Perspectives on Pilgrimage to Folk Deities

Rajshree Dhali

SGTB Khalsa College, Delhi University, rdhali@hotmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijrtp

Part of the Tourism and Travel Commons

Recommended Citation

Available at: https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijrtp/vol8/iss1/5

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 License
Perspectives on Pilgrimage to Folk Deities

Rajshree Dhali
SGTB Khalsa College, University of Delhi, Delhi, India
rdhali@hotmail.com

The title ‘Perspectives on Pilgrimage to folk deities’ has been chosen to underline the pattern of the alternative religious spaces and their transformation over the centuries which is not yet explored much. The evolution and shaping of folk cults, associated religious processes, and their incorporation into high ritual Hinduism forms a very dynamic part of the cultural and the religious history of India.

My paper explores the pilgrimage to Ramdevra in the Jaisalmer district of Rajasthan, India, where the main shrine of the folk deity Ramdev is located. He is a popular folk deity of the erstwhile untouchable communities and is currently considered a Pan Hindu God in Rajasthan. The historical evolution of the religious pattern of the deity in question has been outside the margins of the institutionalised religion, Hinduism, for a very long time, and only from the nineteenth century on has there been some infusion of the high ritual-religious pattern in its non-Brahmanical origins. The paper traces the dynamism of intermixing of the Brahmanical and the non-Brahmanical traditions at the main shrine at Ramdevra at the time of a large congregation during August-September, commonly referred to as Mela (fair).

I make two main arguments in the paper: one, there is a growing influence and assimilation of Brahmanical rituals in the traditions of the Ramdev cult as well as an increased marginalisation of integral non-orthodox traditions associated with it at the pilgrimage site in the wake of the resurgence of Hindutva politics. I also argue that this sacred space contributes to a process of formation of solidarity in a subtle manner amongst the members of the Dalit community, the traditional followers of Ramdev.

Key Words: Brahmanical, Non-Brahmanical, ex-untouchables, appropriation and traditions.

Introduction

This paper does not suggest that a pilgrimage to the folk deities and the institutionalised gods are two completely different religious phenomena. Nor does the paper intend to compartmentalise the spiritual world of pilgrims; rather, it attempts to highlight the divergent trends and perceptions regarding pilgrimage since religion is interrelated with the social process, that in return is impacted heavily by the socio-political and economic conditions. Indian society is held to be highly stratified and hierarchical, which fosters division of its people into upper castes and lower castes, and it further associates the upper caste members with purity and the lower caste who were also the poor lot, with the notion of pollution. Several communities were reduced to inhuman conditions with all kinds of socio-economic rules and restrictions, thus making them untouchables. This categorisation was legitimised by religious sanctions and sustained through the centuries by sets of everyday regulations and restrictions for every caste that is laid down in the Dharma Shastras (collection of ancient Sanskrit texts which gives the code of conduct and moral principles for Hindus). The restrictions on the untouchables and the lower castes prohibited their entry into temples and access to any public place like a well, village square, rivers, roads, schools and any gatherings; they were even barred from hearing religious sermons like the Vedas.

In such deplorable conditions, the socially and culturally excluded and economically deprived populace who lacked any religious identity crafted their own spiritual world which is considered non-orthodox and non-Brahmanical and was heavily influenced by several radical and non-conformist heterodox religious sects like the Charvakas, the traditions of radical bhakti and the Sufi saints, and the Nathpanthis (Dhali 2016). Such religious domains have been called popular religion or folk religion and accused of having little tradition and also lesser gods. Hence, it is widely accepted and acknowledged that an alternative religion has been in existence. Therefore, it
wouldn’t be wrong to presume that the pilgrimage to a folk cult which had evolved historically outside the sphere of the institutionalised traditions, does inherit many of its traits, though effectively it can be different in many aspects (Dhali 2016).

In fact, Gold (1989) terms the journey to any of the innumerable shrines of the local gods and goddesses, who had been once human and whose powers were more prone to manipulation than to just reverence as Jatra, Yatra to her indicates a pilgrimage to a tirtha, or ‘crossing place,’ like the river Ganges at Hardwar or Gaya, the temple of Jagannath Puri near the ocean shore or Shri Badrinath at the Himalayan peak. (Gold 1989:136-7). Gold points towards the institutionalised Gods or the Brahmanical tradition while referring to Yatra as the places of bhagyan, vast and omnipresent, that are to be approached with selfless devotion.

**Pilgrims and Pilgrimages**

In recent years, there has been increasing scholarship in the field of pilgrimage, and most of the mega and the high-ritual sacred places have been explored. But there is hardly any work, barring some very valuable contributions, dealing with the understanding of alternative traditions and their sacred domain. Bharadwaj (1973:105-106) has rightly considered caste in India one of the most important and prevalent variables in the socio-religious phenomena while approaching the subject of pilgrimage in a very detailed manner. Bharadwaj presents a holistic panorama of the inter-relationship between religion and caste. He categorised pilgrimage into different levels of sacred places; i.e. pan Hindu, supra-regional, regional, sub-regional and local according to their importance in Hinduism, the ritual level, location and reverence. Hardwar and Badrinath were considered as Pan-Hindu and high level, which are exclusively visited for general purposes. The local-level sacred places (Bharadwaj 1973:159) seem to be intimately related to local needs, not only in the religious sphere, but also in the economic and social life. Bharadwaj deals with different purposes at different levels of the sacred places.

Bharadwaj explains that there is one category of pilgrim concerned with life-cycles, while the other has purposes that are problem-generated. In the first category of motives, the deity is the focus of the pilgrimage, which consists of earning religious merit. This may include a holy bath on a specific climactic occasion, the darshana (sight of the deity), and tonsure, visiting holy men, conducting ceremonies for the deceased and consigning the ashes of the deceased to the holy waters. The second type of purposes is closely related with the economic and corporeal conditions of the person making a pilgrimage. It gives an impression that there is nothing spiritual per se, the intention appears to be a personal and routine problem. It may consist of longing for male offspring, marriage, higher profits, better crops, favourable settlement of pending court proceedings or blessing for the solution of a crisis bothering the pilgrim. Bharadwaj (1973:150-51) notes that since the pilgrim depends on the supernatural power of the deity for the fulfilment of their mundane desires, so it appears to belong to the realm of religion.

With a slight difference I would like to point out, based on my study of folk deities like Goga, Ramdev, Pabu and Teja in Rajasthan, that until recently, folk/local deities were ascribed functions for curing diseases of human and livestock and solving numerous other mundane problems. The religious worlds of the subordinates and the ex-untouchables were woven around their local heroes, who addressed their immediate needs. Komal Kothari (1982:5-31) expresses it aptly by addressing such shrines as ‘an expression of the social needs of the rural people.’ He adds further that these shrines are people’s court of justice, their hospital and mental home, their guidance clinic as well as the focus of their faith.

An essential and significant difference between high ritual pilgrimage sites and the sacred site of the folk deities appears to be the symbolic importance of the river. In nearly all research on the massive pilgrimages, the river has been considered most significant for reverence. Pilgrimage meaning tirtha, is used for places where a river can be crossed (ford). It is considered the first word to know in order to explore the sacred geography of India; rivers are places where devotees deposit their sins and spiritual impurities. (Eck 2012:183-184). Peter Van Der Veer (1988:2) describes the significance of the river in Hindu religion in the following manner:

> In Hinduism the word for ‘sacred place’ refers to a place at a riverside. The river is an ancient and complex cultural symbol in Hinduism. India’s rivers are seen originating in heaven and flowing vertically from the celestial lake of divine waters down through the atmosphere, and out on to the face of the earth.
Similarly, Diana Eck and Kalpesh Bhatt (2015: 31-56) consider Kumbh Mela a great bathing fair and pilgrimage. They view rivers as sites which yield powerful spiritual fruit and it is riverside, *tirthas*, that absorb the sins and sorrows of countless pilgrims.

Bhardwaj (1973) refers to the river hymn (nadistuti) of the Rig Veda, to suggest that perhaps the concept of *tirtha* (ford) grew from reverence for the river by Aryans. LP Vidyarthiy (1978) places importance on the role of the river Phalgu in making Gaya a sacred city. In fact, the river and the landscape of Gaya holds such an important component of his study that it also forms part of his three analytic concepts: ‘a sacred geography’, a set of ‘sacred performances’, and ‘sacred complex’.

Van De Veer (1988) mentions that the water of Sarayu, on the banks of which the town of Ayodhya is situated, is believed to have purifying strength and therefore the first and most important ritual of most Hindu pilgrim is to take a bath in the river Sarayu to get rid of all sort of impurity (1988: 2-3). In contrast, Anne Feldhaus, not giving much importance to the pious nature of rivers, visualises them more as a means of connecting places and comprising the ability to form regions, since they are the sole moving facet of the landscape. On many occasions in great tradition, other water bodies may assume a devout function and the importance of the river, e.g. the Pushkar Lake in Ajmer, Rajasthan, which is considered to be one of the most sacred places for Hindus in India, and hence it is called the king of all sacred places (Rajani Mishra 1999). According to legends, Brahma, who is the creator of the universe, is said to have founded holy Pushkar.

The legend runs like this:

*In satyayuga era, once a thought came in the mind of Shri Brahmaji as to where he should perform the holy sacrifice(yajna). He said to himself that in this mortal world, there are places of Pilgrimage in the name of all Devas. Similarly, there should also be a place of pilgrimage in my name. Meditating on this point pronouncing the words Mangal ho Mangal (Prosperity everywhere) he threw the lotus flower on earth. This flower fell at three places and holy water sprang from all these three places. Then Brahma said that these three places would be known as Pushkar and further added that these three kunds (lakes) would be famous for removing the sins of the sinners.* (Rajani Mishra 1999:2)

What emerges from the above theoretical deliberation is that Hindus consider rivers as sacred and purifying, and a dip in a river can absolve the sinner of sins which in turn is the reason for visiting the sacred region. However, Bhardwaj describes that bathing in a sacred river or a lake is not to be interpreted merely as a purificatory ceremony; it also means bathing in the amrita, or life-giving water. Furthermore, Kama Maclean (2008), while looking for an answer to why people flock to Kumbh Mela, reveals that bathing at the confluence of rivers on the occasion of the Kumbh offers immortality. Immortality is not only accessed through the process of snan (bathing), it can also be achieved through gaining an audience (darshan) with the sadhus in the festival (2008:14-15)

On the other hand, the sacred places of folk deities like Ramdeoara or Gogamedi in Rajasthan have become sacred due to the deity’s mortal remains in the grave and their supposedly great deeds achieved during their lifetime. The water bodies associated with them are famous for their healing properties rather than for the purification of sinners. It is important to link this phenomenon with the omnipresent caste structure of the Hindus. In the ladder of the caste positioning, at the lowest ranks were/are the lower caste, especially the ex-untouchables who were considered to be polluting and an upper caste member had to purify themselves if they came into physical contact with the untouchables. Bharadwaj observes that pan-Indian pilgrimages are more likely to be upper caste phenomena. His study reveals that only 2 members of the scheduled castes were encountered at Badrinath in a total pilgrim sample of 400, and similar findings are indicated at Hardwar and Varanasi. Bharadwaj wraps up his findings with the understanding that the scheduled castes do not have the tendency to select these areas. This understanding of Bharadwaj does not appreciate the historical evolution of the erstwhile untouchables; Hindu customary restrictions for centuries prohibited them from visiting temples and public gatherings of such nature and only in the recent past, have the shackles of social barriers been loosened.

It must be pointed out, however, that whenever any upper caste family undertook a pilgrimage, lower caste servants/workers were bound to travel to look after the comforts of their masters and contribute their labour. With an estimated attendance of seventy million people in the Kumbh Mela, 2013 in Allahabad, approximately 9,000 people worked as sweepers for the evacuation of the waste. (Rahul Mehrotra and Filipe Vera. 2015: 67-92). In the same gathering Chaun Hao chen (2015:172-202) describes that thousands of sweepers were engaged in cleaning out various alleys that became areas of public defecation - they had to
deal with large sewage pits, spraying them with sanitizer and DDT to control insects. Hence, the sweepers and other cleaners comprising the scheduled caste section, travel to the sacred sites but high caste Hindus maintain their distance from them. Until a few decades back, customary restrictions and rules controlled the movements of these sections. But now, with awareness of affirmative constitutional penalties for caste offences, and due to mass mobility of pilgrims, social barriers are difficult to maintain, so scheduled caste members can be found in the ritually high sacred places.

Besides much dissimilarity between the high ritual sacred places and local religious spaces, the concepts of the accretion of religious merit and removal of sin are seen to be among the most important purposes of the former type. The notions of Pap (sins) and Punya (merit) were hardly any concern for the lower caste populace. While differentiating between the Yatris and the Jatris, Gold argues (1988:136-138) that Yatris pursued ‘merit’ (punya), and ‘removal of sins’, ‘biomoral duty’ (dharma), and even ‘release’ (Moksha), while Jatris had work to be done or vows to fulfil. Gold’s deliberations on the perspectives of the pilgrimage to folk deity are of immense value; however, she does not contextualise within the framework of the overarching caste structure of India. Use of categories like villager and village overlook the power relation operating in the village itself that is based on the hierarchy of caste structure. All high-ritual pilgrimages are also not similar to each other; every pilgrimage is unique due to its own peculiarity and multiple different aspects.

**Overview of the Cult**

The traditions followed and the social composition of the followers visiting the pilgrimage site of Ramdevra are directly connected to the deity in question. The peculiar historical evolution of the cult does determine the religious process so it becomes important to bring into light whatever understanding can be achieved from the available sources. There appear to be two prevailing perceptions about Ramdev. The dominant perception holds him as a Rajput of the Tomar dynasty and incarnation of Vishnu-Krishna; the other projects him as born in a lower caste Meghwal family. The narrative projecting Ramdev as Kshatriya and incarnation of Krishna begins to appear only from the 19th century onwards.

The oral traditions and interactions with cross sections of pilgrims at the pilgrimage site reveals that Ramdev was a champion for the causes of untouchables, diseased and downtrodden during his lifetime. Two phrases ‘Ramdev ne milya Dhedh hi Dhedh’(Ramdev had the untouchables as his company) and ‘Dhedho ka Dev’ (God of the untouchables) about Ramdev are immensely popular till today. That Ramdev had multiple images in the medieval period is evident in eighteenth century-chronicles - Nainsi’s *Khyaat* (1993) and *Vigat* (Nainsi Munhta, 1968). Interestingly, three different images of Ramdev emerge from Nainsi’s brief references - a peasant settler in a hostile territory, a Muslim saint and finally a follower of Nathpanth. His chief artefact, the grave, shows his association with some kind of Islamic tradition (now commonly claimed as *samadhi* - permanent trance). In the contemporary period along with the earlier images he is more famous as an incarnation of Lord Vishnu and the champion for the rights of erstwhile untouchables. Hence, the current traditions around him are a blend of various traditions into a cult which evolved through the ages.

Dominique Sila Khan (1997) points out that Ramdev was converted to Islam. He became a disciple of *pir Satguru*, an Ismaili saint and had been deputed among the lower castes to propagate the teachings of Nizarpanth, a sect of Islam. *Vanis* and verses attributed to Ramdev suggest a deep influence of *Gorakhpanthis*, a non-Brahmanical heterodox sect, on his personality and teachings (Sona Ram Bishnoi 1997). Writers from Meghwal community consider him a vehicle of Buddhism (Geva, 2001) and several legends suggest that he practiced some Tantric rituals. He was worshipped to ward off specific problems related to dermatological disorders and the evil spirits which were common concerns in western Rajasthan, a semi-arid region. It was believed that if the people suffering from warts circumambulated Ramdev’s *thaan* (small structured shrine) and scattered bird feed on it, they could be cured in no time. He was also worshipped for curing leprosy (Srivastava 1997). Taking pledges in the name of the deity was very common and *jamma jagran* (an all-night vigil of devotional music) was organised once the deity was believed to have fulfilled the wishes of the devotees (D. C Shukla and Onkar Narayan Singh 1992). The grave at Ramdevra and the symbol of footprints used to be the main artefacts of veneration. The devotees also wore a locket called ‘phul’ (amulet) around their necks with a picture of Ramdev riding a horse (see Figure 1) imprinted on it with gold or silver colour (Shukla and Singh1992).
indicate that various Hindu organisations were worried about the weaning away of the Dalits by the missionary work of Islam and Christianity. In fact, a memorandum to the Maharaja of Jodhpur by All India Hindu (Arya) Dharma Seva Sangha reflected their anxiety about the indifference of Harijans towards Hindu Dharma (Jayakar papers).

The process of appropriation that started in the eighteenth century, gained momentum by the third decade of the twentieth century, as religious nationalism became inseparable from the freedom movement and all heterodox sects that showed some symbols of resemblance with Hinduism were brought under it.

The earliest evidence of this process of appropriation depicts Ramdev and nine other local heroes and saints as warriors in the hall of heroes called ‘Tainted Karor Devaton ka Sthan (Abode of 330 million gods of Hindu mythology)’ at Mandore, the old capital of the Rathor rulers of Jodhpur in the 1740s (Binford 1976). Then gradually from the nineteenth century onwards, the upper caste, especially the Brahmins, brought worship of Ramdev into the fold of their religious system with the Brahmanic injunctions. Presently, devotees from across all castes and communities undertake pilgrimage to Ramdev’s shrine. The change in the social composition of the devotees has consequently led to transformation in the methods of worship, the narratives and the traditions of the Ramdev cult, which becomes very obvious at the pilgrimage site.

Ramdevra-Runeecha - The Site of Pilgrimage

During the main period of pilgrimage, when Ramdevra mela (Fair) is held from August through to September, the sacred site of Ramdevra, is host to pilgrims from all castes and creed, and the performance of variant strands of practices and traditions.

The change in social composition of the adherents of Ramdev became discernible from the eighteenth century onwards when the ruling Rajput community changed its approach towards Ramdev and many other local heroes and saints by acknowledging their contribution to society. The probable reason can be located in the changing social and political milieu of the time. With the entry of the British, drastic changes occurred; the new political situation weakened the position of the Rajputs as well as the Brahmins. Moreover, from the nineteenth century onwards, several Dalit reformers as well as anti-Brahmanical movements emerged in several parts of India, including Rajasthan, which challenged the Brahmanical dominance and social discrimination based on the caste system (Aloysius, 1997:15; Omvedt, 1994; Zelliot, 2009; Shyam lal, 2010; Darshan, 2000). Sources

Oral literature reveals that Ramdev was despised by the dominant and the upper caste members for being in the company of the untouchables. Moreover, sources leave no doubt that his worship was first incorporated into the spiritual domain by lower caste communities and Muslims. In fact, priests of the temples of Ramdev belonged to the lower caste only. The upper caste members joined the rank of these followers quite late, and currently he has followers from across all castes and classes.

Since Folk cults crop up outside the ritualistic paradigm of major religions, they constitute elements that are non-orthodox and have features that may be considered abhorrent by major religions. As explained above, Ramdev was appropriated by the ruling Rajputs from the eighteenth century onwards, and by other upper caste communities from the nineteenth century onwards; gradual assimilation and Brahmanic interpolations, and the disappearance of many unorthodox elements are best represented at the pilgrimage site during the gathering of pilgrims. This paper now explores the various practices and their

~ 28 ~
progression while tracing the journey of Ramdev from a Folk deity to a Pan Hindu God.

The main shrine at Ramdevra is located at a place where Ramdev chose to be buried. There are fourteen other graves, said to be Ramdev’s family members’ near his grave/samadhi. The first significant structural change was made in 1912 by Ganga Singh, a Rajput king of Bikaner (Binford 1976), who undertook the renovation work without changing the basic structure and enlarged it into a temple complex. Gradually, an idol of Ramdev with vermilion and flower garlands made its way to the top of the grave/samadhi, and is always covered with colourful cloth. There is a life sized multi-coloured horse and there is also a space around the original enclosure for circumambulation around the Grave/Samadhi. Small shrines of Shiva, Hanuman and a few other gods are also part of the temple. There is a small shrine with a grave/samadhi of Dalbai, a Meghwal, and Ramdev’s co-disciple venerated by the Dalits. Two water bodies exist, one is a step well and the other important place is the Ram Sarovar Pond, which is believed to have been constructed by Ramdev. This latter site is of significance to the pilgrims due to its curing powers. Twice a year the fair is held, once in January-February and then a large fair, the main gathering, in August-September. Devotees from Rajasthan and neighbouring states, irrespective of their caste, creed or religious affiliation throng the shrine.

The first authentic information regarding the fair can be inferred from Nainsi’s Vigat II (1968: 308). Nainsi states that in an agriculturally prosperous year (such as 1659), the State earned Rs. 15000/- from land revenue and other taxes, whereas income from two fairs of Ramdev held at Ramdevra in the same year was Rs 5000/-. There is no doubt that the fair provided and still provides very lucrative business for a wide range of marketable articles, transport and railways. Animal transactions also take place, for example in 1967-68, 2569 animals exchanged hands (Rajasthan district Gazettes 1973:10).

Brahmin priests conduct worship with detailed rituals as per Brahmanical religious patterns (As told by the members of the Tanwar family, who are the custodians of the temple complex). Currently, 25-30 Pujaris manage and stay in the temple premises on a regular basis. During the fair, 96 Pujaris are engaged in facilitating the offerings and worship (Devasthan Department, Government of Rajasthan (2016:20). Sultan Singh, a Trust Member, informs us that Yagna is occasionally performed outside the main compound of the temple due to the presence of several graves inside the main compound and Yagna cannot be performed in a graveyard. Aarti (a kind of prayer with lamps) is performed five times a day with devotional songs. The traditional devotional songs were/are modified to make way for gods of the Hindu pantheon to join Ramdev. Every year the numbers of pilgrims are swelling; in 2016, 25-30 lacs pilgrims visited Ramdevra, with 5000-10,000 pilgrims visiting on a daily basis (Devasthan Department, Government of Rajasthan 2016:20). Kamads, also known as Bhopas, are the traditional singers of devotional songs of Ramdev and they sing throughout the entire year, while, more teams called Bhajan Mandal perform during the fair period.

The State Government and Trust make provisions to facilitate the visits and offerings of devotees. Moreover, independent organisations are also involved. One organization called Ramdeo anna Khsetra was established in 1970 and has been entitled to collect food for the free distribution to beggars and sadhus who assemble on the occasion of the fair. In fact, members of Parliament and other officials and political leaders inaugurate the rituals during the fathering with prayers and the offer of Panchamrit (sacred things) - milk, purified butter, curd, honey, saffron, sacred water of the river Ganges and velvet sheets on the Samadhi. They unfurl the flag at the entry gate of the shrine at 3am. After that laks of devotees who stand in the queue all night start making offerings (Patrika 2018).

Negotiations and Contestation at the Religious Space

A number of multi religious processes - assimilation, negotiation, appropriation and contestation - go on simultaneously during the days of congregation at Ramdevra. Many followers from the Dalit community have accepted and adopted Brahmanical patterns of worship along with their own simple practices. This has been referred to as a process of sanskritisation, whereby it is held that cultural behaviours are imitated for upward social mobility. However, Turner’s theory of the limonoid or disconnected stage during pilgrimage seems to be a more probable condition for the Dalit’s act of assimilating the high-rutual in their own traditions. Historical evolution of their religious world reflects the malleability in readily adopting different traditions by the subaltern groups. Therefore, at the pilgrimage site, in their stage of anti-structure,
they are open and even vulnerable to new practices. In such conditions a subaltern pilgrim finds it easy to follow or adopt any new practice in hopes of getting his wishes fulfilled and does not necessarily aim on all occasions for an upward position in caste structure as stipulated by the concept of sanskritisation.

In such crucial gatherings of pilgrims at the sacred site, subtle and at times volatile tensions also erupt. I was told by the singers sitting in front of the main shrine of Ramdev, that the sacred site at Ramdevra had been the centre of contestation between the Tanvar Rajputs who are the custodians of the temple complex and the Meghwals who are the traditional and dominant lower caste followers of Ramdev. So much so that the conflict took on political tones and was on the verge of becoming a legal issue. Thrice, pamphlets were distributed at the main temple and at various places in Rajasthan from the years 2000 to 2004, questioning the appropriation of Ramdev’s religious space in Ramdevra and the income from it by the Rajputs (Pamphlets were written and distributed by social worker Kusum Meghwal, a government employee in Rajasthan). There is a strong element of resentment among the Meghwal and Kamad community over the monetary income appropriated by the upper caste in the temples of Ramdev.

The tension could be felt even amongst the Tanvar Rajputs because of the claim made by Meghwals on the deity. It was very evident in one of my interactions with them at the Ramdev temple. I was informed that Baba Ramdev was their ancestor as he and the temple trust belonged to the Tanvar Rajput Vansh (dynasty) and priests have always been Brahmins, never from the Meghwal community. When asked about the popular phrase ‘Ramdev ne milya dhed hi dhedh,’ Sultan Singh informed me in an exasperated mood that a hundred years back Baba ended caste-based discrimination and that’s why he is found to be associated with such a saying.

The process of appropriation of the cult by the Brahmanical religious system is best operated at the sacred site, which doubles as a dissemination ground for the rituals to thousands of onlookers. The very existence of the grave which was the main artefact has been camouflaged by the colourful cloth and silver and gold masks of Ramdev. Moreover, the identity of Ramdev as ‘Ramsa Pir’ and the chief symbol ‘Mazar’ is substituted by the term ‘Baba Ramdev’ and ‘Samadhi’ respectively in all government and tourist documents. On the main entry gate, it is written in bold colourful letters ‘Shri Baba Ramdev ji Samadhi’ and on top of it ‘Jai Baba ri’. The worship in intricate Brahmanical patterns has increasingly taken over the multiple non-Brahmanical traditions and Panths associated with Ramdev. Even the iconography on most posters, calendars, religious books and walls has been modified to facilitate the process of incorporating Ramdev into the established Hindu religious system. The photograph of samadhi sthal (Burial place) of Ramdev shows him in a posture similar to that of Brahma with his right palm projected forwarded with two devotees on both sides, holding musical instruments. The photograph is designed in a manner that it covers the marble stone slab (mazar) which suggests his burial in accordance with Islamic tradition.

Fairs are/were an effective medium for dissemination of new images through print literature. Owing to the spread of print literature and literacy, Ramdev has been increasingly absorbed into the Hindu religious system with texts following the pattern of scriptures of the mainstream Hindu religion like ‘Hanuman Chalisa’. Traditional devotional songs were modified to make way for gods of the Hindu pantheon along with Ramdev. The printed literature therefore indicates complete assimilation of the popular deity into the Brahmanical fold. The bookshops at the pilgrimage site are full of such literature and chromolithographic photos of Ramdev.

Besides the constant contestation on questions of the identity of Ramdev, the temple of Dalibai reflects caste hierarchies lurking in the temple complex. She is considered a deity by the Meghwals and worshipped along with Ramdev. Meghwals are priests of her shrine and offerings are made to her in the same temple complex. The presence of her shrine leads to occasional skirmishes between the Meghwals and the Rajputs. In the recent past, the Meghwal community tried to file a FIR (criminal report) in vain against a large mob of about 70 Rajputs, who according to them were armed and damaged structures at the eastern exit of the temple. Dalits had brightened up the exit, cemented, and cleaned it and had more material ready to use on the structure, but Rajputs made off with the material (Times of India 2017). The same source informs us that in 2002, the local Rajputs tried to erect barricades and direct the crowd to the samadhi of Ramdev only.

Another element of discomfort is that the new patrons, that is, the upper caste, have decided to appropriate Ramdev without his associate, Dalibai. It was observed during my visit to Ramdevra in September 2011, that
hardly any ‘clean’ caste devotee visited the temple of Dalibai or made offerings. Rather, idols of Hindu pantheon gods began to occupy places in the modern temples of Ramdev. In addition, discrimination is clearly visible at nearby food stalls, which operate according to caste lines.

Still, Ramdevra will always hold a special meaning for all lower caste and ex-untouchables in Rajasthan, because it has been their own religious space, crafted by them since the champion of their rights, Ramdev, was buried on the spot where his grave was raised.

Nainsi mentions fairly good revenue coming from the Ramdevra fair in the mid seventeenth century (Nainsi, 1968), indicating that the marginal sections might have been visiting the shrine in good numbers and participating in the trading of its goods as they were the artisanal caste, the majority amongst them working with leather or occupied as weavers. They are considered traditional pilgrims and the upper caste members have joined the ranks from the late 18th century on. Mira Reym Binford (1976:132) remarks that such pilgrimages offer many opportunities for social mixing and sharing, as this is possible due to the absence of caste and religious boundaries unlike other high-ritual sacred places.

During such pilgrimages, Turner’s theory of ‘limonoid’ or disconnected phase, might apply partially, as both upper as well as lower caste pilgrims depart from the condition of structured existence (anti-structure) for some time in the sacred complex as they mix without any prohibitions and restrictions for the visit (darshan) of their deity. Nevertheless, discrimination at food stalls and in other, more subtle situations, can be felt in the behaviour of some upper caste groups within the complex precincts.

Brahmanical rituals, however, have not completely replaced traditional forms of invoking the deity and unorthodox rituals followed by common people over the centuries. They seem to co-exist in the everyday lives of the people and were reflected in one such visit to the Ramdevra pilgrimage site (2011). By random questioning I gathered that the maximum number of devotees were from lower castes, belonging to the various communities of Meghwal, Chamar, Kamad and Harijan. Many Rajputs, Brahmins, Kayasth, some Sikhs and Jains visit the site, although in lesser number, but Muslims in good number were present in the temple complex. Large numbers of them were carrying a white flag with footprints on it, a traditional symbol of Ramdev and only some had his figure on horseback printed on their flags. Invoking the deity was sought by those performing Havana (ritualistic fire), recitation of mantras (hymns) and shaving of heads by the young - these are all Brahmanical rituals which dominated the scenario in and around the temple complex. However, observance of non-Brahmanical and Sufi traditions such as visit to Dalibai’s mazar and tying thread to the Jaal tree (drought resistance tree found in desert) could not be missed.

The pilgrimage site at Ramdevra provides an occasion for the Dalit communities, especially the Meghwal and the Kamad community, to forge solidarity amongst themselves. A section of the Meghwals is voicing their concern on the appropriation of Ramdev by the upper caste community and is contesting for a share of the donations made at the shrine of Ramdev. The traditional singers of Ramdev’s devotional songs, the Kamad, are disturbed as their role is being taken over by singers of other castes and moreover, they are not received well by the Tanwar Rajputs at the complex. In fact, in my presence two members of Tanwar Rajputs were rude to three Kamad singers, as they overheard them telling me about a conflict. Hence, frequent skirmishes between the Rajputs and the Meghwal community tend to build a bond amongst the traditional followers, the Dalits, who consider the deity Ramdev as their symbol of identity.

Conclusion

The pilgrimage site appeared to me as a space where multiple cultural traditions get appropriated and assimilated and acquire new meanings which then are carried back by the pilgrims to their respective places. My observation of the pilgrimage sites of the folk deities (I visited Ramdevra and Gogamedi twice) holds that the divergent and multiple cultural traditions of the folk cults are more vulnerable to appropriation and assimilation at the Pilgrimage site, and as a result the new incorporated religious tradition is carried back by the pilgrims. With the resurgence of Hindutva, there seems to be an attempt to have a consensus religion, a homogeneous Hindu tradition- the inherent divergent and pluralist nature of folk cults is under risk of gradual wipe out.
References


Jayakar Papers. Memorandum to the Maharaja of Jodhpur by All India Hindu (Arya) Dharma Seva Sangha. New Delhi: National Archives.


