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Pilgrimage to the Abode of a Folk Deity

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Pilgrimage to the shrines of folk deities differ little from pilgrimages to the centres of the institutionalised Gods. However, the historical evolution of a folk cult and the specific socio-cultural context of the emergence and growth of folk deities provides a different dimension to their religious space. This paper examines pilgrimage to the shrine of the folk deity, Goga that attracts followers from across faiths including Hindus and Muslims. The aim of the paper is to explore the double edged religious process at Gogamedi. First, the growing efforts by Hindu Brahmanical traditions to subdue and unsettle divergent traditions of the cult by appropriating it and promoting a monolithic religious culture; second, resistance to these unwelcomed attempts by traditional followers.

For the purpose of studying the aforesaid religious processes, this paper is organised into three sections. The first section deals with the historical overview of Goga and the evolution of the religious space, Gogamedi. The second section looks into the spiritual world and customs followed by traditional pilgrims at Gogamedi, most of who belong to the marginalised sections and also upper caste pilgrims who have joined the ranks of the followers just recently. The last section scrutinises how Brahmanical traditions have interpolated non-Brahmanical and Islamic methods of worship associated with the deity in a subtle manner, and how this interpolation, over a period of time, has changed the popular perception of the deity, making him part of the Hindu pantheon of Gods. This section also analyses the response of traditional followers to the attempts of the aforesaid cultural appropriation. At a time when attempts are being made to project Hinduism as a monolithic religion, deities such as Goga are excellent examples of amalgamation and co-existence of different religions and traditions without any boundaries.

Key Words: folk deity, Goga, Gogamedi, cult, pilgrimage, Brahmanical traditions, Hindu, Muslim

Deification of Goga and Emergence of Gogamedi as a Pilgrimage Centre

Pilgrimage to sites associated with folk deities or 'lesser' gods and goddesses, many of whom were once human and later deified, is called *Jatra*, whereas a journey to places of institutionalised Hindu Gods is termed *Yatra* by Ann Gold (1994). She has rightly pointed out that pilgrimage to major Hindu gods are pursued for merit (*punya*), moral duty (*dharma*), removal of sins, and freedom from rebirth (*moksa*). Pilgrimages to folk deities, however, are conducted for fulfilling particular projects or vows. For example, journeys to folk deities in most cases are conducted to address a mundane or specified task, such as the curing of ailments, snakebites, scorpion bites, infertility, possession by spirits, and also for divine view (*darshan*). In Rajasthan, Goga is one such deity who is worshipped for curing ailments - snakebites in particular.

Goga, widely worshipped as a snake god, is also known as Jafarpir, Goga Pir or Jaharpir (Mor, undated). His cult is popular not only in Rajasthan but also in adjoining regions. He is believed to have been a Chauhan Rajput.^[1] James Tod in his *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* (written in the third decade of the 19th century) mentioned that the Chauhan Rajput identity of Goga had come to be treated as a well-established fact. Perhaps the first mention of Goga's Chauhan lineage occurs in a 17th century text, *Kyamkhan Rasau*, by Jan Kavi (1996) and then in Nainsi's (1657-1666) celebrated *Khyat* (Nainsi, 1993:58-79). The period of Goga roughly falls in the early part of the 11th century. As is evident from the

1. Chauhan, Chouhan, Chohan is an Indian caste and historically powerful group in Rajasthan. In the medieval period, some people associated with it ruled parts of Northern India. Descendants of Chauhan Rajput ruled princely states in Western and Northern India.

works of *Dashratha Sharma* (2002) and BD Chattopadhyaya (1994), the Chauhan caste rose to a position of dominance in northwestern Rajasthan during 10th-12th centuries. Manuscripts such as *Gogaji Ra Chhand* (AD 1789, No. 106, RORI, Bikaner), *Goga Pairi* (Jodhpur Records, Granthak 5) and *Goga Chauhan Ki Nisani* (Jodhpur Records, Granthak 4) say that the birth of Goga was the result of a wish granted to his mother, Bachhal, by guru Gorakhnath,^[2] the founder of Nathpanth. The period of Gorakhnath has been fixed by scholars sometime in the 11th century (Pemaram, 1977:32-34). Goga, if at all a historical figure, must have lived during the same period.

From a Chauhan Rajput chief to a warrior hero to a non-Brahmanical deity and then a God of the Hindu pantheon is a trajectory that Goga followed and this is delineated by popular traditions that are woven around him. *Gogaji Ra Raswala*, a work compiled by a bard named Vithu Meha in the 16th century, portrays Goga mainly as a saviour of cows or cattle wealth belonging to herdsmen. This narrative, perhaps the earliest account of Goga available to us, opens with the description of a conflict between Goga and his co-brothers (or cousins) over land and territory. It presents Goga as a rescuer of cows, and as sacrificing his life for the welfare of the community. Perhaps the original image of Goga was that of a defender of cattle wealth in a semi-pastoral society. Portrayals of Goga as a Chauhan Rajput hero riding a horse, fighting Turkish invaders, and as a Hindu warrior fighting against Muslim rulers of Delhi (a portrayal containing distinct communal overtones that are characteristic of many historical works from the times of Tod) seem to be later representations and superimpositions on the original version. Goga sacrificing his life in the interest of local herdsmen became the basis of his glorification and deification. The oral traditions associated with Goga contain two important features - his projection as a war hero, since he is shown to have died fighting Turkish invaders, and his close association with Guru Gorakhnath, the founder of a non-Brahmanical and heterodox Nathpanth sect.

If the traditions kept alive by the present community of devotees are analysed, Goga appears to have been closely associated with Nathpanth during his lifetime. It may be mentioned that the 10th-11th century and the 14th-15th century witnessed the growth of the powerful, non-Brahmanical Nathpanth movement in various parts of northern India (Chandra, 1966:110-31). Dashratha Sharma refers to a 13th century source that records the existence of Goga's *math* (centre of a sect) (Sharma, Varda, 1960:2-4). This was one of the several *maths* established by the Nathpanth sect across Rajasthan and Gujarat.

The association of Goga with Nathpanth helped in his deification. As mentioned earlier, one popular tradition informs us that Goga was born as a result of a wish granted by Guru Gorakhnath. While granting the wish to Bachhal, the queen of Dedreva, Guru Gorakhnath prophesied that Goga would be a powerful man (Charan, and Varda, 1954:91-97). In a Nathpanth version, Goga is shown as a follower of Guru Gorakhnath (Briggs, 1920: 24).

Subsequent traditions associated him with snakes and elevated him to the status of a snake god. Goga is believed to be the incarnation of a powerful snake, Padam *Naga* (snake), and is perceived to be able to command snakes. In popular perceptions the appearance of a snake inside a house or in its vicinity is indicative of the deity's displeasure with the residents of the house.

Besides his association with Nathpanth and snake worship, Goga is also considered a Muslim saint, Gogapir. The existence of a *mazar* (grave) in the shrine constructed at the burial place and enormous following among Muslims which Goga enjoys leaves no doubt that he was also venerated as a *pir* (saint).^[3] PW Powlett makes his observation in *Rajputana Gazetteer* (1874) that at Dadrewa, 'a fair in honour of a Musalman Chouhan Saint named Goga is held'. It is probable that Powlett had made this observation based on the popular view in which Goga was looked upon as a Muslim. It is suggested that Goga was born as a Hindu and later became a Muslim (Briggs, 1920: 151).

2. Gorakhnath is known as the founder of Nathpanth in northern India. Nathpanth, a non-Brahmanical sect, became popular during the early medieval period and challenged Brahmanical authority in the religious sphere by rejecting Brahmanical rituals and way of life. North Indian popular traditions do not assign any time and place to Gorakhnath. He is believed to have interacted with different historical personalities at different points of time. He is considered immortal, ever present and appears whenever his devotees face difficulties.

3. The *qabre* or simple grave is transformed into *mazar* once a dead person begins to be venerated as a saint. See AR Saiyed's *Saints and Dargahs in the Indian subcontinent: A Review*; and Christian W Troll's (eds) *Muslim Shrines in India: Their character, History and Significance*, pp. 242.

Figure 1 : Engraved Figure of Goga Astride a Horse with his Guards and Snakes Twined Around his Neck

Note : Carving is located in the shrine at Gogamedi. Maharaja of Bikaner, Ganga Singh had renovated the grave of Goga with marble and engraved the figure in the 1920s.

Source: Devasthan. rajasthan.gov.in

Gogamedi must have emerged as a pilgrimage centre over a period of time owing to the veneration of the *mazar* of Goga by his followers. Legends constructed about the miraculous powers of the *mazar* in curing snake bites, one of the major causes of death in western Rajasthan, drew a large number of people to it. Gradually, the congregation of people provided an opportunity for traders, merchants and commoners to sell their products, including cattle. This turned the yearly congregation in August-September into a large-scale fair. Though the shrine of Goga remains a pilgrimage centre throughout the year, this fair attracts lakhs of devotees, entertainers and cattle traders.

A Visit to Gogamedi

Gogamedi is a village located at Nohar Tehsil in the Hanumangarh district of western Rajasthan (Rajasthan district Gazetteer, 1972). A grand month-long fair is held here in the month of *Bhadrapada* (August-September) in the memory of Goga (Jan, 1996:10-11). The fair has great religious significance as Goga is believed to be buried here. Goga's grave in white marble with an engraved figure of him astride a horse with a snake around his neck is enclosed inside the shrine (see Figure 1).

The shrine is believed to be 950 years old (Devasthan. rajasthan.gov.in). The main shrine has many khejri and jaal trees around it. During a personal visit to the shrine, I observed that these are treated as special for it is believed that a branch broken from them would turn

into a snake.^[4] Such popular beliefs, which treat Goga as being synonymous with trees, suggests an important relationship between the cult of the deity and the ecosystem of the region.

In the 20th century, the temple of Goga was enlarged and renovated by the Maharaja of Bikaner, Ganga Singh (1887-1943), without altering the inner place of worship (Binford, 1976; Progress report of the ASI, 1910). The Maharaja renovated it in marble and attached an engraved slab of Goga astride a horse with snakes twined around his neck on one side of the grave. This helped initiating the worship of Goga by Brahmin priests during the month of the fair. The presence of the image, however, altered the meaning of the shrine; it no longer remained a purely Muslim *dargah*. In addition, the shrine has minarets and appears more as an Islamic work of architecture than a temple (see Figure 2).

There is an inscription in Persian at the main entrance that describes the Mahmud of Ghazni's regard for Goga. The priests of the shrine are from the Chayal Muslim community and during the fair a Brahmin priest joins them and the donation is divided among them (Sohanlal:38).

The area of the annual fair covers approximately 500 acres. Livestock, crops, handicrafts, soaps, food items, religious books, audio and video music cassettes are

4. In informal interaction several devotees narrated the myth.

Figure 2 : Shrine of Goga at Gogamedi.



Source - <http://www.exploremytrip.com/>

sold. Nearly half a kilometre from the main structure is the temple of Gorakhnath. It is considered mandatory for devotees to visit this temple before visiting the shrine of Goga. In the temple of Gorakhnath, besides Goga's, one can also see the idols of Hanuman, Shiva and Krishna. The worshippers belong to Hindu as well as Muslim communities, all coming from distant places in Rajasthan, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh. Hindus worship Goga as Gogaveer or Jhujharveer, Muslims pray to him as Jaharpir.

During one such fair, I witnessed hundreds of pilgrims waiting for many hours to have *darshan* of the *mazar* (mausoleum) of Goga and once they got a chance to enter the enclosure, people competed with each other to touch and clean the *mazar*. They encircled it, kissed and hugged the *mazar*, tried to establish an intimate relationship with the divinity and quench their spiritual thirst. Those who succeed in touching the *mazar* considered themselves lucky. A majority of them seemed to be from the lower caste groups such as Chamars, Mirasans, Kalbelia and Jats.^[5] They visited all points of *darshan*, in which, besides Goga, the temple of Gorakhnath holds a very special place. There were a huge number of Muslim devotees and their main object of veneration was the *mazar*. I observed that there was an absence of any ritual among these

5. Details were collected through personal interaction with individuals during the fair in September 1999.

devotees, only some of them offered coconut and sugar drops (*batasa*) or sweets. Besides paying obeisance to the *mazar* and other points of devotion, they spent quality time in being part of the audience of various cultural events such as the *swang* (singing legends related to Goga and also presenting them in theatre form) and snake dances. Performance and being part of the audience is a mark of their devotion to Goga.

Pilgrims who come for a divine view of the *mazar* or *samadhi* of Goga, venerate him at different occasions to prevent and protect themselves from snake bites. Many of them visit Gogamedi with the desire for a child. Childless women or their relatives offer coconut wrapped mostly in red cloth at Gorakhnath temple, as according to legends Goga's parents were childless for many years and Goga was born due to the blessings of Gorakhnath (Prithvirai, undated). The Gaduliyas (ironsmiths) are also followers of Goga and visit Gogamedi regularly. They wear a locket bearing the embossed image of one or more snakes and call it *sarparophool* (snake amulet) or Gogajirophool (Goga amulet). The Gaduliyas are a nomadic tribe who are always on the move and do not build any permanent structures (Ruhela, 1999). The threat of snakebites in makeshift arrangements is more than anywhere else. It is believed that a *tabeej* (a kind of amulet), if worn around the neck or arm, will protect them from snakebite. I also observed groups of members from the Sikh community at the shrine of Goga and the premises of Gorakhnath at Gogamedi.^[6] Harjot Oberoi (1994) observed that in the 19th century Goga was part of Punjab's religious culture.

The pilgrims from all of these communities take vows, and some who are granted their wishes, return to offer *prasad* (devotional offering consisting of food) to the deity as promised.

I also observed a huge number of Bhagats from the Jogi caste with multi-coloured flags topped with peacock feathers called *nishans* dancing to the beat of drums and gongs. Unlike common people who worship Goga for warding off snakes and evil spirits and perform simple rituals, the Bhagats and Jogis are full-time professional devotees and priests, instrumental in disseminating the myths, rituals and practices associated with the cultic worship of the folk deity.

6. Parmeshwaridevi, aged 80, informed me in December 2015 during a conversation at Rohtak that when she visited Gogamedi, members of the Sikh community were distributing *kada prasad* (*halwa*, a sweet) at Gorakhtila in Goga's name.

A Bhagat, initiated into the office of serving Goga, has to undertake a pilgrimage to a major shrine of Goga, particularly one in Goga's home territory in Rajasthan. There the aspirants must acquaint themselves with the rituals and practices associated with the worship of Goga. He has to also acquire and appropriate artefacts to perform the rituals. Prominent among them are a *chabuk*, (iron whip) used ceremonially to confer blessings of Goga (Lapoint, 1978). Bhagats and Jogis carry Goga's flag or standard called *chari* – a long bamboo pole to which worshippers affix brightly coloured pieces of cloth. Topped with peacock feathers, the *chari* is made by a Bhagat to carry during a ritual procession honouring Goga.

With the inclusion of higher castes among the followers of Goga, rituals have entered the traditions and a definite Rajput image has taken the place of the symbol of snake. Since the 19th century, Goga's function as a deity to safeguard devotees from snake bite and evil spirits has extended to other concerns with the inclusion of the upper castes in the ranks of his followers. He is now worshipped by many, like the established Gods of the Hindu pantheon, for the accomplishment of various spiritual and material desires. Devotees interviewed at the Gogamedi fair revealed various distresses being resolved due to the worship of Goga.^[7] In fact, many of the upper caste urban devotees were not aware of Goga's special powers in controlling snakes.

Ritualistic worship was also observed at the shrine. A Vaishya family, including two women and two children, who had brought a Brahmin priest with them, performed detailed ritualistic worship. The *puja* was organised by them in the open premises of a *dharamshala* (pilgrims' inn) adjacent to the main temple of Goga. The worship began with the burning of dry mango tree sticks in a *havan kund* (iron container for the ritualistic fire).^[8] A bowl full of *ghee* (clarified butter) was kept next to it and was used intermittently to keep the mango sticks burning. A dry coconut, a few mango leaves, fruits, sweetmeats and some coins were placed in a plate, which were used by the priest in the course of worship. Another plate full of *havan samagri* (a mixture used for making ritualistic

burnt offerings) was also placed near it. The worship began with the act of invoking Lord Ganesha, the first to be worshipped among the Hindu deities. The priest continued with the recitation of *mantras* (hymns) for nearly 45 minutes, which people around could not understand as they were in Sanskrit. The priest and the family members kept offering fruits, sweets, and the mixture to the fire after completion of one set of *mantras* or whenever the priest asked them. After completion of the worship, *prasad* was offered to Goga in the main temple by the head of the family. The remaining *prasad* was subsequently distributed among the people. However, the number of public performances of worships such as this, in the gathering of nearly 50,000-70,000 people, was not significant.

Another ritual that I observed was the *sandhya aarti* (devotional songs sung in the evening). The devotees were led by a Brahmin priest. Sanskrit *shloks* (verses) were recited by the priest followed by devotees standing in two rows. I could make out Vishnu was invoked and Goga was addressed as an incarnation of Vishnu (*Vishnu avtari jai jai*). The priest put vermilion and sprinkled sacred water of river Ganges on the engraved figure of Goga, his horse and two of his assistants and rotated lamps in front of the engraved figure. Devotees, led by the Brahmin priest, sang devotional songs invoking Vishnu, Brahma, Krishna and others.

Besides the congregation of devotees, a cattle fair has been an essential part of the fair. Cows, sheep and camels were important for the agriculture-driven population living in the arid and semi-arid regions of Bikaner, and in the uncultivated tracts they are practically the only source of income for pastoral tribes (Imperial Gazetteer, 1908:210). Presently, the fair is organised by the Animal Husbandry Department of the state (Gazetteer of Rajasthan, 1972).

The area is decorated with a large number of shops with religious reading material, photos, calendars and stuffed toys. The print material on sale includes *Goga Chalisa*, *Goga Puran* and *Bhajanmala*, similar to the religious texts associated with the Hindu Gods.

Hundreds of makeshift eateries arise during the fair to cater to the devotees. These eateries are arranged on caste lines and people from the lower castes are not allowed to eat in the eateries meant for the upper castes. However, those who come in large groups bring provisions and can be seen cooking for themselves. A narrow canal nearby serves as the source of water for the pilgrims.

7. These devotees belonged to Vaishya, Baniya and Brahmin communities who had come to seek Goga's blessing for financial betterment and job prospects. Some have been coming here for many years since Goga had fulfilled their earlier wishes.

8. According to rituals of the Brahmanical religion, burning mango tree sticks are considered pure and auspicious. Burning them, it is believed, cleans the atmosphere and gives a religious aura to the surroundings.

Brahmanical Interpolation of Non-Brahmanical and Islamic Methods of Worship

The traditions followed by pilgrims clearly show how multiple customs are conducted during the fair at Gogamedi. It is also discernible that Islamic traditions are being replaced by Brahmanical rituals. The image of a Rajput warrior has overtaken the *mazar*; in the Islamic tradition images are not venerated, whereas the alteration of the grave, because of the engraved image, has paved the way for increased Hindu worship since Maharaja Ganga Singh renovated the grave. The Brahmanical rituals have unsettled and modified the unorthodox or non-Brahmanical practices.

A majority of the pilgrims belong to the lower castes and the Muslim community. They worship Goga mainly as a serpent god at their dwellings without any definite image, generally as a symbol of a snake made with dough, or they will keep a lamp in a small carved out niche on their wall called *aala*. Since Goga has multiple images and traditions and there is no fixed body of scriptures or system of rituals, not even any sect around him, the devotees propitiate him according to their own needs. Goga, being the deity of the subalterns, has been deprived of any kind of patronage from the ruling gentry or the wealthy communities. Therefore, one does not come across big temples dedicated to him. Goga is usually housed in small shrines called *meri* or *devro* in the fields or bylanes (Kothari, 1982). However, the 19th and 20th centuries increasingly witnessed the association of Brahmanical rituals with the worship of Goga, who until then was associated exclusively with the lower castes. Making public offerings by the ruling and upper castes had become a common feature by the 19th century when Brahmin priests began to manage the shrines of Goga. By then, higher caste commoners had started worshipping Goga for their mundane needs, though the Gods of the Hindu pantheon remained their chief objects of worship. These changes indicated a process where deities of the lower castes that had remained outside the ambit of the dominant religious system were gradually being incorporated into it. The change in the attitude of Rajput rulers towards folk deities in the 18th century and the upper castes in the 19th century was due to an overall changing political scenario (Dhali, 2015: 783-789).

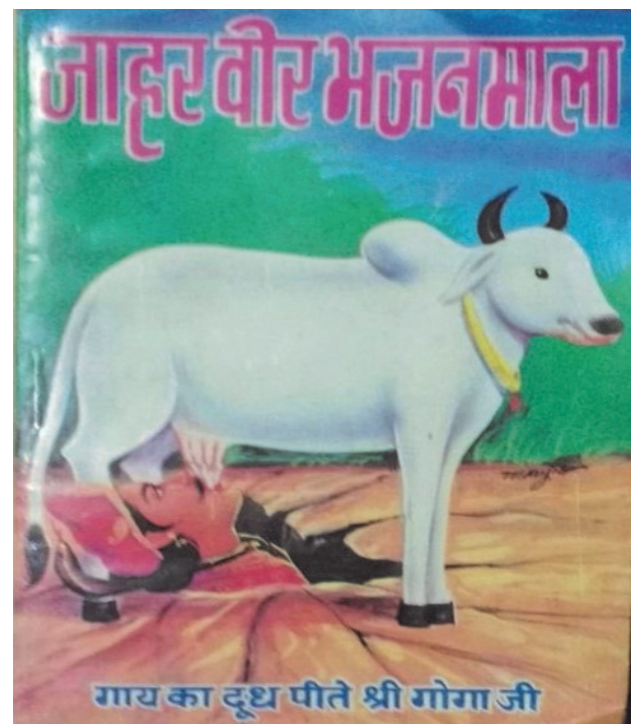
An attempt to appropriate the cult completely by the upper caste is clearly visible. With the inclusion of the upper castes as followers, Brahmanical patterns have

made inroads into the non-Brahmanical traditions of the Goga cult.

The rituals followed by the upper castes are transmitted through hagiographical material. At Gogamedi, the markets are flooded with booklets that have legends fashioned along the lines of the Brahmanical religious pattern, e.g. *Goga Chalisa* or *Goga Puran*, a religious narrative composed in the 20th century that attempts to project him as a Puranic God. *Goga Chalisa* which is written on the pattern of *Hanuman Chalisa* is widely in circulation in parts of western Rajasthan and southern Haryana. The representation of Goga in this popular literature (low-priced material published in the form of booklets and widely circulated and sold around places of worships and fairs) as one of the Brahminical Gods who took special care of the Brahmins and cows, is evident not only in the verses composed but also in the preface to these booklets and their introductions (Mahipal, undated). Posters and photos of Goga along with institutionalized Gods are framed together, making the Goga cult an integral part of institutionalized Hindu religion (see Figure 3).

Calendars, posters and videos play a very significant role in fixing an image in the devotees' mind and memory. Devotional songs - often composed on the tunes of Hindi film songs - are printed and widely

Figure 3 : Religious Text Relating to Goga.



Source: Shops at the fair.

Figure 4 : Framed Images of Guru Goraknath, Image of a Rajput Warrior and Goddess Kali .

Note : These three images are framed together: On the left is Guru Goraknath, resembling Lord Shiva. In the centre is Goga's typical image of a Rajput warrior on a horse, his wife and mother in the front, a guard behind him, and snake 'hood' on his neck. Goddess Kali is on his right.

Source: Shops at Gogamedi.

circulated. This ensures the easy remembrance and popularity of the songs. The role of shops and markets are equally crucial in the religious process where Goga is increasingly being absorbed into the Hindu religious system.

Undoubtedly, we must guard against the acceptance of a binary view of religious life as elite versus popular, Brahmanical versus lower caste, high spiritualism versus 'primitive' custom. The religious systems of the elite and the lower classes have never existed in isolation from each other or in 'pure' form. After all, what we characterise as Brahmanical religion has evolved as a consequence of the assimilation of many non-Brahmanical elements into the religious practises of the upper castes. Similarly, it may also be argued, without subscribing to the Sanskritisation theory, that many elements of the elite religion percolate down to the lowest levels of society and in the course of time become an integral part of the religious life of subjugated groups. There is, therefore, much interaction between the religion of the upper classes and that of the lower classes. But it should be emphasised that while the elites and the lower classes may share certain beliefs, deities, ceremonies and artefacts, their attitudes towards them will differ owing to the relations of dominance and power within society. This is amply clear in the case of Gogamedi, where lakhs of devotees from different social backgrounds congregate in the month-long fair to pay their obeisance to Goga.

To understand the legacy of unorthodox traditions and how they transgress religious boundaries, one needs to

take into account the pre-modern, social and religious perceptions that shape the lower caste communities' religious outlook and traditions. In pre-modern societies, religious identities among the majority of the population remained vague. Many lower castes, 'untouchables' and 'tribals' were never considered a part of Hindu society by the upper castes nor did they look upon themselves as Hindu. Worshipping Hindu Gods in temples and participation in rituals pertaining to Hindu religion for lower castes was a taboo. Citing various examples from 19th century Punjab, Harjot Oberoi mentions that thousands of Hindus regularly undertook pilgrimages to what were apparently Muslim shrines while vast numbers of Muslims conducted part of their life cycle rituals as if they were Hindus, and equally, Sikhs attended Muslim shrines and Hindu sacred centres (Oberoi, 1994:3-4). The traditional pilgrims of Goga are a version of a religious cult that evolved in the absence of a fixed religious identity and they followed ritual-free traditions. As mentioned earlier, sources indicate a close association between Goga and the non-Brahmanical sect Nathpanth. Interaction between the Sufi sects and the non-Brahmanical sects such as Nathpanth of western Rajasthan may have helped in bringing lower caste groups closer to Islam. The history of interaction and exchange of ideas between Sufis and Hindu *yogis* goes back to the 13th century (Oberoi, 1994:256). The cosmic world of the subaltern section was nurtured on such a medley of religious processes; consequently, they were detached from established religions and had no problems in embracing multiple traditions that were different from orthodox religious patterns.

The process of appropriation has impacted the devotee's belief system. It has opened Hinduism to lower caste groups whose chief deities until then were local and non-Brahmanical. In these changed circumstances, the lower caste groups saw a new opportunity to shed the stigma of being 'unclean' and move up the ladder of social hierarchy. They began to worship the Gods of the Hindu pantheon and some of them were raised to the status of chief deities. It was considered an imperative by many among the lower castes to be the part of the overarching Brahmanical religious world in order to gain religious equality. Many lower castes, who for centuries considered Goga as their chief deity, began to worship other Hindu Gods as well.^[9] The traditional specificities of Goga as a deity, however, limited the scope of the expansion of the cult among new groups. The introduction of new social groups as believers helped him rise to a higher level, where he began to be worshipped for both specific and general purposes. The higher status attained by the deity, in turn, attracted more followers, particularly from the upper castes.^[10]

Since pilgrimage to Gogamedi dates back to a time when Goga was the chief deity of the lower castes and Muslims, many early traditions continue till today despite the cultural appropriation by the Brahmanical religious system. The subaltern version of religion which has no boundaries due to its unique historical development continues along with the elite version, and the Muslim devotees still come in large numbers to venerate the *mazar* and consider the shrine as a *dargah*.

In spite of vigorous attempts by dominant castes to push it towards a monolithic entity, one also comes across a variant version of Goga's legends and his life story. Over the years his legends have been interspersed with Sanskrit epics, while retaining some original versions. His legends have generated varieties of cultural manifestations in the form of *swang* (musical performance of narratives) as performed by the Jat community, snake dances by Kalbelia, and others. The non-religious activities of the fair adds a

different dynamism to the cult and pilgrimage; the cattle fair held since the medieval period, for example, connects the pilgrimage with the peasants and pastoralists who domesticate camels, buffalo, and cows.

Conclusion

The cult of Goga is shared by multiple traditions, and the pilgrimage centre of Gogamedi works like a cauldron in the month-long fair where traditions assimilate and lakhs of devotees belonging to different strata of society assert their worldviews peacefully alongside one another. My research confirms the argument of Sontheimer (1995) that folk religion is indeed a realm of its own. Over thousands of years it has constantly interacted with other religious traditions but has nevertheless maintained its identity, despite the growing efforts by Hindu Brahmanical traditions to subdue it.

9. Many lower castes listed in the census of 1909 and 1911 stated that Ramdev was their chief deity, but later in the 20th century Ramdev no longer remained their chief deity, The *People of India* does not mention Ramdev as the chief deity of the Nai, Jogi or Raiger, who had listed Ramdev as their chief deity in the Census of 1911.

10. Maheshwari, a Brahmin from western Uttar Pradesh, who had visited the shrine of Goga on 5th September 1999, informed during a personal interaction that he believed Goga to be a *Kashtnivarak* (one who removes all pains and sufferings).

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