

# SACRALISING SOLDIER: DYNAMICS OF COLLECTIVE MEMORY IN SYNCRETIC SHRINES

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## ABSTRACT

The present paper investigates social and religious transitions inherent in the figure of a deceased foreign warrior who is metamorphosed into a syncretic saint in a conquered land through cultural mediations and collective amnesia. This shift from a martyred mercenary soldier to a miracle-working saint is facilitated through his transplantation into a syncretic mix of the invading and the recipient cultures' religio-cultural space. This process is not automatic but is embedded into the material needs, shared communal space, amnesia inherent in collective memory, and common patterns in the cosmology of both religious communities. Though the signs of a prior conflict are never totally erased, a systematic reorientation in the soldier's tale takes place in which the conflictual elements are de-emphasised, and his sudden, violent death becomes a vehicle of charisma, thus rechristening the fallen soldier as a saintly figure. The present study discusses the dynamics of this collective amnesia in both invading and recipient religious communities through a case study of some selected North Indian Islamic saints such as Meera Meharban, *pirs* of Ghadsidha, and Hajib Sakarbar. *Keywords:* Myth, syncretic shrines, folk religion, folk culture.

The boundary line between a warrior and a saint within popular culture is relatively thin and criss-crosses through a shared sacred landscape. Although, in urban, globalized cultures which have largely imbibed modern Western politico-religious ideas, they are often separated by a dichotomy between the sacred and the profane, the material and the transcendent; in cultures still enmeshed within their traditional mytho-religious spaces, warriors and saints converge together. It is pertinent to argue here that even in Western culture, this divergence reveals only synchronically due to an amalgamation of multiple factors, such as the rise of enlightenment, secularism, and Reformation within it, leading to the creation of a particular modern consciousness which revels in this schism. Against it, within India's contemporary syncretic culture, which is a palimpsest of multiple ethnic communities and religions, the warrior still sits quite comfortably with his saintly counterpart. The movement between these spheres keeps him religiously relevant and a figure of veneration through changing power dynamics of South Asian cultures.

It is to be noted that an alliance between the temporal and the spiritual authority within the ancient cultures of the world is not uncommon. The notion of

warrior saints in Europe originated primarily from martyred Roman soldiers of the early Church, such as Demetrius, George, Theodore, Sebastian, and Maurice. Later on, during the Crusades, the virtues of warrior-saints were exemplified by the clerics through the desirability of both temporal and spiritual arms<sup>1</sup>. Later on, this coalition became apparent in the collaboration of the Pope and the king through the Reformation. Within ancient Hindu culture, the kings often proclaimed themselves as protector of *dharmā*, thus assigning themselves the attributes of spiritual authority.<sup>2</sup> It is undeniable, however, that Brahmins, the priestly class, were often found in a clash with this usurpation of their self-proclaimed rights by the kings, and the ensuing conflicts between the *Kshatriyas* and Brahmins within the history of Hinduism are an integral part of this separation.<sup>3</sup> This alliance between the temporal and the spiritual authority is also critical to Sikhism, Jainism, and Buddhism, where the separation between these two is denied, and both spheres get associated with the figure of an ideal king.

The present paper focuses on processes and factors responsible for the transformation of a warrior belonging to a raiding army into a syncretic saint under the dynamics of encounters between two disparate cultures.<sup>4</sup> The cultural contexts selected for the present study are popular Hinduism and Islam, particularly its Sufi version. The field of study is limited to three syncretic shrines currently existing in two north Indian states of Haryana and Rajasthan. The inferences, however, have trans-regional applications, as similar shrines exist in different parts of India with a commonality of situation, purpose, and trajectory. Some such shrines existing in other parts of India are those of Gogaji in Rajasthan, Baba Chamliyal in Jammu, Sakhi Sarvar in Punjab, Ghazi Miyan in Uttar Pradesh, and Angar *pir* in Gujarat.<sup>5</sup> It is proposed that a shift in the identity of a warrior into a saint is part of a syncretic cultural context in which a reformulation in the collective memory of both cultures takes place. This paper takes its theoretical positioning from the stand taken by Aleida Assmann that the significance of collective memory lies not in how it is

<sup>1</sup> See MacGregor 2004, Good 2018, and Smith 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Most of the kings considered themselves representatives of gods on earth; thus, the tenets of *dharmā* were part of their existence. This amalgamation of spiritual and temporal can be best found in the figure of King Janak, the father of Sita, who was considered *rajyārishi*, a kingly saint. For a more detailed discussion, see Granoff 1984.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout scriptural history, Brahmins considered themselves superior to *kshatriyas* due to their spiritual authority, which they saw as superior to the temporal power of their rivals. A classic example of it can be found in the struggle between Visvamitra and Vashistha, in which Visvamitra's attempts to attain Brahminhood were severely resisted and belittled by Vashistha. These conflicts have been a subject of multiple interpretations in both creative and critical writings. Amish Tripathi's Ram Chandra series (2015-2022) is one of the most contemporary attempts to imaginatively reinterpret some of the finer issues in this clash.

<sup>4</sup> This transformation is in reverse to the process of a saint converting into a warrior which often happens under a composite of religious, political, and mercenary motives. David N. Lorenzen mentions Dasnami nagas, Dadu panthi nagas, Madari fakirs of the Sannyasi Rebellion, early Sikh Khalsa, Satnamis of the Narnaul region, Sikh Kukas and certain groups of Vaisnava bairagis as some representative warrior ascetics in India signalling this metamorphosis.

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed discussions of these syncretic saints, see Dhali 2014, Rajrah 2018, Oberoi 1987, Amin 2015, Abdi 2011.

constructed but in how it is used in a social context: “It is therefore no longer the constructedness of a collective memory as such but the use to which it is put that has become the basis for investigation, evaluation, and critique” (Assmann 2008: 69).

Some of the markers of the study are the religious and material needs for reformulating the sacred, the process of integrating the invading culture with the recipient one, and the dynamics of the collective memory of both communities in this realignment. For this paper, ‘invading’ culture represents the cultural, ethnic, and religious background of the warrior from which he enters into a ‘recipient’ culture. The words ‘invading’ and ‘recipient’ have been used here in the dynamic sense of their interchangeability, with an awareness that ‘invading’ and ‘recipient’ do not always connote agency and passiveness and that these roles can shift under varying historical and political situations.

## CASE STUDIES<sup>6</sup>

### Meera Meharban



Figure 1:  
Gate of the  
Shrine of Meera  
Meharban

Within the ruined fort of Prithwiraj in Hansi, an old city in Haryana at a distance of around 140 kilometers from Delhi, there is a small shrine of Hazrat Mir Niamat Ullah near the north side of the wall of the fort, which is now known by the name of Meera Meharban Sat Sahib Baba Sultan Saheb or in short form as Meera Meharban. Though many people visit the shrine during Bhadra (August/September), the shrine is not well-maintained. The qawwali programs and *bhandara* (community meals) are regularly organized by the *sewadar* (caretaker), a non-Muslim, and artists from different parts of Haryana give their presentations before the Baba Meera Meharban Sat Saheb. Within the shrine’s precincts lies a yogi

<sup>6</sup> The study is based on various field trips which the author undertook between 2020-2023 and interacted with the residents of Hansi, Ghadsida and Narhar.

shrine of Joga Das ji Maharaj. There is also the third shrine of Guru ji Swami Ramanand ji Maharaj close by, consisting of an ochre-clad statue and a separate enclosure with a stone floor, just near the complex of these shrines (Figures 1 and 2). A reference to Hazrat Mir Niamat Ullah is found in the *Haryana District Gazetteers: Hisar* (1987), which notes: “The Muslim conquest of Hansi is attested to by the mausoleum (at the northern end of the mound) of Shah Niamat Ullah who, although successfully led the attack in conquering the fort, was himself killed in the action” (Haryana 1987: 31).



Figure 2:  
Inner shrine  
of Meera  
Mehar-ban

The pilgrims going to Goga Medi, another syncretic shrine in Rajasthan representing a warrior turning into a Muslim saint,<sup>7</sup> first visit the shrine of Meera Meharban before proceeding further. Most worshippers visiting the shrine are Hindus, as Muslims left Hansi in large numbers during and after the 1947 partition. The sign board at the entrance of the shrine complex proclaims *Dargah Mandir Kila Hansi* (shrine-temple of fort Hansi), which does not seem incongruous to the devotees in its being both a mandir and a dargah. Two other lines on the inner gate of the shrine, in their invocation to the sacrality, make the interpenetration of multiple faiths more apparent:

*tumhi mere mālik,/ tumhi mere mīrā,/ tumhi mere sultan rām,/ tumhi ho ujirā.*

You are my owner,/ you are my Meera;/ You are my king Ram,/ you are my illumination. (Translation mine)

Further, another verse creates this amalgamation through images and divinities borrowed from diverse traditions of faith:

<sup>7</sup> Goga, Guga or Jahar Vir straddles syncretic space between folk Hinduism, Sufi Islam and Nath. Alexander Cunningham notes that “he was killed in battle with the Muhammadans in one of Mahmud’s invasions, and as everyone who dies a violent death is worshipped as a Bir, or demon, so Bachhal’s son was made into Gugga Bir, amongst the Hindus, which by a trifling change become Gugga Pir amongst the Muhammadans” (Cunnigham 1882: 84).

*mālik mīrā meharbān./ suniyo arj āwāj;/ panjā rākho śś par./ yam nahi hot tirās.*  
 Oh, Benevolent King Meera,/ listen to my petition;/ keep your hand on my head,/ (so that) death won't be calamitous. (Translation mine)

The words and imagery in these lines reveal an eclectic vision in which concepts and personages from Islamic and Hindu worlds are chosen and mixed, thus revealing the composite nature of the supplication. The co-existence of yogi and Islamic shrines indicates, in a concrete way, the co-mingling and sustenance of these traditions. The pillars close to the shrine have intricate designs with human figures entwined, cohering with the distant part of the fort within Hindu/Jain architecture, which Islamic conquerors may have used. There is a *swastika* symbol on the gate of the inner shrine of Meera Saheb, in whose four hands the signs of Om, Cross, Ek Onkar, and Crescent Moon are imprinted, thus creating the oneness of diverse religious traditions.

### **The pirs of Ghadsida**

Nearly ten kilometers from the fort of Hansi and scattered in nearby villages, there are many shrines of Turk soldiers who were killed during the attack on the fort by Muhammed Ghorī (1149-1206). One such small dilapidated shrine within the fields is known as *ganj-e-sahida* or Ghadsida (Figures 3 and 4). This shrine, reported to belong to a slain soldier of Mohammad Gori's army, has become a source of veneration for nearby villagers. The shrine remains abandoned most of the year and is cared for by non-Muslim villagers. Those desiring a boon for everyday misfortunes such as diseases, childlessness, etc., visit the shrine and pay obeisance to the saint.



Figure 3:  
*Dargah* of the  
 unknown soldier  
 at Ghadsida:  
 Inside view



Figure 4:  
Dilapidated  
*dargah* at Ghad-  
sida: Outside  
view

### **Hazrat Syed Ahmad Hajib Shakarbar**

The shrine of Hazrat Syed Ahmad Hajib Shakarbar is situated in Narhar town, near Chirawa, Rajasthan, around 180 kilometers from Delhi (Figure 5). The shrine belongs to Hajib Shakarbar, born in 1213 AD, the son of the famous Ismaili Nizari saint Shamsuddin Sabzwari. He got his name for causing a rain of sugar at the request of a devotee in Sabzwar. He accompanied *dawa* (preaching) missions with a large *lashkar* (army) and was assigned the *bagar* (semi-desert) area by his father for his preaching missions. He was killed in 1302 while offering his night prayers in his conflict with Raja Sripal of Nahar, the Jat king,<sup>8</sup> when the king's army attacked him in the night. Raja Sripal was later killed by the Muslim army that won the town and renamed it Narhar Sharif. A Hindu tradesman built the shrine in 1445, having been impressed by the rain of sugar around the saint's grave (Saraf 2018: 1). The tradesman later adopted Islam and became the first Imam of the newly built shrine.

The *dargah* of Hajib Shakarbar Shah is now attended by both Hindus and Muslims who seek relief from various ailments from the saint. There is no *sajda-nishin* (successor) of the shrine, not unlike those of Meera Meharban and Ghadsida, representing a discontinuity in its historical ownership and its stand-alone nature. At present, there are thirteen *Khadims* in the shrine, the title being hereditary and held by Muslim families living in Narhar, who attend the pilgrims, guide them

<sup>8</sup> The presence of Jats in the region is reported in Habibullah wherein the conflict of Jats with Qutb-ud-din-Aibak is mentioned: "In 1192 a Hindu chief whom Hasan Nizami calls Jatwan (evidently some chief of the Jat tribe who traditionally are said to have possessed the area) besieged the Muslim garrison at Hansi. Aibek at once rushed to its relief, raised the siege and pursued Jatwan upto Bagar. There the chief turned around, gave battle and was defeated and slain" (Habibullah 1976: 51). Qanungo more elaborately mentions this episode in his book *History of the Jats* (Qanungo 1925: 32).

through rituals, and make them aware of the spiritual power of the saint. They play the role of a facilitator and a bridge between the pilgrims of various faiths and the rites to be observed in the shrine. Before partition, there were 114 *Khadims*, most of whom migrated to Pakistan in 1947. After deducting a seven percent share from the revenue, which goes to the Wakf board, the rest of the collected amount gets divided into 44% share of *Khadims* and 56% share of the management committee. This percentage was decided by the High Court in 1958. The management committee is appointed by the Wakf board and, at present, has 40 members who take care of the management of the shrine, its development, and the stay of the pilgrims. The shrine is well-maintained, and it gets visitors other than on *urs* and Krishna Janmashtami suffering from various ailments, particularly those of the mind. The shrine has nearly 50 rooms where they stay till they are relieved of the symptoms. The *dargah* specializes in treating ailments of the spirit. The soil of the *dargah*, called *khak-e-sifah*, along with water, is considered efficacious in removing lunacy when rubbed over the body.<sup>9</sup>



Figure 5:  
Shrine of Hazrat Syed  
Ahmad Hajib Shakarbar  
at Narhar

The shrine is well known for its custom of celebrating Krishna Janmashtami together by both Hindu and Muslim communities. A large fair is organized on the occasion of Krishna Janmashtami in which devotees from Rajasthan, Gujarat, Haryana, Punjab, and Madhya Pradesh participate. A performance of *khayal* is organized along with a night vigil (*Ratjaga*) on this occasion. The rites such as the

<sup>9</sup> The account of the shrine is based on the testimony of Karim *chacha*, one of the *Khadims* of the shrine who, along with Mohammad Riyajuddin Kadri, Maulvi of the shrine, and Siraj Ali from the Management was interviewed by me on 12 July 2023.

sacrifice of hair of new-born children (*judla utarwana*), the sanctification of the first milk of a cow or buffalo, and tying clothes/threads to a tree symbolizing the fulfilment of wishes, are undertaken by the devotees here.

#### ANALYSIS

The trajectory of these saints from warriors of faith and conquerors situated firmly within the ethnic, regional, and religious contexts of Islam to syncretic saints belonging to both communities, with the majority of devotees from Hinduism, passes through the terrain of collective social memory and its transformation under varying socio-political conditions. As the continued popularity of these shrines and their shift from a locus in the invading culture to the host one passes through an understanding of how collective social memory is liable to transform itself; the study utilizes developments in social and collective memory studies within Western scholarship which traces its genesis in the works of Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Maurice Halbwach and Aby Warburg.<sup>10</sup> Studies in collective memory and its generational transmutation have been undertaken by historians such as Merrill Peterson (1962), Bernard Lewis (1975), and Thomas Connelly (1977). However, their focus has been on secular examples from the modern era. Halbwach's *Les Cadres Sociaux de la Mémoire* (1952) and *La Topographie Légendaire des Évangiles* (1971) more closely examine the processes of contemporary history through a social group's relation to memories and how perspectives on Christianity change with doctrinal and political shifts. Pierra Nora's distinction between memory and history in *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire* (1989) is based on history as being a partial, locational understanding of the past, while memory in its dynamic, lively impression of the events binds past and present in an organic way: "Memory is life.... It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past" (Nora 1989: 8).

What is relevant for the present case studies is understanding collective memory as a contested field due to its ability to reinterpret and reclassify historical events. Edward W. Said in *Invention, Memory, and Place* (2000) notices this aspect of memory when he asserts: "Collective memory is not an inert and passive thing, but a field of activity in which past events are selected, reconstructed, maintained, modified, and endowed with political meaning" (Said 2000: 185). Another crucial theoretical tool related to shaping the syncretic saints under study is how history is written, transmitted, and understood. The conception of historiography under current scholarship as a moving positionality on a scale of the subjective experiences of a narrator and the outside realm of monuments, artefacts, etc.,

<sup>10</sup> For a detailed history of the development of social and collective memory as a discipline, see Jeffrey K. Olick and Joyce Robbins (1998).



makes it difficult to distinguish ‘real’ from ‘imagined’ within religious traditions, as historical memories of the events are determined not by any historical ‘truth’ but by a consensus bestowed by their durability. Further, as the longevity of the popular memory of the syncretic saints under study reveals, it is not as much the truth/false dialectic on collective memories but their function and utility that makes them persist and move on in a socio-cultural space. Aleida Assmann refers to how the constructedness of collective memories loses its significance before their functional dimension: “Memory constructs that inform commemorative practices and traditions are therefore not necessarily false because they are constructed – of course they are!... As they are necessarily selective, the question is: By which norms and bias are they chosen? What is included and what is excluded from the constructions of collective memory? And what are the political consequences of such choices in the present and for future?” (Assmann 2008: 67).

The persistence of syncretic saints’ memories within India’s cultural landscape can further be related to what Yerushalmi comments concerning the Jews: “Collective memory... is drastically selective. Certain memories live on; the rest are winnowed out, repressed, or simply discarded by a process of natural selection which the historian, uninvited, disturbs and reverses” (Yerushalmi 1982: 95).

The selective and reordering attributes of collective memory, facilitated by the notion of ‘imagined traditions’ and the value of historiography in rendering factual knowledge, play a crucial role in transforming these warrior figures into saintly ones. Collective memory does not depend on the factuality of the events. Instead, the position of the event/person in the network of historical developments gives them durability and relevance, as noted by Halbwach in *La Topographie Légendaire des Évangiles* (1971): “If, as we believe, collective memory is essentially a reconstruction of the past, if it adapts the image of ancient facts to the beliefs and spiritual needs of the present, then a knowledge of the origin of these facts must be secondary, if not altogether useless, for the reality of the past is no longer in the past” (p. 7). That is why the significance of the fallen warrior and his transformation into a saint does not lie within the originating incident of the sacrifice; it lies in his relationship with his community, his use as a symbol of bravery, and later on as a saint. The selective transformative function of collective memory becomes visible in these saints under the observation that in their transmutation from warriors to saints, only specific attributes such as their piety and religiosity were transferred to the saintly figure while relegating their participation in wars and their hatred for the non-Muslims to the arena of amnesia. This view of collective social memory as a dynamic process in which old beliefs are reshaped and reconfigured makes one of the vantage points to understand the changing dynamics of the syncretic shrines at Hansi and Narhar.

One crucial factor that ensures the longevity of syncretic saints and places them firmly within society’s collective memory is the timely creation of a mausoleum on the graves of these fallen heroes.<sup>11</sup> Alin Coman *et al.* notice the role of commemorative

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<sup>11</sup> The relationship between memorials and collective memory has been studied, among others, by William Cohen (1989), Sarah Shields Driggs *et al.* (2001), Kathryn Allamong Jacob (1998), Sanford Levinson (1998), Kirk Savage (1997), and Barry Schwartz (1982).

monuments in shaping the collective social memory: “The memories are only available to members of a community because of interactions members of the community have with social artefacts.... social artifacts, such as memorials and commemorations, reshape these memories in a manner that leads to community-wide shared memories” (Coman 2009: 129). In all three cases of syncretic saints under study, a mausoleum/tomb was placed to commemorate their sacrifice by their companions. The construction of memorials for fallen soldiers helps create, preserve, and shape collective memories for future generations. Further, since, architecturally there is not much difference between the grave and dome of a fallen soldier and that of a saint, a shift from one identity to another was simply a transfer of feelings and emotions when the required remodelling took place.

Alongside the role of concretization of memory by the dome and the tomb, the longevity of any cultural memory of a hero depends on the intensity of the emotions the persona/event can evoke in society. The events that find an easy path into social and collective memories are often cataclysmic or repeated incidents. While manufactured and natural accidents are included in the former, the latter category contains the life-cycle events and seasonal cycles. Along with these two, another class of persons and their actions is also included within the storehouse of collective memories. These persons are often exemplars of heroic attributes in performing spectacular deeds. It can be seen that moral actions if they are to be part of collective memory, would have to be something drastic and out of the ordinary.<sup>12</sup> Thus, it is easy to see that social memory needs something appealing and extraordinary to be remembered.

It should be noted that within traditional Islam, the figure of the warrior is entwined with that of a saint; sainthood in scriptural Islam is both a condition and product of warriorhood. This identification can be seen even in the case of Sufi saints, who actively participated in wars and saw it as their religious duty.<sup>13</sup> Most of them accompanied the marching armies, blessed the warriors, and it was only after the dust of battle was settled that the work for peaceful negotiations within the community began, though here, too, the community was primarily identified with the Muslims. Sudhir Kakar, in *The Colours of Violence: Cultural Identities: Religion and Conflict* (1996), comments appropriately: “In the medieval period, even the Sufis, the Islamic mystics who were so often held up as examples of ‘composite culture’ the syncretic Muslims par excellence, had serious limits to their tolerance. In the question of faith, they were unequivocal about the superiority of Islam and the hellish fate in store for the Hindu infidels on judgment day”

<sup>12</sup> A reference can be made here to *Bhomiyas* and *Jhunjar* in Rajasthan, which are considered the spirits of fallen heroes who died defending their lands and cattle against raiders. These warriors are presented in popular memory as brave-hearts who continued fighting even after being beheaded. Vinay Kumar Srivastava mentions them as “hundreds of protector-spirits generically called bhomia-ji (in Bikaner and adjoining districts) or junjar-ji (in Jodhpur and Pali)” (1994: 612).

<sup>13</sup> T.N. Madan notices in this connection: “Anti-Hindu polemics were characteristic of Indian Sufism in the pre-Mughal period. Leaders of various Sufi orders were active in converting Hindus to Islam. Kashmir and Bengal, where mass conversions took place, were won over by Sufis no less than by kings” (Madan 1989: 132).

(p. 21). Only after their death did most of them acquire the status of syncretic saints, extending their influence to cover the recipient community. Thus, in a way, the saints of Meera Meharban, Ghadsida, and Shakarbar share their popularity with Sufi saints in that they attained their recognition in the recipient community after death, which brought about a significant change in their acceptance through a reorientation towards syncretism.

Thus, the transformation of a common soldier into a revered figure passes through a sudden and violent death, along with a display of bravery and often willing acceptance of death. Blackburn identifies three prerequisites for the deification of a hero in collective memory: “First, the death must be premature, an end that cuts short a person’s normal life span. Second, and more important, the death must be violent, an act of aggression, or a sudden blow from nature. Many deified heroes are killed in battle, some in less glorious conflicts; others (especially women) commit suicide. Lastly, the death that deifies is undeserved; the person killed is an innocent (if often fated) victim” (Blackburn 1985: 260).

The suddenness of the tragic event, coupled with the violence of the event, makes the warrior share some shade of the supernatural.<sup>14</sup> As the supernatural in its essentials involves incomprehensibility and unpredictability, the cessation of life, which is an unpredictable obstruction to the even flow of life, gives the death event an affinity to the supernatural. Further, though all deaths contain within them an element of shock and unbelief, what marks a warrior’s death as different from all such losses in everyday life is the calmness and acceptance of the death shown by the warrior. Thus, the calmness and acceptance, when combined with the suddenness of the event, give an aura to the warrior figure, which is not much different from those worn by saints. The persistence of the memories of the warriors and saints in human societies is linked with an innate desire in human beings to seek interventions in the supernatural. The memory of both the warrior and the saint relies on some powerful impulses in a community – to transgress death, either through a challenge or through supplication to it. Though the motif of the challenge is a critical path, its inability to provide an alternative and solace makes the saintly way a far better option and, thus, more sustainable.

Another factor, which exists in consonance with the sudden death and willing surrender to it, thus bringing it close to the supernatural, is that the heroes, both warrior types and saintly ones, will have more durability in collective memory if they are somehow connected with the aspirations and identity of the community. This bond may exist on religious, social, cultural, or political levels. W. Lloyd Warner, in *The Living and the Dead: A Study of the Symbolic Life of Americans* (1959), emphasizes that the attributes of a hero are part of the cultural repertoire of a particular community: “A hero always expresses fundamental and important themes of the culture in which he is found...The creation of heroic forms, their crystallization

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<sup>14</sup> Ann Grodzins Gold’s reference to “the lingering spirit of a Muslim butcher from Savar who was robbed and murdered in the vicinity” (Gold 1988: 165) residing alongside Hanuman and Shiva in *Fruitful Journeys: The Ways of Rajasthani Pilgrims* makes the connection between violence of death and supernatural quite apparent.

around actual persons, makes these themes and the beliefs and values they represent manifest in a human being” (p. 14). While evaluating the reasons for the selection of specific events for persistence in its cultural memory against many, Andras Keszei makes a comment which can be used to shed important light on the issue: “Generally, we can better recall unexpected, spectacular, shocking events, but only events which remain relevant endure as memories because they brought about significant changes in people’s lives and they have been used in the fashioning of a positive image of the community” (Keszei 2017: 812). It can be argued that for the rural clientele of syncretic saints in India, what mattered was their ability to intervene successfully in the lives of people through miracles, effecting a cure of diseases, bestowing of sons, and exorcising of malevolent spirits, rather than either their religious affiliations or spiritual and ethical transcendence. Aubrey O’Brien notices it about the Mohammedan saints of Punjab: “It is not essential that saints should be of known piety. They are approved because of their magical powers and not for their spiritual qualities” (O’Brien 1911: 510-11). It is also clear from this point that a saint, as being better equipped to intervene in the lives of ordinary people, stands a better chance to live in people’s collective memory. Hence, the transformation of a figure in collective memory from a soldier to a saint gives that figure greater longevity and stability.

Another strand that needs understanding due to its influence on the persistence of syncretic figures developing from a warrior is the critical role played by emotions of loss and sorrow in perpetuating these myths. The memories of loss and suffering, which play a part in constructing a nation and a community, are also related to the longevity of the collective memory of syncretic saints. Their tragic death provides a spur and a gist for their persistence in the social memory. The *dargahs* of slain soldiers/saints are needed to create a community of believers who receive encouragement from these sacrifices. “The grief, anger, and despair of individuals can be integrated over time into collectively shared assumptions about the indebtedness of the living to their heroic compatriots and ancestors” (Nelson 2003: 443). This investment of emotions of loss and grief into the longevity of collective memories is noted by András Keszei, who opines: “Memories accompanied by strong emotions are likely to remain more vivid than more general and less emotional memories. We cannot remember everything, recollection is guided by emotional relationships concerning past events. Emotional relevance creates the structure of communicative memory in the case of images and narratives” (Keszei 2017: 808). The charged nature of the narrative related to a fallen hero makes it possible for the event to be immortalized in the collective memory.

Additionally, the transformation of a warrior into a saint reveals the ability of the recipient community to transform uncomfortable truths into valuable tools. Often studied under the dynamics of colonialism, it can be argued that the power of mimesis operates in all those contexts which involve an asymmetrical relation of power. When the politically and militarily powerful Islam made inroads into territories where Hindu beliefs and practices prevailed, the native religions were constrained to adopt some religious terminology and transmute it as a defensive

reaction of survival and resistance. The process of the adoption of a warrior seen in terms of conquest, usurpation, and rule into a saint of piety, benevolence, and magnanimity for all was an assertion of the ‘power of the weak’ against a politically and militarily powerful invading culture. In this transference, the invading culture slowly loses its disruption of normative life and is gradually immersed within the arena of the miraculous. The warriors often shift to the sphere of the miraculous, becoming saints with the capacity to intervene in the supernatural arena. In this process, the ethnic identity is neglected, and the fallen warrior becomes akin to the indigenous deities forming the sub-strata of the native religion. In this movement, from a warrior serving the interests of a particular ethnic community to a saint with followers from different communities, the soldier’s original motivations are selectively forgotten and are layered over with spiritual ones. In most such cases, the ethnic background is preserved by the caretakers though the devotees have only a very nebulous idea of such affiliations.

In this understanding, a close resemblance between the syncretic saints and aboriginal deities can provide a much-needed hypothesis.<sup>15</sup> The syncretization of a warrior member of the invading community into the sacred space of the host community takes place through his slow detachment from his original religioscape by de-emphasizing his ethnic roots and his role as a warrior. This process is similar to how conflicts between indigenous/tribal heroes and Brahmanism were resolved. The structural similarities between an Islamic warrior turning into a syncretic saint and the adoption of tribal/folk deities into Brahmanism are noted by Diane M. Coccari in *The Bir Babas of Banaras and the Deified Dead* (1989): “The household worship of Muslim deities, their position in many villages as guardians, and the general activity at tomb sites are analogous to that of the non-Islamic deified dead. In the role of Bhut Nath (or Jinn Nath: *Lord of Ghosts*) in particular, the Pir/Shahid, Bir, and Brahm are equally the sources of healing, wish fulfillment, and exorcism” (p. 256). This convergence between the folk deities, “the demon devotees”, as discussed by Hildebeitel in *Criminal Gods and Demon Devotees: Essays on the Guardians of Popular Hinduism*, and Islamic Sufi saints as viewed by their Hindu devotees has been noted by Daniel Gold also (Gold 2005: 130). Daniel Gold refers to this exoticization of Muslim figures in Hindu minds in reference to Sufi saint Mir Badshah of Gwalior. He finds it responsible for the convergence between *pirs/dargahs* and their dominant connection with exorcism and witchcraft: “To Gwalior Hindus, Mir Badshah may thus suggest something of the dark forces that the rakshasa Other commands but which, subdued in a Hindu realm, are no longer particularly threatening. For many Indians, especially those from lower urban classes and rural areas, the idea of a somewhat shady – and for that reason, particularly powerful being is a familiar one. Such beings are worshipped in many parts of India at small local shrines of the sort in which Mir Badshah seems to have found its origins” (Gold 2005: 130).

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<sup>15</sup> For the issues of contestation and amalgamation involved in the conversion of Khatu Shyam alias Barbarika into a Hindu deity, see *Sacrificing Sons and Decapitated Heads: A Gift of Severed Head in the Myth of Barbarika* (Singh 2020).

The similarity between the ambience of Islamic *pirs/dargahs* and shrines belonging to indigenous deities, as noted by the scholar, reveals that both have undergone a similar transformation process. The conversion of *rakshasas* and *daityas* into the Brahminic deities/Aryan heroes took place through tracing their lineage to Brahminic sages and deities. This assimilation of them into the Brahminic fold assigned them a position, although a subordinate one, in the Brahminic pantheon.<sup>16</sup>

One of the issues related to the popularity of syncretic shrines is their very nature as part of alien culture and exotica. Despite being part of a syncretic milieu for a long time, the distinctiveness of Islamic culture, as revealed in dress, rites, and food habits, has maintained its separate identity as part of their cultural milieu. In the rituals related to them, the Islamic saints carry within them a notion of a different cosmology. Since on the level of popular religiosity, the religious affiliations are often not important, what determines the devotees' faith is the nearby presence of a deity and its ability to intervene and give solace in his affliction, the syncretic saints due to their alien nature as well as their easy availability provide the necessary religious prop.

Another way to look at these transformations is through the role of socio-political mutations affecting relations between the two communities. The collective memory undergoes significant transformations with time and changes in the socio-political dominance wherein the past experiences are remodelled and reshaped by the present generation according to its needs and compulsions. These needs and compulsions are further determined by the power equations between them, affecting the creation, transference, and significations of the events. W. Lloyd Warner, in *The Living and the Dead: A Study of the Symbolic Life of Americans* (1959), emphasizes that every generation reconfigures the experiences of the past and the extant human culture is born out of these symbolic representations: "Human culture is a symbolic organization of the remembered experiences of the dead past as newly felt and understood by the living members of the collectivity" (Warner 1959: 4).

It would be instructive to discuss briefly here the reconfiguration of power equations between Hindus and Muslims after the partition of India, its attendant riots, and resultant amnesia. This cataclysmic event significantly altered the socio-cultural balance between the communities, leading to the rise of right-wing nationalism in post-Independence India. While most of the Hindus reacted to the partition of India as a kind of betrayal to the indivisibility of mother India,<sup>17</sup> a large proportion of Muslims who chose to stay in India were affected by collective guilt and a need to reaffirm their loyalty through conscious display of the acts of patriotism. It further made a significant portion of Hindus accept the foreignness of

<sup>16</sup> Some examples of this transformation can be found in relation of Khatu Shyam/Barbarika with both Krishna and Bhim, and Pabuji and Devnarayan with Lakshman and Vishnu.

<sup>17</sup> Balraj Puri is quite explicit in this context that the partition of India was not seen by Hindus in political and nationalist terms but "as a vivisection of the limbs of Mother India, the latter perception caused a spiritual and emotional shock to the Hindu consciousness and hence the partition was seen as an unforgivable crime on the part of those who had demanded it" (Puri 1993: 2145).

Muslims and a need to reassert the purity of their traditions as distinct from the slow but definitive emergence of *Ganga-Jamuni tehzeeb*. At the same time, the ferocity of communal riots during partition became part of the collective memory of both the communities, which is constantly replayed by recurrent communal riots in different parts of India (see Pandey 2001, Didur 2006). The painful memories of partition and the role of communities and individuals in rapes, killings, and betrayal during this saga of barbarism are plagued by the same process of suppression, displacement, and amnesia, as is reflected in the memory reconstitution of the sacred shines under study.<sup>18</sup>

While emphasizing the process of conversion of a warrior into a syncretic saint through historical amnesia and transfiguration of elements through the encounter between an invading and recipient culture, one must be aware of a reverse process taking place under transformed socio-political conditions. Since the process of syncretization moves on the axis of power relations between two communities, there is always a possibility of anti-syncretization in which both the contending parties de-emphasize the elements they share and return to their earlier positions. Under anti-syncretic pull, the purity of tradition and scriptural view prevails compared to the folk and popular elements. The journey undertaken in the persona of the fallen hero towards a saintly figure becomes more stringent, and the warrior ethos and ethnic roots of the figure come to the forefront. This reverse process is determined by the rising trend towards fundamentalism in which such syncretic saints become the first casualty. While discussing the popularity of Mir Badshah, a Sufi saint in Gwalior, M.P., Daniel Gold notices that “renewed communalist sentiment may also heighten particular aspects of a Muslim saint’s image for Hindu devotees” (Gold 2005: 127). Under this re-evaluation of relations, both the invading and recipient communities re-emphasize the warrior attributes. Here, the syncretic elements that transformed a warrior into a saint are seen as contamination of an original, factual truth under which the communities existed in their original whole as antagonists to each other. The saintly attributes of the hero are seen as a false layer, and the invading community reclaims the warrior as an assertion of its masculinity and power.

## CONCLUSION

In all three cases of Meera Meharban, Ghadsida, and Shakarbar, the warriors originally belonged to the invading community, which was militarily more potent than the recipient community at the time of the encounter between the two. That is why the figure of the warrior was more critical to the invading community initially, which commemorated it within its communal memory. But simultaneously,

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<sup>18</sup> Gynendra Pandey acknowledges in his analysis of partition memories that these are histories of “assertion and suppression at one and the same time: the assertion of community identity and pride, of ingenuity and bravery and resistance, along with the suppression of what are deemed to be weaknesses in the history of the family, community, individual. There is a refusal to acknowledge the gratuitous acts of injury done to helpless and isolated people who happened to belong to the Other community” (Pandey 1997: 2041).

the warrior figure was ill-fitted within the recipient community's cultural repertoire. To be successfully integrated into its mytho-religious worldview, a transformation in the fallen hero was required. Further, the immortality of the fallen hero in the host community could only be possible through his integration into the sacred space. Since most of the Muslims within the hinterlands of India belonged to rural/lower castes before their conversion, the transmutation of the warrior into a saint conformed with the religio-cultural space of popular Hinduism. While for the recipient culture, due to the role of Sufi saints in the conversion of a large number of followers into the Islamic fold and the structural similarities between the Sufis and yogis/popular Hinduism,<sup>19</sup> the assimilation of the fallen warriors into its sacred fold was both easy and natural, for the members of invading culture, both due to acculturation into more prominent popular Hinduism and the loss of political power in the reorganized political-economic scenario, the attributes of the warrior slowly became less critical, and the saintly qualities accentuating his role and life before his death in the clash became more pronounced. To say it is not to deny the co-presence of saintly/warrior qualities in his persona, but only to emphasize the slippage of the persona from one set to another and the foregrounding of the requisite attributes in the cultural space as per social and religious needs of both the societies.

The transformation in the collective memory related to Hajib Shakarbar, Mira Saheb, and the unknown soldier in Ghadsida seems to have taken place through its modification by selective amnesia about the conflictual elements and the foregrounding of shared features. It reveals that a recipient culture notes the multiplicity of identities implicit within an incoming culture, and the political clashes often become less important with time. The adoption of the cosmology of the invading culture passes through selective remembering of those aspects, such as violent death and sacrifice, which appeal to the imagination of the recipient culture. These elements supersede the sectarian conflicts between religious systems, and the filtering acts in consonance with the spread of beliefs in supernatural elements from one cultural unit to another. This sharing in the power of the divine through the alleviation of suffering and problems of life reveals the ability of human communities to overcome their political, religious, and other mundane divergences. A movement from a warrior figure to a saintly person is part of an ability shared by cultures existing together in a geographical plane to adapt, adopt and survive. It is also a tribute to human communities to overcome singular political identities and relocate themselves onto a shared conception of the supernatural on the level of popular needs. As revealed in these shrines, the syncretic ethos represents a loosening of secular/political concerns towards a shared divinity. At the same time, there lies within them an uneasy figure of a

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<sup>19</sup> The spread of Islam in India was largely facilitated by a common base between popular Hinduism and Sufi version of Islam. In this process Nath Yogi *panth* can be seen as a liminal community, featuring salient attributes of both the religions. Some of the structural similarities between the two include *sagun* oriented worship, deities/saints as source of power and miracle for common people and their lower-class base. For more detail see, Singh 2023, Bouillier 2015, and Ernest 1996.



warrior, symbolizing a past of conflicts and seeds of such a future again whenever a monochromatic vision of the multiple identities becomes dominant.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> The author would like to acknowledge the support of ICSSR, New Delhi for the award of research programme grant, thus enabling this paper.

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