Archaeological landscapes and textual images: a study of the sacred geography of late medieval Ballabgarh

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Abstract

This study explores the disjunction between notions of religious space in the textual tradition and the construction of sacred geography on the ground. It does this by examining some elements that make up the sacred geography of medieval Ballabgarh, the northern segment of Faridabad which shares its northern border with Delhi. The paper argues that religious structures like temples and mosques which are generally regarded as constituent components of Hindu and Muslim sacred geography were not an integral part of village geography. Where they were present, the components of commemoration could be varied, animated by elements of local and clan history, rather than scriptural notions of cosmic space. Moreover, much of what was central to folk worship – open air village shrines, anonymous graves of pirs, ‘miraculous’ trees, a local goddess of the floods – is not textually imaged. Consequently, Ballabgarh’s religious geography can be constituted only through the microcosm of archaeology and oral history.

Keywords

Ballabgarh; sacred geography; Vastu sastra; pirs; temple.

Introduction

‘Sacred geography’ is a politicized term in the Indian subcontinent, with certain nodes in the Indian system of religious circulation having been made the foci of communal episodes in the recent past. What is not as evident is that this sacred geography is comprised of various, complex and contradictory strands. On the one hand, operating at a macro-scale are systems of holy places and sacred spaces that are defined and sanctioned by the scriptural/textual tradition going back to the epics. That there are connections between concepts of sacred/cosmic spaces and the formal and monumental layouts of particular places is also well acknowledged (cf. Vijayanagara; Fritz 1985). On the other hand, outside such nodal systems, the construction of sacred geography, even while being grounded in
the dominant scriptural tradition, creates its own world of meanings around the local landscape, meanings that can be archaeologically documented and that are shaped by many elements of local and clan history. My purpose will be to demonstrate this through the microcosm of a small segment of Faridabad — the Ballabgarh tehsil.

There are two issues here that seem to be worth identifying and exploring: first, the different types of sacred spots and phenomena at the village level primarily, their spatial characteristics and variant histories; and, second, the ways in which this religious universe was related to familiar processes in the life cycles of rural groups. Since I will argue that the religious geography of Ballabgarh was in the cultural contexts that make up the shifting history of the land, what I will also be suggesting is that it cannot be neatly subsumed within standard symbolic or cosmological principles. Such principles are elucidated at length in textual sources, especially in the substantial corpus of medieval Indian literature known as Vastu sastra. Apart from the spatial and architectural characteristics of different habitational forms and buildings, Vastu sastra digests such as the Manasara Silapasstra (Acharyya 1930) and the Mayamata (Dagens 1985) also contain layouts and orientations of temples of various sectarian affiliations and other religious spaces. It is not that traditional texts specifically delineate cultural areas where such principles governed the social division of space, but extant writings on iconography and religious architecture have generally considered their expositions as providing the conceptual basis of religious forms/spaces. However, much of what was integral to the religious landscape of Ballabgarh — village shrines of different types ranging from open air platforms to miniature sanctuaries and natural elements imbued with religious meaning — does not even merit mention in such texts. Moreover, this landscape was made up of a pool of shared meanings and spaces along with more exclusive structures which were meaningful to particular population groups only. Consequently, there was no overarching consensual structure in the sacred geography of the type that is suggested in textual sources, a structure which was uniformly comprehensible and significant to all rural groups. The term ‘sacred geography’ in this paper, therefore, is only used as a broad descriptive term.

The area of Ballabgarh surveyed lies approximately between 28°14’–28°29’N and 77°10’–77°32’E and falls in the northern segment of Faridabad, sharing its border with Delhi, the Union Capital of India. This segment has a specific geographic identity, the Aravalli hills and the Yamuna river providing natural boundaries on the west and east respectively, and contains the varied types of physiographic settings encountered in the district as a whole. The old shrines of Ballabgarh, within and outside the settlement areas of villages there, are distributed in the Yamuna plains area, as also in the Aravalli zone of plateaus and hills. The period around which this study revolves coincides broadly with the centuries of Mughal rule, with a special focus on the late medieval phase (eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century). Ballabgarh formed a part of the Delhi subah of the Mughal empire. However, as early as the reign of Aurangzeb, in the shadow of imperial Delhi, the bloody banner of revolt had been raised by Gokul Jat, the zamindar of Tilpat (Qanungo 1925: 21). In fact, in the later centuries of the Mughal regime, from the early eighteenth century when Balram, the son of Gopal Singh, a Tawatia Jat landlord (zamindar) of Alawalpur village was given the titles of Naib Bakhshi and Rao by the Delhi king, until the Ballabgarh Raj was confiscated following the mutiny of 1857, actual political power lay in the hands of the Jat Rajas of Ballabgarh.
This chronology has been chosen mainly because the documentation that forms the database of the present paper suggests this. These centuries witnessed an unprecedented profusion of new constructions including brick temples, mosques, elegant havelis (residences) belonging to members of the commercial gentry (baniyas), memorial shrines and stepped, quartzite tanks. Among other things, they suggest a period of notable social and cultural vitality at the outskirts of the visibly collapsing Mughal centre at Delhi. Many elements of the religious geography of this phase, especially in the rural facies of the roughly 700 sq km that were surveyed can, in fact, still be seen and this study bases itself on a grass-roots documentation of their presence in the field, mostly in a living form. But, of course, they are known to have premodern archaeological and folk resonances. The archaeological associations of some spots (cf. Ekamukhalinga of Gothra Mohabbatabad) discussed in this paper go back to the first half of the first millennium AD. At the same time, the coexistence of these earlier forms with later religious structures can be most graphically visualized in the late medieval centuries. The observations on village shrines and religious spots in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century ethnohistorical accounts written by British administrators and scholars also lend credence to their existence. The folk traditions and beliefs that are interwoven with these sacred spots have generally been orally transmitted, but in some cases are documented in the records of the traditional genealogists – the Bhattas – of the rural communities of Ballabgarh and in a few rare instances in medieval literature. These elements of archaeology and folk beliefs provide the basis for taking features of the ethnoarchaeological present as the signifiers of a premodern reality.
Religious shrines/phenomena and their cultural geography

A village in medieval Ballabgarh appears to have contained several types of sacred spots. But before examining the pattern of this geography, it may be helpful to bear in mind the character of the medieval village. Physically, it appeared almost always as a nucleated settlement, a collection of houses of mud with occasional brick buildings. In these villages, the demarcation between the habitational area and the fields/natural vegetational cover was fairly marked. At the same time, as we look at the various religious shrines/phenomena, it will become obvious that this demarcation was of no cognitive significance in terms of rural religious geography. Monuments, ranging from temples to samadhis (memorials), were located within and outside the habitation just as elements of the natural environment were culturally incorporated into the religious world of local communities. The local communities in question were several: Gujars, Jats, Tagas, Rajputs, Brahmins, Saiyyads, Bilochs, Meos, menial groups, as also untouchables. Barring the last two groups, all the others were generally landed proprietors. Most of these groups cannot be simply divided on religious lines: there were Muslims among Gujars, Jats, Tagas and Rajputs. We know this because these various communities represented themselves as such – that is, as Muslim Gujars or Muslim Jats – to British officials even in the nineteenth century (Gazetteer of the Delhi District (1884: 72)). It is not likely that their conversion to Islam meant an ideological break from clan loyalty or beliefs and objects of reverence connected with that institution.

For the purpose of this essay, it is also useful to distinguish the religious arenas of ‘high culture’ from that of ‘folk culture’. The landscape of high culture was made of monumental religious structures rooted in Islam and Hinduism, mainly in the form of temples and mosques. The folk tradition was inscribed in more humble village and family shrines, memorials in honour of dead saints/ascetics and women who committed sati, miraculous water/mud and slag. This section describes their diversity but, beyond this, it also tries to show that these were coexisting arenas in the lives of local communities, intersected in various ways, and that these elements of the human and natural landscape were mediated and informed by images, artefacts and cultural elements spread across time and space. Consequently, the religious geography is best viewed here as the container of many histories.

Temples and mosques

No village in Ballabgarh contained an ancient temple. There were temples, no doubt, mostly with octagonal-shaped sanctums and high spires, but invariably made from bricks – of the small lakhauri type – that formed the constructional material in this area only in the Mughal and late medieval period. This does not mean that the free-standing form of the temple evolved and was integrated into rural religious geography only after the establishment of the Mughal dynasty. On the contrary, between the seventh and thirteenth centuries AD Hindu temples indeed stood at villages like Kheri Kalan, Mawai and Chandpur while a Jaina establishment flourished at Gharora. But they perished during the foundation of Muslim rule here, in the thirteenth century, under the Delhi Sultanate. At the above mentioned villages, these earlier chapters in the history of the temple are
Plate 1 (left) Gharora: the west face of a quadruple Jaina image depicting a cross-legged Parsvanatha.

Plate 2 (below) Kheri Kalan: lower half of an Uma-Maheshwara image.
evident in the present archaeological configurations (Plates 1 and 2). Lying around several sites are richly carved but mutilated images ranging from serpentine deities to classic Uma-Maheshwara representations and architectural fragments including stone grilles, decorated panels and doorway elements in various types of stone. These strikingly evoke, for rural residents and outside observers, one of the ways in which Turkish political authority was articulated, through the desecration of sacred spaces of the conquered populace not merely in the vicinities of urban Qila Ral Pithora but also in villages south and south-east of Sultanate cities on the Delhi plain. Jaina worship was never revived but solidly constructed Hindu temple structures were, becoming integrated into the visible religious geography of villages only in the later centuries, when they were made in the popular style of that period. Even then, these monuments of ‘high culture’ were not essential elements of village geography. Of the various villages where the Raja of Ballabgarh enjoyed revenue privileges and land, not more than ten or fifteen settlements contained temples. Outside the Raja’s territory, there were some others where such shrines stood but their number is not large. Today, it is common to see one or more temples in every village but it is important to keep in mind that this is only a recent proliferation.

Where village temples existed, they were generally at the peripheries or outside the habitational settlement, as at Tigaon where the Bal Bhawani mandir stood on the north-eastern edge, while at Majesar the temple that is presently known by the name of Siddha Baba Hriday Ram Tapovan bhumi kund was outside the village, to the south-west. These were almost always Saiva shrines, with the linga, the phallic emblem of Siva, forming the central object of worship in the small cells.

Apart from propitiating the ruling deity, the conditions under which a shrine was created were also foregrounded through various visual elements in the complex. For the villagers of Kurali, for instance, Rupa ka mandir (Plate 3), constructed in the last century, was indeed their village Sivala (Siva shrine) but they must also have viewed it as the ideological project of one of their rich residents, Rupa Singh, who had been without a male issue and who chose to commemorate the birth of his son by constructing it and inscribing the details of this event there (this has recently been obliterated by a coat of whitewash). Moreover, the paintings on the temple walls introduce us to the mind of Rupa Singh himself (Plates 4–7). Interestingly enough, the religious imagery does not in any way evoke the monotheistic primacy of Siva, the presiding deity. The painted panels depict various gods and goddesses – Durga, Brahma on a lotus, Krishna, Ganesha, Narasimha and Varaha avatara (incarnations of Vishnu) and Hanuman. These coexist with representations of mendicants (sadhus), their consorts and ordinary mortals including horse riders and guards. Why did Rupa Singh have various and, what appear to be, unrelated themes painted in the way he did? At one level, the question is unanswerable and we shall never know. But it is possible to guess on the basis of local folklore (pers. testimony of the late Rupa Singh’s family members and residents of Kurali) that Krishna and Vishnu imagery was so prominent there because the patron had made a pilgrimage and an endowment of 525 silver coins at the shrine of Balram/Baldeo Ji, the mythological brother of Krishna (who is an avatara of Vishnu, as are Narasimha and Varaha), at Gokul near Mathura. Moreover, this pilgrimage was made on the advice of a mendicant who had visited the village and prophesied the birth of his son. The panels depicting various sadhus and
Plate 3 (left) Kurali: Rupa Singh’s Siva temple.

Plate 4 (below) Kurali: panel depicting Varaha, an incarnation of Vishnu.
ascetics in the temple convey the central significance that a member of this class of people had assumed in the lived experience of Rupa Singh.

Similarly, the prophetic vision of a local mendicant of the eighteenth century, Baba Hrdayram, in local folk tradition was responsible for the founding of a Saiva temple complex at Majesar (pers. testimony of Mehd Ram). Apparently, at the spot where the temple stands, the ascetic predicted to the king of Bharatpur, who was passing through the area, on his way towards a military combat at Delhi, that he would win the battle but would not rule over that area. A material basis for this tradition can be sought in medieval records which mention Jawahir Singh’s (the ruler of Bharatpur) military success against Najib-ud-daulah at Delhi in 1764–5, the camp geography in the direction of Faridabad, and the compromise worked out by Malhar Rao Holkhar by which final victory eluded the king of Bharatpur (Qanungo 1925: 94–6). But, coming back to the remembered tradition, apparently, on his return from the battle, the king honoured the ascetic, who had predicted the outcome of the campaign before it had begun, by constructing a water tank (kunda), endowing land and a fixed annual income for a temple at that spot – the complex covers an area of 6 acres. An inscription at the temple immortalizes this lore and also contains a samadhi (memorial platform) of Hrdayram marked by what are considered to be his footprints. The subsequent succession of disciples at the temple is similarly immortalized and the Saiva temple contains samadhis marked by the footprints of Babas such as Hari Das, Baikunth Das and Sukhram Das. The temple did contain several emblems of the god Siva but to the Jats of Majesar these were in no way more important than those connected with the founder mendicant and his prophecy.

Temples could also be constructed to commemorate important local personages, rather than the recognized deities of the Hindu pantheon and ascetics. At Hodal, a large village of Faridabad situated several miles to the south of the Ballabgarh town, a temple propitiates the memory of a ‘Hindoo Jemaudtar’ who had built a fine structure and tank in the neighbourhood of the settlement. Reginald Heber (1838: 325) the bishop of Calcutta, who travelled across this zone in 1824, testified that in this temple he ‘saw the representation of four human feet, one pair larger than the other, on a little altar against the wall, and was told that it was the customary way of commemorating that the favourite wife had burnt herself with her husband’. At Chhansa as well, a temple marked the spot where the traditional clan account of the resident Rajputs locates the self-immolation of Mahorkar (Plate 8). It is an empty shrine with no idols, not even footprints. Mahorkar was apparently the daughter of the Rajput leader credited with settling Rajputs in Chhansa, which was made possible, according to the traditional account, by evicting Muslim Meo inhabitants. Both structures, at Hodal and Chhansa, were locally regarded as temples and described as such. However, the form of the temple there did not contain icons central to the Brahmanical tradition, but commemorated practices endowed with special sacrality by the local/clan custom. To be sure, clan culture was parochial; one wonders, for instance, whether the low-caste occupational groups or Muslim villagers in Chhansa identified with such customs. But those groups that were part of local clans, regardless of differences in status, perceived these religious structures as their own, commemorating aspects of their shared ‘history’.

These are some vignettes picked from a large collection of archaeological and folk images. But through them I would argue that micro-level religious geography cannot be
Plate 5 (above left) Kurali: panel depicting Brahma springing from Vishnu’s navel.

Plate 6 (above right) Kurali: panel depicting Durga on a tiger.

Plate 7 (left) Kurali: panel depicting mendicants bathing under trees.
textually constituted. Textual sources considered temples dedicated to gods and goddesses ranging from Vishnu to Chamunda to be essential aspects of the geography of all village forms. For instance, in the Manasara Silpasasra, the most representative text of the Vastu sastra genre, every one of the eight layouts provided of villages specifies the presence of multiple temples and temple pavilions (Acharya 1930). Moreover, in these texts, the various geographical spots where temples were to be constructed are also systematically elaborated. In the Manasara, the sacred diagrams for the layout of villages and their shrines generally sketch out the positioning of Vishnu and Siva temples at the centre of the settlement. But on the ground, in medieval Ballabgarh at least, temples were not integral elements of village religious geography. Where they existed, they were often constructed at a significant distance from the village – in the fields of the patron, as at Kurali, or at the spot where a mendicant lived as at Majesar. Moreover, in textual sources, ‘the Indian temple is not a building; it is an image, a conception of divinity’ (Ramachandra Rao 1993: 54), a construction for the habitation of gods. But it is evident that temples were also the containers of many other meanings which were locally important. These are palpable in the archaeological elements of the shrine and in the local traditions that circulated around them. It is these mundane circumstances, rather than the nature of the presiding deity, which made the village temple intelligible to the devotees who came there. In fact, there was no presiding deity in some temples at Ballabgarh. In other words, within the same archaeological form – the temple – one can detect different objects of commemoration and some of these did not have a physical form.

As for the congregational mosques of the Meo, Saiyyad and other Muslim residents of the tehsil, these were invariably constructed in the main habitation area and could be impressive buildings: the dismantled dome of the medieval mosque at Tilpat (Plates 9 and 10), the arched monument of Tikauli and Murtaza Khan’s mosque at Faridabad are representative examples. What is important, however, is that, like temples, they were not an integral part of village geography. There were a large number of villages with a substantial Muslim population, but without mosques. This can be explained. Among rural communities medieval mosques often served as the hubs of prayer for a religious congregation that extended beyond the specific settlements where they were located, encompassing, in fact, several neighbouring villages and hamlets (for a documentation of
this phenomenon in Bengal, see Eaton 1994: 230–2). It is from this perspective that the monumentality of mosques and their remnants in small villages like Tikauli, or at Tilpat which was much larger but with a small Muslim population, makes eminent sense. In the case of Ballabgarh, there was a further local peculiarity. A large part of the Muslim population, especially in the western segment, was made up of Meos, a community whose villages did not generally contain such religious structures. Alexander Cunningham’s report (1969: 22–3) on Eastern Rajputana, for instance, stated that ‘the religion of the Meos is not strict, as they seldom have any mosque, only eight have been found by Major Powlett in 52 Meo villages. They still reverenced the local divinities of the Hindus, such as Bhaiya, a platform with white stones, who is also called Bhumia or Chahund, or Khera Deo.’

Enough has been said to demonstrate that religious structures that are generally considered to be the constituent components of Hindu and Muslim sacred geography were present in some settlements in Ballabgarh but were not elements that an average rural person always encountered in her/his village. Moving beyond this we may then ask: what was the network of shrines and symbols that was regarded to be more central at the village level? For this, one must move to the religious shrines/phenomena which may be described as forming a part of folk culture.
Folk shrines and representations

In the case of Ballabgarh, these were of several types. The most important were the various kinds of *grama shtanas* (village spots) dedicated to a *Khera* (homestead) *deota* (god)/*Khera dadi* (old woman of the homestead) and/or a *bhumia* (god of the settled land). These were all manifestations of the inhabited, socially domesticated land and homestead that constituted a village. This worship of the earth, unlike the idols of different gods, did not have a specific iconic form. Most such shrines were unpretentious – small, plain platforms with a collection of stones or miniature house-like structures (Plates 11 and 12). They were geographically located outside the village, though over time they occasionally became encircled by the expanding settlement. Sometimes, the stones on such shrines were the vestigial residue of destroyed temples of early antiquity – motley collections of sculptural fragments or single architectural elements recovered from the old settlement mound of the village (see Plate 1 and Plate 13). In this way, archaeological remnants of ancient ‘high culture’ became dramatically visible in the arena of medieval folk worship and such worship can still be observed at Mawai, Kheri Kalan and Gharora. Moreover, their worship at the local level speaks volumes for the ground reality and relevance of scriptural sanctions that strictly forbid any worship of broken/mutilated images. Texts dealing with the creation and installation of images like the *Pratimanalakshanam* (Banerjea 1956: 615) specifically warned worshippers that ‘the image of a deity, if it be burnt, worn out, broken or split up, after its establishment or at the time of its enshrinement, will always be harmful. A burnt image brings forth drought, a worn-out one causes loss of wealth, a broken image forebodes death in the family, while one that is split up, war’. Unmindful of such proscriptions, broken images were placed on village shrines meant to promote habitational bounty.

This veneration of the village land was a religious practice in which the whole community collaborated – low castes and élite groups, including Muslims. Earlier, village temples were discussed in this paper, but these were establishments from which several low castes were excluded. Consequently, in a strictly sociological sense these were not ‘village’ shrines since they did not grant access to all. On the other hand, the *khera deota/bhumia* cult was incorporative – these gods were the tutelary deities of all village residents. Hence, their importance: they functioned as one of the several channels feeding into the existence of the village as a social interacting unit.

This brings up the question of the factors that may cast light on the importance of the *bhumia* and *khera deota/dadi*. The reasons are not far to seek. For one thing, these cults were the visible symbols of the founding and the continued prosperity of settlements, signifiers of village production and reproduction, economic and biological. H. A. Rose’s observations make this amply clear:

The most honoured of the village deities proper is Bhumia or the god of the homestead, often called Khera (a village). The erection of his shrine is the first formal act by which the proposed site of a new village is consecrated; and where two villages have combined their homesteads for greater security against the marauders of the former days, the people of the one which moved still worship the Bhumia of the deserted site. Bhumia is worshipped after the harvests, at marriages, and on the birth of a male child and
Plate 11  Dhauj: prototype of a *Khera deota* shrine.

Plate 12  Mawai: prototype of a *Bhumia* shrine.

Plate 13 (below)  Mawai: *Sitala Mata* shrine containing sculptural fragments.
Brahmans are commonly fed in his name. Women often take their children to the shrine on Sundays; and the first milk of a cow or buffalo is always offered there.

(Rose 1883: 193)

In the Middle Ages, neither economic nor biological production/reproduction could be taken for granted. For instance, the harvests could be threatened by all types of dangers ranging from the failure of the monsoons to arrive on time to the destructive temperament of the Yamuna river and its flood waters. Such failures led to famines. The Gazetteer of the Delhi District noted several such catastrophes, known by tradition, or reported by different authorities:

AD 1345, 1631, 1661, 173? , 1779, 1783–84, 1865, 1868 and 1877. Of these the worst are said to have been 1783–84, 1803–4, 1837 and 1860–61. Perhaps this is said because there is a commonly known tradition of these years than of others especially of the terrible chalisa 1783–84 (Sambat 1840). But the earlier famines are well-known in histories. Muhammad Tughlak’s savage extravagance in his war schemes brought on, it is said, the famine of 1345, wherein men ate each other. Shah Jahan saw two years of drought, 1629–30, and this induced the scarcity of the following year. Aurangzeb’s reign had the famine of 1661 in which in spite of the personal exertions of the Emperor, multitudes perished, and at least as many at Delhi as in other places.

(Gazetteer 1884: 30)

Epidemics and diseases were also common enough, including smallpox; the archaeological visibility of the goddess of smallpox – Sitala Mata – suggests that she was regularly propitiated in grama sthanams. Moreover, local testimony revealed a disquietude relating to infertility – this, caused by suspect ground water, was believed to be a frequent cause for the shifting of the village site (as at Tilauri Khadar and Kheri Gujran). The dates of famines, the shifts in the courses of the river, the periodic abandonment and repeopling of villages, episodes of political persecution – such data need to be compiled and recorded into a more precise pattern than has presently been done. As it is, they underline the logic of peasant anxiety about maintaining the normal, accustomed rhythm of rural life. These also enable us historically to locate the centrality of worship meant to promote the continuance and prosperity of the habitational area and land.

The second element of religious geography grounded in folk culture was the abundance of beliefs and meanings that revolved around elements of the natural and human geography of the immediate lived world of rural inhabitants. Many natural forms, for instance, were imbued with sacrality with the purpose of seeking supernatural protection against disease/bodily harm. In what is now part of the old Faridabad township the water of the Barahi talab (a water tank dedicated to the mother goddess Barahi) and, when this dried up, the mud contained in it was believed to cure bodily diseases like boils. A contemporary billboard inscribed near it provides a ‘scientific’ explanation for the phenomenon, suggesting that, since the waters of the Aravalli hills during the monsoons filled up the tank, they were impregnated with the natural qualities of jungle herbs and plants. Moreover, the goddess was reverred as the guardian of the village-like township of Faridabad against floods (Barahi etymologically means that floods have come, i.e. Bar aayee) caused by torrential monsoon water from the hills to the west. It is unlikely that this local goddess would be textually imaged in the Brahmanical tradition. There are also
Plate 14 (above) Dhauj: shrine of Dadi Pipalasari.

Plate 15 (left) Dhauj: the bargad tree which has replaced the dead pipal.
instances when a rock face such as the one outside Sirohi village was considered to derive its power from its association with the village pir (mystic) and one has also come across numerous trees imbued with sacred qualities of different kinds. The most famous was the pipal (Ficus religiosa) tree in the hills behind the village of Dhauj which was considered as being imbued with the spirit of the Goddess Kali. People stung by snakes were said to find a cure from her help, if they vowed to sacrifice at her shrine (Gazetteer of the Delhi District 1884: 59). At the annual fair held there, pilgrims from Ballabgarh, Gurgaon, Palwal, Faridabad, Nuh, Firozpur and Alwar came to make offerings. The shrine still exists, now called Dadi Pipalasan (Plate 14). However, the pipal has since died and a bargard/banyan (Ficus benghalensis) has taken its place (Plate 15).

More interesting are those cases where elements of the past historical geography of a village were similarly incorporated into the local religious universe. To understand this, let us look very briefly at the history of this tehsil. Pre-Mughal Ballabgarh has a long antecedent history stretching back to the protohistoric late Harappan (1500 BC) and Painted Grey Ware cultural levels (1000 BC). The abundance and geographical spread of historical and early medieval settlements is even more impressive when, along with the riverine plain, the rugged Aravalli uplands and interior plateau area were systematically opened out. In fact, the distribution of settlements suggests that since the historical period there has been a steady continuity at or around most of these locations. What is also reasonably clear, however, is that, at these stable locations, there were constant readjustments of population groups and demographic mobility. There were movements of Gaur brahmins, along with segments of animal-grazing Gujars, Jat and Rajput agriculturists, into different parts of Ballabgarh in the medieval centuries and we are fortunate to have documentation of this in the traditions of migrations of these groups which are recorded with their genealogists, the Bhatas. For instance, the three major population groups in old Faridabad, after it was set up by Murtaza Khan (i.e. Sheikh Farid), at the outset of the seventeenth century, were 'outsiders': the Khatris (traders) came from Jaipur and Jodhpur, the Brahmins, of the Parasara gotra, from Indore (pers. testimony of Jit Ram Bhat and Dr Lakhha) and at least some of the Saityads came from Bokhara, as, for instance, Afzal Ali who was given a mafi of 400 bighas of land, two wells and a large garden (Gazetteer of the Delhi District 1884: 80). Similarly, at Tilpat village, identified with Tilaprashta of the Mahabharata tradition, there is a 40 m high mound which was the site of limited excavations that established a 1000 BC cultural stratum there (Lal 1954/1955: 141). One is also certain, on the basis of an archaeological reconnaissance done in 1994, that Tilpat remained largely inhabited well into the medieval period. However, the old family trees of resident Brahmins who constituted a substantial segment of the medieval village population, go back only to the early sixteenth century or so. A case in point is the family tree of the late Pandit Nathu Singh Girdawar which is traced back to AD 1525 and to a personage called Mukha (the family tree from AD 1525 till 1950 in the form of a flow chart is available in the village). It is understandable, then, that such village residents would not view various archaeological indicators of the past history/histories of their habitational area in terms of their own community background or in terms that are in consonance with modern archaeological thinking. Instead, they chose to view them through a filter of traditional socio-religious associations.

Expectations of miraculous cures of ailments, for instance, came to be embodied in slag
from the old village mound. At Sihi, a place regarded locally as the birthplace of Surdas, a medieval bhakti poet, there is a mound with habitational debris going back to 1000 BC which yields large quantities of iron slag. These, however, were locally believed to be the 'bones' of snakes and were used as antidotes in ailments caused through poison (cf. Lahiri 1995: 129–30). What imbued these residues of early metal working with a sacred character was their 'restitution' within a discourse that is grounded in an old religious tradition. This tradition pertains to a sacrifice that was said to have been conducted by Janmejaya, a king in the Mahabharaata, the oldest religious epic of India – in fact, structurally speaking, this is crucial to the construction of the epic tale since the latter was recited during the intervals of that sacrifice. This was conducted by Janmejaya to avenge the death of his father, Parikshit, who had been bitten by Taksaka, a serpent king. In the sacrificial fire thousands of snakes were said to have died through the performance of a serpent-spell and it was locally believed, as it still is, that this yajna was conducted at Sihi. That this connection, between an epic event and a local mound at Sihi, is definitely part of a tradition that circulated in the sixteenth century is known from, among other things, the testimony of Harirai, author of Bhavapraakasha (cited in Yadav 1979: 34), who stated that Sur's Sihi was the place where Janmejaya had performed the snake sacrifice. I found this belief illuminating also because it is yet another instance of movement between 'High Tradition' and popular religious belief. A local archaeological phenomenon was interwoven with a finely tuned textual image of the Mahabharaata. In the process it transformed the meaning that was traditionally read into the epic episode (as also into mundane garbage of a past culture) and attempted, through this transformation, to create for a village spot an important space in the larger cultural geography of India.

Similarly, structural ruins and stone etchings even today are generally described and explained with reference to phenomena that are intelligible in terms of local religious beliefs. At Dhauj, the Meo inhabitants (pers. testimony of Hasmat and Kasim Khan) recount an old tradition about the quartzite structure (date: thirteenth to fifteenth centuries AD) on the western edge of the village. Originally domed and locally called the Dera, it is considered as being the overnight handiwork of a Jinn, a class of spirits regarded as belonging to the malevolent dead (Plate 16). Among other things, Jinns have no bones in their arms, only four fingers and no thumb (Rose 1911: 207). Similarly, at Gothra Mohabbatabad, in the hills immediately above what is called Uddalaka muni ka taposthana – which is marked by a Gupta ekamukhalinga – and adjacent to a twelfth-century rock inscription is an etching on a rock surface. Made up of three fan-like chequered elements emanating from a small central triangle, this seems to be a prototype of a game. Local Gujjars, however, consider this to be the dao (machette) of the Devi (i.e. the goddess). One may add many such examples, but the more general point that needs to be made is that through such associations both the natural geography/physiography and products of past cultures in the lived environment of the village inhabitants, Hindus and Muslims, were incorporated into their cultural universe.

The third element, reverence to the pir/pirs, commonly encountered in rural Ballabgarh, like the first was constituted through a deliberate physical form – the grave/tomb. Pirs were local mystics, generally of Muslim faith although revered by other groups as well. Generally supposed to be of unassuming countenance, they were believed to have miraculous powers and attracted devotion even after their death. This tradition in north
India is old – the earliest pir spot goes back to 531 A H (AD 1136–7) in Narnaul, Mahendragarh (Parihar 1985: 46). The pir graves of Ballabgarh, commonly found at the geographical peripheries of villages and village lands, are, however, more difficult to date. They were largely anonymous, containing no label inscriptions that would allow us to identify the personages that lie buried, nor are they listed in the chapters specially devoted to pirs in medieval accounts. Often, they were mere mud-covered kaccha (temporary) tombs. There were some substantial pir tombs such as the ziarat of Megupir, north of Bhoapur, with a domed quartzite superstructure, and lakhauri brick bases and/or structures, as at the pir shrines of Mujehri, Kabulpur Khadar and Dalelgarh, among other settlements. However, in the absence of inscriptions or any other written testimony, it may be that what appear today as pir spots of the Mughal period have antecedents going back to the Sultanate centuries, especially since this zone is geographically contiguous to the core area of the Delhi Sultanate. Whatever may be their origins, it is certain that, around the late medieval settlements of Ballabgarh, these were commonly encountered religious forms.

As stated earlier, these were also religious forms that attracted devotion from various castes and communities. The basis for this negotiation by which the saint and his tomb were commonly revered may be sought, to some extent, in the philosophical commonalities between Islam and Hindu beliefs. This has been well put by A. B. M. Habibullah in the context of the Sufi pirs of the Sultanate period:

Whether one agrees or not with the view that Indian Vedantism was largely responsible for its growth, it is undeniable that the mysticism of the sufi furnished Islam’s philosophical point of contact with Hinduism. . . . In the sufi’s pantheistic outlook and engrossment with the soul which transcended the formalism of religion, the spiritualist
Hindu recognized a familiar cult; his humility, tolerance and humanism held out a powerful appeal.

(Habibullah 1976: 251–2)

What Habibullah did not mention is that local cosmologies rooted in Hinduism were known to have deified important mendicants/yogis with superhuman powers. Muslim holy men were very much within this tradition—this explains the ease with which pir spots came to be accommodated in rural village geography. This may also explain why Muslims could offer a similar regard to Hindu mendicants. An instance in point concerns nineteenth-century Garhmukteswar (less than a hundred miles east of Ballabgarh tehsil) where the Muslim ‘Jemautdar’ informed Bishop Heber about:

a very wonderful thing in the neighbourhood; that there were two Hindoo Yogis, who lived in different cells in the wilderness, about two coss from the village, in opposite directions, of whom the one was never hurt by the tygers though living in the neighbourhood where they most abounded, and where no other man would pass a night for half Rohilcund; while, to the other, a tyger actually came every night and licked his hands, and fondled and lay by him for hours.

Heber also noted that ‘the Jemautdar was a Mussulaman, and had no motive for swelling the praises of a Hindoo saint, so that I have little doubt that he himself believed what he told me’. It probably escaped Heber’s notice that this was entirely in keeping with the religious practices of the Muslim notable where reverence was traditionally shown to ascetics, during their lifetimes and in their death.

The tradition of revering pir graves in Ballabgarh is even now a living one, although the partition years (1946–7) and the violence attending upon them ensured that only a small number of Muslims live there today. However, pir shrines have survived and prospered because of local devotion, even from such groups that have migrated into the state only after 1950. Plate 17 is of one such shrine, of a Sultan Saiyyad Baba. This shrine is situated on an abandoned mound (Agwanpur ka Kheda) and has been renovated by a Sikh resident of a nearby village—Ismailpur—whose family from Pakistan settled here only fifty years ago.
Conclusion

What do these various elements that animated the religious geography of a small tehsil imply?

First of all, they imply the problems involved in viewing the text as the source and signifier of religious geography. Sultan Saiyyad Baba and his grave at Agwanpur, the tradition and memorial of Baba Hrdayram at Majesar, the khera sthana as a religious manifestation of rural anxiety related to agricultural production and biological reproduction, the miraculous pipal tree of Dhauj, the healing powers of mud and slag – these are hardly mentioned in any text. They appear as elements of Ballabgarh’s religious geography only through the microcosm of archaeology and oral history. It is not that ground-level religious representations in Ballabgarh were not influenced at all by what is contained in religious literature. It is just that, as the case of Sihi demonstrates, these representations did not simply and mimetically reproduce the prescriptions/proscriptions contained in the scriptural tradition. Moreover, textual discourses on consecrated spots and phenomena are generally schematic and monolithic. To squeeze the lived reality of a spatio-temporal area into such structures does violence to the different domains that exist, each with their own specificities.

Next, as we distinguish these various domains, archaeology and oral history enable us to individualize and separate, even within those forms that are part of the ‘Great Tradition’ and have a vivid textual reality, the varied and multiple components of commemoration – a temple, for instance, may be viewed as the habitation of a presiding deity, also as a monument that signified the continuance of a family lineage and the circumstances which made that possible, and as a structure which served as a memorial to episodes in local clan traditions. Similarly, the importance of the mosque among Saiyyads and Sheikhs was not replicated in the villages with substantial Meo populations. This rich variety is hardly emphasized in religious literature.

Third, the infinite wealth of meanings within each domain and between them is not merely a question of detail – these are related to historical specificities that include the presence of multiple population groups, with their various histories of movement, with their own social institutions, and the important ways in which these groups intersected in their religious worship and customs and the basis of these intersections. Moreover, these intersections ensured that sacred domains at the folk level could not be separated strictly on the basis of clan and religion – a pir grave may have been an Islamic form but was regarded as a sacred site by various rural groups. At the same time, because the local landscape was perceived and constructed through diverse filters, these elements also cannot be treated as aspects of a homogeneous culturally unified tradition. One does not have to ‘Hinduize’ or ‘Islamicize’ landscapes or periods. Instead, medieval religious geography has to be seen as being produced by a context of shared social norms and tolerances, of convergences, along with sanctions of caste, clan and religion which disclosed limits – the Jatav (untouchable caste) notion of the village temple of Kurali from which she/he was excluded was far from that of Rupa Singh and his clan for whom it signified the continuance of their lineage. In just the same way the mosque built by the Sheikh Farid, Emperor Jahangir’s treasurer, was a place of religious congregation for the
Saiyyads and Sheikhs but not for the Brahmin residents of Bad mohalla or the traders of the Khatri wara of medeival Faridabad.

References


