspective of the movement that it brought as a sacred accessory, it remained familiar. The innovation however was not entirely without its departures. The rim of the parasol was decorated with artificial flowers and with intermittent dangling artificial flower strings, forgoing continuous fringe. As I observed the use of flowers in particular among the procession vehicles, their textures, volumes, colour stories, and integration with other decorative materials, I found that some were decorated with strictly natural flowers, increasingly noticeable as the hot day went on, while others intermixed a variety of natural and therefore withering organic flowers with the more durable and 'ever-fresh' in appearance, inorganic flowers. The high speed of the whirling parasol that drew people toward it would have instantly pulled the petals from dangling organic flowers. The force of the electric parasol was not compatible with tassels made from organic materials. So while this new age parasol did not present a departure in its general use, it did bring new tendencies in force and material to the festival environment.

To this notion of incremental or uneven change in plastics and electricity, I add a few more nodes of change and related unevenness that have evolved through the years since my first visit to Pondicherry in 2007 that can provide us a wider context for the whirling parasol. In my

neighbourhood in 2020, there were still carts where men smoothed laundry with coal-filled irons. There was a man with a grinding stone built into his bicycle who rode from house to house calling out his knife-sharpening services. But there were also more dry cleaners and maternity and baby specialty boutiques popping up in the vicinity since my stay in 2010. Internet cafes with signs advertising ‘browsing’ were no more because our cell phones used data plans, and the coffee shops had WIFI. The existence of Xerox shops and power outages had decreased in equal measure. In my friend’s neighbourhood in 2020, I heard small lorries and motorcycles drive up and down the residential streets playing amplified, automated, and pre-recorded advertisements. The lorry announced they were selling onions and garlic from the back of the truck. The motorcycle’s service? Hair fall or hair loss treatments. On the same street women still called out to housewives while walking with big silver bowls of produce or fish covered with a light hand towel on their hips or heads. The ad hoc mechanisation of Pondicherry’s domestic services was part of the same larger dynamic context in which the parasol whirled and in which it drew the attention of festival attendants with an organic, eclectic, and electric flair for the material presentations of gods. Alongside this automation thrived yet another expression of collectivity made through piecemeal handiwork and craft. In addition to string wrapped around paper and leaf parcels and pins securing jewellery onto the goddess’s dress, more practices of binding tied the festival assemblage together. Thick ropes secured pedestals to carts. Banana fibres ran through the spines of the gods’ flower garlands. Safety pins in women’s saris and extra pins riding on their marriage necklaces were joined by the nearly invisible but ubiquitous presence of black bobby pins. White thread was tied into flower buds and worn in long strands or short tufts at the napes of women's necks. Subtle, common, invisible, behind the scenes, however you conceive of these binding technologies, they are nonetheless the quiet glue of the Masi Magam festival.

Finally, I return to the goddess on Ellaiyammankoil street where we both started our day ahead of the procession activities to engage with vital materials that evolved over the course of a day and as the materials moved through changing contexts. I begin with the visual reception of the ornamented procession goddess inside and outside. Inside the temple under the fluorescent tube lighting, the painted columns and walls, other deities, and their own decorated shrines shared many visual resemblances. The contents and container of the goddess temple reflected a mutually colourful, shining, shared aesthetic. In this context the temple surroundings were in such harmony with the main deity it was difficult to visually isolate the individualised features or ornaments of the specially dressed goddess. When she moved outside, the goddess appeared much differently in the muted context of the paved and tree-lined street. Although her surroundings did not contribute the same symbiotic energy of the temple interior, natural sunlight caught her gold jewellery and sari border, and most of all the sunlight picked up the iridescent quality of her orange-coloured dress. Both contexts, inside and outside, offered changing opportunities for engagement with the goddess. In procession through the streets and beach path, devotees could get closer to the goddess than if she was set into the depths of a formally structured temple shrine. But she was also in motion and passing by when outside, and so, she could not be viewed in detail or contemplated from a stationary position. In addition, she was up high, putting the devotees at eye level with her reclining feet and the folds fanning from the bottom of her sari. Even as I tried to position myself to photograph the procession event for my notes and this article, I encountered changing conditions. Many of the important accessories such as the coverage of the umbrella and the roof of the temporary parking structure, cast irregular shadows across the vehicle and goddess.

The overall display also changed over the course of the day. At the beach, the garlands were visibly wilted and wilting even in the indirect light while parked in the shade under corrugated structures. Bennett explains that the force-power of assemblage is a “mood or style of an open

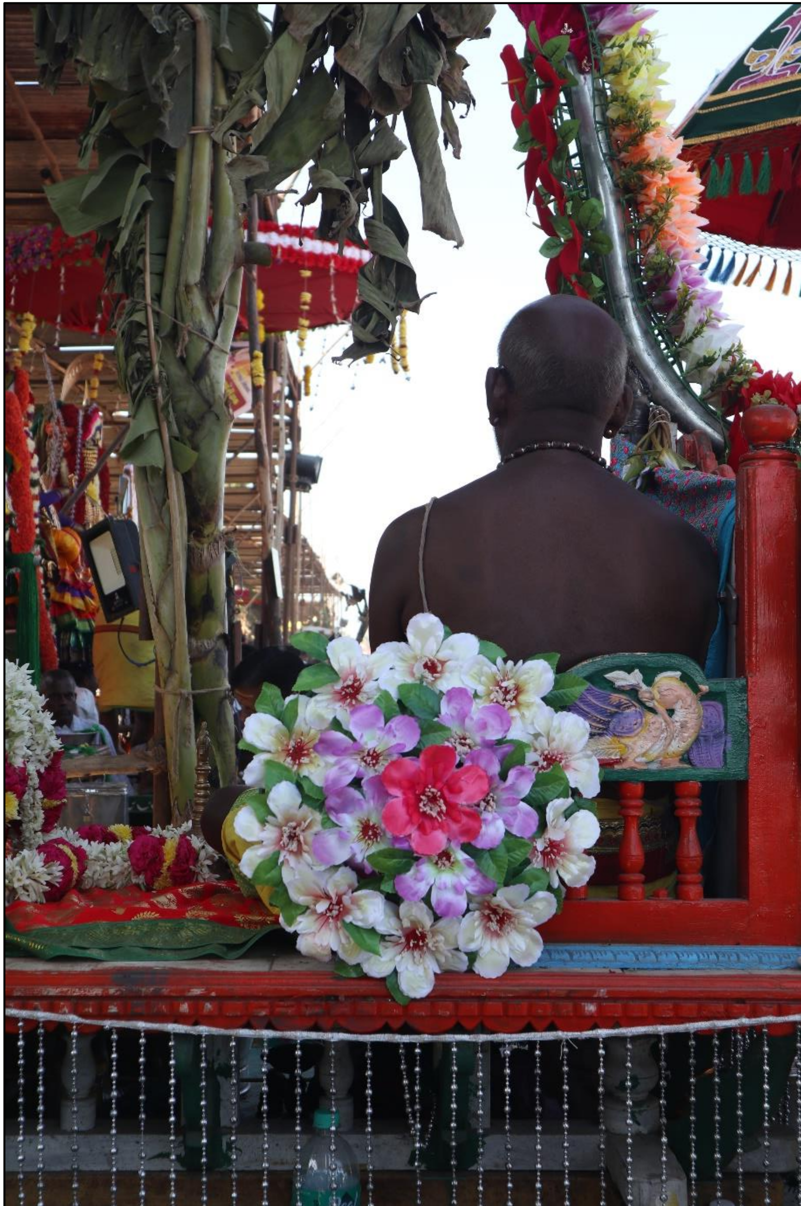
Image 4.8: Detail of one procession vehicle with organic and inorganic flowers, fabric, metal, wood posts, electric lights, parasol with fringe, and a priest wearing a sacred thread at the Masi Magam festival. March 2020. Photo by author.

whole in which both the membership changes over time and the members themselves undergo internal alteration" (Bennett 2010: 35). By the late afternoon the organic leaves tied to the ends of the goddess's garland, leaves especially known for their fresh fragrance and silvery green tones that give texture to a garland design, showed damage and browning edges, and shrivelled to expose the strings that bound them to each other. Finally, as the cart pulled away from the stalls on its departing route, the goddess appeared in yet another outdoor context. Riding along the ledge of the cliff, the bright clear blue sky evoked a wide-open impression in contrast to the soft enclosure of the tree-lined street just outside her temple.

Here in the literal light of day, we see the agency of a human-nonhuman working group (See Bennett 2010: xvii). The changes that I saw in the goddess as she moved through the street and the beach reflect the agency of changing nonhuman contexts. As recipients considering the goddess, we must constantly hold two points in tension. In one sense, the materials of an assemblage have 'thing power', are actants, and find momentary independence from subjectivity (See Bennett 2010: 3). The decorated vehicle inclusive of priests and bulls is an independent agent. At the same time, and possibly the most important concept of assemblage, "an actant never acts alone" (Bennett 2010: 21). The vehicle both attends the festival and *makes* the festival for other human and nonhuman things to attend. The goddess assemblage really shines as a contingent tableau, a constellation, and a vivid entity and at the same time, in Bennett's words, remains, "irreducible to the contexts in which human subjects set [her]" (Bennett 2010: 5). Let's also consider Puar's powerful writing on assembled time (Puar 2007: xxx):

> ... something is happening to time, not in time, revamping an encounter with time. And so this book is an assemblage of temporalities and movements–speed, pace, duration–which is not strictly bound to developmentalist or historical telos or their

> disruption, and an assemblage of theoretical interests, meaning that there is not one or several main strands that thread through this book, but rather ideas that converge, diverge, and merge.

These temporalities expressed by Puar as duration, speed, and diversion describe the friction between time, heat, natural flowers, and notions of freshness that are disrupted by the intermingling of artificial flowers *as well as* the early and late arrivals of deities over the course of the day, their positions in the shade, the initial conditions of the ornaments before they left their temples, and so on. Taking a step beyond the contingencies of the floral decorations, it is noteworthy that while faded, falling loose from the jostling garlands, and being distributed from the vehicle by the priest to crowding devotees in the form of *prasad* (a sacred status reserved for organic flowers and not applied to inorganic lookalikes) these variously damaged or dispersed flowers and greens participate no less in the evolving assemblage of the festival after they break away from the goddess's ornaments. In fact, these take-away materialised blessings have the potential to stir up new assemblages of devotion as they are variously tucked into women's hair, presented to deities in shrines at home, or in some cases ingested.

Conclusion

Over the course of this article, I have presented a Hindu festival day using and thus testing the concept assemblage in partnership with the priorities of material religion, both of which are theoretical positions that elevate the potential agency of sacred stuff that is essential to and constitutive of religious experiences. Returning to Flueckiger's examples of marriage necklaces and stone figurines, she presents objects that create effects for Hindu devotees without the continuous presence of ritual specialists. In my study of the beach festival, I began with the ornamented goddess and attending priest riding in a cart together. Both Flueckiger and I take overtly religious materials as our starting points. As my analysis developed, however, I found the eclecticism of assemblage to be especially beneficial to how I wanted to build up the festival environment for readers because it allowed me to include electricity, string, the contingency of organic materials, sensorial effects, and other things that are not overtly or exclusively sacred materials, yet fit easily and well under the wide umbrella of an ad hoc grouping of diverse elements. Assemblage is a big tent and consequently raises questions about scope, a theme already present in the eclecticism argued for in Bennett's analysis and working environment. To vital materialist Bennett, a complex community resource such as the electrical grid for a major American city should not be cast as a single cohesive system. Rather it is better understood as "a volatile mix of coal, sweat, electromagnetic fields, computer programs, electron streams, profit motives, heat, lifestyles, nuclear fuel, plastic, fantasies of mastery, static, legislation, water, economic theory, wire, and wood–to name just some of the actants" (Bennett 2010: 25). Bennett gestures toward her own eclectic grouping of uneven actants when she incorporates the contributions of her eyeglasses, plastic keyboard, gut health, and to some extent a littered gutter in Baltimore into her vision of the electrical grid and into her publication product*ion* (Bennett 2010: 4, 23).

To the vital materialist ethnographer of religious festivals, the discursive boundaries of cleansing rituals and blessings from one local goddess are variously expressed by a throbbing confederation of jostling member-actants, reflected sunlight, smoke, loudspeakers, cut fruits, lines and lines of thread, outstretched hands, flowers, synthetic rhinestones, bronze *murti*s, plastic toys, rupees, paper litter, vehicles, the Bay of Bengal, arms of the state, and the verge of a global pandemic. From this perspective, I have redistributed agentive power to material actants and to the people who inhabit the festival, thus dissolving the 'us versus stuff' or the binary of spiritual devotees versus the material world. At times the characteristic eclecticism and unevenness of assemblages, however, run the risk of including anything or everything—

a conceptual death by diffusion. The porous boundaries of an assemblage are precisely the working context in which I as the author may call attention to the safety pins and automated onion vendors that inform my interpretation of the festival yet are not the central matter of my research. Handed the long leash of assemblage and the ensuing uncontainable pool of resources, the author's writing—my writing this, the notes I jotted down on the day, and even the plans that I made in advance of my temple observations—is a form of assembling itself. And, in order for the assemblage to be something rather than anything I find myself responsible for holding up the edges, like the corners of an apron, for the thing I want to write about. The author does control how the assemblage is framed in her writing, and this is perhaps why I initially proposed three 'ranges' for the assemblage: the ornamented goddess, the collective in the rolling cart, or the two or three city blocks along the beach that host the festivities. Each time I reset the possible boundaries of the assemblage by drawing in an impression of the market or noting silent actants such as the string, the animals, and myself, I signal to the reader that there are many possible edges to the assemblages that are up for grabs and up for consideration—and reconsideration. However, on the day of the festival, I was also subject to the unpredictable ebbs and flows of the material environment which narrowed my perception of the festival from anything goes to a still significantly varied understanding of the festival that was grounded by the limits and happenings of the day.

Assemblages are destabilising. These open wholes disrupt the exaggerated stability and the neat contain-ability of religious life. They are thick descriptions with loose edges and uneven topographies of power that include the hand and limits of the author. This article, written through the lens of assemblage about my meeting with the goddess at a beach festival is not a presentation of one person and one procession deity, but rather it is offered as one pulse among many that were created and emitted by the vibrant materials of the 2020 Masi Magam festival day.

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Book Review

The Extraordinary Life of M.P.T. Acharya

Ole Birk Laursen. (2023). *Anarchy or Chaos: M.P.T. Acharya and the Indian Struggle for Freedom*. New York: Oxford University Press. Pp. 352. Price: € 54.99. ISBN: 9780177752159. Hardcover.

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In June of 1945, the Berlin-based journalist A.C.N. Nambiar who was at the time running the Free India Centre set up by Indian nationalist leader Subhas Chandra Bose, was arrested by allied forces in the Austrian town of Bad Gastein along with several others. They were transported to a prison camp in Herford. While Nambiar deflected the question regarding his initials, his fellow prisoner had no such compunctions and instead confounded the registration officer with his full traditional name: Prativadi Bhayankara Thiru Venkatesayya Pantulu. Often used jokingly to indicate the tongue-twisting ineffability of south Indian appellations, the name in fact had great heft. The Medieval-period Vaishnava saint Annagacharya, composer of the popular devotional Sanskrit hymn *Venkatesha Suprabhatam*, the militant nationalist Venkatacharya, and the well-known singer, musician and poet P.B.S., all bore the lofty name Prativadi Bhayankara, which means formidable or awe-inspiring. Also holding this same honour was a one-time Berlin resident known to Nambiar, M.P.T. Acharya, who was an extraordinary Indian revolutionary, anti-colonial agitator, anarchist, and political theorist. This review discusses the same M.P.T. Acharya, the subject of a timely biography by the research scholar and writer Ole Birk Laursen.

The book *Anarchy or Chaos* explores Acharya's itinerant life as a revolutionary nationalist in Berlin who fled India in December 1908 in search of a safe haven, the company of like-minded associates, and stable employment. Travelling first to France, Acharya would very soon shift to the alleged 'hotbed of sedition'—the North London students hostel 'India House' founded by Shyamji Krishna Varma. At the time, the charismatic V.D. Savarkar had been directing the affairs of the revolutionary group stationed at the house in Highgate, which was not only closely monitored by British authorities but also infiltrated by its agents. It was here that Acharya would fraternize with several fellow Indians. The revolutionaries were greatly motivated by militant rhetoric and fiercely advocated violent acts against the British, which included carrying out political assassinations. The group included another charismatic figure, Virendranath Chattopadhaya or Chatto, with whom Acharya would be associated for a long time, as his itinerant political journey unfolded. Unlike other members of India House, Acharya had not travelled to London to study for the Bar or the civil services. Quite uniquely, he had enrolled at the London County Council School to study Lithography and Photo-Engraving, whilst working as a cook at India House. He also assisted Savarkar in the editing of the latter's revisionist work, *The Indian War of Independence of 1857*, which provided ideological fodder to the other residents of India House.

The militant group very rapidly dispersed following the assassination of Curzon-Wyllie, the aide-de-camp to the Secretary of State for India, carried out on 1st July 1909 by Madan Lal Dhingra. This was a landmark event in the revolutionary phase of Indian nationalism, given its wider implications. India House shut down very soon thereafter, with several members shifting their base to Paris. As Laursen reveals, Acharya and his comrade Sukh Sagar Dutt decided

quite incredibly to travel to Morocco with the intention of joining the Riffs or Riffians in their struggle against the Spanish, and to learn the techniques of guerrilla warfare from them. This proved to be both impractical and foolhardy. In October 1909, Acharya moved to Paris to join the Indian revolutionary group there, led by Madame Bhikaji Cama and S.R. Rana. This period of intense anti-colonial activities that included forging solidarities with fellow revolutionaries of other nationalities exiled in Paris and across Europe, would only intensify Acharya's involvement and fervour, despite his life that was at the time, beset with instability and financial insecurity. At this point, Acharya adopted a conceit, *nom-de-guerre*, putting his name down at a Brussels conference of Egyptian nationalists as 'Mr Bhayankaram'. War was brewing, and the political calculus for the itinerant group of exiled Indian revolutionaries began to alter.

With great detail and factual fidelity, Laursen painstakingly maps Acharya's increasingly complicated and often vexed attempts to forge anti-British alliances with the Young Turks in Constantinople, his flight to New York in June 1912, his subsequent involvement in the Ghadar Party, his return to Europe and move to Berlin, and his and Chatto's attempts to solicit the support of European socialists in Stockholm during the last phase of World War I. Thereafter, Laursen reveals a fascinating phase in Acharya's life—his involvement with the Moscow based Communist International (Comintern), and the setting up of the Indian Communist Party in Tashkent with M.N. Roy and other revolutionaries. Plagued by numerous conflicts amongst the many stakeholders, the intrigues and political manoeuvrings of this period remain a most interesting historical niche. In uncovering the goings-on of this phase, Laursen provides a critically important perspective in the role played by Acharya, to his detriment, due to his failure to gain the support of the Comintern establishment, his discomfort with Bolshevik totalitarianism, and his gravitation towards anarchism.

Laursen importantly points out that the lives of exiled anticolonial activists were greatly tumultuous, plagued by uncertainties and upheavals. Indeed, the anticolonialism of the exiled activist was also shaped by the vicissitudes of affective considerations that were not exclusively the result of political exigencies and ideological compulsions. As he writes (p. 49):

> Marked by uncertainty, frustration, and poverty, the constant movement was both in response to intelligence surveillance, geopolitical rivalries, and imperial ambitions of European powers but also the ultimate expression of anticolonial praxis—that is, forging anticolonial alliances with other nationalists in exile, producing nationalist literature and propaganda, and an allegiance to militancy and armed struggle.

Acharya was under no illusions about the life of a revolutionary and its chimerical, idealistic outcome. Thoughts of 'what it will be all worth' did not however diminish his commitment to grappling with intellectual ideas of freedom. The peripatetic and newlywed Acharya would shift to Weimar Germany during the 1920s, as he progressively began to embrace anarchism and sought to introduce Indian radicals to it. His intellectual engagements during this period would further mould him, as elements of anti-militarism, pacifism, and Gandhism began to influence his thinking. There was a vibrant, if fractious, community of Indian anticolonial exiles in Berlin at this point and the book unpacks the complex contestations and intrigues that animated the anticolonial space of Weimar Germany's Berlin. Following the establishment of Nazi rule in 1933, Acharya escaped Germany and returned to India with his artist wife Magda Nachman. Over time, Acharya would fade away into obscurity.

In recent times, there has been quite some scholarship on Indian anticolonialism from the turn of the century and over the interwar years. Extensive declassification of records, especially secret intelligence records have substantially aided these efforts. As Laursen also indicates,

recent scholarship in this broad area has been shaped by the intellectual frames of transnationalism, theories of entanglement, and an increasing attention to 'affective archives', which have brought fresh perspectives to global histories and to the study of individuals, mobilities, and movements alike. This has untethered the critical study of anticolonialism from the fetters of nationalist discourse by examining the global connectivity of ideas and praxis. Activists such as Acharya, who were living abroad and sought to liberate India from afar, were drawing from a multiplicity of political and personal influences. This matrix of global interconnectivity found its way back to India through letters, pamphlets, newspaper articles, and also by returning activists and their proxies through the underground networks of anticolonialism. From key figures like Chatto and M.N. Roy who dominated the Indian anticolonial space of exiles in Europe and numerous others such as Madame Cama, Shyamji Krishnavarma, V.D. Savarkar, A.C.N. Nambiar, Suhasini Chattopadhyaya, and Agnes Smedley amongst others; to critical organisational efforts including the India House, Ghadar Party, Indian Independence Committee, and League Against Imperialism to name but a few; the efforts of Indian exiles (and their patrons and collaborators) abroad to shape the destiny of India is a complex and rich area of study.

Laursen's work is a valuable addition to the study of Indian anticolonialism. He, very successfully, recovers Acharya's life, intellectualism, and legacy from the margins of history. The work is also a study of the British Intelligence surveillance networks in its detailing of colonial efforts to thwart anticolonialism abroad. Finally, it is the biography of an anarchist, indeed, of "India's most important anarchist theoretician and proponent" (p. 22). Laursen rightly claims that Acharya's writings, and his life, offer us with "new ways of thinking about emancipatory politics from below" (p. 246) in his articulation of an "entirely different understanding of freedom from all forms of oppression" (p. 6) given the putative revolutionary, communist, nationalist, and ultra-nationalist operative modes of the Indian anti-colonial struggle. Crafted with diligence and meticulous archival research, *Anarchy or Chaos* does a great service to the field of anticolonial studies by illuminating new pathways for future research, for fellow scholars. To the lay reader, it reveals the extraordinary story of a mostly forgotten Indian freedom fighter whose itinerant and tragic life is truly awe-inspiring in many ways.

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Book Review

Martin Christof-Füchsle, Razak Khan (eds.). (2024). *Nodes of Translation: Intellectual History between Modern India and Germany*. Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg. Pp. viii+350. Price: € 79.95. ISBN: 9783110787139. Hardcover.

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This volume is the result of an international conference in Göttingen that took place in July 2022 as part of a larger project on "Modern India in German Archives, 1706-1989." Since The conference, originally planned for autumn 2021, was still suffering from the turbulence created by the pandemic, some participants had to contribute online. The 13 articles published in this volume indicate and contribute to the blossoming interest in the study of translation and translation politics as part of intellectual histories developed in recent years in different fields of translation expertise. I am providing a summary of the articles contained the volume below:

Anandita Sharma goes into the first Hindi translation of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's famous drama "Faust" (part one) by Bholanath Sharma, whose recreation in a highly Sanskritized code of Hindi in late colonial India is on one side an outflow of an Indian nationalist interest in German intellectual history. However, on the other hand, this translation has also been inspired by a direct translation of the "Faust" into Urdu from 1931. As with many other Pandits of his time, the translator was a traditional Brahmin and cultural modernist at the same time, who saw German culture as an antipode to colonialist British cultural dominance in the India of his days. Beyond that, his translation was also meant as a contribution to the emergence of Hindi as the future official language of the Indian Union.

Faisal Chaudhry also goes back to the fascination for German intellectual history in the late colonial epoch and the 'intermediating ideas across languages, paradigms and disciplines' with a focus of Muhammad Iqbal and Zakir Hussain. This article contains an interesting cross-cultural dimension, namely that "German economic ideas have effectively been regarded as essential to the development of what has sometimes been called Indian economics" (p. 46). Not only Hussain, but even Iqbal had a deep interest in economics, as his monumental *Ilm-ul Iqtesad* (The Science of Economics, in Urdu) from as early as 1904 demonstrates.

Catalina Ioana Pavel covers the story of Hermann Gundert and the 'making of modern Malayalam'. Gundert's explorations into his host language, which he was exposed to as a missionary, deeply changed the linguistic setup of the very language he not only studied, but even devoted himself to. While this went together with a time of dramatic changes with the spread of literacy, printing presses, and publishing houses, much of his scholarship was also dedicated in the service of Christian mission. The creation of modern literary Malayalam was a product of intertwined layers of missionary and scholarly zeal, German orientalism, colonial modernity and socio-linguistic resilience on the side of colonial subjects.

Gajendran Ayyathurai focusses on "the German reliance on the brahminical framework to produce Christian texts and images" (p. 98) in early colonial South India. He states that "brahminical sciolism remains inadequately examined" (p. 104), which goes much beyond the particular German missionary and scholarly engagement with South India, particularly in his focus on Roberto de Nobili's "obsession with brahmins and importing brahminicial [sic]

sciolism into Roman Catholicism" (p. 107). The article basically sees the same bias at this place as in the Tranquebar mission, i.e. the Lutheran side. However, early "castefree vernacular Indian" (p. 121) converts develop a resilience towards caste society – a feature that needs further study.

Torsten Tschacher engages with two Hitler-biographies from 1936 in Tamil, one of them written by Hermann Beythan, lecturer of Tamil at the famous Department for Oriental Languages at Berlin University. Beythan stood "in a long tradition of German missionary engagement with Tamil language and literature" (p. 128), who tried to present "Hitler's life as exemplifying the teachings of the Tirukkural" (p. 129) as a clear strategy to influence Tamil public opinion. The second was composed by Vengalathur Swaminatha Sharma infused by an anticolonial spirit. For a modern reader it is difficult to understand how both authors managed to go over the programmatic racism explicit or implicit in any Nazi ideological product and present Nazism as a kind of "anti-imperialist movement" (p. 136).

Mangesh Kulkarni goes into Shankar Ramachandra Rajwade's "appropriation of F.W. Nietzsche" (p. 151) in Marathi. As a free spirit and without institutional support, Rajwade saw himself as a defender of Vedic Hinduism, and took a keen interest in Nietzsche as a kind of Brahmanic soulmate, particularly as a translator of Nietzsche's "Der Antichrist" (German 1895, Marathi 1931). The critique of Christianity "incorporates elements of anticolonial resistance, Vedic revivalism, and Hindu nationalism" (p. 152). Kulkarni calls Rajwade's ideological position as "Brahminical radicalism" (p. 167) after the famous characterization of Nietzsche's philosophy as "aristocratic radicalism" by Georg Brandes. Kulkarni compares this appropriation through translation with similar processes in the translation of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels into Indian language (p. 169).

This is the subject of the following article by Juned Shaikh, who studies Gangadhar Adhikari and S.A. Dange as a "process of domesticating Marxism" (p. 181). Dange saw historical materialism not as a destructive force for Hindu identity, but he "believed in the historicity of mythology and philology" (p. 190). For him, Aryan society was originally an ideal non-hierarchic society, with caste assuming a simply functional role. This romantic view on early Indian history led him to even dismiss the findings of pre-Aryan urban culture in Harappa and Mohenjo Daro in the 1920s. History would begin with textual evidence (a classical Hegelian position), and the inscriptions of the Indus valley civilization remained undeciphered and therefore meaningless.

Sai Bhatawadekar analyses the translations and the fascination for Bertolt Brecht's *Die Dreigroschenoper* in Marathi. It has often been stated that Brecht's epical theatre served the anti-imperialist and socially critical spirit of 20th century Indian intellectuals very well. At the same time, Bhatawadekar points out that certain features of Pu.La. Deshpande's translation (produced 1978) remind him of the musician in a traditional Indian *jugalbandi*, "who takes on the given musical challenge and recreates its sounds" (p. 203), in other words a creative adaptation of a given (musical) theme. Bhatawadekar refers particularly to the prologue of the play, which the translator expands "extensively to set the Mumbai milieu" (p. 204f).

Julia Hauser goes into the repercussions of Mahatma Gandhi's views in the early 1920s in Germany, expressed particularly in Zakir Husain and Alfred Ehrentreich's *Die Botschaft des Mahatma Gandhi*, a selection of 33 articles from the journal *Young India* (started 1919) published in 1924 into German, three years after the enthusiastic welcome for Rabindranath Tagore during his first visit to Germany. Ehrentreich reports in his memoirs how Husain introduced a spinning wheel into his household and used to follow Gandhi's advice to use spare time for hand spinning, which "must have reminded … of the German village life

members of the *völkische Bewegung*" (p. 226f). Naturally, Gandhi's perceived "persönliche Heiligkeit" (personal holiness, p. 229) stood more than his opinions in the centre of the Gandhi reception in post-war Germany, as Hauser's reading points out. Hauser goes into the details of the selection of articles that were chosen to be translated for German readership. The focus was on issues like female chastity, educational reform, and the criticism of industrial modernity. The book however was overshadowed by Romain Rolland's famous (and enthusiastic) Gandhi-biography, which came out the same year in the French original and in German translation.

Martin Kämpchen, probably the most prominent specialist on Rabindranath Tagore in German publishing, contributed an article on Tagore in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. This article has been published before in a volume on hundred years of global reception of the first non-Western Nobel prize winner for literature in 1913. Tagore was published in German mainly by the legendary Kurt Wolff in the publication house under his name. An astonishing number of 25 books by Tagore, including an 8-volume set of collected works, appeared in German from 1914 to 1925. A single first volume of direct translations from Bengali appeared only a couple of years later (Reclam Verlag ca. 1930). These direct translations resumed only in 1961 on the occasion of the Tagore centenary. The East German government publishers tried to appropriate Tagore as "internationalist and propagator of the brotherhood of man" (p. 249) and honoured him by an edition of selected works in four volumes. Gisela Leiste's translation of the novel *Gora* and the story *Nashta Nid* (Das zerstörte Nest) were later republished in West Germany. Kämpchen describes how Tagore-enthusiasm in the German speaking public of the 1920 and its focus on Tagore as "a mystic and wise man" (p. 261) prevented a more profound appreciation of the Bengali author even after World War II and even until today.

Lisa Mitchell goes into the interactions between the "Telugu and German worlds" (p. 267). A special role in these worlds is played by Wuppala Lakshmana Rao, particularly her translations of Heinrich Heine's poetry of the 1950s, and the contributions of his Swiss friend and later wife, Melly Zollinger, who translated from Telugu into German. Zollinger had joined the 1929 Lahore session of the Indian National Congress, had lived in Gandhi's Ashram, and had participated in the famous Salt Satyagraha of 1930. After World War II and India's independence, both turned towards communism and had their connections in East Germany as well as in the Soviet Union. Rao and Zollinger represent "forgotten histories" (p. 283), and this article is part of an approach to shed light onto one of these.

Martin Christof-Füchsle's contribution is on translations from modern Indian languages in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), i.e. East Germany. It demonstrates how the initial rejection of independent India as 'capitalist' turned into a more complex relationship after the death of Stalin (1953) with its implications on governmental cultural and translation politics from 1957 onwards. The number of translations from modern Indian literature from 1953 to 1990 was about 45 books, with 10-12 among them being direct translations from Indian languages. Christof-Füchsle explains the complicated process entailed in the idea of book publishing that changed to translation publishing in detail, that entailed procuring printing permits for these. He sees the process, mainly as a top down, state-induced process. The leading idea behind it was the idea of progressive versus reactionary writing, and the focus on social realism based on "all-pervasive ideological concerns" (p. 317).

The last article is, according to its title, is a broad historical overview, drawing a line "from legibility to mutual intelligibility" (p. 323) by Parnal Chirmuley. It goes back to the beginnings of German travel in South Asia, namely Balthasar Sprenger's travel to Goa 1502, resulting in the romantic interest in India and to the origins of Indology, and to Nazi interest in India. The article goes on to explore post-war Germany's cultural pragmatics in relation to independent India and the momentary opening of the German Book Office (GBO) in recent years. Chirmuley

also covers the rise of Hindutva as a modern political power in India and the controversial visit of the German ambassador in Delhi, Walter J. Lindner, to the headquarters of the Hindu-nationalist RSS headquarters in Nagpur in 2019. It remains a bit unclear how Chirmuley relates his critical view on this breach of taboo to the perceived historical line of argument in his article that explores the question of mutual intelligibility as is stated in the title.

This is not only one more publication on intellectual exchange between South Asia/ India and Germany. This wonderful collection of scholarly contributions on translation is part of a trend that explores the cultural transformation of Indian thought into German and vice versa, without repeating existing research on intellectual history topics that are already well known through a number of publications from Indian and Western scholars. *Nodes of Translation* contains many insights into the politics of translation, and provides readers with an understanding of the setup, of cultural interaction accompanied and initiated by individuals inspired to learn the languages and literatures of the other, and beyond that, the role these languages and literatures played in the history of cultural understanding. The many footnotes, and the reference lists in the volume that accompany the articles, makes this volume into a reference for any future study in the field of cultural interaction between Germany and India.

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Book Review

Sutapa Dutta and Shivangini Tandon (eds.). (2024). *Making the 'Woman': Discourses of Gender in 18th-19th Century India*. London and New York: Routledge. Pp. 240. Price: US$ 144.00. ISBN: 9781032609041. Hardcover.

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Edited by Sutapa Dutta and Shivangini Tandon, *Making the 'Woman'* brings together 12 essays that interrogate discourses around the conception of women and gender in 18th-19th century India. The book emerged from a conference organised by the India International Society for Eighteenth Century (IISECS) in collaboration with Jamia Millia Islamia in 2020 and is dedicated to the memory of the late Professor Vijaya Ramaswamy. Like Prof. Ramaswamy, whose article on women in Tamil Mahabharatas is part of this volume, the editors and other contributors are committed to providing us with a complex and textured view of the past. They unravel the historical processes that were fashioning and reshaping new representations of women and gender binaries in this period.

In the introduction, which begins with a succinct historiographical essay on feminist debates on sex and gender, the editors argue against conceiting the category of woman as one way of being. They are quite categorical in their assertion that there is no universal category of 'woman' and no common womanhood, but its multiple imaginations and articulations. Historically and theoretically, many have already countered an overreliance on biological determinism that defines what they see as the 'social category' of woman. While the central premise of modern feminist theory is an acknowledgement of the distinction between sex and gender, with gender referring to socio-cultural forms of identity, this latter category does not have a particular and fixed external essence. A woman is made so by social forces. Other scholars seek to move away and beyond the sex/ gender dualism by seeing sex itself as an effect of gender that is reified and reiterated through a performance of gender norms (Butler 1993: 2). More recent scholarship on the subject sees gender as being as real as 'natural' sex. Since the latter is not objectively 'real' and 'natural', sex categories also depend on social practices. The distinction between men and women is thus not primarily anatomical, but social and hierarchical (Haslanger 2005: 22). These distinctions are causally and materially constructed. Feminine and masculine personalities develop due to social conditioning and early childhood parenting practices which convey and reinforce feelings of essential difference (Chodorow 1978: 78). Is there a fixed woman-ness then, that all women, beyond their differences, share? Can it be separated from other facets of one's identity?

Many scholars recognise that there is no feature that can be considered definitive of woman-ness. Rather, they view woman-ness as culturally specific, defined in conjunction with racial, class, ethnic, and national identities, and the roles inhabited by different women (Spelman 1988: 134). Notions of womanhood are not universal either and assumptions about its universality can marginalise certain sections of women (qua women) if they are seen as experiencing woman-ness in a different way. Mari Mikkola argues that complex features and conditions that classify a woman as a woman are shared, prescribed, and legitimised by societies and ideologies, and this complex universal is not necessarily epistemically incompatible with individual women's diversities (Mikkola 2006: 85). Cultural and political processes in combination with social change carry, construct, and disseminate ideologies of

'model' womanhood and thereby reconstitute patriarchal conceptualisations of femininity and woman-ness. The editors of *Making the 'Woman'* declare that the making of the woman is a perpetual process, an unremitting part of many a historical project.

The editorial focus in this book is precisely on demonstrating this project: notions of womanhood that were created and circulated in 18th-19th century colonial India, a period when a particular brand of early modernity was taking shape within South Asia. Colonialism and the responses to it played a large role in reshaping the perceptions and formations of gender, body, sexuality, domesticity, and household. Indian society engaged with western ideas and the intended and unintended consequences of colonial rule by embracing and rejecting 'modernity'. In many ways this reflected the shifting imperialist characterisation of Indian society and civilisation, from celebrating it to deeming it backward and uncivilised, often basing this evaluation on the notion of the 'degraded' status of Indian women. Colonial and missionary attempts at 'reforming' Indian society were centred around orientalist and western bourgeois ideals seeking to 'rescue' Indian women from an immoral and oppressive patriarchal structure. Many scholars have pointed out the profoundly conservative nature of these reforms, which in many ways upheld gender systems that were already in place (Sarkar 2024: 21). While these changes and reforms, even if in a limited way, were hailed by some Indian reformists of the 19th century, they were staunchly resisted by others who began venerating a traditional model of 'Indian womanhood', who was virtuous and honoured. This trend was seen in the writings of many a Hindu ideologues as well as Muslim scholars, who used theological, scriptural arguments based on an idealised past that conferred women with high status in society. The editors rightfully point out that the debates of this period cannot be contained within the 'tradition' versus 'modernity' framework, as modernity in India was itself intrinsically linked with colonial and imperialist legacy. The idea of modernity was also used and indigenised by 'native' reformers and thinkers, one example of this being the separation and fashioning of the 'public' and 'private' domains by Indian nationalists seen as appropriate realms for men and women respectively. Partha Chatterjee sees this development as reflecting the desire of upper and middle-class men to retain some form of freedom and agency in the inner realm of religion and faith, encompassed by home and family. The woman, the high-caste and Hindu person thus represented the as yet, untouched, pristine and un-colonised inner domain (Chatterjee 1989: 627). This new assertion of an ideal Indian woman was, thus, part of a larger cultural critique of colonialism and burgeoning nationalist sensibilities where women's bodies became a site for expressing the supposed superiority of Indian culture and civilisation. Nationalist and reformist entanglements with colonially mediated modernity thus 'recast' women and gender forms in a new context. The nation in nationalist thought was imagined as an ideal Indian woman who was sacrificial and dutiful, and who was to be defended and glorified. Women were considered the icons of nation, Indian culture, and their communities. With this notion, patriarchies were thus being simultaneously recast in powerful ways. It is thus not amiss for the editors here to elaborate on the various ways in which these patriarchies were being questioned and subverted, reflected in some of the essays of the volume. Perhaps incongruously, the editors include a precis of some of more recent works on the pre-colonial (16th-17th centuries) that foreground the inadequacies of the 'public' and 'private' dichotomy used to study women and gender relations in the Mughal realm. This diversion is, however, intended to point to the epistemic presence of certain traditional histories of women, written from within a rigid, and simplistic conceptual framework. Perhaps the editors are pointing to how overt reliance on unexamined categories in such research often distort the histories and historical experiences of non-western societies.

The collection of essays encompassed in *Making the 'Woman'* is divided into 4 sections, and begins with two essays that interrogate the dichotomous models of public/ private, presenting their interrogation as a lens for historical analysis of gender relations and roles. The first essay

by Shazia Malik (*Interrogating the Colonial Categorisation of Female Dancers*) examines the changing colonial discourse about female performers (Hafiza) of Kashmir. While Hafizas in question were associated with certain distinct regional art forms and Sufi poetical traditions, they were categorised as 'nautch girls' and prostitutes in the writings of European travellers and colonial officials (p. 27). Descriptions of Hafizas, both textual and pictorial, within colonial sources focusses our attention on the nexus between gender, sexuality, race, and empire. It is a valuable addition to existing research on the sexual politics of colonisation, even though I feel that the author has oversimplified the precolonial and the pre Mughal past of female performers. The author, by alluding to how the stigmatisation and exploitation of Hafizas began under the Mughals, Sikhs, Dogras, and the British, neglects the complex realities of continued gender inequalities and labour exploitation in the region. The second chapter by Tara Sami Dutt seeks to redefine concepts of public/ private by focusing on female performers who entered the *parikhana* (an institution which was part of the larger *harem*) of the last Nawab of Awadh, Wajid Ali Shah (1847-56), to show how they used their skills and political acumen to rise to a status of power within the cosmopolitan but hierarchical Nawabi court and household. These women, as seen through the folios contained in the text, *Ishqnama*, were seen to move seamlessly between both public and private spaces by using multiple identities, especially as both the *zenana* (harem) and the *parikhana* were seen as state institutions. The performances of *pari*s (young female performer/ dancer) can then be seen as political acts contextualised within the politics of a kingdom that was beleaguered by the last vestiges of Nawabi rule under the growing shadow of colonial control. Though the author mentions the culturally essentialist construction of the rulers of Awadh within colonial sources, where they are seen as both barbaric and effeminate (p. 53) due to the influence and visibility of women in his court, it would have been helpful for interested readers if more details on the representations of these women within colonial discourse were included.

The next section, *Questioning the Normative*, consists of 4 essays that seek to question the various social constructs surrounding gender, caste, class, the self, and 'the other'. Riya Gupta in her chapter on the Mughal Mirza, studies conduct manuals of the 18th century, which defined ideal masculinities (and 'un-masculinities') for the Mughal service gentry and middling strata of officials at court. Based on an exposition of the discursive contrariness between men and women, these texts imagined, expressed and even mocked manliness through the deployment of certain concepts, seen in opposition to what was seen as feminine and hence, 'the other' (p. 66). It would have been beneficial if the author had situated these shifts within the larger changes that were taking place in the Mughal imperium, helping readers to see the development of these gendered subjectivities within specific and situated historical moments. Charu Gupta in her essay on Dalit women in 1857 provides readers with an illuminating account of the female icons of Dalit Hindi literature and popular memory by exploring gender politics from the perspective of caste. Since Dalit *viranganas* (women warriors) were valorised as symbols of resistance against the colonial, and upper caste Hindu order, they were projected as moral, virtuous, chaste, and courageous, 'like men'. Their representation thus reproduced and further codified the dominant patriarchal order and its gender norms within Dalit memory and history. This essay is crucial to the volume, challenging the official and mainstream documented histories of the revolt of 1857, while at the same time, widening its historiographical scope. In her article, *Gender and Tribal Identity in Western India*, Maya Unnithan-Kumar draws a contrast between the self-representation of the Girahya tribe of southern Rajasthan and their classification by others as 'inferior tribals'. The gender relations within the Girahya community is the central basis in their depiction within accounts of the non-Girahyas, legitimised by modern sociologists and anthropologists. In her essay on the changing depictions of the goddess Kali in the late 19th century in Bengali literature, Nilanjana Mukherjee presents readers with interesting dynamics of the shift from depictions of the goddess from fierce to dispossessed and besieged. A goddess of clear 'tribal' origins, her dark skin, scarred

face, and 'primitive' form was seen as a symbol of a nation in captivity, resonating with the racial and patriarchal imaginations of this period. While this section on subversive female iconography is compared to similar other subversive representations of the iconic feminine form in western history and tradition like in the case of Medusa, the Lady Liberty, or Britannia, this albeit fascinating read appears to be supervenient to the article's main argument.

The third section, on problematic 'others' contains three chapters highlighting the othering/ marginalisation of certain social groups like the Tawa'ifs (female public entertainers) and eunuchs in India. The first two chapters engage with the reimagination of the Tawa'ifs in Awadh and Delhi in 18th-19th centuries, with Tanya Burman exploring the material realities of female entertainers, whose modern representations often oscillates between colonial-nationalist condemnations of their immorality, or then, the glorification of their supposed autonomy and agency within the location of *kotha*s (loosely translated as brothels). Noble Srivastava examines the role of Tawa'ifs in Delhi's cultural landscape during a period of political instability. While criticising the gradual debasement of this 'dynamic institution' under colonial rule (p. 149), the author, in parts, appears to be perilously close to celebrating the pre-colonial and indigenous past of these women. This takes away from what is otherwise a panoptic view of the role played by women performers in the city. The third chapter by Lubna Irfan on *Eunuchs in Mughal India* or *khwajasara*s as they were called, explores the power eunuchs wielded within the Mughal household and court due to the nature of their gender identity that transcended the binaries of Mughal elite culture. On the other hand, their mobility also resulted in their demonisation in the accounts of European travellers.

The last section, titled Narratives of Femininity, explores different narratives of femaleness within the material and ideological dynamics of colonialism, and in the emergent reformist and nationalist ideas in 18th-19th century India. In one of the most significant essays in the volume, Vijaya Ramaswamy focuses on the women characters in the Tamil Mahabharatas which emerge from the interactions between local oral traditions and Sanskrit textual versions. These Mahabharatas contain protagonists that can be termed 'deviant females' as they often challenge and thwart the heroes of the more mainstream iteration. But, at the same time, these texts were hardly 'non-patriarchal', as they often reiterated the subordinate status of women, made complaisant within the narratives. Meenakshi Malhotra turns our attention to the liminal category of the girl child in 18th-19th century Bengal. Through a study of *agomani* songs (songs welcoming the goddess to the *Navratri* festival), sung during Durga Puja, Malhotra explores the contemporary conceptualisations of the collective female childhood, a category missing from print literature and culture. In the last chapter, Nizara Hazarika examines the literary discourses of women writers from 19th century Assam. In the writings about missionary women, and later, notions of domesticity among Assamese women, the author posits a discussion of how gender and self-identity were being constructed without challenging patriarchal structures and their prescribed norms. The main leitmotif of the book is further explored here: the impact of 'new modernity' on women and on gender formulations that were entangled with the socio-political and epistemological strands of colonialism, reformist, and nationalist ideologies, along with the material changes they harbingered.

In the last few decades, there have been several crucial books challenging stereotypes about Indian women, specially countering their alleged 'invisibility' in the histories of pre-colonial and colonial India (Sangari & Vaid 2003, Sarkar 2024). This volume is a welcome addition to the existing body of scholarship on the subject, refining our understanding of women's lives and roles in the 18th and the 19th centuries and the various constructions of womanhood and gender identities. The chapters of *Making the 'Woman'* explore the diverse implications of contemporary developments on the positioning of women and men in what was a period of immense transformation. While the tremendous impact of the western/ colonial hegemonic

structure is acknowledged, without denying agency to Indian subjects, the chapters undertake a robust discussion of marginalised gender categories as well. The editors admit that the book is not meant to be completely inclusive in its attempt to understand the 'making of woman'. At the same time, it successfully unravels many complex interfaces between colonialism, nation, culture and gender. Some aspects do however remain unscrutinised: for example it is surprising that women's healthcare and the larger politics of reproductive and mental health remains neglected despite it constituting such a crucial theme in the exploration of colonial modernity, especially with many diseases being characterised as exclusively female. The medical discourse was predicated after all on an essentialist notion of gender, racial, and cultural difference. The issue of women's role within the changing economic structure is also left largely untouched. However, these absences do not detract from the volume's main purpose and strength, with its many tightly argued and searching chapters, providing readers with scholarly intervention on the study of women, culture, and nation. This volume will be useful, not only for scholars, but for anyone wondering about how the larger developments of this period redrew patriarchal and gender forms and structures in India.

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Book Review

Amrita Datta. (2023). *Stories of the Indian Immigrant Communities in Germany: Why Move?* Chad: Palgrave Macmillan. Pp. xxi+106. Price: €39.99. ISBN: 9783031401466. Hardcover.

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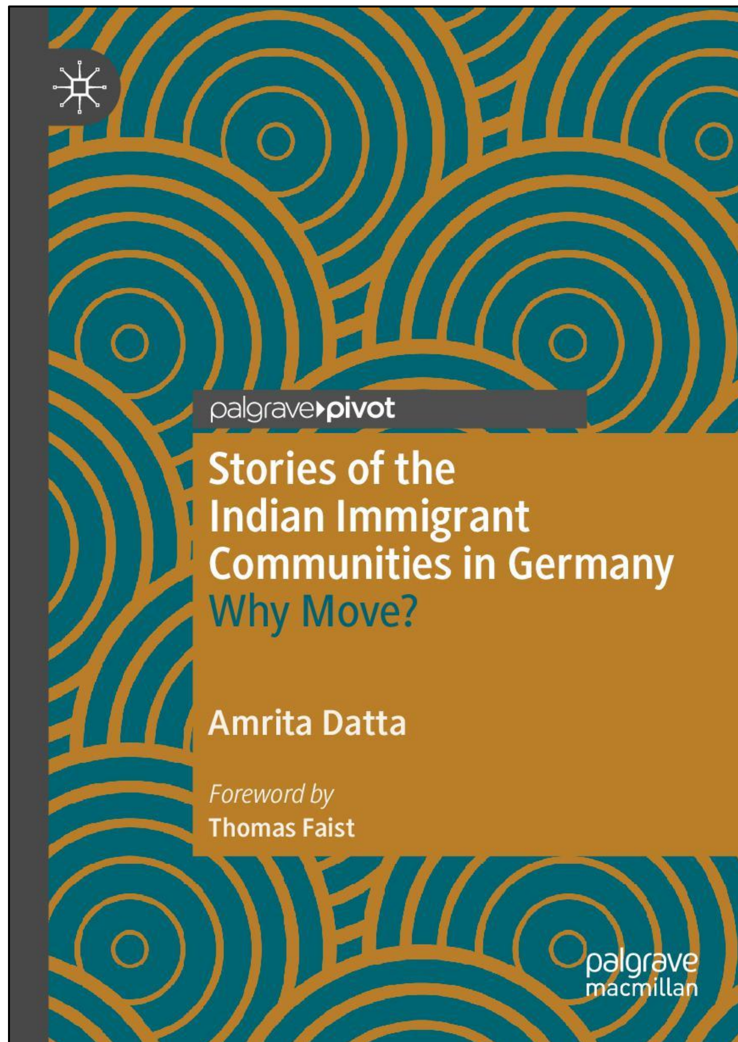

Image 9.1: Jacket cover. Image source: Amrita Datta

Why Move? is a revolutionary book in many ways, addressing an important, and a very topical debate: increasing white collar immigration to Germany. Using statistical data to undergird and guide her research questions, Amrita Datta's monograph is informed by qualitative data—semi-structured interviews with Indian immigrants in Germany.

Quoting Datta (p. ix), out of the total number of Indians in Germany, 57.6% are white collar immigrants, their numbers having increased from 42000 in 2010 to 159000 in 2020. The EU Blue Card has enabled Indian migrants to further consider Germany a place for long term opportunities, especially as the EU Blue Card allows their families to accompany migrants (spouse and children). Datta begins by outlining some motivating factors underlying Indian migration: unemployment and economic precarity in India, authoritarianism, and frustration with healthcare infrastructure that has gained salience during the pandemic, along with gender discrimination and religious violence. Increasing white collar migration from India is obviously also a matter of internal conflict in German society that suffers from structural racism. The figure of the elite, highly skilled Indian migrant certainly poses Germans with a self-definition issue that emphasises their dependence on the Global South. Exacerbated by the spectre of labour shortage and energy crisis in Europe that threatens Germany's economic stability, these challenges feel all the more daunting in a post-pandemic climate of wars. Having only experimented with guest workers before, Germany does not traditionally see itself as an immigration country for elite, white collar, educated dreamers, who plan to, along with families, settle long-term in Germany.

Why Move? contains nine chapters including the *Prologue*. The first chapter *Pandemic and Politics* explores the Indian immigrant frustration with poor healthcare infrastructure, economic precarity, and political instability in India after 2014. There was growing discomfort among Datta's interlocutors about the obfuscating nature of Hindutva coupled with the absence of free speech: concealing the real challenges of bad governance, employment generation, public education, and health care. Non-Hindus were more likely to emigrate than Hindus, though growing discomfort about governmental failure in India was common for all emigrees, irrespective of religious affiliation. Besides, public healthcare in Germany could also be navigated without fluency in German and this was a large motivating factor for migrants.

Chapter 2 titled *Refuge from the Bovine?* consists of a robust discussion of political instability. The popularity of Hindutva served to motivate Indians to seek political refuge in Germany, despite India ranking lowest in the list of countries from where Germany accepts refugees. Accepting refugees from India would require Germany to acknowledge the presence of political instability, which poses a significant challenge. Despite India being considered the world's biggest democracy, DeStatis recorded that 7410 Indians sought protection from the German government to escape political turbulence in India. In the absence of Germany recognising India's political instability, "the biggest challenge for Indians seeking refugee status in a third country is to demystify that India is a democracy" (p. 17). This challenge henceforth led to the employment of subterfuges that camouflaged Indian attempts to seek refuge that Datta describes as "shadow emigration", or other pathways of migration that sidestepped problematic contestations surrounding their exiting India, escaping political conflicts, and the suppression of free speech.

Chapter 3 (*Gendering the Immigrants*) highlights the case of gender freedom/ unfreedom as a motivating factor for Indians migrating to Germany, with women and non-male migrants constituting a significant proportion of emigrees. Women comprised 36% of the total number of Indian immigrants to Germany between 2016 and 2022 with 67% of them being independent migrants. Interviews Datta conducted with women migrants highlight crucial points about the extent of patriarchal violence in India. In contrast, free mobility in Germany comes as a relief "where the moral borders at home (emerge) as a crucial competitor of physical borders of the barbed wire that often provokes women and non-male actors to take a leap of faith for survival and better livelihood" (pp. 32-33). Datta further describes this liberation (p. 34) as: "some of the participants actually looked forward to the immigration process in the hope that migration would liberate them, while the others unknowingly discovered liberation in a post-immigration phase." The robust discussion on gender continues in Chapter 4 (*In Pursuit of Freedom: Queer Girl Moves to Berlin*) where Datta narrows down on a few qualitative instances of the freedom/ unfreedom experience. Datta clarifies her analysis about one of her interlocuters (Sukanya—name changed) in the following words (p. 40):

> …my submission is to look at Sukanya's experiences from the intersection of multiple discrimination at home and the host country leading to a situation where immigrants are compelled to prefer one set of discrimination to be less interfering, less dangerous and more negotiable in everyday lives. I call this a "discrimination bargain." Discrimination bargain compels the immigrants to operate in a framework of choice-based othering.

Choice-based systems of othering and discrimination bargain based on the 'autonomy-agency' structure of decision making is thus in Datta's words (p. 41), "a continuous process of balancing among multiple decisions across time and space." Datta is clear about how qualitative studies and findings are located in the tangible experiences of political unfreedom in the home country that lead to the soldering of feminist and creative solidarities abroad—something Datta calls

"intimate cohorts" (p. 44). It is these "intimate cohorts in the host country that dismiss and replace political unfreedom expressed in the home country" (ibid.). However, since intersectional discrimination is not absent in Germany either, especially within the usual formalised networks of solidarity, participation in these networks again join the familiar arc of what can be described as the discrimination bargain.

In Chapter 5 (*Immigrant Homemakers*), Datta discusses the barriers Indians encounter, while settling long term in Germany that can be located within the methodological frame of nationalism. To produce Germany as a "invented homeland" (p. 47), Indians must first navigate the obstacles of housing and culinary, religious and political practices. Analysed through an everyday frame of immigrant host-society interaction, especially in the light of an increasing number of migrants, the interaction between Germans and Indians have begun to spill over into other social fields apart from work spaces, that generate cultural conflicts. While Indian visibility in German public spaces was traditionally low with Indians practicing what Datta calls "forced self-exclusion" (p. 48), the EU Blue Card scheme has allowed families to migrate, resulting in Indians interacting more, and confronting deep-seated racial hostilities in the German public domain. This hostility is mostly expressed in the difficulty of finding housing (p. 51). Calling the experience of racism and the resultant trepidation that continues to pervade and haunt Indian migrant lives in Germany "social constants" (p. 53), Datta describes how the experience of precarity never really abates even after migrants are successful in making their permanent homes in Germany. Moving on to the challenge posed by culinary practices, Datta discusses how Indians have substantial cultural differences when it comes to matters of food, language, and dress. However, in Germany, due to the racialisation of Indians into one othered category, these everyday cultural practices of difference have come to acquire deeper and more dangerous political meanings that transforms food and culture into political practices. Enforced vegetarianism is an important example of this political practice and discourse that has North Indian Hindus and Hindu festivals impose hegemonic status in the representation of India. The diabolic transformation of the everyday located within a climate of racism results in rising uncertainty among Indian migrants, making their homing a never-ending process.

The discussion of 'homing uncertainty' continues in Chapter 6 (*Uncertain Mobilities: Pandemic, Time and Certitude*) wherein Datta explores the underlying reasons about why migrants continue to stay on in Germany despite the difficulties they face (something she calls "lifestyle migration" [p. 64]). In her reading of it, the trauma of the pandemic and its mismanagement in India has continued to dominate and motivate such decisions. Since Germany has an efficient and affordable public healthcare system that can be navigated in English, the health concern counterbalance anxieties about children forgetting their roots. This is a delicate balance that Datta describes in the following words: "Indian immigrants in Germany are negotiating through multiple levels of uncertainties and concomitant risks informing their decisions and indecisions" (p. 62). Since the pandemic has changed the way work is organised, the option of working from home has further resulted in even more uncertainly for migrants, producing them as disposable and perpetually vulnerable migrant populations, especially as many are unable to bring their aging parents to Germany. This makes migration an intensely anxious and emotional journey that Datta describes as the "gap-lapse framework" (p. 65): micromanaged across physical and temporal distance. Caregiving is increasingly managed by depending on technology: CCTV and virtual intimacy (p. 67), a situation in which taking calculated risks is no longer possible.

Using autoethnography in Chapter 7, Datta describes her own traumatic experience of the pandemic as a migrant caught between lockdown regimes (*Immigrants as Biocitizens*). Traveling to Germany with a Covid-negative certificate from India, she describes how she was nevertheless unable "to confirm my status, or more precisely the status of my body with regard

to inoculation rules of the Germany government" (p. 70). While Datta had been allowed to migrate to Germany with a Covaxin certificate, this certificate was not enough to allow her to remain mobile in Germany, as Covaxin was neither understood nor recognised by German doctors. An experience shared by many, Indian migrants thus fell into the gap between international migration and local systems of Germany, with a doctor, distressingly for Datta, and rather unfortunately, describing Covaxin as "a black box" (p. 73). Datta then describes her harrowing experience in the following words (p. 75): "Already fully vaccinated with Covaxin in India, structurally I was compelled to get inoculated all over again because in the eyes of the German government I was unvaccinated." The pandemic thus transformed immigrants into problematic biocitizens whose bodies had to mandatorily comply with the state's governmentality with a bare minimum of information available to them as they underwent the health risk of double immunisation. This was how the message was brought home: migrants became disposable bodies, made to feel responsible for their own health for being allowed to migrate.

Why Move? ends with a conclusion titled *Imagining Tomorrow* that summarises the book's findings—that immigrant experiences in Germany are constantly unstable, evolving, and at a formative stage. The challenge on the German side lies in retaining white collar, highly skilled professionals in Germany by offering them a stable future: simplifying German bureaucracy, addressing linguistic nationalism, and structural racism in Germany. Structural racism in Germany is a specific thing with specific historical moorings and can not to be generalised and confused with other racisms across the world more generally (including in India). She provides instances of how the Federal Statistical Office (DeStatis) has since 2020 begun recording migration backgrounds in their micro-census data (p. 84) that makes identifying and possibly targeting Indians and foreigners of colour more easily. When combined with other subtle and overt forms of structural racism in Germany, DeStasis's categorisation of "immigrants and their descendants" may well become a tool of renewed violence—especially if misused by the burgeoning far right—the so called Neo Nazi political groups in Germany.

Why Move? is a powerful book that forces us to introspect on the growing scope of migration studies—its evolving relevance to ever-changing, different, and new political locales—not just traditional neoliberal bastions like the UK, USA, Canada, Australia, China, and South East Asia—Malaysia and Singapore. *Why Move?* is also a book that leaves many of us—especially if we are Indian migrants in Germany—feeling helpless and frustrated. While Datta's qualitative interviews describe elite, liberal, and white collar migrant subjectivities that experience shock at their new subaltern status, both in their home country and abroad, this burgeoning spate of elite migration does indeed pose a challenge to German society. White collar Indian migrants *are* elite, and enjoy global networks; they are not to be easily dismissed off in the long run. Given Germany's internal crisis, and India's political and economic instability, this migration is not about to end too soon either. With traditional neoliberal English-speaking bastions reaching their alleged 'saturation point', Germany (and Europe) is the new destination of what is an evolving battleground that will witness the Indian elite struggle.

This Indian migration story has, perhaps, just begun!

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Book Review

Sadan Jha. (2023). *Social City: Urban Experience and Belonging in Surat*. Oxon: Routledge. Pp. 248. Price: GBP 31.99. ISBN: 9781032406459. Paperback

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Studies on Indian cities have proliferated in the last decade or so to such an extent that it can be legitimately claimed that Indian Urban Studies now constitutes its own unique field of study as part of the general field of Urban Studies. This claim is supported not only by the number of monographs and studies produced on the subject, but by the impact it has had on empirically driven theory-building enterprises within Urban Studies. Several books recognized in this field are pathbreaking, winning awards for its contributions. This exciting field of research can also be inserted into wider debates on cities and the unique urban experience of India that has successfully served to transform the conceptual and theoretical apparatus of Urban Studies, making it a more nuanced and rigorous field. If there is a lacuna at all in this brilliant scholarly range, then it is that most of this research endeavours overemphasize the three cities of Delhi, Mumbai, and Kolkata. While other cities are being studied too, especially in recent times, it is not incorrect to critically note the scholarly skew favouring the Big Three. It is in this context that Sadan Jha's *Social City* makes a substantial contribution to understanding a city that is unique in terms of temporal and spatial location. To this end, this review is also slightly different from the other usual book reviews. Instead of going into an extended description of the book's contents, this review discusses some parts of the book which are specially illuminating and generative for future reflection and research. I think this mode fitting as the book also starts with Jha's heartfelt reminiscences of coming to Surat to live and work there. The image of him, his family with luggage on a train teeming with people evokes an enduring image of migration and the charms and travails of any big aspirational and dynamic city full of dreamers. At the same time, the same image also evokes the experience of struggle, survival, and of belonging to a city.

Sadan Jha's *Social City,* not unlike the city it studies, is a book of many parts. As an academic work it has all aspects required to make a rigorous and complexly argued book. In fact, the intellectual traditions it marshals that situates its core conceptual framework is wide in scope and leads readers to interesting results. Its bibliography includes the usual Urban Studies foundational figures such as Walter Benjamin, Michel de Certeau, Henri Lefebvre, and Georg Simmel among others. However, it is the detailed exposition on "dwelling" as postulated by Martin Heidegger and its brilliant use in the monograph's chapter on Surat's marketplace, that is one of the remarkable highlights of the book. In between these expositions, Jha comes up with other aphoristic propositions as well such as "trust as a spatially located concept" (p. 191). The only quibble one can have in this regard is that these stirring phrases could have been further unpacked and explored for their potential multi-directionality. I am sure that future researchers in the field of urban studies will take these up for further study. As a reviewer I can only implore Jha to reflect more on these concepts in his own future works.

The book is dedicated to one of the pioneers of Indian Sociology late Professor I.P. Desai. Desai was the founder of Centre for Social Studies Surat, one of the most important institutions of Social Sciences in India. Sadan Jha uses Desai's formulation of the "Surat Way" of urbanization and social relations in the city as an initial analytical lens for his book. Important for Jha's study,

this gambit also opens up space to think more about research institutions and their modes of knowledge production, and of the way in which the city is understood. One of the lesser explored themes in Urban Studies concerns how knowledge institutions shape our understanding of places in which they are situated. Of course, while the Bombay School of Sociology or the Lucknow School of Sociology constituted independent epistemic and institutional hubs, their development mostly indicates the approaches these institutions took, and did not necessarily focus on their relationship with the city itself. Jha's book is one of the first major works that indicates this possibly: a profitable way of studying the connection between new approaches to institutional archives, and the location of these great research institutions within the same city.

Jha's book is a major contribution to our understanding of how caste operates in cities. As he rightly points out, while caste has been extensively studied in the context of villages these findings may not be true for cities. He thus makes caste the central analytical focus of his study. Chapter 3, *Dalit Desires and the City* is especially moving in this regard. His interaction with Rita especially brings out, not only a complex intersectionality of gender and caste, but how this intersectionality is at the core of the city's spatial formation. Both through archival research and testimonies from dwellers of Surat the book is a painstaking cartography of how intracity movement occurs, informed by business and caste which are entangled in a complex web of relationships. In fact, it requires a close reading of the book in order for us to appreciate the vicissitudes of business and caste groups associated with each other that lead to temporal and spatial transformation. Intracity movements as a result of caste-work transformation also changes caste spaces in the city, while changing workspaces. As Jha presents readers with a dynamic evolutionary geography of Surat in terms of caste, capital, commerce, and work, one also wonders if it is indeed possible to conceptualize these population movements as migration, and if one does, then how best to situate this mobility within the definitions of migration available in academic and governmental literature. This book offers a tantalizing invitation to explore this intellectual strand further.

Despite Jha's magnificent analytical framework on spatiality, intracity movements, aspiration, neighbourhood and place making, primarily through the production of subjectivities around caste, there are a few things that could have been developed in a more deliberate and expansive way. One of them is the relationship between caste and work. It would have been helpful to understand the trajectory of various caste groups while joining and leaving some forms of work that are included either as appendices or in boxes in the chapter. This would have helped readers to follow the maze of caste-work entanglement in Surat that led to its development as a city. Another question that kept reoccurring while reading of the intricacies of caste and work is, if there was inter-caste competition in work sectors, how did this affect work/ business? And how did this affect the development of the city? For sure, Jha draws a meticulous picture of how different castes entered and exited certain businesses, but a discussion on rivalries between caste groups would have been extremely interesting for understanding the intersections between caste, spatiality, and neighbourhood. Similarly, when Jha discusses 'otherness' in terms of everyday articulations and behavioural dimensions, I really wanted more information on ritualistic aspects associated with caste. While there is some mention in the book about worship and temples associated with certain caste groups, I think a detailed discussion on the production of caste subjectivities would have been enriching. This would have also brought the multi-cultural aspects of the city to the surface, especially given Jha's rich use of literary allusions. However, these observations are more in nature of wanting more than to identify any lacuna. This review ends by declaring *Social City* by Sadan Jha as an essential read for its scope, both in terms of empirical rigour as well as its theoretical contributions.

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Book Review

Shama Mitra Chenoy. (2023). *Delhi and Its Environs Before 1857: The Account of Ramji Das, Sarishtadar* (Trans. & Anno.). New Delhi: Primus Books. Pp. xviii+204. Price: ₹ 1295. ISBN: 9789358520217. Hardcover.

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Over decades, the Revolt of 1857 has been closely scrutinized and thoroughly examined from various angles by umpteen number of historians and history enthusiasts. In fact, the various perspectives shedding light on different facets of the 1857 uprising has only enriched the study of this period. With political authority shifting from the East India Company (EIC) to the British Crown in 1858, the Revolt of 1857 did indeed mark an important disjuncture in the history of modern India. While there are several diaries, travelogues and memoirs penned by the local population as well as by colonial officials and their family members, which chronicle the Revolt as it happened, records throwing light on the life of cities like, among others, Delhi and Lucknow, are not too many. Interestingly, the few works of this type belong primarily to the genre of historical fiction with Farhatullah Beg's *Delhi Ka Aakri Mushaira* (1845) being the most popular. The present book, Ramji Das's *Zikr-e-Umurat-e Am Zila-e Dehli* (henceforth the *Zikr*), translated by Shama Mitra Chenoy was originally written in Urdu in 1854. Authored barely three years before the Revolt of 1857, the text is unique—instead of studying Delhi and its vicinities through its people—it makes an attempt to delineate it through the religious and secular buildings and monuments of the city. Given that most of the structures described by Das were ruthlessly destroyed by the colonial state as retribution following the crushing of the Revolt, the *Zikr* assumes great importance as an archival source. Besides shedding important light on a bygone era, it provides important insights into the socio-cultural praxis associated with many of the Mughal as well non-Mughal structures of the 18th and mid-19th centuries.

Interest in the history of pre-colonial India was to an extent a by-product of the British colonial state's political interests. To govern its territories better, the East India Company (subsequently the British government) wanted its officials to collect all kinds of information pertaining to areas located in its territorial domain that included Delhi. The notion of power was deeply entrenched in this production of knowledge. The present text of Ramji Das should be specially read against this backdrop. Das, of course, was not the only one who wrote about Delhi. Between the 18th and the early 20th centuries, quite a few scholars of repute studied Delhi along with its various facets: examples such as Mirza Sangin Beg's *Sair-ul-Manazil* (1821), Saiyid Ahmed Khan's two volume *Asar-us-Sanadid* (1847 and 1854), and Bashiruddin Ahmad Khan's *Waqiat-e Dar-ul Hukumat-e Dehli* (1918-1919) are some works that focus almost entirely on Delhi, celebrating its spaces, structures, and people. Like his predecessors, Ramji Das, as Chenoy notes, focused primarily on the religious and non-religious structures located in and around Delhi, and he attempted to study the history of the region mainly through its monuments. To make his work more accessible, he moreover chose to write in Urdu, rather than Persian. And in this regard he followed in the footsteps of Sir Saiyid Ahmed Khan, who also wrote his *Asar-us-Sanadid* in Urdu. Ramji Das greatly admired Sir Saiyid Ahmed Khan and as a matter of fact even dedicated his work to the erudite scholar. Das, describing Khan in glorious terms, wrote (p. 51):

> In the city of Delhi in colonial India the first accomplished historian, Saiyid Ahmad Khan, who on account of his social and communal familiarity and convictions, made a historic creation and alongside this service not only has written the first

> history of Delhi *Asar-us-Sanadid* but has also made a wonderful beginning by writing the history of Delhi in Urdu language.

Shama Mitra Chenoy's work comprises of three parts. While the first part is the introduction, the second and third parts contain the translation of the text and the original text in Urdu. In a short but crisp introductory section, the author discusses the historical importance of Das's work at some length. Though the *Zikr*, much like its contemporaries, studied the structures of Delhi in detail, it was unique in that in addition to the more well-known areas of the region, it took into account "even the remote areas of Delhi that were completely rural" (p. xv). Through a comprehensive study of such areas, Das introduced his readers to 'several structures and cultures that were associated with these spaces about which there was no documentation except perhaps in revenue records (p. xv). The author stresses on the fact that this sort of thorough study of structures of Delhi is absent in almost the works written on Delhi between the 19th and 20th centuries and before.

Rather than merely collating the names of the more popular structures and narrating albeit briefly, the anecdotes associated with them—a model followed by Mirza Sangin Beg in *Sair-ul-Manazil*—Das's text makes an attempt to study the structures of Delhi in a historical context. Moreover, treating structures as palimpsests, the *Zikr* tries to study them in their present context. Das, thus, brings the structures alive. In this regard, his descriptions of *sarais*, *dargahs* and temples, to name a few, are quite revealing. At these places he encountered the modern habitations of *zamindars*, policemen, and the common people. In addition to this, he became familiarised with the religious ceremonies of religious institutions and the fiscal restrictions imposed on such places by the colonial government. Das also highlights the creation of new civic amenities and the repair work undertaken for older buildings at such religious and non-religious sites. Again, being a thinker, the author provides a long-term and coherent view of Delhi and its development. His work sheds important light on the urbanization process witnessed by colonial Delhi as well as the growth of urban centres of the region. Moreover, from his work it is clear that Das possessed intricate knowledge about the topographical contours of Delhi's geographical regions. It was, perhaps, due to this, as Chenoy notes, that he was able to appreciate "the placement of various dams and catchment areas" (p. xvi). In fact, he was the only writer in the 18th and the 20th centuries who understood the effects that rivers like the Sahibi river (Sabi river) had while enroute the Jamuna river in Delhi. In this regard, *Zikr-e-Umurat-e Am Zila-e Dehli* is, indeed, a treasure trove especially as far as the historical reconstruction of Delhi is concerned. Das, by providing a thorough glossary for those terms, especially in dialects, that appeared in revenue records provides excellent guidance to his readers through his work.

Ramji Das was associated with the British colonial government as a Deputy *Sarishtadar* or a record keeper and for his work, appeared regularly in the office of the Collectorate. It may be mentioned here that as far as locals were concerned, there was a glass ceiling in the bureaucratic order of the British Indian government with the post of a *sarishtadar* being the highest administrative position that an Indian could aspire to. Being a Deputy *Sarishtadar* allowed Das to observe Delhi, its architecture, its people as well as its socio-economic developments from close quarters. Apart from administering Delhi and collecting revenue from the people of the city, the Department of the Collectorate was also responsible for renovating old structures and constructing new ones. Given his association with this department, Das regularly visited many of the areas where such structures were located. In addition to this, being a resident of Delhi, he was quite familiar with Delhi's topography. It was perhaps, because of this familiarity that he realized the importance of structures located in areas beyond the boundaries of the city and made them a part of his discussions.

Chenoy notes in the introductory section that though Ramji Das was a “meticulous officer, a keen observer, exceptionally well versed with administrative details and modifications carried out by the British government in the city and possessed an enviable knowledge about Delhi” (p. 17), he was not adept at describing structures. However, the support that he received from his superior, Colonel George William Hamilton, the Chief of the Revenue Department in Delhi, encouraged Das to take up this project. Moreover, the presence of a text like *Asar-us-Sanadid* by Saiyid Ahmed Khan, also helped Ramji Das to write the *Zikr*. It is not surprising that, given the extent to which Khan’s work influenced Das, his years in the Revenue Department taught him to write with brevity. This tendency continued after he retired from the department and began writing the *Zikr*, which provides clear, brief, and crisp descriptions of structures.

Ramji Das followed Sir Saiyid Ahmed Khan framework with respect to sites and their descriptions. This becomes evident from his account of Mehrauli. Like Khan, Das delineates the continuing importance of the place in contemporary society. Again since he was posted in Mehrauli, he had an in-depth knowledge of the area and its environs. His account of frequent visits of the ‘Badshah of Delhi’ and his family in Mehrauli are quite fascinating, as he mentions sites like *Dargah* Qutb Mian and the *Hauz-e Shamsi* that functioned as important monsoon retreats for the royal entourage. Das also mentions the popularity of festivals like *Sair-e-Gul Farroshan*, annually organized in Mehrauli. While facets associated with this festival, like the *juloos* and the *chahariyan mela* were organized primarily in the ‘core’ area of Mehrauli, structures on Mehrauli’s outskirts were not part of the festivities. A case in point is the Jog Maya Temple. That structures like these were never part of the celebrations held in this area is attested to by other contemporary works such as *Asar-us Sanadid*. From Das’s work it becomes clear that after Shahjahanabad, it was Mehrauli that witnessed activities in the late Mughal and early colonial periods. In this respect, Mehrauli enjoyed a distinct status compared to other contemporary sites like Bawana and Palam.

Ramji Das’s *Zikr* is an important historical source providing readers with critical insights into other socio-economic, political, and religious developments that took place in Delhi between the 18th and the early 19th centuries. In addition to discussing extensive renovation works which were undertaken by the East India Company throughout the length and breadth of Delhi, Das also wrote about the migration of various communities into Delhi during the 18th and the early 19th centuries. In this sense, the *Zikr* is also a social history of Delhi. A reading of the text allows us to realize that the East India Company went out of its way to provide water to Delhi’s population, with a major portion of the text shedding light on the numerous canals, wells, and dams in the region that were constructed and renovated by the British administration. The work also alludes to how, in order to facilitate smooth movement and communication, the Delhi administration initiated several infrastructural projects. Das’s exceptional knowledge of the old and new administrative divisions of Delhi ranging from Akbar’s time in 1823 to the year when the British colonial government changed the existing administrative divisions, allowed him to discuss at length the contemporary spatial divisions and nomenclature of each of them. Further, it is quite evident from the *Zikr* that Ramji Das was influenced by the British colonial government. His in-depth discussions about the prevailing system of revenue collection in Delhi bears testimony to this, with the *Zikr* peppered with anecdotes. A majority of the anecdotes are related to one or the other structures, and significantly, while narrating anecdotes, Das does not restrict himself to the late Mughal and early colonial periods. As a matter of fact, there are several stories in the text that pertain to the pre Mughal period as well, especially the Tughlaq era. Anecdotes relating to construction works undertaken during the reign of Firuz Shah Tughlaq are in fact quite fascinating. Similarly, bits of information such as the transfer of the Siri fort by Muhammed Tughlaq to the successors of the Abbasi Caliph (following which Delhi was considered a *Qubba* or sanctuary of Islam), or the degeneration of the Tughlaqabad fort (a refuge of Gujjars or pastoralists, robbers, cotton carders, as well as

petty criminals), are quite unorthodox and distinct. These little known pieces of information are scattered throughout the *Zikr* making the text all the more engaging.

It must however be said that the *Zikr* has not come down to us in an unabridged form. There are several pages that are missing from the text leading to gaps in Das's ideas and writings. So while he begins the work by describing Inderpat and the beginnings of Delhi, and subsequently moves to writing about Qila Shahjahani, there is a big gap in the chronology. The developments in the centuries between the establishment of Inderpat (Indraprastha) and Qila Shahjahani (Shahjahanabad) are completely missing from the text. Significantly, even though, Chenoy notes, Ramji Das was well-versed with multiple almanacs including Hijri, *Bikramjit Sambat*, *Fasli* and Gregorian calendars, he, as evident from the text, confused calculations pertaining to the dates of construction of various structures and establishment of areas. To cite an instance, Qila-e Mu'alla or Red Fort was built in the 17th century by Mughal Emperor Shahjahan; however, according to Das its construction predated the Emperor. This calculation is obviously off the mark. Similarly, Das confuses the dates of construction of the Purana Qila and Qila Rai Pithora. Even though a treasure trove, Ramji Das's *Zikr* is not bereft of flaws. He lacked clarity about various places and their names, for instance, using names Firuzabad, Kotla Gadai (beggar's or mendicant's fort), and Kotla Firuz Shah interchangeably. Significantly, Kotla Gadai, according to extant sources had never been part of any other contemporary records. Similarly, many structures built by Alauddin Khalji had earlier been attributed to Jalaluddin Khalji and that too with incongruous dates. Surprisingly, despite some areas on the eastern side of Jamuna being part of Delhi's environs, Das does not write anything about them.

Shama Mitra Chenoy's *Delhi and Its Environs Before 1857* makes for an exciting and engaging read. Having previously translated Mirza Sangin Beg's *Sair-ul-Manazil*, Chenoy is able to highlight the salient features of Ramji Das's work and at the same time demonstrate, rather succinctly, the academic importance of the *Zikr* vis á vis *Asar-us Sanadid* and *Sair-ul-Manazil.* Of course, given the gaps and incongruity in the text, Das is in no way as thorough and precise as Mirza Sangin Beg and Sir Saiyid Ahmed Khan. Besides providing the translation of the text, along with the original Urdu version, Chenoy in an insightful introductory section, interestingly examines terms such as *Quwwat-ul Islam* and *qaum*. Terms like these were used in a completely different sense in Das's work, bereft of any religious connotations. It is only in the post-independence era that these terms have been misconstrued. Written in easy to understand language, Chenoy has tried her best to adhere as closely as possible to the original Urdu text. And indeed she has done a commendable job. Given the expansive view of Chenoy's book and the fascinating glimpse of a lost Delhi which it provides, *Delhi and Its Environs Before 1857* will be of interest to scholars and students of history and also to those unfamiliar with the historian's craft!