

**GODS FOR THE MODERN ERA: THE RISE OF MIRACLE SHRINES IN  
NORTHWESTERN INDIA**

by

Rufin Jamey Saul

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
(Asian Languages and Cultures)  
in the University of Michigan  
2013

Doctoral Committee:

Associate Professor Arvind-Pal Mandair, Chair  
Assistant Professor Varuni Bhatia  
Professor Madhav Deshpande  
Associate Professor Matthew Hull  
Professor Philip Lutgendorf, University of Iowa



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## **DEDICATION**

*For all devotees of Balaji.*

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Research for this dissertation was conducted in India over a period of 12 months with funding from a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad fellowship, and also a Rackham International Research Award. I would also like to acknowledge the support of my Ph.D. dissertation committee, Arvind Mandair, Varuni Bhatia, Madhav Deshpande, Matthew Hull, and Philip Lutgendorf. Within my own department, I was fortunate for the unfailing support of Professors Mandair, Bhatia, and Deshpande. Professor Hull provided a much-appreciated ethnographic perspective from Anthropology. And I feel especially fortunate that Professor Lutgendorf, who has published widely on topics related to the subject of this dissertation generously agreed to join my committee, even though he teaches at a different university than my own academic program.

In India, I received immeasurable support from the USIEF staff in Delhi in conducting my research. Returning to the serene USIEF center to take care of the occasional formalities of research always marked a respite from the uncertainties of fieldwork. The USIEF-sponsored conference in Goa was a very memorable occasion, in which virtually all Fulbright students in India and the surrounding region converged to talk about their research. In the beginning stages of my research, Ann Grodzins Gold very kindly shared her knowledge about Rajasthan and Balaji, and gave me guidance on pursuing the process of affiliating with an overseas academic institution for research. Once I had arrived in India, I also benefited from guidance provided by

my fieldwork advisor, Professor Shail Mayaram of the Center for the Study of Developing Societies in Delhi.

For around half of my time in fieldwork I officially resided in Salasar, the village where one of the main Balaji temples is found, and for the balance of my time I shifted my attention to Mehndipur, the location of the other main Balaji temple. I am grateful to have received much useful information during my many meetings with the Brahmins of Salasar, including Harish Dadhich. I much enjoyed joining them as a spectator for their daily cricket games. Going with the Brahmins on their annual foot pilgrimage to the shrine in Goth Manglod introduced me to the experience of multi-day pilgrimage on foot. Among the Brahmins, Bajrang and his cohort of scripture reciters also gave me valuable information about rituals in Salasar. Manoj gave me valuable information about domestic spirits and took me to shrines in the area of Salasar.

In Mehndipur, I received helpful information from a number of local shopkeepers and villagers, and the police of the Karauli Mehndipur station, with whom I enjoyed a good meal and conversation. Jawan, the ritual offerings salesman, helped me to avoid long lines into the temple, for which I will always be indebted. Farther afield, many people in villages throughout northwestern India, met at Balaji's temples and elsewhere, welcomed me into their homes and told me about their experiences with deities. Menpal Machra, Vinod Jakhar, and many others brought me to religious sites that became important in my research. Lastly, I wish to acknowledge the urban contacts that helped me to discover devotional groups in cities throughout India. Public religious song events in cities became a rich research resource. I would like to particularly acknowledge Pawan Sarawagi for introducing me to Marwari urban culture, which was central to my research.

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## GLOSSARY OF HINDI NAMES AND TERMS

All Hindi words, including names, have been transliterated with diacritics for ease in pronunciation. All definitions conform to R. S. McGregor's *Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary* (1993). For proper nouns and Indic words commonly used in English, I have additionally provided Anglicized forms in brackets.

*Amāvasyā*: The night of the new moon, at the end of its waning phase.

*Andhāviśvās*: Superstition [literally "blind faith"].

*Arth*: Wealth or finance.

*Arth Yug*: The era of wealth (or money), in reference to the present-day corrupt or money-driven period of time within the Kali Yug.

*Ārtī*: Ceremonial worship in the presence of a god's image, typically conducted by a *pujārī* with sound accompaniment (percussion or *bhajans*).

*Arzi*: A formal offering to a deity as an application for assistance in resolving a supernatural affliction; in this study, it is brought to deities such as Mehndipur Balaji who oversee exorcisms.

*Āśirvād*: A blessing.

*Āśram*: A residential religious sanctuary.

*Ātmā*: Soul.

*Ātmāviśvās*: Self-confidence.

*Avatār*: An earthly manifestation of God.

*Bābā*: A term of respect for a holy man or deity.

*Bābosā* [Babosa]: A particular god, he derives his divine power from Balaji (or Hanuman) and is popular among urban Jains who trace their ancestry to the region of Salasar.

*Bābū*: An Indian government bureaucrat.

*Bāgrī* [Bagri]: A local dialect of Hindi spoken in the border region between Rajasthan, Punjab, and Haryana; this region corresponds to most of Salasar Balaji's devotional heartland.

*Bāl Brahmācārī*: One who remains celibate throughout life as a mark of devotion; in this study, the term is used in reference to the hereditary *mahants* of Mehndipur.

*Bālājī* [Balaji]: Any of several local manifestations of the monkey god Hanuman in northeastern Rajasthan.

*Bālak*: A child; many devotees regard Mehndipur Balaji as a *bālak*.

*Baniyā*: A merchant.

*Bhabhūti*: Ash from a sacred fire; it has magical uses.

*Bhagat*: A faith healer; a devotee.

*Bhagvān*: God.

*Bhairū* [Bhairava]: A god worshiped at many shrines in Rajasthan, often in his fierce form; in Mehndipur, he is worshiped as a divine assistant of Balaji.

*Bhajan*: A kind of religious song.

*Bhakti*: Devotion.

*Bhaṇḍārā*: A temporary establishment offering the public free food and a place to rest, particularly during a religious festival.

*Bhānjā*: One's sister's son.

*Bhūt*: A ghost.

*Bhūt-pret*: Ghosts and demons; the term is often used to collectively describe the invisible beings that trouble us.

*Cālīsā*: A kind of scripture for recitation, consisting of 40 verses; sometimes used in reference to *Hanumān Cālīsā*.

*Camatkār*: A miracle.

*Cūrmā*: A kind of sweet consisting of flour and sugar that is popular in northeastern Rajasthan, and often offered to the divine.

*Dādhīc* [Dadhich]: A particular Brahmin clan; one branch of this clan serves as *pujārīs* for Salasar Balaji's temple.

*Ḍaṇḍavat*: The performance of ritual prostrations on the ground as one approaches a deity's temple; the same action as *pet pālāniyā*.

*Darbār*: A court; in this context, the scene of a court presided over by a god, in the company of other divinities.

*Dargah*: The mausoleum of a Muslim saint; both Muslims and Hindus often come to *dargahs* to pray for miracles.

*Darkhāst*: A small offering of money to a deity to signal one's arrival at a shrine with the intention of resolving a supernatural affliction; in Mehndipur, one is also expected to pay a visit to the deity at the end of treatment to formally request permission to depart.

*Darśan*: Divine audience; coming before the image of a deity.

*Dasēhrā* [Dashehra]: a nationwide annual Hindu holiday; at Balaji's shrines, this is considered to be an especially auspicious occasion for paying respect to the deity.

*Dhām*: A religious shrine.

*Dharm* [Dharma]: The divine law of the universe.

*Dharmśālā*: A rest house for pilgrims.

*Gadā*: Hanuman's emblematic club weapon; as Hanuman-derived gods, Balaji and Babosa also frequently carry this weapon.

*Gośālā*: A sanctuary for cows.

*Hanumān cālīsā*: A particular scripture that honors Hanuman; it is understood to facilitate supernatural benefits (e.g. the granting of miracles) for those who recite it.

*Havan*: A sacred fire for invoking divine blessing.

*Havelī*: A mansion.

*Iṣṭadev*: One's most favored deity.

*Jāgran*: A large public singing event in honor of a god; it may last anywhere from a few hours to an entire night until dawn.

*Jāp*: An incantation repeated many times in honor of a deity.

*Jāt* [Jat]: A caste group traditionally working as farmers across much of northwestern India.

*Jīvit samādhī*: Intentional death while in a state of meditation.

*Jogī* [Jogī]: A widely distributed caste group traditionally associated with mendicacy; some of members of this caste now operate the various small shrines on one of the hills adjacent to Mehndipur.

*Jot*: the sacred flame kept in a temple.

*Kal*: Machine (in this context).

*Kal yug*: The era of machines; another way of describing the Kali Yug.

*Kali*: Strife (note: not Kālī, the goddess).

*Kali yug*: The fourth, final, and most morally degenerate of the four eras that constitute Hinduism's endlessly-repeating cycles of cosmic time.

*Kāñvar*: a bamboo pole used for carrying loads at each end.

*Kāñvar yātrā*: a journey on foot from Hardwar to bring sacred water from the Ganga back to one's hometown and local temple, with the water traditionally carried in baskets slung on a pole; it is not typically necessary to walk to Hardwar, but rather only on the return journey from there.

*Kartāl*: A stick-like rattle for making music that is often held by faith healers while treating those who are spiritually afflicted; it represents the efficacy of religious songs to drive away malevolent spirits.

*Khāṭū śyām* [Khatu Shyam]: A local manifestation of Krishna in the region of Salasar; also the name of the site where he is worshiped.

*Kīrtan*: A public program of religious songs to invoke the divine.

*Kuldev*: A hereditary lineage god; normally any family has only one *kuldev*.

*Kuldevī*: A hereditary lineage goddess; a family may have one *kuldev* and one *kuldevī*.

*Kurtā*: A long collarless shirt often worn by men in India.

*Laḍḍū*: A ball-shaped sweet popularly offered to the divine and in turn received from *pujārīs* (priests) as a form of blessing.

*Mahant*: A religious leader; in this context, the hereditary caretaker of Mehndipur Balaji's temple.

*Mālā*: A rosary for the recitation of prayers.

*Maṇḍal*: A circle or organization; in this context, a devotional group.

*Mantra*: An incantation to elicit a supernatural response.

*Mārvāḍī* [Marwari]: Any merchant tracing descent to the Shekhawati region or adjacent areas, where Salasar is located.

*Mīnā* [Meena]: A tribal caste common in Rajasthan.

*Mukti*: Spiritual liberation; release from the cycle of rebirth in the world.

*Muṇḍan*: The ritual cutting of a child's hair in the temple of his lineage deity to mark his or her attainment of the milestone of a certain age (e.g. three years).

*Paidal*: Moving on foot.

*Paidal yātrā*: Journey or pilgrimage on foot.

*Paidal yātrī*: A pilgrim arriving on foot.

*Pāñcmukhī Hanumān* [Panchmukhi Hanuman]: A five-headed form of Hanuman [literally "Five-headed Hanuman"].

*Paṇḍā*: A kind of Brahmin or *paṇḍit* who has the responsibility of arranging the accommodations and ritual needs of pilgrims visiting the sacred Ganga at Hardwar; each paṇḍā traditionally maintains a hereditary responsibility for particular lineages, and keeps track of their family information.

*Parikramā*: Circumambulation around a shrine deity's image.

*Pāṭh*: Any scripture for devotional recitation.

*Pavitṛsthān*: A sacred place or region.

*Pet pālāniyā*: The performance of ritual prostrations on the ground; a Rajasthani term for *daṇḍavat*.

*Pitṛ*: An ancestor deity; in many cases, this may nowadays refer to the spirit of any deceased relative, even if not a direct ancestor.

*Pitṛ doś*: An affront to an ancestor spirit, often causing the spirit to harrass the living transgressors, and requiring the mediation of a religious specialist to undo the trouble.



*Prasād*: An offering to the divine, usually in the form of a sweet; normally a *pujārī* will consecrate it in the presence of the god's image and then return it to devotees for distribution among themselves.

*Pret*: A demon.

*Pūjā*: Worship.

*Pujārī*: A priest, most often of the Brahmin caste.

*Pūrṇimā*: The night of the full moon; the day preceding this night is especially popular for worshipping Hanuman or Balaji, as it is regarded as his (monthly) birthday.

*Rām nām*: An auspicious incantation in reverence to Rama.

*Śakti*: Divine power.

*Śalvār kamīz*: A pajama-like outfit that women in India commonly wear.

*Samādhi*: A memorial erected for a holy person or other notable; also a state of profound meditative concentration, which may precede a holy person's intentional exit from life (*jīvit samādhi*).

*Saṅkat*: An affliction; a possessing spirit.

*Saṅkatvālā*: One who is afflicted with spirit possession.

*Sant*: An ascetic.

*Satī*: A woman who immolates herself on her deceased husband's funeral pyre.

*Savāmani*: A ceremonial feast commissioned by a devotee in recognition of a prayer answered by the divine; normally produced as 50 kilograms of food, equal to 40 kilograms plus 10 extra (one *savā* = 125 percent, hence one and a quarter times 40 kilograms).

*Seṭh*: A prosperous merchant.

*Sevak*: A servant or employee, especially in a religious establishment.

*Sindūr*: A red paste commonly smeared on the images of gods, especially Hanuman or Balaji, as an act of reverence.

*Sindūrī hanumān*: An image of Hanuman (or Balaji) coated with *sindūr*.

*Śiśya*: A guru's disciple or follower.

*Śobhā yātrā*: A costumed religious procession typically leading to the site where a *jāgraṇ* will take place; it may also occur on a separate day as one component in a series of orchestrated public devotional events.

*Śrāddh*: A ceremony in honor of one's ancestors typically performed once a year in the days preceding the holiday known as Dashehra.

*Stotra*: A Sanskrit incantation to induce divine benefits.

*Sundarkāṇḍ*: A chapter in Tulsidas's Hindi-language *Rāmcaritmānas*; it documents Hanuman's exploits in reverence for Rama, and brings supernatural benefits when recited.

*Svarūp*: A self-formed divine image; such an image surfaces from the ground ready-made at a time of its own choosing, and is understood not to have been fashioned by human hands.

*Tantra*: An occult system of worship; often associated with Mehndipur Balaji (along with many other deities) due to his involvement with exorcism.

*Tāntrik*: A sorcerer who employs tantric methods, such as sending a ghost to possess a victim.

*Tapasya*: Physical austerities that lead to the acquisition of supernatural powers.

*Tīrth*: A pilgrimage shrine.

*Vaiṣṇava* [Vaishnava]: A branch of Hinduism in which Vishnu is regarded as the ultimate god in the cosmos; as Rama is an *avatār* of Vishnu, he, and associated deities, such as Hanuman, are typically included in Vaishnava worship.

*Viśvās*: Faith; in this context, it means faith in the divine.

*Yātrā*: A journey or pilgrimage.

*Yātrī*: A traveler or pilgrim.

*Yug*: Any of the four cyclicly repeating Hindu cosmic eras.

## NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

Throughout this dissertation, I have presented personal names and place names in the form that they are commonly known in English, without the use of diacritics (e.g. Rama, Krishna, Sita, Delhi). The titles of Sanskrit texts have been italicized and rendered with diacritics, with a final short "a" when needed, following conventional romanization (e.g. *Rāmāyaṇa*). Texts and terms presented in this study in a Hindi-language context have been italicized and transliterated with diacritics, but without a final short "a" except when indicated for euphony, in accordance with Hindi rather than Sanskrit usage (e.g. *yug*, *bhūt*, *bhagvān*, *tantra*, *tāntrik*). Indic terms commonly understood in English, or modified for English grammatical usage, appear unitalicized and without diacritics (e.g. karma, tantric). Note that a "*tāntrik*" is a practitioner of tantra, while "tantric" is simply an English adjectival form in reference to tantra. Also note, in transliteration, "c" is to be read as "ch," in accordance with the normal convention for romanizing Indic words.

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation argues that the development of religious shrines offering miracles in northwestern India has been substantially facilitated by neoliberal reforms and concomitant social change over the past twenty years. The study focuses on Balaji, a local manifestation of the monkey god Hanuman, at two sites in Rajasthan respectively known as Salasar and Mehndipur. This dissertation intersects with scholarship across disciplines on new religious movements, the popularization of faith and miracles as instruments of personal advancement, and the construction of local histories from oral accounts.

Structured as a collective oral history, the research shifts between analyses of present-day devotion at shrines of miracles, the religious practices of devotees in their home locales, case studies of priests and faith healers, and anecdotes about how Hindu devotion has changed in recent history. In these accounts, respondents interpret modern socioeconomic change as cosmically preordained history resulting in societal corruption. Faith in Balaji is understood as a path for restoring an idealized ancient moral society in which miracles are normal.

The historical backdrop of this study starts in 1990, when affluent merchants acclaimed Salasar Balaji and certain nearby deities as their hereditary guarantors of prosperity. These merchants also started urban devotional organizations based on their prior social and economic relationships. In the years of neoliberal reform, their prosperity and pious donations to Salasar's rulers, the Brahmins, spurred stories about miracles. This led to a new tradition of long pilgrimages on foot among farmers and townspeople from the region surrounding Salasar who were eager for a fast track to the good life.

Meanwhile, having a more decentralized form of local authority, Mehndipur became a magnet for faith healers attracted by the influx of pilgrims seeking relief from afflictions. From around 1996 on, this rising culture of pilgrimage spurred the establishment of many new faith healing shrines in Rajasthan. This study observes that healers have been pragmatically elevating their minor household spirits into miracle-granting gods to serve these new shrines. In the aftermath, this study documents the popular reification of Rajasthan as a reservoir of charismatic gurus and miracle shrines juxtaposed against a modernizing but decaying society.

# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background

### *The Aims of this Study*

This study investigates the spread of devotion for two gods known as Balaji over the last twenty years, one of which is worshiped at a shrine in the village of Salasar and the other in the village of Mehndipur. The two villages are in separate parts of northeastern Rajasthan. Although these two Balajis preside over rather different kinds of worship—Salasar Balaji (Figure 1-1) as a god who gives blessings and Mehndipur Balaji (Figure 1-2) best known as a god of exorcism—they share a name, a broader identity as manifestations of the pan-Indian Hindu monkey god Hanuman, and a proclivity for performing miracles. In this study I ask why devotion to these two Balajis grew and how this came about. I argue that this transformation was substantially facilitated by socioeconomic changes in the communities that embraced these gods over the last twenty years. As I will show, an initial burst of urban mercantile patronage of Balaji from around 1990 onwards initially propelled his rise to fame. This development, I suggest, was indicative of a longer-term societal turn towards seeking prosperity and self-betterment in line with the diffusion of global capitalist practices. Meeting this societal demand, religious intermediaries offering magical services in the name of these gods assumed new importance. This study thus documents the instrumentality of religious faith for getting ahead in a time of upward mobility, and broadly intersects with scholarship on new religious movements in the setting of contemporary emerging economies (Endres, Jackson, Taussig, Waller, Wiegele).



Figure 1-1. Salasar Balaji. Photograph distributed by Brahmins to pilgrims in Salasar.



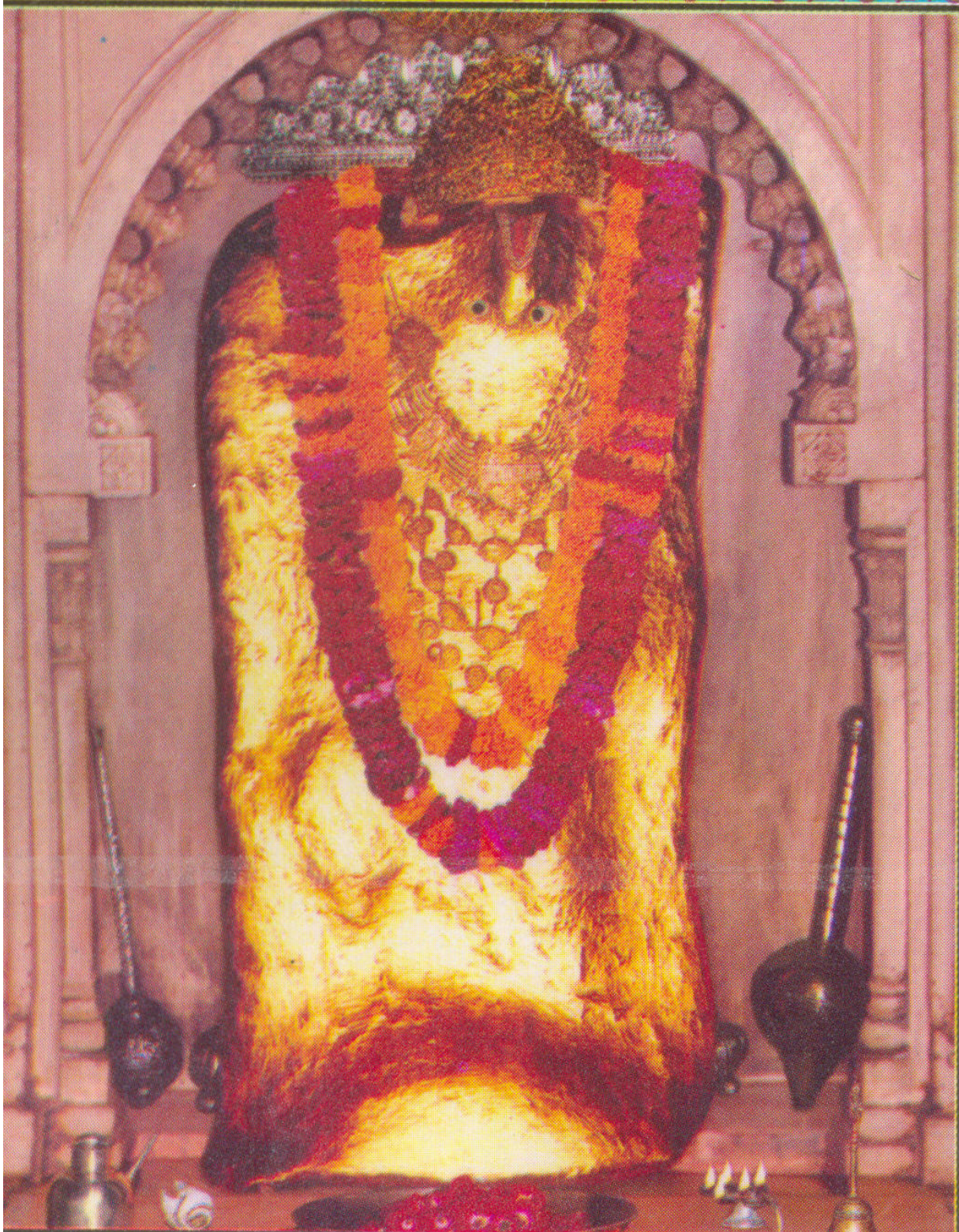


Figure 1-2. Mehndipur Balaji. Photograph of the god's image sold in Mehndipur.



In focusing on the growth of a culture of devotion centered on Balaji, this project provides a case study of local history primarily based on the oral accounts of religious intermediaries and devotees, thereby expanding the scope of inquiry beyond the availability of written texts. A few commercially sold texts, such as guidebooks for shrines and collections of religious songs, along with devotional CD and DVD videos, are available at Salasar and Mehndipur, and I have put these to use whenever possible. The historical period of this study is so recent that most of what I have written about has yet to receive scholarly attention. Further, the shrines are still growing, and faith healers undoubtedly continue to establish new shrines in the name of Balaji and other deities of the region, so there is more to discover. But, despite this ongoing flux, this study has a firm starting point. That is, while the two Balajis were already locally popular several decades ago, according to locals at the shrines and pilgrims alike, visitors dramatically increased from around 1990 onwards. Today it is locally claimed that each of these shrines receives a million or more visitors annually. On any given day, Mehndipur gets a more steady flow of visitors than Salasar, where the crowds tend to converge more on certain festival occasions, as discussed in Chapter 4, but everyone agrees on the two shrines' narrative of growth.

The transformation of these two sites from obscure villages to major pilgrim centers is the basic narrative that drives this study. Moreover, the story of the two Balajis is not restricted to these two main shrines. At the same time that visitors increased around 1990, numerous self-organized communities based on devotion to these deities started to coalesce in cities around India. After a few years, seemingly in response to this rising wave of visitors, new satellite shrines started to appear in northeastern Rajasthan. The collective proliferation of these various new places of pilgrimage across northeastern Rajasthan from the mid-to-late 1990s has substantiated a popular viewpoint across northwestern India that this is a land of miracle shrines.



From the beginning, this project entailed overcoming a highly lopsided field of scholarship on shrines in northeastern Rajasthan. A handful of articles, a book, and some discussions within books on other topics have focused on the treatment of spirit possession and tantric or occult literature sold in Mehndipur (Satija, Pakaslahti, Dwyer, Smith, Lutgendorf) while Salasar, where possession is not treated, has barely entered into scholarly discussion (Babb; more recently, see Saul).<sup>1</sup> Some other deities based in the Salasar region that similarly receive urban mercantile patronage, to be discussed as well, have remained unknown to scholarship up to this point, even though they have many adherents (including many who also worship Balaji). Most notable among these are Khatu Shyam, a local manifestation of Krishna, and Babosa, a new god who is closely modeled after Balaji. This study therefore marks an attempt at smoothing out this empirical imbalance so that we can begin to talk about the recent historical transformation of devotional culture at the shrines of these deities in more inclusive, systemic terms.

Despite the output of scholarship on Mehndipur Balaji, little has been said about what pilgrims do in relation to the god when they have returned home. For this reason, one of my core aims in fieldwork was to visit devotees in their home setting, as I also did with Salasar Balaji's devotees. In embarking on this investigation, certain questions came to mind. What is the relationship between these two Balais? Has the worship of Mehndipur Balaji expanded in relation to any particular social or economic networks? How is Mehndipur Balaji connected to additional shrines newly founded in his name? For Salasar, the gap in our knowledge is even bigger, given the dearth of scholarship; I initially suspected that this Balaji might perform similarly to better-known Mehndipur Balaji. Since the god of Salasar, like that of Mehndipur, is named Balaji, do they similarly oversee exorcism? And if not, then why should this practice be restricted only to Mehndipur Balaji? As I found out, exorcism is not practiced in Salasar, which

will be the starting point for the discussion in Chapter 3. Tracking the reason for this absence of exorcism at Salasar ultimately led me to think about the correlation between the socioeconomic context of religious shrines and the doctrines to which devotees adhere. As I found, in upholding a particular doctrine of Salasar Balaji's powers (i.e. banning exorcism), local religious authorities simultaneously enshrine their own indispensability within that system. Hence, faith healers, who practice exorcism and are potential rivals to Brahmin ritual authority, are effectively held back from offering their services in Salasar.

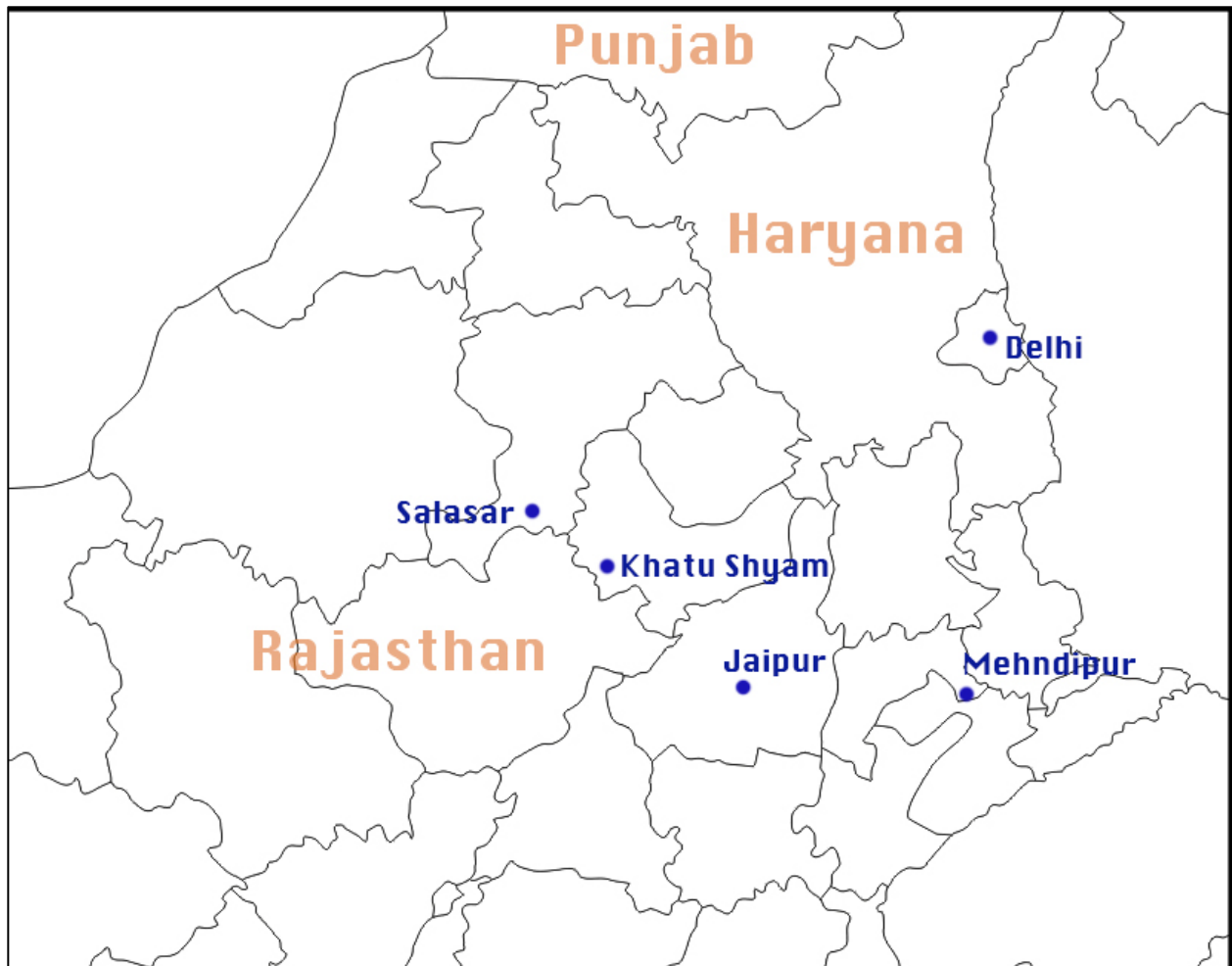
Notwithstanding the absence of exorcism in Salasar, I later found that treatment for spirit possession is common in many other shrines in the region of Salasar, virtually all of which were established under the guidance of faith healers within the last fifteen years or so. Many of these faith healers revere Salasar Balaji as a spiritual overlord while distancing themselves from the authority of the Brahmins. How do we reconcile the common inclination towards exorcism at new shrines that pay spiritual allegiance to Salasar Balaji with its absence in Salasar itself? In Chapter 7, I address this problem through case studies of faith healers and their shrines in northeastern Rajasthan. I argue that the prevalence of pilgrimage to Salasar and a general rise of interest in miracles have stimulated the development of these new shrines offering treatment for possession, to which the title of this dissertation alludes. The fact that faith healing itself is made unavailable in Salasar means that these new shrines are in a position to offer a service for a demand that is otherwise unmet. This has led to a regional coexistence of major temples offering blessings and smaller "start-ups" that serve a complimentary role for pilgrims.

This patchwork of shrines starts to seem even more complex when we consider that those shrines that are ritually oriented to Mehndipur Balaji are also found in the region of Salasar Balaji, but not around Mehndipur itself. At first glance, it would seem surprising to think that

the area around Salasar offers a more congenial setting for Mehndipur Balaji than the area of Mehndipur. Are these new Mehndipur-oriented shrines somehow connected to Salasar? In Chapter 7, I explain this in terms of the dynamics of patronage in the Salasar region, which is different than in the area around Mehndipur. Salasar and similar shrines such as Khatu Shyam are very popular among merchants from cities around India, commonly known as Marwaris, who trace their ancestry to this region. Their patronage is reflexive; they are supporting what they believe to be their own family lineage gods. On the other hand, Mehndipur is located in a land predominantly inhabited by tribals and Rajput overlords who had no special connection to Balaji. Therefore, Mehndipur lacks hereditary Marwari or other patrons (Map 1). I suggest, then, that new shrines in the Salasar region that are oriented to Mehndipur are functionally the same as faith healing shrines that are oriented to Salasar (all offering exorcism) and that they similarly benefit from the overall rise in pilgrimage to that area. They effectively constitute a peripheral ritual economy of sorts in relation to Salasar.

At these new faith healing shrines, Salasar Balaji and Mehndipur Balaji are equally accessible as gods of miracles, but when one goes to the two Balajis' respective main temples in Salasar and Mehndipur one will encounter very distinct protocols for one or the other deity (blessings versus exorcism). The new faith healing shrines' seeming lack of adherence to distinct doctrines reflects the personal freedom that the presiding gurus have in innovating to appeal to visitors seeking miracles by whatever means is efficacious. As I examine in Chapter 7, each faith healer of these new miracle shrines operates as an independent agent, and is generally autonomous from the surrounding community, and so sets the agenda of his own shrine in accordance with his personal inclinations. My approach to pursuing the evolution of these various new shrines, and the stories of those who run them, was not easily planned prior to arriving in the field, given

these sites' obscurity in scholarship. However, I already knew that Mehndipur was a popular pilgrimage center, and I had hoped that Salasar would prove to be similar lively. I had thought I would meet pilgrims at these sites and then carry the study further in their home environments. As it turned out, this method was augmented by an unanticipated discovery: promotional posters for public religious events for Balaji or allied deities in distant cities. Members of the devotional organizations hosting these events often affix these posters to walls in the vicinity of the main



Map 1. The region of Salasar and Mehndipur.

shrines. I would record the pertinent information and then set off, often on very short notice. Once I had showed up at the event, I had the opportunity to meet local devotees, which would lead to additional investigations. Chapter 6 of this study, in which I discuss urban devotional groups, would have been impossible without being able to attend such events in distant cities. This study's exploration of the growth of devotion to the gods of shrines, then, is necessarily multi-sited in the interest of tracking systemic social and religious change among a geographically diffuse clientele.

### *Ethnography as Local History*

In this subsection, I will give an overview of this dissertation's theorization of the history of miracle shrines in northeastern Rajasthan. Based on local testimony, we are looking at the rise of deities that were not well known outside their respective regions, or outright nonexistent, until two decades ago or less. The pilgrimage shrines of this study do not have a long and venerable history like many of the most famous holy places of northern India. For instance, Diana Eck has framed her study of Banaras within ancient Sanskrit Hindu mythologies, and James Lochtefeld has done similarly for Hardwar, albeit with more emphasis on recent historical change.<sup>2</sup> To understand the present situation at Balaji's shrines, we need to look at the past two decades, which is why this ethnographic study is really an oral history assembled from interviews with hundreds of respondents. The scope of this study is largely contained within the span of my respondents' memories, except for a few old texts discussed. The narrative thus moves between the present and the recent past, revealing events both in the making and in retrospect.

As I suggested at the outset of this chapter, in the case of Salasar Balaji the transition to a major pilgrimage shrine can be inferred from the formation of widespread urban devotional organizations dedicated to this god from 1990 onwards. In Chapter 6, I will discuss the oldest

such organization known to me, in Mumbai. It is connected to some particularly affluent and influential Marwari merchants. Well-connected Marwaris are often referred to as “VIPs,” as their generous donations to religious shrines in Rajasthan and elsewhere earn them special privileges, such as being able to enter Balaji’s temple through a special shortcut so as to avoid long lines. In the village of Salasar, the historical advent of these faraway urban organizations was coeval with the appearance of plaques in the main temple and on certain infrastructural projects around town (religious rest houses, public fountains, and so forth) announcing donations, apparently from many of the same Marwaris that were forming the urban devotional organizations. In the early 1990s the Marwaris’ awareness that they were descended from merchants of the Salasar region underwent a revival, and so they felt a duty to revere Balaji and allied gods of the area as their lineage deities or *kuldevs*, and to materially support their shrines. As the Brahmins who serve as *pujārīs* or priests at Balaji’s temple concur, these merchants were the first outsiders in modern times to discover the god’s miracles.

I argue that Mehndipur went through a similar trajectory, in its own way. Although the site had already gained some regional fame by the late 1970s on account of a charismatic faith healing guru there, locals say that it was only in the early 1990s that it attracted truly large crowds, especially from afar, as was the case at Salasar. There is material evidence for this, although less straightforward than at Salasar because of the diffuse nature of patronage in Mehndipur, inasmuch as the Marwaris do not have an ancestral relation to the site. We can say that there were very few *dharmśālās* or rest houses in Mehndipur until the early 1990s, as was also the case in Salasar, but these notably increased during the 1990s, suggesting an upswing in arrivals and patronage or outside investment. At Mehndipur in the early 1990s, we also start to see dated inscriptions from devotees from the region at the nexus of Delhi, Haryana, and Uttar

Pradesh on outdoor ancestor altars, suggesting a heightened level of interest in this site as a center for managing ancestor spirits. These altars were, and continue to be, installed after exorcisms in which a troublesome *pitr* or family spirit would be ritually extracted from a possessed individual and induced to henceforth reside in Mehndipur under the watch of Balaji.

The exorcisms required for these altars in Mehndipur are typically faith healer-mediated events. I infer that in the old days, before these altars has been erected, such as when the charismatic guru mentioned earlier had facilitated all miracles in Mehndipur, outside faith healers had not yet entered the picture at this site. The advent of these altars in Mehndipur broadly indicates a public expansion of faith healing and also the large-scale arrival of healers, who have since become a ubiquitous feature at this site. We can also suspect the earlier lack of faith healers, and their subsequent arrival, from ethnographic descriptions of pilgrimage there (see Satija for a pre-arrival study), and the testimony of locals themselves. Thus, it was only in the 1990s that large numbers of faith healers started to come to Mehndipur with their clients, seemingly due to a societal trend towards magical remedies (which resonates with Meera Nanda's thesis that Indian society has been undergoing a kind of re-enchantment with magic and ritualism).<sup>3</sup> As Mehndipur was not considered to be an ancestral shrine to anyone in its own right, its claim to fame rested not on ancestral piety but rather the efficacy of the god to heal afflictions. This meant that patronage was not concentrated exclusively on a class of religious administrators who represented the site, as in Salasar, but rather on the diverse faith healers who assert the ability to channel Balaji's power for the benefit of devotees.

The influx of new money in the 1990s substantially fueled a culture of miracles at both of Balaji's temples. I argue that this culture was fueled by the capitalist zeitgeist of rapid personal advancement in the wake of neoliberal economic reforms, as visitors prayed for miracles to bring

the good life. The flip side of this economic development was that corruption and tax avoidance became increasingly pervasive in public life, even though the government had intended tax and tariff reductions as incentives for citizens to honestly report their income. It appears that to many devotees, Balaji (either of the two) is a morally upright alternative to government bureaucracy for getting things done. For instance, in Chapter 5 I note a devotee's description of Balaji and his assistants in Mehndipur as a kind of divine bureaucracy. As is well known, we live in the *Kali Yug*, the Hindu era predestined to moral degeneracy, when corruption is on the rise. Most devotees looking at the state of the world conclude that faith in Balaji, being a manifestation of heroic Hanuman, will restore the principles of earlier eras, when Hanuman's overlord Rama righteously ruled the world. So, Balaji not only exemplifies selfless devotion to Rama but also serves as the modern representation of a time before corruption came into the world. Further, the fact that he operates by miracles, as his followers readily attest, means that he is a very efficient servant of the public (more so than human bureaucrats), albeit granting wishes by his own whim, or in response to the devotee's demonstration of faith.

For devotees seeking favors from Balaji, the god therefore serves as a middleman for the higher gods, like Hanuman, whom Philip Lutgendorf therefore calls "the monkey in the middle."<sup>4</sup> By the late 1990s, spurred by stories of miracles, many farmers and townspeople from the region north of Salasar—especially those of the Jat caste—started a new tradition of walking hundreds of kilometers on foot to the shrine. This development arose several years after *dharmśālās* and other infrastructure had become part of the landscape in Salasar. These *dharmśālās* guaranteed hospitality for pilgrims; prior to their construction, I was told, the few pilgrims who came were obliged to sleep on a mat in the outdoor scrub. My Jat respondents also cited their acquisition of farm vehicles (signaling increased prosperity) later in the 1990s as a key



factor that made it possible for them to bring provisions in support of such long journeys. Thousands of young men in particular nowadays make this march to pray for divine assistance in passing college exams and getting jobs, showing Balaji's relevance to economic ambitions. Thus, I interpret the rise in Balaji's stature on multiple levels. On the one hand, it goes hand in hand with a broader societal embrace of Hanuman as a heroic symbol of Hindu resurgence. Then too, of course, there is the narrative of caste (or societal) advancement (tractors and so forth), which allows for more leisure and mobility. Further, I document a broad trend to externalize domestic religion in public terms. Jats said that in the old days they mostly worshiped Hanuman at home, whereas nowadays they identify him with Balaji (on account of his miracles) and therefore embark on very public journeys to that shrine.

By the late 1990s numerous faith healers were bringing devotees to Mehndipur to be spiritually treated for anxiety-like syndromes and other problems of everyday life. One frequent kind of ailment was ghost possession as the result of attack by a *tāntrik* [sorcerer], often at the behest of a jealous relative engaged in a property inheritance dispute with the afflicted. I would consider this period at both Salasar and Mehndipur as the "mature phase" in the history of Balaji's ascent, when the devotional clientele had become well established, and pilgrims started to increasingly arrive from more distant areas, like northern Punjab. We can see an indication of this development in the rise of devotional organizations in that area of Punjab around this time, which I discuss at length in Chapter 6. Many of the devotional organizations that I document in Punjab were established on the basis of preexisting economic relationships among merchants, which were transmuted into joint reverence for charismatic gurus. This model for the formation of mercantile religious communities is distinct from the Marwari discovery of Salasar Balaji as an ancestral protector, in which gurus played no special role.

I correlate this mature phase in the rise of pilgrimage to Balaji's temples with the establishment of "second generation" shrines in the Salasar area from the mid-to-late 1990s onwards, most often dedicated to either of the two Balajis, but sometimes other local gods or ancestor spirits newly elevated as gods. Although, as noted, no new shrines geared to pilgrims were established near Mehndipur, apparently due to the lack of Marwari ancestral interest and the absence of a new tradition of foot pilgrimages there, we can see an equivalent development in the proliferation of small shrines on a hill adjacent to Mehndipur around this time. Local inhabitants attest that these small shrines on the hill were intended to draw visitors—and donations—from the crowds that were now coming to Mehndipur Balaji's nearby temple (a "first-generation" site). With the burgeoning number of shrines in northeastern Rajasthan by the late 1990s, a region-wide culture of miracles had taken shape that encompassed both Salasar and Mehndipur. These places of pilgrimage, whether older (Salasar, Mehndipur, and certain others) or newer, reinforced a popular perception of Rajasthan as a holy land. In this study, I address this late historical stage when I discuss Babosa, who is derived from Balaji (and hence a second-generation deity), and is associated with Jain and Marwari urban communities. In this study, Babosa thus marks the endpoint of the trajectory that had started twenty years earlier.

## 1.2 Contextualizing Balaji

### *Balaji as a God for the Modern Era*

An underlying theoretical message in the preceding historical overview is that Balaji's importance to his followers as a god of miracles is tied up with socioeconomic changes of the last twenty years. As I discuss in Chapter 2 and elsewhere, my respondents in Salasar and Mehndipur saw parallels between the rise of religious devotion at these sites and broader historical change, which is divinely driven. That is to say, they repeatedly emphasized that the

modern era conforms to the Hindu theory of *yugs* or eras, as mentioned earlier. We have been living in the present *Kali Yug* for around 5,000 years, and yet my respondents tended to collapse this long period as if it was coeval with the modern era. Hindi dictionaries generally translate “*kali*” as “strife,” therefore *Kali Yug* would be “the era of strife.”<sup>5</sup> But, as I discuss in Chapter 2, some devotees told me that this term actually means “the age of machines” [*kal yug*] and still others characterized this era as the *Arth Yug*, “the era of money.” The age of machines indexes our era of industry, while the era of money narrows that scope further to the capitalist (or more properly neoliberal) era. In a theological reading of history, the corruption and despair of the modern era compels many to seek refuge in devotion to Balaji, which justifies the importance of faith as the currency that obtains the god’s favor.

Prior to initiating my research, I had read Michael Taussig’s work on capitalism as experienced by South American subsistence farmers. This work usefully documents how one might see modernity through a religious worldview. As Taussig describes it, farmers adopting wage work interpret the commodity-based economic system as a kind of devilry. In other words, they interpret capitalism in terms of pre-capitalist beliefs.<sup>6</sup> By comparison, devotees of Balaji and allied deities say that these gods have arrived to save us from the bad effects of the modern era. Hence, the divine is at work in history. But, I would contend that these Marwari-patronized gods are not just antidotes for the modern era; they are also creations of it. The socioeconomic conditions of recent local history—patronage, local regimes of religious authority, pilgrimage—have given rise to these gods. Taking this a step further, another book that I read before starting my research was Susan Harding’s ethnographic history of the rise of Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority. She documents a decades-long process in which the religious right of the U.S. made its way from the margins of public life to centrality during the Reagan presidency, in tandem

with what she calls the increasing “biblicalization” of public life.<sup>7</sup> Although my research does not dwell on the nationwide political dimensions of devotion, it does explore the centrality of faith in rhetoric and practice. Narrating the rise of Balaji as a god of miracles, my respondents frequently employed their own kind of biblicalization in characterizing life events as manifesting the will of this god.

In focusing on devotional change in recent history, I aspire for common ground with scholarship that would situate the global perspective in terms of the local setting. I adopt this stance because a term like “neoliberalism” is understandably grand and therefore a bit elusive for analyzing empirical material. I use the term “neoliberal” as an analytical category to bracket the 1990s and beyond, when global capitalism was making inroads in Indian society under the rubric of government legislation commonly termed “neoliberal reform.” I approach such change on the ground level by documenting it as a pervasive background factor in the daily lives of devotees. This means that other, perhaps more immediate reasons for devotional change may come between the simple narrative of economic reform and everyday life. For instance, in all the chapters of this study, I look at individual (or class / caste-based) motives behind religious affiliation. As I describe it, Marwari patronage happens not simply in reaction to governmental tax policies but also because of their particular motive to affirm a sense of belonging to an ancestral land.

I interpret personal desires as collectively constituting a kind of neoliberal culture. In this way, I extrapolate a broader system from individual cases. Along similar lines, in Chapter 3 I analyze local Brahmin histories that are used to justify their present-day authority. Again, personal motive produces a documented outcome. Further, in Chapter 6, I look at the economic networks that underlie the formation of organizations for Balaji, which produce a regional

devotional culture. All of these changes are arguably informed by broader narratives that could be connected with the neoliberal era—money comes to Balaji’s temples, the sons of farmers seek an education and jobs so they pray to Balaji, businessmen find it advantageous to make social connections through religious activities, and so forth. But I assemble this picture not as a grand narrative first, but as a series of small narratives that allow us to consider individual strategies for getting ahead in conditions of change.

As an example of foregrounding the local as a way of understanding larger historical currents, I would cite Veena Das’s work on the internalization in women’s lives of the violence of Partition and later the assassination of Indira Gandhi. Das focuses on the necessary ordinary tasks that women carry out amidst this nationwide distress, a mode of life that gives them a way of keeping these bigger events in perspective.<sup>8</sup> Following this model, I note the possible presence of global capitalism in individual stories of miracles leading to self-betterment—still, the emphasis is on individual choice. Putting this approach in a different context, Jeffrey Brackett’s dissertation on the worship of Hanuman in Maharashtra also gives attention to the small acts of devotion that texture daily religious practice.<sup>9</sup> He presents this as a counterpoint to scholarship that would frame popular religion in larger political narratives.<sup>10</sup> I similarly look at Balaji’s shrines in the terms that my interlocutors understand in day-to-life, in which one can see the effects of the Kali Yuga. Lastly, I would note Bruno Latour’s interest in studying local conditions as a way of entering a discussion on the global scale. In introducing Actor-Network Theory, he argues that the global is produced locally, meaning that the global has no separate substantiality beyond being recognized as a phenomenon at the local level.<sup>11</sup> So too, my method is to let the bigger picture come into view from the personal lives of my respondents.

In light of Latour's point, it is my aim in this dissertation to interpret divine acts and doctrines in terms of human needs. For instance, examining the local systems of authority in Salasar and Mehndipur allows us to theorize why possession is not performed at the former site but is overwhelmingly present at the latter. The Brahmin *pujārīs* of Salasar have an interest in restricting the mediation of Balaji to their lineage as a divinely-given hereditary right. Thus, the fact that Salasar Balaji does not treat possession is more complex than just a matter of doctrine; it is a matter of protecting a ritual monopoly. On the other hand, as mentioned, at Mehndipur the system of authority is rather diffuse, as the leader, formally titled *mahant*, is nowadays less involved in running the shrine. Consequently, faith healers treat the possessed with a considerable amount of ritual autonomy, and locals have even set up small new shrines adjacent to town to solicit donations from pilgrims without repercussions from the temple's administrators. Were this to happen at Salasar, the ruling Brahmins would surely object to this infringement. Indeed, as I discuss in Chapter 3, they often rail against the allegedly nefarious practices of faith healers.

In the interactions between religious specialists and the devotional public, Salasar Balaji is thus constituted as a deity of blessings only (which preserves Brahmin primacy), whereas Mehndipur Balaji, by virtue of the presence of so many healers, has been reinforced as a deity of the occult or tantric system. Healers, after all, do their work in a hands-on way, which more often tends to involve what most devotees consider to be mystical techniques involving the summoning of spirit helpers. For these healers, imagining Balaji as the ultimate healer—indeed, some call him the greatest *tāntrik*—ensures their own centrality in mediating his response to devotees' prayers. At the same time, Brahmin *pujārīs* also exist in Mehndipur but they serve as ritual functionaries, who may be hired and fired by the temple trust at will. They have no

autonomy or job security, unlike the hereditary *pujārīs* of Salasar. Examining the social ramifications of locality is thus critical to understanding the ontologies of the two Balajis. Moreover, were we to explain the capabilities of Salasar Balaji and Mehndipur Balaji only as reflections of pan-Indian Hanuman, we would miss this local story.

### *Religious Practice and Neoliberal Transformation*

In this study, I frequently invoke the presence of neoliberalism, even though this study is less about the effects of neoliberalism in its own right than local religious change that happens in the era of economic liberalization. In consideration of this setting, I shift attention to the socioeconomic factors that underlie choices in religious practice. One might understand this to mean uncovering corruption or hidden agendas for financial gain from religious activities, but this inquiry will at least as often take a more positive route, as in examining the social and economic networks that inform the formation of religious organizations. Arguing that religion and economics involve many of the same concerns, Larry Witham thus characterizes religious practice as a kind of investment with the idea of receiving future benefits.<sup>12</sup> In other words, an individual's religious acts involve a cost-benefit analysis not unlike economic undertakings. Witham thus puts emphasis on the individual's motives in religious practice, as I also endeavor to do.

I have found that describing religious practice in terms of economic benefits can be analytically useful, since my respondents overwhelmingly spoke of the advantages—material, psychological, or otherwise—of faith in Balaji. In fact, many devotees observe that if Balaji did not provide benefits they would surely stop coming to him. Witham emphasizes that he wants to avoid “the black box of biology and culture;” which is to say that he wants to look at what motivates one to affiliate with a religious system, rather than attribute this choice to forces that

are beyond the individual's control.<sup>13</sup> I take a similar approach. For instance, in Chapter 6, I report the testimony of some members of urban devotional organizations; once affiliated, they benefit from loan arrangements for members, and they may revere a faith healing guru with an awareness of his prior success in business. Hence, a guru's economic success suggests spiritual efficacy. However, Witham's work makes no mention of India, and would be an outlier if it did, because I think that there is still much work to be done in connecting religious acts to economic motive.

Rather than economics, I would contend that a dominant theme in studies on recent religious history in South Asia has been the rise of the religious right, as witnessed in political movements promoting Hindu nationalism. My respondents generally did not much emphasize the larger political dimensions of their religious practice, so this dominant theme in scholarship is comparatively muted in my dissertation. As a referent for scholarship that sees modern Indian religions in terms of national politics, I would just mention Christophe Jaffrelot's comprehensive history of the rise of Hindu nationalism in the twentieth century, with an epilogue covering the early 1990s. This work could reasonably give one the impression that Hinduism has become deeply intertwined with political agendas.<sup>14</sup> In Jaffrelot's history, the final stage is the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992 by Hindu activists amidst nationwide agitation for the masjid's replacement with a temple for the Hindu god Rama. Hanuman is often publicly invoked as a symbol of nationwide Hindu renewal (in reaction against the effects of the *Kali Yug* or the perceived transgressions of past Muslim rulers), which would include actions taken for the sake of the proposed Rama temple.<sup>15</sup> While I acknowledge the importance of investigating the political side of contemporary Hindu religiosity, for the purposes of my research I shift the narrative to the domain of new money and everyday practice.



The term “neoliberalism” in relation to India generally refers to a series of governmental legislative reforms that reduced industrial barriers (taxes and import-export tariffs), which smoothed the way for the nation’s economy to become more closely integrated with the global capitalist system. As I elaborate in Chapter 2, in the 1980s some efforts were already being made to reduce government strictures on business activities, but the most significant legislative move came in 1991, supplemented with additional reforms in the following years.<sup>16</sup> I refer to 1991 less as a determinative touchstone of economic transformation, but more as the starting point for discussing a more generalized shift in societal attitudes in line with the spread of capitalist values. The year 1991 comes slightly later than the first urban devotional organization for Balaji known to me, formed in Mumbai in 1990. So, I cannot suggest that faith in Balaji was an immediate outcome of economic reform. Rather, the discovery of this god’s miracles initially arose from changes within the Marwari community itself, as discussed in Chapter 2. Many members, feeling as cultural outsiders in the pan-Indian urban diaspora, and seemingly seeking a caste identity that connoted the prestige of an ancient pedigree, affirmed their connection to their former homeland in Rajasthan. And, as devotees told me, their return to this homeland from distant cities was made easier by improvements in transportation and communications at this time.

Along with this examination of the reconfiguration of Marwari identity, I document several instances in which other castes have similarly supported agendas of social uplift by constructing idealized histories about their origins. In Chapter 4, I describe Jat caste histories that characterize Jats as heroic leaders in ancient Aryan migrations. In Chapter 5, I explore the recent Meena project to reconstitute their tribal heritage in line with Sanskritic culture. As a result of this, the Meenas have adopted a manifestation of Vishnu as a caste lineage god and have built a

temple for him near Mehndipur. At the time that Marwaris discovered Balaji's miracles in the early 1990s, Hanuman was already ascendant as a symbol of Hindu vigor, so the Marwari embrace of Balaji points to a convergence of factors. I argue that once the Marwaris had established Salasar as a place of pilgrimage, the rising arc of neoliberalism fueled the growth of this site, as urban merchants sought to ensure their ongoing affluence in worshipping Balaji.

### *Balaji and Middle-Class Life*

This study of Balaji and other deities of Rajasthan favored by Marwaris could also be imagined in terms of the rising middle class. Although the middle class is a very broad social category, one could say that it comprises those who earn enough income for some leisure—hence, who can travel to distant shrines—and who aspire to maintain that upward trajectory. As one example of a wide range of scholarship on the Indian middle class, I would point to several interesting chapters in *Being Middle Class in India: A Way of Life*, edited by Henrike Donner. These chapters address themes that I likewise highlight in my study. In her forward, Donner problematizes the rubric that defines the middle class primarily as consumers (of the products of economic liberalization,). While acknowledging consumerism in middle-class life, Donner would like to document the middle class experience in terms of other “group-based identities,” such as caste, religion, language, region, status, gender, and other measures.<sup>17</sup> All these subjects potentially offer instances of middle class life. Taking this as a prompt, I would interpret the worship of Balaji as a kind of caste performance (in regard to Marwaris and Jats) that situates these groups within identities of language and region (the area of Balaji as a kind of spiritual homeland), which mobilizes their socioeconomic advancement (e.g. becoming middle class). The narratives I described earlier of caste uplift could thus be theorized as these groups' own “middle class” project, beyond the obvious observation of consumerism. Coming to Balaji and

successfully making wishes for a better life thus involves an acknowledgment that one's religious life is an instrument of self-betterment.

None of the chapters in Donner's edited volume defines middle-class life in terms of religious practice, which my own study attempts to do in looking at the socioeconomic dimensions of worshipping Balaji. Nonetheless, I would highlight a chapter by Thomas Scrase and Ruchira Ganguly-Scrase, in Donner's edited volume, on the widening social disparities and conflicts over cultural resources in Kolkata in the post-1991 era as a way of considering recent changes in Marwari life. The authors note the rise of the "new money" entrepreneurial community—including, we may, suspect Marwaris, although this group is never mentioned by name—that has profited from globalization.<sup>18</sup> The authors find that in the new economy, the upwardly mobile entrepreneurial class was quicker to embrace school instruction in English over Bengali, and private jobs over government work.<sup>19</sup> This is the sort of situation that I draw from in suggesting that gods of miracles assume new instrumental significance in this era of heightened ambitions. In this setting, not only the haves but also the have-nots would be involved in this search for divine efficacy. Once the wealthy have found a source of miracles, those who aspire to similar good fortune follow.

I would extend this discussion of religious upward mobility to Geert de Neve's exploration of the formation of middle class identity as both a material and a cultural project among "wealthy industrialists" in a city of Tamil Nadu.<sup>20</sup> Again, although Marwaris are never mentioned, these wealthy industrialists could as well describe them. While I discuss the Marwari embrace of a rustic, economically underdeveloped Rajasthan as a project of cultural development, De Neve identifies a similar dynamic in the industrialists' rediscovery of their ancestral roots in rural Tamil Nadu, which "reflects many of the more established middle-class preoccupations with

morality, respectability, and honor.”<sup>21</sup> Surely this cultural project would resonate with the Marwari desire to embrace a homeland (however distant) that signifies moral standing to match their relatively high economic position. The awareness that Hanuman and other gods (such as Krishna) are champions of classical Hindu morality (given their exemplary roles in the Hindu epics) would make them well suited to be the emblems of caste uplift.

One additional study from the same volume addresses another kind of experience of upward mobility that I would attach to my study. Margit van Wessel describes the production of new identities among middle-class youth of Baroda (in Gujarat).<sup>22</sup> She sees young people as adopting their own styles of living, constituting a kind of youth culture, in which “modern” is seen positively and “traditional” has negative connotations.<sup>23</sup> I have highlighted a nascent youth culture among the Jats who now walk to Salasar each year, generally as an adventure with their friends, but also as a means for wishing for personal success. On the one hand, this new pilgrimage would seem like a conscious “traditionalization” of what is in fact an innovation. The setting for this “tradition” is youthful ambition for attaining modern opportunities. Within this Jat population, many are college students in various cities with high expectations for the future. Making a pilgrimage to Balaji amounts to “coming home” (to their ancestral region), conceptually akin to the Marwari return to the ancestral village and Balaji from distant cities. Even for those youths who remain close to home all year round, going to Balaji involves the pursuit of personal advancement and self-constructed new identity (in seeking careers) by way of miracles. I would like to suggest, then, that the divine offering of transformative miracles has a particular appeal for young pilgrims aspiring to get ahead, all the more so as the wish fulfilled is predicated on undertaking the physical challenge of a long-distance walk of many kilometers. In

Chapter 4, I discuss such a youth culture of pilgrimage as virtually a rite of passage that is presided over by Balaji as a bearded representation of adult masculinity.

Lastly, I would note that the worship of gurus is also a prime locus of middle class interest. I find this confluence well articulated in Maya Warrier's work on Mata Amritanandamayi of Kerala. Warrier depicts Mata as being aligned with the middle class ethos of free choice, and self-determined outcomes. Faith—the key to achieving results under Mata's guidance, as with Balaji—is arguably the ultimate tool of individual empowerment, as it perpetuates the individual's own resolve towards achieving a desired end (whether relief from troubles or attainment of a wish). According to Warrier, Mata is also popular because she freely adapts tradition to meet modern principles, such as doing away with caste and gender hierarchies.<sup>24</sup> In my study, too, devotion has a gendered dimension. As I will discuss in Chapter 5, women are more often the ones needing treatment for possession in Mehndipur. Therefore, they are typically the center of ritual attention in Mehndipur's exorcisms, not only as patients needing treatment but also as relatives looking on. In Salasar, by comparison, women, like men, simply offer prayers to the god without receiving any special ritual attention.

As with Mata, worshipping Mehndipur Balaji also entails little in the way of caste identity politics, compared to Salasar Balaji and his hereditary devotees. The overriding concern at Mehndipur is not on maintaining one's relationship with a lineage protector, but on relief from specific troubles of the world. In a sense, Mata, like gurus who operate in the name of Mehndipur Balaji, is offering a cure for the dark side of middle class life—*anxiety over relationships, lack of direction, lingering domestic oppression amidst new societal freedom, and so forth*—which prayer to an image alone, such as Salasar Balaji cannot so easily remedy. Indeed, as I will explore later, devotees explain that a statue can offer blessings, but a living guru

can actually show the best path to a better life. For those responding to the modern message of individual choice, such a guide is a valued resource.

### 1.3 Issues at Stake

#### *Theorizing the Rise of Balaji*

In this section, I will outline the main objectives and theoretical arguments of each chapter in this study. I link each theoretical perspective discussed to the work of a scholar who is highlighted in one of the chapters. Since I cite a large number of scholars in each chapter, I do not attempt to introduce all of them in this section; instead, I select two representative scholars for each chapter. I have grouped the first three chapters (after the introduction) together in this initial subsection because they all relate to the worship of Salasar Balaji in his main shrine (although Chapter 4 also includes a substantial foray into devotion in the countryside of Haryana). Little has been published on Salasar Balaji, whereas much has already been written on Mehndipur Balaji. Therefore, I present proportionately more discussion on Salasar Balaji (three chapters) than the other Balaji (one chapter only) to increase scholarly knowledge of Salasar Balaji to a level commensurate with Mehndipur Balaji, which will make possible a more even-handed comparative discussion of the two gods together.

In Chapter 2, my main theoretical aim is to present the case for Marwaris as agents of Salasar's rise as a shrine of miracles. My underlying premise is that Marwari wealth and its deployment in various projects of donation vitally stimulated cultural production, and subsidized Salasar's religious authority in the region. In this discussion, I cite Philip Lutgendorf's comprehensive book on Hanuman, in which he places the monkey god at the end of a long textual and devotional tradition that has been locally expressed in numerous cultural forms.<sup>25</sup> Although Lutgendorf does not discuss Salasar or the Marwaris, he does nonetheless outline the

narrative sweep of recent devotional history in northern India on which the narrative of Balaji's rise also plays out. While sharing similar subject matter, in narrative terms my study moves in the opposite direction from Lutgendorf's work in that I start with attention on local shrines and then move outwards to discern a broader history. All the same, we can readily see that Balaji broadly shares pan-Indian Hanuman's essential characteristics, therefore this local god has presumably benefited from Hanuman's nationwide rise in popularity. The interplay of local and nationwide dimensions reflects the contemporary Marwari social condition. They remain apart from the surrounding population in their distant urban homes, and seemingly long to consolidate their identity through identifying with this arid but magical corner of Rajasthan. Hence, Marwari devotees (or anyone with money) celebrate a miracle by sponsoring public readings of revered Hanuman-related scriptures in Salasar Balaji's temple (such as *Rāmcaritmanas* and *Sundarkāṇḍ*), along with other meritorious activities, which in essence affirms that this local god is part of the larger pan-Indian scriptural tradition. At the same time, in these acts they are acknowledging Balaji's role as the particular lineage deity of their ancestors.

Meera Nanda, whom I also introduce in Chapter 2, is a critic of the resurgence of religiosity in Indian public life, and is in a way the theoretical opposite of Lutgendorf, inasmuch as she seeks to undermine contemporary Hinduism's organic relation to a longstanding tradition. Instead, Nanda argues that a new era of religiosity has unfolded within the last twenty years in tandem with India's expanding middle class and increased access to, and desire for, the material benefits of world capitalism. As she tells us, purportedly ancient rituals are being revived, and Hindus are enthusiastically embracing these practices as an integral aspect of attaining the good life.<sup>26</sup> The rise of pilgrimage to shrines where one expects miracles for practical needs would be the most obvious example that relates to my study. Nanda characterizes this new insertion of

religiosity in everyday middle-class life as a re-enchantment of Indian public life in the neoliberal era of upward mobility.

As Nanda tells us, the upward arc of the middle class prompts “Hindu triumphalism,” in which these modern citizens, seemingly aligned with the Western world of global capitalism, self-consciously embrace primeval Hinduism to reaffirm that they have not lost their ancestral identity.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, it would seem, timeless Hindu principles are ultimately the key to modern success.<sup>28</sup> However, Nanda, like Lutgendorf, does not discuss Balaji.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless converging with Nanda’s argument, I suggest that the rise of devotional culture at Salasar and Mehndipur has much to do with a revival of magical beliefs, which instrumentally serve devotees as expedients for self-betterment. The universalization of capitalist desire conceivably intersects with this, resulting in the popularization of miracle-laden shrine worship. At the same time, I theoretically diverge from Nanda in respect to her theory that this burgeoning religiosity is conspiratorially promoted by a loose alliance between the government, big business, and religious leaders.<sup>30</sup> Instead, I look at religious change in terms of local experience, with nationwide authority never more than a distant entity.

In Chapter 3, I switch the focus from the Marwaris to Salasar’s Brahmins, the primary beneficiaries of patronage for Balaji, as co-agents in the conception of this god as a lineage deity. The Brahmin promotion of a local history is the main vehicle for enshrining their social primacy and therefore their special status as mediators for Marwari patrons. I theorize that Salasar’s local history is largely retrospective, meaning that the events it describes, however factual they may be, are shaped to anticipate the present-day power structure and relations between the Brahmin *pujārīs* and the Marwaris. Thus, the foundation story of the temple divinely authorizes the *pujārīs* as Balaji’s hereditary representatives. Lawrence Babb’s work on merchants in Rajasthan



sets the precedent for this kind of analysis, and, as I mentioned, he is the only scholar that has discussed the god at all, although he only looks at Balaji's early history, not his present worship.<sup>31</sup> Babb and I diverge insofar as he is talking about pre-modern relations, whereas I frame Balaji's story within the social imperatives of the neoliberal era (hence closer to Nanda's scope of analysis). Nonetheless, even approaching Balaji from the standpoint of an earlier age, Babb's work is useful, as he notes early Marwari-Brahmin relations embedded in the Brahmins' history of Salasar.<sup>32</sup> Babb's scholarship, as exemplified in *Alchemies of Violence*, is also particularly interesting because it looks at Marwaris in their "native" land, Rajasthan. By the time the Marwaris enter my dissertation, they have of course already migrated to the pan-Indian diaspora. Babb also provides a counterweight to scholars (like Ann Hardgrove, introduced later) who would question the deep-rootedness of the Marwari identification with Rajasthan as a spiritual and ancestral homeland.

I also highlight the theoretical problem of whether to take histories such as Salasar's at face value when I consider Peter van der Veer's work on Brahmins in Ayodhya. Van der Veer regards the local narratives that Brahmins tell as a kind of deception that an anthropologist might be advised to avoid for the sake of seeing the actual power relations beneath the ideological façade.<sup>33</sup> On this account, I would take a middle ground. I critique the Brahmin historical narrative in Salasar as a composition that explains contemporary relations of patronage and authority, but I do not see it as something to be avoided but rather as a key to exploring what is at stake. And so, in recounting Salasar's history I discuss the possible palimpsest of the local folkloric story of a Brahmin falling in a well and haunting it after his death. This story, which appears as part of Salasar's history in locally-sold texts, but without much explanation as to its significance or relation to later events, may signify the local knowledge of non-elites embedded

in the Brahmins' history. My approach in this study, then, is to look at the dominant narratives but juxtapose them with counter-arguments, as represented by local voices that do not necessarily echo the status quo.

In these first two chapters, caste comes across as a socially stable structure. This is surprising in a way, since my respondents typically denied any caste-specificity in their religious practice. Balaji is beloved for his origins as a savior of our era, and for his reputation for granting miracles; these are traits that would seem to have universal, not caste-specific appeal. But how do we explain the fact that Salasar primarily attracts Marwaris and Jats? In contrast to Mehndipur, where relief from troubles without regard to social group is the dominant theme (both for devotees and scholars), Salasar offers us a two-track narrative of devotion, wherein the god is universal but at the same time retains an additional significance as a representation of caste mobilization. And so, I theorize that caste self-narratives—stories that valorize a particular caste—utilize Balaji as a kind of cultural hero in support of their localized social agendas of improvement. Marwaris find a noble rural ancestry in the worship of Balaji, and Jats see him as an idealized version of themselves.

In discussing this kind of thinking in Chapter 4, I draw from the work of Louis Dumont on caste, as he famously argued for its primacy in Indian society, conditioned by cultural notions of differential purity and power.<sup>34</sup> Purity certainly fits the Brahmins' self-narrative that they are more spiritually refined, but less so the Marwaris and Jats, especially since their social status nowadays seems to primarily hinge on socioeconomic advancement. And so, the power of new money more than purity seems to be the crucial ingredient that differentiates identity—hence, the theme of privileged VIPs versus the others (Jats and less advantaged merchants) frequently erupts through the surface of devotional narratives. Caste has certainly conditioned the spread of

devotion to Balaji because it is already the ground in which social networks take shape and become conduits for shared devotional affiliations. These social networks facilitate pilgrimage to Salasar, as devotees typically arrive in groups. Such networks serve as a template in the formation of devotional circles in devotees' home areas. Further, caste groups to some degree differentiate among themselves as to how they worship Balaji. For instance, Marwaris are said to more often come for the New Year, but Jats especially come during the Dashehra festival. Thus, despite their common allegiance to Salasar Balaji, devotees maintain a sense of caste-marked social separateness in the activities of worship.<sup>35</sup>

As I see it, worshipping Balaji additionally provides a centralizing common focus for these caste-based devotional communities. Hence, in Chapter 4 my theoretical aim is to document the ways in which Balaji strengthens caste identity, even as these groups all seek to advance in the new economy that pervades their lives. The god has the job of watching over his hereditary devotees' efforts to improve their lives, promising a miracle or at least a subtle bit of assistance as the reward for their demonstrations of sincere faith. With this in mind, I note that young Jat men, most of them seemingly college students, now annually walk hundreds of kilometers from home to Salasar each year—as mentioned, partly for adventure, but also to entreat the god to supply benefits. As Jats seemingly all agree, this culture of youth pilgrimage hardly existed until 15 years ago. I would at least partly ascribe this phenomenon to career uncertainty, when educated young men do not wish to go back to the farm, and so see Balaji as a fast track ahead.

We could also theorize Jat pilgrimage as a gendering rite. Philip and Caroline Osella have theorized male-dominant pilgrimage in southern India as having to do with reconstituting native masculinity among men who had returned from overseas work. Building on this idea, I would theorize that this foot pilgrimage to Salasar affirms social solidarity among male peers at the

culmination of embarking into the world to pursue potentially isolating adult careers. Like Balaji, Ayyappa, the chaste male deity of southern India who is the main god of the Osellas' study, serves as a model for the idealized male. That is, he accumulates internal masculinized power through adherence to chastity and austerities. Additionally, the Osellas productively theorize Hindu masculinity as "historically contingent" (i.e. arising in relation to recent social change) rather than just a "traditional" role. This theory meshes with my own argument that pilgrimage to Salasar is indeed a modern construction—a "new tradition." Such pilgrimage is an event that allows for the performance of new identities—the upwardly mobile modern Hindu citizen—as the ambitious seek Balaji's favors to expedite getting ahead in the world.<sup>36</sup> Additionally, these long-distance pilgrimages to Salasar may incorporate Jat male narratives of traditional military acumen and team-based sports culture.

### *Multiple Balajis in Context*

Having analyzed the system of worship at Salasar in Chapters Two through Four in terms of Balaji's three main constituent caste groups (Marwaris, Brahmins, Jats), my objective in the second half of the dissertation (Chapters Five through Seven) shifts to analyzing the relation between Salasar and certain other shrines and devotional groups. In this endeavor, I aim to demonstrate that Salasar's historical trajectory is in some ways comparable to what we see at Mehndipur, which would support considering both shrines within a larger narrative of devotional change taking place over the last twenty or more years. Additionally, in these later chapters, my theoretical aim is to embed the otherwise singular local histories of these sites into a systemic narrative of the spread of cults of devotion to Balaji in both the city and countryside. Tracking this trajectory provides a way of explaining the present-day situation in which numerous Salasar-

oriented and Mehndipur-oriented shrines are found throughout northeastern Rajasthan, while the deities are also worshiped in geographically distant urban communities in particular.

This history of devotional expansion, which takes us geographically far afield from Salasar itself, starts with Mehndipur, the main subject of Chapter 5. The plausibility of a link between the two Balajis and other deities of Rajasthan has not yet been broached in scholarship, insofar as Salasar has gotten little attention and Mehndipur has been treated only by itself. Typically, scholars privilege exorcism as the most notable feature of Mehndipur, which leaves unanswered how to relate it to other shrines dedicated to Balaji in Rajasthan, especially when those shrines do not permit exorcism, as is the case in Salasar and the other major Marwari-sponsored sites (Khatu Shyam and Rani Sati, along with various new temples on the roads to these sites that are likewise patronized by Marwaris). Moreover, not a single faith healer lives in Mehndipur itself; they are all occasional visitors from home bases where they normally do their work. Therefore, I suggest, in order to understand how Mehndipur has become such a popular pilgrimage site, we cannot simply treat it as an enclosed phenomenon. We must equally attend to the history of the many adjunct shrines and faith healers at a distance that supply the regular stream of devotees arriving here. Mehndipur thus only exists in its present state because of social relations that involve individuals and communities that are based elsewhere.

In the interest of reformulating the discussion of shrines in systemic terms, I enter into a theoretical dialogue with Graham Dwyer, who has written a book on Mehndipur that gives most attention to faith healers and their followers. I would highlight two major points from Dwyer's study. First, he advocates what he terms a "phenomenological" approach, which gives attention to possession as a cultural experience. In so doing, he contests earlier scholars, such as Sudhir Kakar, who would interpret possession from a universal psychological perspective, in which

possession is to be read not as a cultural form but as resistance to domestic discord, when oppressive family structure inhibits direct communication. The central problem being addressed here is the fact that most people becoming possessed are young adults, especially women, shortly before or after marriage. As Dwyer tells us, these young victims are playing a culturally scripted role—they are understood to be the most vulnerable to spirit attack, so this is what they perform. Hence, possession is not simply a way of acting out otherwise unaddressed conflict.

The second key theoretical contribution Dwyer makes is that the diagnosis of possession, particularly when assigning blame to a relative or neighbor who has a grudge against the victim's family, resides with the faith healer, so these specialists have considerable suggestive power. This, and the earlier theoretical point that cultural attitudes determine one's possession, are certainly useful for understanding possession, but they really do not explain the fact that faith healing has been on the rise in much of northeastern Rajasthan for the last fifteen years or so. But I do not suggest that Mehndipur simply arises from a Rajasthan-based regional culture. As I discuss in Chapter 5, Mehndipur is an outpost of occult practitioners and their followers based in distant locales. The population around Mehndipur itself seems to be largely indifferent to, or perhaps even disdainful of, visitors and their desire for occult services, other than trying to profit from their arrival.

In this setting, I argue that the local *pujārīs* of Mehndipur, along with visiting healers, are engaged in a subtle competition for income from pilgrims. By contrast, Dwyer sees them as complementary, largely harmonious social classes.<sup>37</sup> The theoretical brunt of my argument, then, which one would not really suspect in Dwyer's work, is that this pilgrimage site is a product not of tradition but of recent historical conditions, such as the middle-class pursuit of magical remedies in rustic settings, which greater financial resources allows them to pursue. Within this

larger societal picture, Mehndipur shares Salasar's recent history, even though the two Balajis offer rather different kinds of benefits (blessings versus exorcism).

In writing about Mehndipur within a much larger study of possession in the Sanskritic tradition, Frederick Smith does in fact connect this site to a wider culture.<sup>38</sup> While our aims are thereby aligned, we link Mehndipur to the historical stream in different directions. Smith vertically integrates Mehndipur in a diverse and evolving but nonetheless continuous Indic tradition of possession going back thousands of years. By contrast, I regard Mehndipur as a modern development. Therefore, I horizontally link it to an encompassing devotional culture of recent history (for instance, connecting Balaji to the rise of pan-Indian Hanuman), not to mention the stresses of contemporary urban life (which potentially hinder people from taking care of ancestor spirits, often resulting in possession). From my standpoint, linking Mehndipur to ancient possession would involve an ambitious leap over centuries of historical change. Notwithstanding the existence of a Sanskritic tradition, I would contend that possession and its treatment as now practiced in Mehndipur has more to do with the intrusion of devotees from cities and elsewhere in very recent times. In Chapter 5, I discuss in some detail how locals from the Mehndipur area more or less disown the practices of possession they see among visitors.

I would suggest that since each faith healer has the imperative to perfect a uniquely compelling presentation of magical abilities so as to convince his clients of his particular ability to heal them, his work is inherently innovative, and does not follow a prescribed protocol, although faith healers tend to recycle many traditional practices. And so, I see an analogy to the pivotal relationship between patrons and *pujārīs* at Salasar in the relationship between the devotees and faith healers who come to Mehndipur. In both cases, the social dynamics of religious services offered to a client population constitutes the fertile interactive ground in which

devotional culture arises. If we were to imagine possession and exorcism as a broad institutional category of practice, we might miss the specific local circumstances that constitute them. Hence, I investigate the socioeconomic dimensions of possession in this study as a way of discerning the local element that explains why this phenomenon exists in its present form.

Having presented an argument for some degree of equivalence between Salasar and Mehndipur, despite their doctrinal differences, in Chapter 6 I treat the worship of the two Balajis together in shifting the discussion to devotional organizations in the urban setting. In fact, being located in the city, these various groups are visibly similar in certain ways. For instance, merchant devotees of various religious affiliations commonly sponsor *jāgrans* or public religious singing performances, which broadly follow one format whether dedicated to one Balaji or the other. In documenting the recent historical development of these groups, I have found Milton Singer's thesis of urbanization as a basis for religious change to be useful. He posits that when people move from the countryside to cities they become dislocated from a traditional ritual-based lifestyle and instead embrace "faith" to secure a good life from God.<sup>39</sup> Even though Singer does not really bring faith healers and miracles into this theorization (as he was writing at a time when these were not yet so prominent in public life), his model provides a foundation for describing urban free choice in embracing new deities and faith healers based on their promise of magical efficacy.

In the urban environment, the doctrine of devotion to the two Balajis diverges along the same lines as at the shrines in Rajasthan. Devotion to Salasar Balaji is performed in the city as a dutiful demonstration of ancestral heritage that foregrounds the homeland in Rajasthan, while devotion to Mehndipur Balaji is elective, not hereditary, and results from a personal (or social) conviction of the god's supreme ability to provide miracles with no particular reference to one's



own place of origin. Further, urban devotional groups for Salasar Balaji emphasize a direct connection to the deity with no faith healer intermediaries, insofar as the *pujārīs* in Salasar are the only religious class entitled to mediate (and mostly for Marwaris). On the other hand, urban devotional groups for Mehndipur Balaji typically center on a guiding faith healer, who in some cases may be a wealthy businessman who can point to his ability to channel the god's power to explain his prosperity. Marwari devotees of Salasar Balaji similarly see a correlation between their prosperity and their faith in their god, but they make no claim to heal others with this power. While the presence or absence of a faith healing guru marks a clearly defined difference between the two Balajis' systems of worship, groups for either god are thus similarly prone to organize as devotional groups in relation to business or social relationships in the urban setting.

Although there has been no scholarship on urban groups devoted to Mehndipur Balaji or Salasar Balaji, Anne Hardgrove has addressed the ideology of Rajasthan as the Marwari homeland in her study on merchants in Kolkata.<sup>40</sup> Although never mentioning Balaji, she describes the Marwari rediscovery of a guardian goddess known as Rani Sati, enshrined near Salasar; this deity has had a trajectory similar to Balaji's over the last twenty years. Not unlike what I document at Salasar, Hardgrove observes that the Marwaris stay aloof from the local population as they arrive at the goddess's shrine to reclaim their ancestral deity. This narrative of Marwaris as urban outsiders wanting to become insiders (in Rajasthan) while maintaining privileges above the locals (as elite patrons) is similar to what I have found at the Marwari shrines of Shekhawati. We can see this in the Jat complaint that the Marwaris from afar unfairly get special treatment.

The final step in the historical sequence that I have theorized is the establishment and growth of miracle shrines throughout northeastern Rajasthan from the mid-to-late 1990s onward.

Although faith healers operate these new shrines autonomously, they nonetheless need to somehow come to terms with Salasar Balaji and Mehndipur Balaji as preexisting dominant powers in the region. My aim in Chapter 7, then, is to see how these faith healers who establish new shrines integrate either or both of the Balajis into their individual establishments, where they reinterpret Balaji (and other deities, such as Khatu Shyam) in their own terms. To this end, in Chapter 7 I cite the work of Shail Mayaram, who calls for a theoretical reappraisal of possession (common at these shrines) in which we would move away from analyzing it as either performance or therapy, and instead emphasize the social context that informs its incidence.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, possession is to be theorized foremost as a social experience. Following this line of thinking, throughout this study I look at magic, healing, and miracles through the lens of the social (and economic) setting. For instance, I often note the special powers that individual faith healers cultivate to win a loyal following of devotees. This entails the production of a social— healer-client—relationship.

In Chapter 7, I also investigate the common claim among devotees of Balaji and other local gods that Rajasthan is a “holy land” [*pavitṛsthān*]. This perception retroactively explains the proliferation of shrines in the northeastern part of this state over the last twenty years. As I theorize, however, there are socioeconomic reasons for this perception. The growth of Salasar and Mehndipur in the early 1990s established the precedent for the growth of these other shrines. In the later 1990s and beyond, these later shrines benefited from the increasing presence of moneyed visitors from cities, along with the populace from the surrounding countryside. These locals had heard of the miracles of Marwari prosperity, and they were also participating in the broader societal popularization of magical remedies for daily troubles. Given this apparent “growth industry” for faith healing shrines, it would not be surprising that many aspiring healers

were starting up their own ventures, typically modest operations in their homes that they subsequently expanded as attracted a clientele.

In a situation that demands readymade supernatural powers to back up these healers' claims to magical efficacy, the most reasonable option is to turn operate a new shrine in the name of one of the already-famous gods of the regions—the Balajis, Khatu Shyam, and so forth. At that scale of channeling the divine, any shrine might be equally good. But there is an additional level of mediation that facilitates the transmission of divine power between the healer and the deity, and that is the ancestor spirit or *pitr*. These spirits are not absolutely necessary as intermediaries, and in some cases they may indeed be left out, but they frequently play a role in magical services. These domestic ancestor spirits, which are individual to each shrine, provide a basis for the presiding healer to claim a special efficacy that cannot be duplicated at any other shrine. Ancestor spirits have been around in popular culture for a very long time, but I suggest that in the setting of rising pilgrimage and increased interest in magical outcomes in recent years, healers have had more of an incentive to install a family spirit as a helper that directly attends to clients. Thus, the demand for miracles has fueled the production of new gods, and family spirits are the most obvious source. Furthermore, since each of these ancestor spirits as new gods is essentially unique, the healer can exercise complete control in interpreting and channeling its powers, according to his own inclinations. All the while, the healer formally works under the authority of greater gods such as Balaji.

In light of such devotional changes, I would highlight an article by Jeffrey Snodgrass on the coming of capitalist entrepreneurship to the world of spirit possession. As I discuss in Chapter 7, Snodgrass describes a lower-caste community of performers in southern Rajasthan known as Bhats, among whom certain charismatic individuals channel a *kuldevī* or lineage goddess. But,

as Snodgrass observes, since tourists nowadays offer money to see these locals perform, spirit possession becomes enmeshed in “new money relations.”<sup>42</sup> The goddess herself is said to be deeply preoccupied with money—apparently a new development—and, as Snodgrass tells us, she possesses a woman in the community as a way of getting back at the woman’s husband for allegedly being “stingy” about supplying money in support of the community.<sup>43</sup> Interestingly, Snodgrass cites Taussig’s work on South American peasants entering the money economy, which I cited earlier in this chapter, as an analogous example of how money may be regarded as “tainted” (that is, as a threat to traditional social relations) from the standpoint of those entering capitalism from a subsistence or less overtly money-based society.

Extending Snodgrass’s discussion, I would suggest that the influx of visitors to northeastern Rajasthan, and the increasing pervasiveness of public narratives of the desirability of upward mobility (getting a good education, getting a good job, and obtaining a prosperous lifestyle), helped to prime the region around Salasar as a land of miracles. In line with the capitalist ethos of constant growth, the ever-increasing popularity of faith healers and miracle shrines perpetuate a culture of miracles needed to sustain their existence. This is not any sort of conspiracy, nor is it necessarily a self-conscious effort, but simply a reflection of the ascendant market economics of faith healing. To illustrate this point, I close the final chapter with an undeniably growth-oriented new urban cult that promotes a family spirit as a new god, known as Babosa, along with his female channel. With this development, I bring the city and countryside together in one narrative, as Babosa’s inner circle of followers vigorously promote the doctrine of his origin in the countryside of Rajasthan just north of Salasar, while at the same time Babosa’s following is entirely urban. On the face of it, then, this god’s background in Rajasthan matches the common urban Marwari desire to reclaim this region as their homeland, now elevated as a holy land.

Most interestingly, Babosa's followers formally refer to this god as "Balaji Babosa," in deliberate reference to Salasar Balaji. Indeed, this new god, who only became known within the last eighteen years, replicates the qualities of Balaji but additionally allows for guru-mediated faith healing (unlike Salasar Balaji). In this respect, the god outdoes Balaji, providing a rationale for Marwaris who would otherwise have worshiped Balaji to at least add Babosa to their list of personal deities. Moreover, this god, his inner circle of followers, and the public at large to whom these followers promote the god, are all Jains, who may be considered as a subset of Marwaris because they very often originate in the same region of Rajasthan and are similarly involved in mercantilism. As all Babosa's followers know, he was born a Jain boy who manifested many miraculous powers but died young, which ensured that he would become a kind of *pitr*. After death, his ability to provide miracles was so impressive that he was acclaimed as a supremely powerful god, whose power derived from none other than Balaji. This vignette empirically demonstrates my earlier argument that in this era, the need to supply gods of miracles to the public has made a booming market for ancestor spirits that can be elevated into gods.

On this note, I end this introduction. The story of Babosa brings this relatively brief (twenty-year) historical journey full circle. This narrative started with socioeconomic changes in the Marwari community, partly reflecting nationwide developments, such as the ascent of Hanuman-worship, but also due to the Marwari desire to find an ennobling ancestral home that would give them a lineage to match their rising economic status in the pan-Indian urban diaspora. As the 1990s unfolded, neoliberal reforms seemed to increase the incentive for Marwaris to establish relations of patronage to shrines in their ancestral homeland, since donations to religious establishments are tax-free. And so, in the final chapter we come back to Rajasthan, but by this

point in history both Salasar and Mehndipur have grown into major pilgrimage centers. Currently, Marwaris remain in a privileged relationship with the *pujārīs* operating Salasar in Balaji's name, but the Jats from the surrounding region are now the most substantial presence there. Meanwhile, Mehndipur experienced its own version of popularization in relation to modern urban life. This overall expansion of Balaji's devotional population appears to have spurred the growth of many new faith healing shrines operating in this god's name. Babosa is the most vivid and grandest example of this final stage in the twenty-year history that comprises this study. Beneath this story of devotional change, then, this dissertation demonstrates the significance of economic relations, such as patronage, and also the local ramifications of neoliberal reforms, in the development of new traditions of worship.

## Chapter 1 Notes

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<sup>1</sup> In Babb, see pp. 37-44.

<sup>2</sup> See Eck and Lochtefeld; I discuss these authors further in Chapter 2.

<sup>3</sup> Nanda, pp. 3, 70-71, notes the recent revival of religiosity and “re-ritualization” in India at the expense of “secularism” (in the Western sense in which religion is separate from political life).

<sup>4</sup> Lutgendorf (2007), pp. 334-396, explores the significance of the monkey as a being who is a bit human-like but not altogether so. Hence, Hanuman is suited to serve as a conduit between humanity and the supernatural world.

<sup>5</sup> See McGregor’s *Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary*, p. 178.

<sup>6</sup> Taussig, p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> Harding, p. 194.

<sup>8</sup> Das’s first chapter, pp. 1-37, gives an overview of her interest in moving between larger and smaller frames of social analysis.

<sup>9</sup> In Brackett’s forward, pp. v-vi, he describes his approach to looking at the worship of Hanuman in the context of everyday life, which he argues is “not different from popular practice.”

<sup>10</sup> Brackett, p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> Latour, pp. 175-183.

<sup>12</sup> Witham, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Witham, p. 183.

<sup>14</sup> Jaffrelot, pp. 369-410, discusses the Bharatiya Jana Party’s efforts to constitute the Hindu populace as a dependable constituency.

<sup>15</sup> Lutgendorf (2007) discusses the importance of Hanuman in popular culture and the movement to build a Rama temple in Ayodhya; see pp. 360-361, and elsewhere in his work.

<sup>16</sup> Gupta, p. 20, gives an overview of scholarship that analyzes the changes of 1991 amidst the broader process of economic change.

<sup>17</sup> Donner, p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> Scrase and Ganguly-Scrase, p. 117-118.

<sup>19</sup> Scrase and Ganguly-Scrase, pp. 125-126.

<sup>20</sup> De Neve, p. 74.

<sup>21</sup> De Neve, p. 75.

<sup>22</sup> Van Wessel uses these terms and outlines her main argument on pp. 101.

<sup>23</sup> Van Wessel, p. 104.

<sup>24</sup> Warriar (2005), p. 61

<sup>25</sup> I cite several of Lutgendorf’s works separately throughout this study. At this point, I will only mention his monumental work on pan-Indian Hanuman which also explores some local manifestations, including Mehndipur Balaji; see Lutgendorf (2007), 262-270, for the main discussion on Mehndipur.

<sup>26</sup> Nanda, pp. 5-6.

<sup>27</sup> Nanda, p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> Nanda’s chapter on the globalization and the Indian middle class, pp. 61-107, is useful for my study, inasmuch as she integrates middle class aspirations with Hindu revivalism.

<sup>29</sup> Pertinent to the rise of pilgrimage, I suggest that the Marwaris’ turn to Balaji reconstructs a rustic piety that they imagine they had lost in the pan-Indian urban diaspora. The story of how

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this loss occurred is less clear, inasmuch as I did not hear enough from Marwari devotees about the pre-Balaji period of their history. In this study, I discuss earlier Marwari history at certain points, but the scholarship on Marwari religious practices is surprisingly scant. More often, scholars such as Ritu Birla highlight the economic dimensions of their history, given the Marwaris' fame as merchants. In Chapter 6, I theorize that some of these economic practices—specifically mercantile organizations—may have been precursors to current-day Marwari religious organizations, inasmuch as the members acknowledge that business relations often play a role in joining a devotional organization.

<sup>30</sup> Nanda, pp. 108-144, describes this tripartite conspiracy.

<sup>31</sup> Babb (2004), pp. 37-40, briefly recounts the story of Salasar Balaji's discovery in 1754.

<sup>32</sup> Hardgrove, pp. 250-253, exemplifies the perspective that would problematize the Marwari ideology that Rajasthan is inherently their source of ancestral spirituality. As she observes, the locals near the shrine of Rani Sati in Rajasthan seem to regard the Marwaris not as brethren but as modern interlopers from the city.

<sup>33</sup> Van der Veer, p. 57.

<sup>34</sup> Dumont, pp. 33-61, gives a good outline of his views on caste purity and its ramifications.

<sup>35</sup> Irawati Karve's essay on the persistence of caste restrictions in pilgrimage makes very clear that shared devotion does not necessarily trump social difference.

<sup>36</sup> Osella and Osella, pp. 144-168, discuss the Sabarimala pilgrimage, where men alone may worship Ayyappa.

<sup>37</sup> Dwyer, pp. 114-116, distinguishes these two classes of religious specialists.

<sup>38</sup> Smith, pp. 114-119.

<sup>39</sup> Singer, pp. 67-68.

<sup>40</sup> Hardgrove's final chapter, pp. 248-284, uses the example of Rani Sati as a foil for discussing gender in Marwari society.

<sup>41</sup> Mayaram, p. 104, argues that the social context should be given more attention in the analysis of possession.

<sup>42</sup> Snodgrass, p. 602.

<sup>43</sup> Snodgrass, p. 603.



## CHAPTER 2: MAKING A “VIP” SHRINE

### 2.1 Financing Devotion

#### Tracking Religious Change

It was the day of Diwali, the nationwide Hindu holiday for honoring Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity who showers gold coins from her outstretched hands. A family of industrialists from Mumbai had come to Balaji’s temple to double its chances of divine blessing by worshiping the goddess while dedicating a silver relief of Hanuman, which would be installed on an adjacent wall in the inner shrine. For this ceremony, two middle-aged brothers accompanying their parents had been granted the privilege of sitting on the floor at the entrance to the innermost niche containing Balaji’s image. They were all comfortably plump in the way that successful people should be, and dressed in white *kurtās* (for men) or colorful *śalvār kamīz* outfits of fine cloth (for women), signaling their good standing. For this particular day only, a temporary image of Lakshmi festooned with flowers had been set up in front, and slightly to the side, of Balaji. The convergence of two fields of divine power would synergistically produce even greater abundance.<sup>44</sup> Bringing their hands together in reverence, these VIP devotees did their best to mumble along in unison as a Brahmin priest led them in reciting a Sanskrit prayer. Two of the devotees were handed ceremonial flywhisks, and instructed to wave them gently back and forth to cool the deities. Meanwhile, kept behind metal railings, the ordinary public was pushing and straining against each other to get a glimpse.

I have chosen this scene to illustrate the hopes that both elite and ordinary devotees place in Balaji, and also this deity's reputation for bestowing prosperity. As devotees know, Balaji can grant miracles in response to heartfelt prayers. For some, this might mean success in business, for others recovery from illness or the restoration of domestic harmony. Surprisingly, despite this deity's superlative abilities, until the early 1990s relatively few people came to his temple, if they had even heard of it. This chapter will focus on the transformation that occurred at that time, and its ongoing aftermath. I argue that the rapid rise of pilgrimage to Balaji's temple, located in the village of Salasar (population: 5,000), Churu District, in the part of Rajasthan traditionally known as Shekhawati, was substantially facilitated by the conditions of India's neoliberal reforms from 1991 onwards. Other factors came into play at that time too, such as the rising popularity of Hanuman across much of India, but I will particularly focus on the economic dimension in this chapter because the devotees most closely associated with Salasar's rise are merchants heavily involved in finance and industry. Indians commonly perceive the Marwaris, who live in cities around India but claim descent from the region of Salasar, to be especially keen about pursuing wealth, which has influenced the spread of tales that Salasar Balaji assists his devotees in attaining wealth and other desires.

The historical moment when the Marwaris started arriving as pilgrims and acclaimed Salasar as their rediscovered ancestral shrine marks the beginning of the historical narrative that runs through this study. From the early 1990s on, testimonies of miracles of prosperity and wellbeing, in tandem with socioeconomic developments that affected the Marwari community as a whole, propelled Salasar as a popular pilgrimage shrine. I argue that this ultimately led to the establishment of a constellation of other miracle shrines in the surrounding region, many of which look to Salasar Balaji as a kind of spiritual overlord. At the same time that the Marwaris

were starting to converge on Salasar, they were also founding religious organizations in their home cities that were dedicated to the worship of Salasar Balaji, often overlaid on their preexisting mercantile social relations. These groups were pivotal to the consolidation of Balaji as a focal point of Marwari social identity.

In this chapter I will limit the narrative to what was happening in Salasar and other shrines of this region of Rajasthan that received merchant patronage. Later chapters will extend this story to the merchants' devotional organizations, and to the region north of Shekhawati. While this chapter focuses on the local situation in Salasar, I will nonetheless also bring in some of the larger changes going on in the early 1990s that helped attract merchants to this previously very small shrine. As is generally known, under neoliberal reforms taxes and regulations on factory production, business transactions, international trade, and personal income were lowered in varying degrees as the government gradually privatized its formerly commanding role in the economy. This process has continued to the present day, in alignment with the free-market policies of the International Monetary Fund. During these years, there was also a growing middle-class and high-class interest in previously obscure or lower-caste deities, and gurus channeling those deities, as they assured miracles for prosperity and wellbeing.

I hypothesize that it is not a coincidence that Balaji's upward trajectory started during the years of freewheeling fiscal deregulation in the 1990s. Mercantile castes, many of which greatly benefited from the lowering of tariffs on their factory products, such as cloth, fortuitously discovered Balaji as their *kuldev* or protective lineage deity at this time and consequently began financially supporting his shrine. The blossoming relationship between the Marwaris and Salasar had the advantage of providing a tax shelter for their new wealth, since religious establishments, and donations to them, are not taxed or at least bring a reduction in tax liability.

This patronage, as illustrated in the vignette of the silver plaque, enhanced Balaji's prestige as a source of miracles and supported the construction of a physical infrastructure to receive pilgrims. Another likely factor for Marwari interest in Balaji at this time is that this purported ancestral relationship added legitimacy and prestige to the material triumph of these mercantile elites. This gives a modern twist to M.N. Srinivas's mid-twentieth century model of Sanskritization, which states that local rulers in ancient India imported Sanskritic culture, with its attendant Brahmins and rituals, to publicly articulate their high status. Whereas Srinivas was theorizing pre-modern feudal relations, we are looking at a modern capitalist environment in which merchants are the new elites asserting their status. In effect, Balaji's elite devotees have translated their economic success under India's globalizing reforms into a theological idiom.

Pilgrims and locals confirm that in less than twenty years Salasar has changed from a quiet village situated among arid fields into a premier pilgrimage center reputedly attracting as many as a million visitors annually. Even though it is known that Balaji's stone image miraculously appeared in 1754, it was only in 1994 or so that we start to see material evidence of donations to his shrine and the surrounding village. These donations primed Salasar's growth as a pilgrimage center. Within these twenty years, numerous *dharmśālās* or rest houses for pilgrims have been constructed, along with a few luxury hotels. Now condominiums are going up as extra homes for the better off who frequently visit Balaji. As pilgrims often told me, the development of a supporting infrastructure—places to eat and stay—has made it feasible for more and more visitors to come to Salasar. Asphalt roads have replaced sandy farm tracks, although camel carts still regularly lumber through Salasar's narrow streets, causing traffic backups for weekenders from Delhi. As tourist brochures and Web sites assure us, Salasar is not only easily accessible by road, but even by train (to the neighboring small city of Lakshmangarh), and ultimately

airports (Jaipur and Delhi). I once saw a state-issued street sign in the district city of Hisar in southern Haryana, 230 kilometers (143 miles) from Salasar, to direct motorists to the shrine, just like any number of cities; Salasar has achieved peerage in the geography of travel destinations.

I frequently asked my respondents—pilgrims, Brahmin priests, and others living in the area—to explain the reasons for Salasar’s transformation. Their typical response was that word had gradually spread of Balaji’s miracles until large crowds started arriving. Some also noted the effect of improved transportation, mass media (such as informational TV shows), and even increased leisure time on weekends. Some reflected that insofar as we live in an era of greed, in which people want to get ahead fast, a deity promising miracles is going to be more in demand. This takes us closer to neoliberalism as a factor, in which India has become more integrated into the worldwide system of consumer desire.

Further, I asked devotees if they had made a wish to Balaji, and, if so, what they had wished for. Some would only confide that they had wished for “world peace” or “peace in the heart” [*sukhśānti*]. They were quick to dismiss wishing for personal gain as a selfish or shortsighted misuse of the deity’s capacities. And yet, a fair number of devotees unabashedly cited Balaji as an instrument for their prosperity, not to mention helping to avoid or mitigate accidents, find a marriage partner, pass an exam, get a job, and bear a child, along with other benefits. But, it is Balaji’s connection to wealth, evidenced in the generous donations from better-off devotees, that has stuck in the popular imagination. Once, when I mentioned this temple to a devotee at another temple, his spontaneous response was “Gold!” As I was repeatedly told over the course of a year, getting benefits from Balaji, like other deities of miracles, is contingent on demonstrating *viśvās*, or faith. In return one should perform pious acts, such as donating to the temple.

### *The God of “50/50” Miracles*

In this section I will further discuss what is meant by “miracles,” for which Balaji is so famous. How do devotees explain the mechanics of wishing for a desired outcome through faith? As mentioned, some are comfortable wishing for a direct benefit, while others will go only so far as asking for generalized wellbeing. I frequently detected presumptions that I would view miracles as irrational. This anxiety embeds two concerns: that the devotee making such prayers is old-fashioned or superstitious, hence backwards, and, secondly, that he is lazy by not seeking the outcome through his own effort. In fact, during my year of research I repeatedly heard these two judgments. This situation spotlights my point that many individuals are enmeshed in projects of self-advancement in the neoliberal setting, and wanting to leave behind what they might regard as old ways. In her edited volume on miracles in modern South Asia, Corinne Dempsey points to this “conundrum”: how do miracles take place in a modern context?<sup>45</sup> As she mentions, the question meshes with the dualist/non-dualist opposition in Indian thought. In the dualist camp, devotees exist separate from deities, who bestow desired outcomes. The non-dualist side, in line with modern Hindu thinkers such as Swami Vivekananda, imagines the divine as an aspect of the self, and thereby downplays ritualism aimed at deities while emphasizing the individual’s capacity to ascertain rational truth.

As a manifestation of Hanuman, the ultimate devotee of Hinduism’s god-hero Rama, Balaji upholds the values of classical Indian civilization. But, insofar as he is dedicated to helping humanity in this modern era, he is seemingly sensitive to the needs of his contemporary devotees. Therefore, he is imagined from all sides of the spectrum when it comes to miracles. One recurring perspective that I encountered, which inserts rationalism and notions of modern business ethics into miracles, is the notion of “50/50 compromise.”<sup>46</sup> By this, some devotees

mean that Balaji likes them to show individual initiative in attaining their goals. As a Brahmin in Salasar told me, Balaji gives the devotee a necessary boost in self-confidence or *ātmāviśvās* sufficient to achieve his aims through his own efforts. It is as if Mitt Romney's notorious public allegations about "47 percent" of the US public depending on government benefits had been put in the words of an upwardly mobile devotee of Balaji: those who expect the god to bestow everything desired are being lazy. Instead, they need to demonstrate their own initiative to win divine favor. This is not to say that *ātmāviśvās* was unknown before the era of neoliberal reforms, but only that it has gained additional significance in the setting of contemporary upward mobility. I most often heard this perspective on miracles from men who were self-employed and satisfied with their ability to accomplish their aims in life in this era of new economic opportunities, albeit with a bit of divine assistance. *Ātmāviśvās* as a divine benefit perfectly matches this ethos; the individual is being endowed with the capacity to help himself rather than relying solely on God.

As an example of divinely-granted *ātmāviśvās*, a Brahmin who runs a computer lab for students in Salasar told me that he had been going each morning to pray in Balaji's temple, while he and his students worked hard to make this fledgling enterprise a joint success. He did not wish for outright success; he wished for the ability to make his project a success. This rationalized approach also involved the cooperation of his students in maintaining upright moral behavior: showing up on time, treating others with respect, and so on. As I was often told, one sinful participant inadvertently can jeopardize the whole group's enterprise; this is why families accompanying individuals seeking divine assistance for problems must consider each member's potential moral complicity in the home situation. As a result of everyone's cooperation, and

Balaji's blessing, the computer instructor estimates that his hard work in starting a business will make a profit within two years.

In another case, a jeweler from Bathinda, Punjab, told me that he had formerly worked as a goldsmith in someone else's business, and had felt frustrated at his lack of entrepreneurial autonomy.<sup>47</sup> Then, having heard about the uplifting effects of Balaji's blessings from other merchants, he started to come to Salasar every three months. Since then, under Balaji's divine assistance, he has gained the confidence to establish his own business, and he says that for the first time he feels empowered in his life. In this era, when inspirational how-to-succeed-in-business books translated from English into Hindi are readily available in bookstores, Balaji serves as the ultimate start-up benefactor.<sup>48</sup> *Ātmāviśvās* is not restricted to Balaji; it comes up with other deities of miracles who help similarly positioned entrepreneurs. A vivid example was provided by the chief guru of a Shani (Saturn) temple recommended to me by Marwari devotees of Balaji in the Dombivli suburb of Mumbai. Already a highly successful real estate developer who razed slum settlements to put up high-rises, he then took on a second career as a clairvoyant guru. This, incidentally, is a life trajectory common to many faith healers who work in the name of Mehndipur Balaji, whose ability to exorcise bad spirits translates to guiding businesses to success. In all these situations, *ātmāviśvās* means the ability to act with assurance that a good outcome is within one's potential. In these devotees' words, inner confidence, not irrational miracles, is what accounts for business success.

Going hand in hand with the need to demonstrate initiative is the viewpoint that God is not going to grant miracles that would be objectively impossible; miracles must be outcomes that the individual could accomplish himself, if he had sufficient self-confidence. This is reminiscent of a trend among some Western theologians, as noted by Dempsey, to say that since nature is God's



creation, then any purported miracle that would violate natural or rational laws would be an affront against God.<sup>49</sup> Still, many devotees evidently expect a more direct exchange of faith for miracles. Devotees who criticized the faith-for-miracles approach said it made no sense to wish for something that is already outright “impossible,” such as receiving a million rupees without any personal effort or suddenly becoming the prime minister. Or, as a Brahmin told me, Balaji could help someone get to Delhi (around nine hours by vehicle), but would not help someone cross the border to Pakistan (because the physical and bureaucratic hurdles are too great for a typical Indian citizen). The wish must index an act that is already conceivable by the devotee’s own initiative, and can be accomplished with greater ease or likelihood of success through the deity’s help. One skeptical pilgrim (not a Marwari, but a Jat—another caste that favors Balaji) revealed to me that he had “challenged” Balaji to make him a couple of inches taller so he could go into the navy; this, of course, did not work, as it was an impossibility. The man thus confirmed that notwithstanding Balaji’s reputation as a great source of miracles, one does not wish for just anything. Balaji supports a rationalist modern reading of the divine. I wonder, then, if the well-known Marwari presence at Salasar (and in Dombivli, as noted) could be imbuing Balaji with core values of neoliberal capitalism. In this mindset, the god favors the Marwaris in the present business environment because they are already prepared to take the first step in their own success.

The notion that god-given *ātmāviśvās* has a link with business values might also be imputed from popular literature on self-confidence as the key to getting ahead in life. After all, is not coming to Balaji ultimately about getting on the fast track to personal improvement? As evidence I would highlight a Hindi book (2008) credited to American motivational writer Orison Swett Marden (1850-1924) that I obtained from a bookstore in Delhi. The title translates as

*Achieving Success* [*Jīt ke dāvedār*]. The editors have Indianized Marden’s advice on how to succeed in business and life in general, and have adapted the original message to a more religious context. Starting with a tale of how a hardworking Indian farmer got ahead in life, the second page presents a block quote from Swami Vivekananda, the famous reformer of modern Hinduism, informing us: “Self-confidence [*ātmāśīsvās*] is the first step to future prosperity!”<sup>50</sup> On the very following page, this advice is given a more religious slant in a quote attributed to Mahatma Gandhi: “Without faith in God, one’s self-confidence [*ātmāśīsvās*] gradually disappears.”<sup>51</sup> The book goes on to outline all the success in life that comes to one who embraces self-confidence. The cover of the book, which shows a sophisticated-looking young Indian man in a business suit, and a message promoting the book which hails the intended reader as an “industrious person” [*mehnti insān*]*—*a description of someone possessing self-confidence. Thus, in this endeavor, confidence in oneself and faith in God are potentially united in the project of personal advancement.

As a follow-up to this discussion, I would also note that there is a mindset that is conceived to be the opposite of *ātmāśīsvās*: that is *andhāśīsvās*, or superstition. I often heard this term leveled at devotees who expect miracles simply upon request. When making this judgment, the respondent is not necessarily a self-employed businessman, but is positioning himself as a modern rationalist. At Salasar, a pilgrim from a village in Nagaur District in Rajasthan described to me his life in a large, extended family [*samyukt parivār*; typical in India]. Inasmuch as everyone in the family is expected to contribute to the welfare of the collective household, disagreements sometimes came up, which he said caused him stress. So, he aspired to attain *ātmāśīsvās* from his devotion to Balaji to find the wherewithal to handle these problems, along with helping him stay clear of illness and financial difficulties.<sup>52</sup> This pilgrim stated that he has a

modern, rational family, in contrast to some gullible city folk and villagers who chase after unrealistic miracles, especially (in the case of Marwari VIPs) through priestly mediation. To him, a boon accrued to the devotee not through his own effort but rather through priestly mediation, is “all in the mind” [*mānasik bāt*].<sup>53</sup> This presents an interesting twist on Balaji’s miracles; this non-Marwari pilgrim (being a farmer) uses the rhetoric of *ātmāviśvās* to criticize the exclusionary Brahmin-Marwari relationship, which is based on Marwari donations made to the temple and its adjunct trusts. This shows the fluidity of these terms of devotion as ways for people to rhetorically position themselves within a continuum of different levels of modern advancement.

### *The Significance of Faith in Balaji*

Even with the expectation of an immediate miracle, one does not unfeelingly submit a wish to Balaji but instead must perform it with emotional conviction. When trying to gain some benefit, one typically makes a prayer to Balaji—even while at home—along with a vow to perform austerities or some manner of personal sacrifice if the wish is granted. These days, the desire to assure results—and quickly enough to meet busy modern lifestyles—means that many devotees actually make performances of faith before the anticipated miracle as a demonstration of their sincerity. This act of faith in exchange for the miracle is informed by the philosophical principle of acting according to one’s particular station in life, as articulated in Hinduism’s classic scripture, the Bhagavad Gita. For instance, a wealthy businessman will sacrifice a token part of his total wealth to Balaji in order to increase his prosperity further. A poor man might only perform faith in physical terms, such as making repeated prostrations on the ground on the way to the temple. This points to a *habitus* of faith—practices rooted in the context of one’s class background—although an overlapping range of performances is possible.<sup>54</sup> One does not expect

to see affluent urban merchants walking 200 kilometers to Salasar, but many devotees from the countryside do this. Thus, Balaji's elite patrons are acting according to their social position. They would argue that any tax advantage is not the point; benefits are accrued not because of selfish calculations but because of the sincere performance of faith in Balaji.

The merchant classes and Brahmin priests known as *pujārīs* that serve them typically describe Balaji as having the special role of protecting humanity in these hard times of the Kali Yug, the present Hindu era, which technically started more than 5,000 years ago but is nowadays commonly imagined in terms of recent modernity. These *yugs* [eras] occur in cycles of four, with each succeeding era in one cycle becoming progressively more morally degraded than the one preceding it, until the cycle is started anew. As all devotees readily agree, in an earlier era, known as the *Treta Yug*, Rama, an *avatār* [earthly manifestation] of God, along with his consort Sita, rewarded Hanuman for his selfless service to them in the war against the demon king Ravan. They granted Hanuman immortality, which meant that he would live close to earth throughout all succeeding eras, even when the higher gods had perished or returned to the heavens. Therefore Hanuman has the particular duty of rescuing humanity from the moral degradation of the present era. As a local manifestation of Hanuman, Balaji is therefore not only the *kuldev* who resides in Salasar but also simultaneously a divinity for the world.

Popular lore in Salasar gives reasons for believing that the Kali Yug describes our present, modern, capitalist, indeed neoliberal era. As mentioned in the introduction to this study, some *pujārīs* told me that the Kali Yug is also popularly known as the *Arth Yug*, or “money era,” in which “everyone is chasing after money.”<sup>55</sup> They are essentially referring to neoliberal India; the pursuit of money thus has theological significance. Insofar as Balaji brings prosperity, he is clearly also attentive to the fiscal concerns of devotees in these times, providing they show faith.

And then, there also is the second interpretation that I heard which further suggests the equivalence between the Kali Yuga and modernity. Some *pujārīs* believe that this term does not actually mean “time of strife,” as we would find in a Hindi dictionary, but rather “the era of machines”—an allusion to industrialization. Hence, they claim, the true word for describing our present era is not “*kali*” but “*kal*,” which happens to mean machine in Hindi. This claim is indicative of the widespread perception that Balaji, the heroic savior-deity of our era, is truly a god for the modern era, despite his ancient origins. Or rather, *pujārīs* and devotees are finding ways to explain his present-day popularity by retroactively revising his mythology.

On account of Balaji’s dual ontology as *kuldev* and pan-Indian deity, he is especially well equipped to perform a wide variety of miracles; and yet, most of his devotees belong to just two caste groups. The first is the urban Marwari merchants, depicted in the opening paragraph of this chapter; they claim descent from Shekhawati, which includes Salasar, but now live in cities throughout India. The second is the Jats, who traditionally work as farmers and are especially concentrated in the Rajasthan-Haryana-Punjab tri-state border region, which is just north of Salasar and overlaps with Shekhawati. As far as I could ascertain, these two caste groups, and the Brahmins of Salasar, are the only ones who regard Balaji as their *kuldev* or lineage deity. This is not to say that all members of these castes would regard Balaji in this way, or even be familiar with him, but only that those who do think this way belong to these castes. A fair proportion of Marwaris, Jats, and Brahmins from this region consider certain other deities having local shrines, instead of Balaji, as their *kuldev*, or even *kuldevī* [lineage goddess]. The reason for having one over another is a matter of shared clan ancestry. Occasionally, Rajput, Brahmin (not resident in Salasar), and perhaps even Sikh pilgrims will show up in Salasar (and lower castes

even less often), but they seem not to regard Balaji as a *kuldev*, hence they do not feel the obligation to demonstrate faith to the same degree as many Marwaris, Jats, and local Brahmins.

Our investigation of the rise of Balaji is therefore intertwined with the evolving fortunes of the Marwari, Jat, and local Brahmin castes. In this study, I frequently refer to castes or clans as having attitudes that correlate with their group identities. Coming from the US, I initially felt hesitation to extrapolate individual views to a broad social group, but I found a surprising concordance between respondents' professed perceptions of religious and social practices and their respective caste or clan identities. This partly relates to their previously distinct traditional livelihoods, not to mention different locales (most obviously, city versus countryside) and perceptions of class or social privilege. As we progress through this study, we will in fact start to see instances where convictions of faith seem to break through these imagined boundaries. Indeed, Salasar Balaji himself presents the challenge of a seemingly new deity who is ostensibly for the world, and yet appeals to particular clientele.

Divergent Marwari, Jat, and Brahmin views about Salasar's devotional system significantly colored my fieldwork. Jats, like many of the villagers from the area around Salasar, generally did not hesitate to give me a socioeconomic critique of the Brahmins and their Marwari clients that runs counter to the theological explanations that the other two groups would tell me. All the groups are in accord about Balaji's supernatural efficacy, but the Jats often differ from the Marwaris and Brahmins in their attitudes about the rightful positions of these groups in this devotional regime, particularly regarding Marwari patronage and the Brahmins' mediatory role. Jats in particular, but often Brahmins as well, will refer to those devotees from the current-day economic or political elite—usually better-off Marwaris, but sometimes also other well-connected individuals—as “VIPs.” Jat pilgrims grumble that VIPs get unfair privileges in

Salasar in return for the donations they make to the temple and related charitable trusts. For instance, during crowded holidays, VIPs are allowed to enter Balaji's inner shrine through special shortcut passageways while common people, including most Jats, wait in line for hours. The Jats are not the only ones who criticize the VIPs. Some non-Marwari locals of various other caste backgrounds (Rajput, Gurjar, Meena, and so forth), who may work as shop clerks or as caretakers at Salasar's many *dharmśālās*, commonly say that VIP donations in Salasar are often a ruse for disposing of "number two money" or "black money," in other words shady or unreported income. Although it is outside the scope of this study to estimate to what degree, if at all, donations in Salasar involve illegal acts, public news reports that I will later cite make clear that VIP devotees have on some occasions been implicated in such misbehavior. However, we should keep in mind that tax avoidance through legal means, such as tax-free donations, is different than tax evasion, the outright hiding of income.

### *Theoretical Approaches to Religious Change at Pilgrimage Shrines*

Numerous studies have described the mechanisms by which Hindu pilgrimage centers operate, and some have discussed the ways in which they have changed in line with modernity. But, the impact of neoliberalism over the last two decades has been less explored, perhaps because of its relative newness in the centuries-old tradition of pilgrimage. Take, for example, James Lochtefeld's study of Hardwar, based on fieldwork mostly conducted in 1989-1990—just before neoliberalism entered the picture, but subsequently updated—in which he notes that the local Brahmins, known as *pāndās* [i.e. *pandits*], are deeply involved in the economy of pilgrimage. The *pāndās* provide ritual services and other assistance for visitors coming to worship at the sacred waters of the Ganga, and also operate the shops that sell religious paraphernalia needed for worship. As we see at Salasar, so too Lochtefeld observes the effect on Hardwar of modern

improvements in transportation, the construction of luxury hotels, and the arrival of middle class leisure pilgrimage. He also presciently hints at the problem of societal corruption, which has been commanding increasing attention in Indian public life. Hence, he notes that for many devotees, the divine may seem like a better bet for benefits than inefficient bureaucrats; we could say the same of Balaji.<sup>56</sup> Lochtefeld distinguishes his approach from scholarship that would privilege Sanskrit literature as the main source for understanding pilgrimage, insofar as it lends itself to a less historical, more mythologized reading. A case in point is Diana Eck's work on Varanasi from more than thirty years ago, which depicts that city in what Lochtefeld characterizes as "romantic" but "inert" (timeless) terms.<sup>57</sup>

Despite Lochtefeld's turn to the social structural aspects of pilgrimage, my study of Balaji is different in one particularly crucial way. Lochtefeld does not really theorize modern economics as having an agentive role in the development of Hardwar; instead, he treats modern change as an inexorable, but ultimately unanalyzed force that remains somewhere "out there," so to speak. Corporate finance, displays of personal wealth, and reactions to tax policies are not a significant part of his discussion of how a pilgrimage site develops. Rather, in his study, it is Hardwar's longstanding spiritual importance that accounts for its economic growth; religious belief precedes contextualization. My study seeks to turn that sequence on its head by considering economic agency as having a formative affect on devotion; belief thus comes from context. For Marxian theorists, this might seem standard, but while class struggle is a familiar theme, the particular mechanisms that undergird neoliberal-era religiosity have been less examined.

Based on the testimony of my respondents, I argue that the attraction of new shrines promising miracles at least partly arises from the ethos of getting ahead fast in a competitive economic environment, and a rising culture of personal improvement that impels devotees to



expel bad spiritual effects that they believe are holding them back. As Salasar has become a magnet for pilgrims, the last decade has witnessed the proliferation of various shrines offering miracles throughout this region of Rajasthan. The desire for benefits, which makes a deity of miracles popular, could be conceptually equivalent to the mindset that fuels societal corruption, since both involve the employment of personal connections or mediation to efficiently accomplish an end. These parallel but morally opposed paths converge in the act of prayer at Salasar, as the devotee who is frustrated because of limiting conditions in everyday life (low salary, bureaucratic restrictions, the slow pace of attaining ambitions, corruption, complications in arranging marriage, unduly high medical bills, for example) seeks to expedite these blocks or injustices through divine intercession. It is fitting, then, that Hanuman is also popularly known as Sankat Mochan, “the remover of obstacles.”

Devotees’ conviction that they have a lifelong commitment to Balaji has a corollary in Western religious theory. First, consider the fundamental rules of honoring a *kuldev*. The devotee is expected to periodically return to this deity to seek his blessing in recognition of important life events, such as the birth of a child, the ceremonial cutting of that child’s hair at the age of three years (to insure his continued good health), and marriage. The *kuldev* represents patrilineal continuity, or the honoring of a primeval abode. I would compare the concept of a periodically renewed, lifelong relationship with the lineage deity to Mircea Eliade’s theologically-informed theory of “the eternal return,” which similarly reifies the divine as an original entity to which we gain spiritual access through ritual acts.<sup>58</sup> From this perspective, Salasar is that point of divine contact to which the devotee regularly returns, typically from a faraway city in the pan-Indian diaspora that is immersed in the Kali Yug, which could imagine in terms of Eliade’s profane world.

As Eliade tells us, ritual entry (e.g. prayer) to the eternal sacred allows one to extract some of its power. Inasmuch as Balaji is equated with pan-Indian Hanuman, we could say that the devotee receiving the Balaji's *darśān* partakes of the charismatic power of Hanuman in that earlier, morally superior era, the Treta Yuga. As the superlative exemplar of faith, Balaji has become a potent symbol for the national political movement to institute a more Hindu-centric popular culture. On the local level, making generous donations to Balaji not only pleases this *kuldev* but also confers the prestige of upholding timeless Hindu social values. Devotees obtain Balaji's blessings in the form of *darśān* and *prasād* [consecrated food], which suffuses them with charismatic power—in other words accumulating *ātmāviśwas*. This self-confidence protectively insures wellbeing and prosperity to the devotee in his home life. I mention this high-minded theological rationale for worshiping Balaji as a Marwari counterpoint to the blunt critique among some Jats that the Marwaris are only looking for financial advantages. Many non-Marwaris refer to these mercantile castes as having a “use and throw away” attitude towards others, but the Marwaris themselves would argue that their generous donations prove their heartfelt gratitude to the deity.

## 2.2 Tracking Donations

### *Economies of Faith*

Starting with this section, I will present the evidence for VIP donations on which I base my conclusions about Salasar's development as a pilgrimage center. Public structures sponsored by devotees are often embedded with a commemorative plaque indicating a patron, place of origin, and date. In surveying these public declarations, I could find none dated earlier than approximately 1994 or 1995. These plaques and structures may represent only a fraction of all donations coming to Salasar, but they are nonetheless useful for getting a sense of donors'

practices. The early-to-mid 1990s seem to have been a formative time for Salasar's public profile; I conclude this not only based on the public material record of donations but also because devotees and Brahmins routinely state that as recently as twenty years ago few people visited Salasar. We start our tour at the edge of town, near a large dusty field that is popular among the *pujārī* youths for evening cricket games. Adjacent to this field is a large *gośālā* [cow sanctuary] said to be one of the biggest in Rajasthan. Started in 1998 by the generous contributions of wealthy, devout businessmen in cities around India, the *gośālā* supports three thousand cows that can no longer be looked after by their original owners because they are crippled, blind, or sick. Some cows sightlessly raise their heads in anticipation towards us as we follow the caretaker weaving among them. Charity towards cows is a standard part of Hindu piety, but here in Salasar such acts are loaded with local meaning because they demonstrate a devotional relation to Balaji.

Near the *gośālā*'s exit is a line of tile plaques raised on cement pedestals, the oldest dating to around a decade ago. Inscribed on them are records of donations from individuals, and sometimes even family or corporate groups, with surnames such as Agrawal, Mittal, and Jindal—all well-known Marwari *baniyā* or merchant names—the same as many of India's most famous economic elites. The individuals whose names appear on the plaques are specified as currently residing in such cities as Kolkata, Mumbai, and Bangalore, and yet they affirm a primal connection to this shrine in a remote corner of Rajasthan. Sometimes the names of their ancestral towns in Salasar's surrounding Shekhawati region are also indicated on these plaques, highlighting the donors' lineage connection to this land and *kuldev*. Many of these patrons moved to the city at a young age, or were born into that diaspora, and have only just started coming to Balaji in the last decade or so.

As we progress through Salasar’s market to the main square, which adjoins the front entrance to Balaji’s temple, we pass by other public works, such as taps for drinking and washing (Figure 2-1). At one public tap, a plaque lists individuals and donations ranging from 5,001 to 24,001 rupees.<sup>59</sup> Sometimes these plaques also invoke the names of deceased parents in the hope that



Figure 2-1. A donation plaque and public water tap in Salasar.

this act will benefit their afterlife. Insofar as Balaji, as Hanuman, is understood to have authority over the souls of the departed—a subject that will come up often in later chapters—bringing the welfare of one’s parents to Balaji’s attention makes good sense. Arriving at the town center, we pass through a tunnel-like entrance to Balaji’s temple (Figure 2-2), which is nowadays externally



indistinguishable as a separate structure from a contiguous mass of shops run by the *pujārīs*. We come into an outdoor courtyard around a khejri tree, a medicinal species idealized among locals as a hardy representation life in Rajasthan. This was the original tree that sheltered Balaji's image when the site was virtually unknown to the outside world. Numerous small birds



Figure 2-2. The entrance to Balaji's temple in Salasar.

twitter about on the branches; they are said to be the souls of past devotees. In this congenial atmosphere, local Brahmins leisurely recline on the benches in the sunshine, sometimes chatting with pilgrims who seek their advice.



The khejri tree and surrounding courtyard society register a past in which rugged desert life enforced a degree of simplicity that amounted to asceticism (Figure 2-3). To visitors, despite Salasar's rapid development as a pilgrimage center over the last decade, it still suggests this bucolic purity, which carries the meaning of spiritual power. After all, *sants* or holy men



Figure 2-3. The inner courtyard of Balaji's temple and the khejri tree.

traditionally sought such isolation in order to practice austerities that would build up their inner spiritual power to the extent that the gods would grant them boons. For big-city devotees, coming to Salasar marks a point of access to a reservoir of such spiritual power. Parallel examples abound in modernizing Asian societies where ascetic traditions meet new money. For

instance, anthropologist Stanley Tambiah researched Thai Buddhist forest monks (fieldwork in 1978-1979) who were sought out by the nouveau riche of Bangkok for their magical abilities attained from lives of meditation. Those Thai bourgeois devotees sought the transmission of some of the monks' spiritual power for their benefit in gaining wealth or physical invulnerability.<sup>60</sup> They derived this benefit from the sacred amulets that the monks gave them. At Salasar, the functional equivalent of those amulets would be consuming *prasād* obtained in the temple, or ingesting sacred ash (or daubing it on one's forehead) taken from a continuously maintained sacred fire in this courtyard.

As Salasar has grown in stature, its association with Rajasthani rusticity has become a bit ironic, as the *pujārīs* have been building ever-more luxurious homes, thanks to their elite patrons. And yet, they safeguard this ideology of primal simplicity and divinity. The *pujārīs* of Salasar, young and old, will readily recite the foundation myth of their temple, which I will describe further in Chapter 3. The key point of this story is that after their ancestor, a *sant* named Mohan Das, had practiced austerities for many years, Balaji recognized him as his primary devotee. Later, Balaji granted the boon that henceforth the *sant's* clan through his sister's descendants would forever serve as his priests. This foundational pact is of course of the highest importance to the *pujārīs*, as it justifies their continued centrality in the workings of Balaji's temple, and more broadly the economy of Salasar.

### *The Temple as a Place of Business*

The courtyard of Balaji's temple is a site for the Brahmins and their followers to negotiate the practicalities of devotion as business. A network of inner rooms surrounding the courtyard are reserved for the *pujārīs* and some of their more elite patrons, but one cavernous room is open to all. It is used for public recitals of scriptures associated with Hanuman, such as *Sundarkāṇḍ*, the

chapter of the *Rāmcāritmānas* (the Hindi version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*) that describes the god’s heroic exploits. The Brahmins who lead these recitations much of the time perform by commission from devotees who wish to thereby please Balaji and gain his blessings. Meanwhile, in nearby offices adjacent to the courtyard, *pujārīs* efficiently register donations in their account books in the name of the temple’s guiding trusts, and dispense receipts. On another side of the courtyard, a signboard painted bright orange—the sacred color of Hanuman—lists all the many kinds of *prasād* available to pilgrims, at a range of prices. Of those specified—*laḍḍū*, *bundī*, *chakki*, and *cūrmā*—the last named is the most emotionally satisfying for a visitor wishing to demonstrate devotion to the deity. *Cūrmā* is the *khās* or indigenous Shekhawati-Rajasthani sweet to be offered to an honored guest, hence also a signal of respect to the divine (and the connection is reinforced by the common saying that “the guest is God”). This business atmosphere is not necessarily different from other Hindu temples, but I mention this to convey the sense that, as the *pujārīs* have become accustomed to the increasing popularity of their temple, they have enlarged their once small shrine to include the full array of normative religious services, while retaining enough local flair (such as offering the deity *cūrmā*) to remind devotees of their ancestral connection here.

When a devotee’s wish to Balaji has come true, he may come to the counter with the orange menu to order a *savāmani*, a standardized ceremonial feeding of Brahmins or other devotees in celebration.<sup>61</sup> On the low end of the price scale, we see *cūrmā savāmanī*, for 5,100 rupees, and on the other extreme we can order a “super deluxe” [*mahāprasād*] *savāmani* for 11,800 rupees—enough for a large group. The food served will be such standards as *ḍāl* [lentils], *roṭīs* [flatbread], and sweets. Class status comes into play, as a higher-income devotee is likely to order high-cost materials. These acts of acknowledging miracles are on the same continuum



with making donations made to the temple to broadcast to the devotional community that the deity has shown favor. So, we see that obtaining a miracle at Balaji's temple entails a human gift in return for a divine gift, which maintains an economic parity between the two sides.

Moving beyond the courtyard, we enter the inner shrine room, the ultimate power center. Standing at the entrance, we face Balaji's stone image, a *sindūr* or sacred red paste-smear, which appears to be no more than a bearded face with rudimentary arms upraised. Surrounding the image are numerous small figurines of Hanuman and other deities in precious metals. Covering the walls around the shrine, and in the passageway leading around the niche for this image that is used for ritual circumambulation [*parikramā*], we find the most vivid evidence of donations in recognition of Balaji's miracles: several hundred splendid silver reliefs of divinities. Among the varied subjects of these reliefs are: Hanuman in his monkey form, seated and raising his right hand in *āśirvād* or blessing; Hanuman carrying the divine heroes Rama and Lakshmana; Hanuman depicted as a baby; bearded Salasar Balaji himself; and other deities, as well as the *sant* Mohan Das. Many of these silver reliefs have inscriptions noting the names of devotees—mostly Marwaris. As a promotional statement, the splendor of the inner shrine room serves as testimony that Balaji has accomplished great wonders.

Upon exiting the *parikramā* or circumambulatory passageway, we pass through a few chambers housing adjunct shrines with more donation plaques—here, too, dating no earlier than the mid 1990s. As before, the surnames on the plaques testify to urban Marwari patronage: Agrawal from Indaur, Garg from Delhi, Lohiya from Varanasi, Poddar from Kolkata, Sedmal from Bhiwani (in Haryana), and a Jain merchant by the surname of Baid from the Shekhawati market town of Ratangarh. One plaque even commemorates a corporate donation from “Bansal [a Marwari surname] Steel Mills” of Delhi. All of these donations formally register previous

miracles for which gratitude is expected, although they never actually specify the nature of those miracles. Since they are positioned along the halls and in the chambers in which most pilgrims pass, these declarations constitute a popular knowledge about not only what the deity can do, but also who the favored faithful are.<sup>62</sup>

Another way of reading these plaques is to consider sociologist Max Weber's famous analysis of "the Protestant ethic."<sup>63</sup> That is, reminiscent of the Calvinist predestination that he describes, these plaques of statements of miracles remind onlookers that this class of people—Marwaris, for the most part—was predestined by birth to receive the protection of this *kuldev*, and their current prosperity is an indication of that *kuldev*'s protection. In theory, others can equally benefit, but the Marwaris have the advantage of being born into his worship. The Marwaris are famously regarded in India as its capitalist class, and the drivers of its neoliberal transformation, so they would seem well suited for comparison with early Protestant merchants. The Marwaris will seem ostentatious at times, in their manner of sponsoring grand public testimonies of faith, and they also have a reputation among many Indians for being preoccupied with making a profit. Methodologically, in this chapter I do not really follow Weber's approach of looking at the cultural (or religious) origins of economic values, insofar as I am emphasizing the economic roots of a rising devotional culture.

The rhetoric that Balaji's miracles are available for all who have faith must be squared with the reality of who has most visibly benefited. VIPs are clearly privileged, but the word "VIP" may not always refer to Marwaris, and perhaps not all Marwaris, but only to the more affluent ones, along with political elites of diverse caste backgrounds. In Salasar's market square in front of Balaji's temple, one knows of the imminent arrival of a VIP by the clattering sound and passing shadow of a helicopter overhead, which lands in the cricket field near the *gosālā*. Or, a

car with an imposing dagger insignia on the hood, apparently signifying a higher-up in the government, pulls up adjacent to the temple entrance; policemen hold back passersby as a well-dressed man is escorted in. When prosperous visitors pull away in their cars, small crowds of beggar children, dressed in rags as the uniform of their work, stubbornly cling to the car doors with the hope that someone will drop a coin out the window. Sitting in the trash-littered street nearby, their sunburnt mothers look on with bored resignation.

### Class Divisions in Devotion

The class divide in devotion at Salasar comes up in popular lore circulated among Jats and other non-Marwaris about privileges accorded to VIPs in Balaji's temple. At the start of this chapter, I described how a Marwari donor family was brought up close to Balaji's image to dedicate a silver relief, while common devotees had to jostle for a more distant view of the deity. As the Brahmins themselves concede, only VIPs are routinely given admittance into the area close to the deity. Non-VIP devotees say that more than just proximity to the image is at stake: the Balaji that is visible to the public in the main niche is allegedly not the original one. The "original" (as they call it in Hindi) looks the same as the "duplicate," but the original image is kept out of public view, insofar as it resides in an indentation in the floor in front of the duplicate (a bit like a Western sunken orchestral chamber). The significance of this is that only big-paying VIPs have access to the more efficacious "original" image, which, according one devotee, promises an "80 to 90 percent" likelihood of a wish being quickly granted. A Brahmin shopkeeper from the small Shekhawati city of Sardarshahar had this to say:

The statue [*mūrti*] that you see in front [of the shrine] is not the real thing ... the original [*aslī*] one is 'underground'—that's the one that Mohan Das [the holy man who founded Balaji's temple] saw. You have to go below the stage [*mañc*] in front of the shrine ... ordinary people can't go there. Only rich people [*paisevāle*] get to see it ... this is the 'era of finance (or wealth)' [*ārthik yug*] ... what counts is money! The

*pujārīs* are greedy. If you give them some money, they'll let you see [the original image]. You have to pay one hundred ... two hundred ... five hundred thousand rupees! [The *pujārīs*] let 'VIP' people go directly in, and conduct *pūjā* there for them. If you don't give enough money they'll do [a perfunctory] *pūjā* for you and send you out in five minutes. Those who give a lot get more time.<sup>64</sup>

The general public must make due with this so-called duplicate image, which no doubt has some power [*śakti*] by virtue of its position in Balaji's shrine but is less efficacious than the original (as its miracles probably take longer to manifest). The contrast in time needed for a miracle to take effect goes to the core of the Indian experience of class difference; common people are accustomed to waiting in long lines, literally or figuratively, for public transportation, government formalities, and educational or vocational opportunities, while those who can pay extra get quick resolution.

As I was told, the original image had once resided at the surface of the ground but its accumulated divine energy manifested as immense weight, causing it to sink. Even twenty men could not reinstall it to its former position, so a duplicate was made for the public, and the sunken original became the private domain of the *pujārīs* to grant admission to select devotees. The Brahmin shopkeeper who spoke with me stated that because his older brother is the general secretary in a politically-connected "youth congress," this shopkeeper, too, received the "VIP treatment" of admittance to the original image. And yet, despite hearing stories about the duplicate image from a fair number of non-VIP devotees during my year of research, I was not able to personally verify whether there truly is a sunken original statue. In fact, my *pujārī* respondents insisted that there is no such thing! The point here, then, is less the factuality of the sunken image than the perception that VIPs are getting special treatment, and that nowadays, more than ever, money makes the difference.

As locals will say, moneyed VIPs formalize their insider status as elite devotees by joining the temple's one or more guiding committees, whose offices are situated adjacent to the temple. Membership entitles these VIPs to "special *darśan*" or expedited audience with the deity, and personalized spiritual guidance from the *pujārīs* for managing day-to-day life, often carried out by long-distance phone calls. As Brahmins in Salasar told me, the amount to be donated for annual membership in a guiding committee ranges from around 20,000 rupees to 100,000 rupees or more.<sup>65</sup> Not surprisingly, locals in this part of India associate Balaji's temple with wealth and privilege.<sup>66</sup> The custom among VIPs of seeking advice from religious leaders is hardly unique to Balaji. Once, when visiting the Rama-centered Triveni Dham [religious sanctuary] near Jaipur I came upon Rajasthan's chief minister and an escort of attentive policemen soliciting advice from the octogenarian guru in charge. Such leaders make inspired or clairvoyant predictions based on spiritual insight, and thereby help in strategizing for upcoming elections or business challenges. But, Salasar is surely one of the prime examples of the VIP patronage of shrines because of the belief among many Marwaris that he is their *kuldev*, and must therefore be honored.

Not just special membership, but the timelines for visiting Balaji correlate with devotees' status. For instance, the nine-day Navaratra festivals of October and April of each year, which are Salasar's biggest festivals, mostly attract Jat pilgrims from the countryside, particularly those who come on foot from their villages up to hundreds of kilometers away. Aside from the fact that these are major national holidays, the timing follows their biannual harvest times. The Marwaris and other privileged followers of Balaji, such as relatives of the *pujārīs* who periodically return from their diasporic lives elsewhere in India, may also show up during Navaratra but they keep to themselves rather than rub shoulders with the raucous crowds. On the other hand, Diwali, the festival of the goddess of wealth that I mentioned at the outset of this

chapter, and January 1, the international New Year, are popular among the business class as a chance to wish for prosperity in the coming year. I was told that Hanuman Jayanti, in the middle of April (following Navaratra) is also a time for VIP visits to Balaji because this is when merchants complete their accounting cycle for the year and start anew. The takeaway from this section, then, is that devotion at Salasar reveals class (typically corresponding to caste) differences, which are registered in the conventions of patronage. Thus, when merchants integral to India's industries received a major boost in profits from the early 1990s onwards and started coming to Salasar, public statements of elite patronage at this shrine evidenced that polarization.

### 2.3 Theorizing Neoliberalism at Salasar

#### *Salasar's Transformation: Two Perspectives*

I have discussed the situation at Salasar in terms of local motives, but nationwide changes in religious practice certainly must have impacted this site. In this section I will discuss the work of two scholars who have taken rather different methodological approaches but provide complimentary insight into popular Hinduism in the 1990s, which will help us see the intersections of local and nationwide social change. I should emphasize, though, that neither author actually discusses Salasar Balaji. First, in numerous publications, Philip Lutgendorf has examined the rising nationwide popularity of Hanuman, the pan-Indian scriptural deity that Balaji locally represents. One visible indication of Hanuman's greater stature in recent decades has been the trend to erect colossal statues of him in public places. Lutgendorf theorizes that these statues of Hanuman are a popular way of displaying Hindu resurgence against a Muslim "other" after earlier centuries of Islamic domination. The controversial destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya by Hindu activists in 1992 suggests that motivation. So far, there seems not to have been a corresponding program of constructing large statues of Hanuman in Salasar,

perhaps because the *pujārīs* in charge would prefer to keep the image of Balaji as his primary manifestation. But, the donations for public religious works that I have described could be taken to represent a similar mindset of making public statements of muscular Hindu piety.

Lutgendorf mentions that, inasmuch as devotion to Hanuman has become widespread in virtually all sectors of Indian society in recent years, the patronage of these colossal statues originates in a broad social spectrum.<sup>67</sup> This observation matches the scope of Lutgendorf's research on Hanuman's textual history, which amalgamates a broad corpus of traditions from across northern India and beyond. By contrast, our discussion of Salasar Balaji is limited to a specific shrine, which has a relatively restricted clientele—mostly Marwaris and Jats. And, when it comes to making publicly visible donations, the field narrows even further to (better-off) Marwaris, although it is possible that other groups are making unpublicized donations. Although Balaji is simultaneously Hanuman, as a *kuldev* he is not interchangeable with the Hanumans of any other shrines because this role arises from the site itself. So, the worship of Salasar Balaji indicates certain local social divisions and customs that are not commensurate with Hanuman the pan-Indian scriptural deity. Therefore, this study of patronage at Salasar is not entirely an echo of what is going on nationally, but instead looks for parallels with those larger trends in the site's local relations of patronage.

Lutgendorf also theorizes that Hanuman's rise points to a convergence of Shaiva and Vaishnava, the two main sects of Hinduism. In Shaiva, Shiva is worshiped as the supreme deity and Hanuman is supposed to be one of his avatars. In Vaishnava, Vishnu is supreme and Hanuman is the ideal devotee of Rama, his *avatār*. These two major scriptural traditions of Hinduism meet in the worship of Hanuman, which would add luster to the worship of Balaji as well. This convergence of two systems of worship relates to a modern-day trend in Hinduism

towards construing its diverse traditions as belonging to an all-inclusive nationwide system that rather ideally supersedes longstanding divisions of caste and sect. In the program of decoration that devotees have sponsored inside Balaji's temple we see such a parallel move towards emphasizing the deity's inclusion within the broader Hindu scriptural tradition. For instance, murals of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and also of Krishna's various exploits line the interior walls and halls; these constitute the two main, allied systems of devotion within Vaishnava (represented by Rama and Krishna, Vishnu's most important avatars). This shift is witnessed in the actual performance of devotion too; for a decade or so, devotees have been sponsoring the non-stop recitation of the pan-Indian epic *Rāmāyaṇa* in a room adjacent to the temple.<sup>68</sup> We can say that when Balaji was discovered by Marwari devotees from across India, and subsequently rewarded for the divine protection he gave, he was materially and ritually upgraded as a higher-profile deity in line with his pan-Indian patrons' identification with nationwide Hinduism.

From a more sociopolitical perspective, and focusing on globalization's affected on Indian religiosity, Meera Nanda likewise makes some useful observations that we could apply in theorizing Balaji's modern trajectory. As in Lutgendorf's study, she seeks to account for the phenomenon of Hindu revivalism. She regards a surge in popular devotional Hinduism (such as faith in miracles) over more philosophical aspects of the religion as a sign of the Hindu triumphalism of a rising middle class. In Nanda's analysis, the middle class has a predilection for new deities and elaborate ritualism that engage them on a personal level as a way of coping with the rapid social change of globalization.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, she adds, middle class or upwardly mobile devotees cherish the heritage of Hindu religiosity as a crucial factor for India's success in the global economy. The innovations of modernity were prefigured in ancient Hinduism, and Hindu culture has preserved ancient wisdom now lost in the West. Similarly, Salasar's devotees



worship Balaji (as Hanuman) as a factually immortal and doctrinally timeless source of spiritual power. In the following statement, a Brahmin in Salasar concurs:

America's Superman and Spiderman is a totally imaginary [*kalpanīya*] affair ... but India's Superman/Spiderman [i.e. deity] is real, and [we] get power from [deities] through our sacred scriptures. It's a great spiritual boon to us that they are truly present among us. As long as the sun lasts, 'Spiderman-Superman-Balaji' will look after [*dhyān rakheṅge*] us.<sup>70</sup>

Balaji is the guarantor of the good life in the neoliberal era, if the devotee practices proper conduct and faith. This line of thinking is reminiscent of Weber's cultural account of Protestant economic success: upholding good values makes for worldly success.

Nanda argues against this "Weberian" Hindu triumphalism by reframing it in socioeconomic terms. The crux of her argument is that the Indian government is deeply implicated in leading the nation on a more overtly religious track, away from its long-established policy of secularism (or religious neutrality), in collusion with business interests and the temple hierarchy. Salasar might seem to be implicated in this axis, inasmuch as at least some Brahmins in Salasar have political connections, although this appears to have more to do with politicians' own desire for advice than any conspiracy. The notion of an alliance between Salasar and political authority is problematized by the fact that, as I was told a number of times, the Brahmin *pujārīs* have been fending off a government takeover of Balaji's temple. The government has noticed the temple's growing income, and there have been some concerns about how the *pujārī* administrators use this money. Some locals complain that the Brahmins have done little to develop the community, although the temple is probably the largest employer of locals, who carry out its routine tasks. In the early days of India's independence the government nationalized the temples that had noticeable incomes, and made their *pujārīs* salaried employees of the state. Salasar was still a

tiny shrine at that time so it was ignored; therefore its priestly bureaucracy remained in control of the temple's finances.

Nanda's fundamental observation is that, contrary to Secularism Theory, which posits that people become less religious as they get wealthier, India has become more religious in this neoliberal era of new affluence. In attempting to account for this, she arrives at a sociological rule: in a society experiencing a high level of social inequality, such as India during its neoliberal transformations, religiosity will rise as people negotiate new social positions.<sup>71</sup> Empirically, the middle-classes—those who aspire to change their socioeconomic position—are the most prone to religious practices that offer a fast track to achieve their ends. Hence, Nanda points out that India's upwardly mobile classes have enthusiastically adopted new iterations of classical Hinduism, such as fire ceremonies, that mark their rising status in the idiom of stable antiquity. And, this up-and-coming gentry likewise seeks gurus offering magical remedies that represent native traditions. This development dovetails with my own study on the rise of miracle shrines, such as Salasar, in the neoliberal era. It should follow that those segments of Indian society in flux would be more enraptured with Balaji and similar deities that offer miracles. But, this explanation is still only part of the picture at Salasar; Balaji's status as a *kuldev*, the reified significance of Rajasthan as a holy land, and caste associations with particular deities all call on us to look at miracle shrines with locality equally in mind.

### *Bābūs, Corruption, and Neoliberal Aspirations*

Expanding on the theme of social change, I would push a bit beyond Lutgendorf and Nanda into some of the fiscal details of neoliberal reforms, to see if these had any impact on the development of a culture of devotion at Salasar. Although predating neoliberal reforms, tax avoidance, corruption, and bureaucratic inefficiency became even more pressing public issues in

the years of economic deregulation, the 1990s. How might this have relevance to Balaji and similar deities? In everyday life in India, a common way to get things done is to bribe, employ the services of a middleman, or exploit personal connections. This would logically extend into the realm of religious practice; there is no reason to think that Indian life compartmentalizes popular religion away from routine life. Much of my study on miracle shrines focuses on this very process: the attainment of a devotee's objectives through the intercession of a deity such as Balaji, who relays these wishes to the higher gods in heavens and then provides a miracle for the devotee. Or, religious specialists, such as priests and faith healers, may install themselves as an additional layer of middlemen. I suggest that such devotional worship, which has become more apparent with the proliferation of miracle shrines in recent years, is therefore a normal aspect of seeking channels for accomplishing everyday tasks. This does not supersede what Lutgendorf and Nanda have told us; it is just an additional dimension of popular religion that had some effect at Salasar and elsewhere.

In the changing economic conditions of neoliberalism, individuals well positioned to profit from deregulation could legally invest in tax-reducing schemes such as religious donations. Many of the new rich went further in actually hiding some portion of their income from taxation. Although the moneyed classes are our main point of discussion here, many observers of Indian economics derisively call tax evasion India's "national sport" for people of all backgrounds.<sup>72</sup> "Black money," or income that has been hidden from taxation, can offer a model for understanding how Balaji and other deities offering miracles have come into higher demand. It is not critical to confirm whether or not such illegal transactions go on in relation to specific temples, but only that the phenomenon itself exists in society, and that this may broadly inform practices of devotion and donations at Salasar. For those who live in a society in which making

bribes or exchanges of favors is normal for accomplishing tasks, or who make use of personal contacts or rely on inside connections as a fast track to success, the prospect of vowing before a deity to make a donation or carry out some religiously significant austerity in return for prayers granted would seem sensible. In this respect, contrary to Nanda's view that belief in miracles is an aberration, I am considering this kind of religiosity to be consistent with the day-to-day normalcy of bureaucracy and petty corruption.

In Hindu practice, there is a long tradition of undergoing physical austerities as a pathway to attaining special powers. And, elites have been making charitable donations to temples and other religious establishments for a long time too. But, in the post-independence era, the so-called "License Raj" of state bureaucracy famously dominated by imperious *bābūs* [bureaucrats] became ever more pervasive in Indian public life.<sup>73</sup> And, this bred a culture of pragmatism to get around, or make the best of, these institutions. Paying electricity bills, getting a desirable job, registering property, or obtaining permission to divert sufficient water to irrigate one's field, and other such everyday tasks, could entail multiple personal interventions. For instance, the *hawālā* system of multiple middlemen in India has served as a conduit for "laundering" money sent by Indians working abroad to their relatives at home.<sup>74</sup> By avoiding banks deposits, this money remains invisible to tax authorities.

Balaji of course upholds moral behavior, but he is a divine middleman. Broadly referring to his position between humanity and the higher gods, Lutgendorf has characterized Hanuman as "the monkey in the middle"—between the earthly and divine realms—which enhances his appeal as a go-to for achieving results.<sup>75</sup> But, beyond what Lutgendorf has stated in doctrinal or scriptural terms, I am suggesting that we further examine Balaji, or Hanuman, in the conventions of mundane life. Devotees at Salasar—as at Mehndipur, Balaji's other major shrine in

Rajasthan—frequently and favorably compare this deity’s quality of work against the more cumbersome world of bureaucratic obstacles and long lines. In fact, in crowded situations at any of Balaji’s temples, a common way of expressing that the deity has granted consideration of one’s request is to state that one’s “number” has come up [e.g. “*merā ‘number’ āyā*” =“(Balaji) answered my prayer”], an allusion to the challenge of waiting in line (at a doctor’s office, in a government office, or in a ticket line, and so forth) to plead one’s case with the *bābū* in charge. When long lines form to get into a temple, however, it is never the deity’s fault. Rather, this is either read as a measure of the deity’s popularity (and hence efficacy) or blamed on the priests for not making the process run more smoothly (and for selectively offering shortcuts to privileged devotees).

### Linking Taxation and Devotion

In tandem with his growing reputation for supernatural efficacy, Balaji has become a magnet for donations made in gratitude. I would argue that the neoliberal reforms, which enriched Balaji’s primary devotional clientele, substantially contributed to the rise of Salasar as a pilgrimage center. First, I will briefly review what we mean by neoliberalism. Its main policies are to lower fees and restrictions on business transactions while reducing government oversight of the economy. In this thinking, an unfettered market allows individual initiative to lead society towards greater social prosperity and integration with the international economy.<sup>76</sup> Although the Indian government had taken small steps to reform its socialist economic policies under Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in the 1980s, when it faced a balance of payments crisis in 1991, during the tenure of Narasimha Rao, it agreed to make some substantial reforms that had been prescribed by the International Monetary Fund. The resulting deregulation, which continued into the following decade, right away brought more profit to elite industrialists and those involved in

the financial sector. It also opened the way for an inflow of worldwide consumerism, which nurtured Indians' ambitions to speedily advance their economic standing. In such a setting, it is easy to see how a deity of miracles such as Balaji would be appealing.

Giving donations to religious establishments and charitable organizations had long been a socially acceptable way to reduce tax liability. With this in mind, I initially suspected that the rush of devotional attention and donations to Balaji from the 1990s onwards might have been a reaction to higher direct taxes, such as personal income tax, which the government could conceivably have raised to compensate for the lowering of indirect taxes, such as tariffs on business. But, it turns out that the highly confiscatory top tax bracket rate of 97.5 percent on personal income in the 1970s was actually going down, and by 1995 it was at 40 percent, and by 1998 it had declined to 30 percent.<sup>77</sup> As it happens, tariffs had gone down even faster in the years following 1991.<sup>78</sup> The economic disparity between the upper and other classes significantly widened during this time of economic deregulation. More people were jostling to get ahead in an increasingly competitive economy. Inasmuch as many devotees cite educational and career concerns for coming to Balaji, we might construe that the rising culture of consumer desire and capitalist ambition has helped popularize deities and gurus offering miracles as a way to quickly attain those objectives. This outcome could correlate with Nanda's theory that rising social inequality leads to stronger affirmations of religiosity.

But, what would be the advantages of new outlets for religious donations such as Balaji when personal taxes were declining anyhow? Without specifically addressing religious donations, economist Arun Kumar poses a parallel question in his study on black money in India: why should the black economy, already around for decades, have kept growing when economic barriers (taxation and tariffs) were going down? Surely this would have obviated much of the

motive to avoid taxation. As Kumar describes it, the Indian government had hoped to undermine smuggling, off-receipt transactions, and other black-economy activities by legalizing some of the previously outlawed business practices and reducing fees on economic activities; and yet, the black economy actually increased! In 1980, the black economy was estimated to be 15% of the size of the white (legitimate) economy, whereas it had allegedly grown to 30 percent by 1991, and 40 percent by 1995.<sup>79</sup> With economic deregulation, instead of an uptick of civic responsibility in paying taxes, there was an economic free-for-all. As Kumar says, the prevailing attitude was “everything goes” [*sab caltā hai*]; in other words, avoiding government fees, even though already reduced, had become so entrenched in society that reducing tariffs alone could not alter this mindset.<sup>80</sup> In summing up the situation, Kumar states that “bad policy” had been replaced by “no policy at all.”<sup>81</sup>

A major factor in the expansion of a culture of tax avoidance was the ongoing inefficiency of the tax code itself, which contained numerous loopholes. For instance, many industries were required to submit separate taxes on multiple stages in the same line of production, such as in making cloth; this added multiples junctures for potential tax subversion.<sup>82</sup> Of relevance to Balaji, Kumar notes that in Surat, a center for cloth production, evasion of such multiple taxes was extremely common. It so happens that Surat is also a center for scores of Marwari organizations centered on Balaji; as I will revisit in Chapter 6, a large archway dedicated to Balaji has even been erected in the middle of the cloth district there. Thus, we may surmise that in the early 1990s many of Balaji’s business-connected devotees were continuing to face a notoriously complex tax structure. The upshot of a rising black economy in a time of deregulation is that many devotees, or potential donors, were by savvy to negotiating strategies for getting around bureaucratic or tax-related obstacles. Kumar notes that widening social

inequality is the foundation of pervasive corruption, as individuals try to get ahead in the system. Recall, then, that Nanda points to social inequality or shifting social relations as a ground for heightened religiosity.

In affirming Balaji in the early 1990s, would-be devotees obtained benefits on multiple levels. They found a way to magically achieve worldly results from a deity with a good track record of success (based on reports of Balaji's miracles) and at the same time some of them obtained a new channel for sheltering the wealth that they had acquired under his blessing. In line with the zeitgeist of the government's gradual withdrawal from its formerly more intensive management of the economy, perhaps it would be fair to consider whether devotees such as the Marwaris correspondingly privatized God as well, in conceiving him as a *kuldev* who looked after their clans. Such a hypothetical divine privatization, echoing the trend towards gated communities and other markers of privilege, would ironically collide with the move to constitute Balaji as a less parochial and more canonical pan-Indian Hindu deity, as Salasar increasingly became drawn into the pan-Indian socioeconomic networks of Marwaris and others from Rajasthan now living in cities across the nation. The outcome of this is that even though Balaji was Hanuman, the savior of all, the Marwaris remained special insiders. This also has ramifications for common devotees. Everyday devotees observed the material evidence of Balaji's miracles in the publicly evident donations from the merchant castes. They hoped to likewise win Balaji's favor when it came to passing exams and getting jobs, or even in less monetized terms, such as domestic happiness and good health.



## 2.4 Finding a Lineage Deity

### Marwaris as “Early Adopters”

In this section I will turn to a more doctrinal way of describing the modern-day Marwari embrace of Balaji. In the Brahmins’ accounts of the recent history of Salasar, as was the case in the material record of donations, the Marwaris—whether properly VIP or otherwise—are the privileged pioneers, or “early adopters,” in apprehending Balaji as a source of miracles. This discovery is understood as return to a lineage deity who once the Marwaris but had seemingly been long forgotten as the Marwaris made new lives in distant urban locales. But, local villagers, and occasionally some from farther away, seem to have been coming here before the Marwaris raised Balaji’s public profile in the early 1990s. In fact, in Balaji’s early history, to which we will return in the following chapter, it was a local Jat farmer that originally came across the deity’s image in a field. Marwaris were also present then, and experienced the deity’s miracles, but a period of over two hundred years ensued in which Balaji remained only locally known. The Marwaris of cities across India are given credit for bringing widespread new interest to this deity around twenty years ago. I have heard conflicting accounts about the actual clientele of the shrine before the 1990s; some respondents implied that some Jats were coming, but most stated that the temple had been more obviously associated with Marwaris.

As far as the Marwaris and Brahmins are concerned, the reason for the growth of Balaji’s cult is not a matter of neoliberalism, nor any other non-theological factor; rather, the deity bestows miracles, and as word about this spread he gained a wider clientele. Inasmuch as we live in the Kali Yuga, an era of cosmologically preordained moral degradation, history itself is imbued with theological meaning. As the Brahmins note, even in this fallen era, some morally upright individuals will desire to maintain timeless moral values, and so they seek refuge in a deity who

upholds the Hindu *dharm* [divine law] of the morally superior earlier eras. That deity is of course Balaji, or Hanuman, although a few other popular shrine deities of Rajasthan have a similar reputation (such as Khatu Shyam, a local version of Krishna). Thus, from the standpoint of Salasar's Brahmins, and affirmed by their Marwari clients, Balaji's rise in this modern age is a narrative of the search for a salvific deity who can serve as a model for humanity to rise above the current moral degradation. The desire for miracles in worshipping Balaji, although accepted as a benefit to the devotee, should ideally not be pursued as an end in itself, lest the devotee succumb to the moral degradation that is typical of this age. Instead, a devotee receives benefits only from expressing faith in Balaji with sincerity in the heart.

A *pujārī* told me that the formative event in the modern growth of devotion to Balaji happened around twenty years ago. A Shekhawati-descended Jain merchant from Kolkata who had suffered paralysis was somehow able to visit his ancestral home and subsequently came to Salasar to seek divine assistance after having unsuccessfully sought treatment in the US (reminding us of the commonly repeated theme of the impotency of modern medicine). He was healed within three weeks of Balaji's *darśan*. This Jain Marwari's miraculous healing sparked a surge of interest among Marwari merchants (although exact dates are a bit hazy).<sup>83</sup> Up to this point, the deity had been obscure to most of the pan-Indian Marwaris due to the difficulties of long-distance transportation.

In the years following the Kolkata man's miraculous healing came further revelations that brought more Marwari devotees. An expatriate Marwari businessman living in Hong Kong saw his company expand steadily after paying a visit to Balaji. Being grateful, he adopted a pious lifestyle of reciting scriptures such as *Sundarkāṇḍ* and *Hanumān cālīsā*, the monkey god's main devotional texts. As a result of his prosperity from devotion, the Marwari from Hong Kong

became a major donor, and has even built a luxury hotel in town for VIPs like himself. His story suggests that for mercantile success in the global diaspora, too, one must remember one's lineage deity. Many businessmen now regularly donate "two to four percent" of their profits to the temple in gratitude, which has enabled the temple trust to continuously upgrade facilities for pilgrims.

Based on these and similar accounts, the Marwaris are understood to be pivotal to the modern advent of Salasar as a place of miracles. Miracles are not unique to Salasar, but this site particularly exemplifies the process by which a miracle shrine rises from obscurity in the neoliberal setting. For that matter, in other emerging economies, small shrine deities have been receiving renewed attention as protectors from misfortune, and for enabling a shortcut to the good life. George Reader and Robert Tanabe have similarly discussed the recent popularity of Japanese spirit shrines that grant practical benefits to devotees. These chthonic spirits have kept up with the times, protecting their clients from vehicular accidents, and insuring job success, domestic harmony, and of course prosperity.<sup>84</sup> Similarly, the Erawan shrine for the Hindu god Brahma in the center of Bangkok became a raging success among Sino-Thais and other upwardly mobile urbanites after a local won a lottery after praying to the deity. Situated in the shadow of gleaming office buildings and department stores, this little shrine is testimony to the search for divine charisma as a strategy for success in capitalist Asia.

Hearing the stories of Balaji's miracles, we may ask what sort of devotion the Marwaris were practicing before they so recently discovered or reaffirmed their faith in him. I will mention the Marwaris' historical background in India's urban landscape in the Chapter 6 of this study, while in this chapter I will limit the focus to religious patronage as a way of considering pre-Balaji Marwari religiosity. Probably the most famous Marwari industrialist from before Balaji's era

was Ghanshyam Das Birla (1894-1983), who is known, along with other members of his family, for having financed the construction of various impressive Hindu temples. Although religious patronage was part of Birla's life story, there is no indication that Birla had ever heard of Balaji, despite the fact that he had been born in a town in Shekhawati, the same region where Salasar is located. He came from a clan of *seths* [well-to-do moneylenders] who had spent long intervals in Bombay for trade purposes; his background thus broadly parallels most of the urban Marwaris that I met during my research. Ambitious to advance his career, Birla transitioned from the traditional *baniyā* occupation in finance or trade to setting up his own factories, especially for the production of cloth, an industry in which many Marwaris are involved. As Birla became more affluent and influential in public life, he started to build temples. The first was Lakshminarayan Temple of Delhi (finished in 1939).<sup>85</sup> In the decades that followed, a dozen or so other temples went up in major cities and pilgrimage centers across India, with no indication of a connection to Salasar. These temples were focused on the worship of the major pan-Indian scriptural deities, such as Vishnu, Lakshmi, Shiva, and Rama. Balaji never appeared in these temples, but Hanuman in his pan-Indian monkey form would make a cameo as an adjunct to the worship of Rama.

In those years, Hanuman must have seemed like a minor figure, different than his current role as a heroic upholder of the Hindu *dharma* [divine law]. Birla evidently felt no reason to build a temple for a locale-specific *kuldev*, if indeed he had one; such a deity would have been kept in a personal shrine inside the family home. In all likelihood, some form of Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity, presumably connected with a specific shrine in Birla's hometown, would have served this role. In fact, taking note of the longstanding Rajput allegiance to *kuldevīs*, lineage goddesses in Rajasthan might conjecturally have a more substantial history than lineage gods. Having

worked in alliance with Mahatma Gandhi in the struggle for independence, Birla's dedication of temples to the pan-Indian gods matched the aspirations of a rising independent nation. His biography makes clear his sense of civic responsibility in taking a close interest in the economic development of the nation. Cognizant of the rising counter-narrative of the black economy, Kumar and other scholars of Indian economics decry the loss of this sense of duty to the nation in the neoliberal age, as desire for personal profit has allegedly corrupted society. Due to the perception of corruption, citizens put less faith in civil authority, and so many place trust in previously obscure, rustic deities, such as those from villages in Rajasthan, who may represent wholesome tradition. Miracles are a focal point of these devotee-divinity relationships, and faith is the currency that produces them.

### Coming Home to a Kuldev

Marwari devotees gave me an array of anecdotes pointing to the same conclusion: Balaji brings miracles, and we should therefore start regularly visiting him in his temple (if not already doing so), especially if we are Marwari. The general theme is thus of coming home to a *kuldev* who had been lost to his followers for generations. In the Salasar temple's courtyard, I met a Marwari man whose family had moved fifty years ago from Shekhawati to the busy city of Nanded, in eastern Maharashtra. He said that, although living far from Rajasthan, he had grown up within a diasporic Shekhawati community of *baniyās* or merchants, along with Jains, and even some Jats. All of them spoke the Marwari language (not to be confused with the caste group), which may refer to any of the dialects of Rajasthan. Growing up far from Salasar, he had perhaps only vaguely been aware, if at all, that Balaji was his lineage deity. As an adult he learned about this deity from his associates but still neglected to regularly pray to him. He later became a factory owner, but one day the whole place burned down. The only thing that had

survived the fire was a framed picture of bearded Salasar Balaji. The man saw in that moment that not only was Balaji a supremely powerful, compassionate being but he was his *kuldev*, and so he should start worshiping him to avoid further misfortunes. Since that time he has devoutly worshiped Balaji, and now visits Salasar as often as three times a year, which he reports has led to renewed prosperity.<sup>86</sup> It is interesting that although the man's factory burned down, this was not a failure of Balaji, but of himself for not having sufficiently placed faith in him up to that time. In this kind of personal narrative, every event potentially reveals the need to show faith in Balaji.

Devotees' stories about discovering Balaji typically end with a visit to the deity in his temple in thanks for a miracle. This may remind us of Eliade's concept of returning from the profane to the site of the divine as a way of accessing a primal vitality. Invoking Balaji from a distance is acceptable as a starting point, but one must ultimately return to the homeland. The Brahmins of Salasar typically emphasize this sequence when talking about the god's importance, which highlights them as necessary middlemen between the VIP devotee and God. The following story, told to me by a *pujārī* in Salasar (presented here in abbreviated form) gives a fairly complete summary of some of the major stages in the individual Marwari's discovery of Balaji: initial distance from the deity, a personal crisis, a miracle which fosters renewed faith in the deity, and a resulting visit to Salasar to demonstrate gratitude:

There was a Marwari devotee of Balaji living in Bombay [Mumbai], originally from the town of Chhapar [near Salasar], whose daughter became sick. Since he was a wealthy devotee, he took her to the most expensive hospital, and phoned a relative in Chhapar [with instructions] to take a wish coconut to Balaji in Salasar to pray for the girl's recovery. The relative called [a *pujārī* shopkeeper in Salasar named] Kapindra, and said, "Please take a coconut to the temple on behalf of a devotee." But, Kapindra said, "One should bring a wishing coconut on one's own ... it's about one's personal wish." The relative told him, "She's in the hospital and can't come, so please do it for her." So, [Kapindra] brought a coconut to the temple, and said to Balaji, "A devotee of yours is

getting treatment in Bombay for a serious condition. Please help her.” One night, five days after the relative had had [Kapindra make] the prayer in Salasar, the daughter got up in her hospital bed and started talking to her mother [who had been staying by her side], saying to bring her a copy of *Hanumān cālīsā* to read. So, the mother called home [for the book], and the girl read it. The following night in the hospital at 2 a.m., [in a dream] the girl saw a light so bright that she could barely open her eyes, and she heard a voice telling her “Read *Hanumān cālīsā* every day, and you will be fine! Then go to Salasar and worship Balaji.” The girl got out of bed and walked over to wake up her mother who was sleeping nearby, declaring, “Mommy, take me to Salasar! I’m all better!” The mother was amazed that the girl had been cured. So, they went off to Salasar, and brought the relative from Chhapar who had arranged for the coconut to be taken to the temple. [In Salasar], the girl came to Kapindra’s shop; Kapindra had never before met her. The relative said [to the girl], “This is the one who brought the coconut for you.” The girl bowed and said, “Your name is Kapindra!” [The shopkeeper] asked, “How did you know my name?” She explained, “I had a dream in which I saw a light, which granted me an audience [*darśan*] with Balaji. And, I saw you in that dream too. Balaji said to me, “This is the person who took the wishing coconut to the temple [for you]. So, read *Hanumān cālīsā* and come to Salasar!”<sup>87</sup>

This story highlights Balaji’s shifting identities both as a local *kuldev* of the Marwaris and as the pan-Indian scriptural Hanuman. The sick girl’s family first tells a relative in the home region to take a coconut supernaturally encapsulating her soul to Balaji so that the deity may judge her sincerity (from afar) and thereupon grant her the miracle; this fits the deity’s role as her *kuldev*. But, when Balaji appears before the girl in the hospital, it is in his generic pan-Indian form as the monkey god, here referred to as “Balaji.” The monkey god tells the girl to recite *Hanumān cālīsā*, a centuries-old, universally revered hymn that is used not just in one place but throughout northern India to invoke his superlative power. At this point, too, he speaks in the voice of the pan-Indian deity. But, the outcome of the girl’s healing is that she must go to not just any Hanuman shrine but only to Salasar to give thanks for her recovery, since that is where her protective *kuldev* resides. As a work of rhetoric, the story articulates a rationale for Marwaris to remember their ancestral home in Shekhawati, their lineage deity, and particularly that deity’s shrine in Salasar, whose continuity is maintained by a hereditary line of *pujārīs*. From this story,

there may also be an implication that forgetting one's lineage deity endangers one's wellbeing, inasmuch as reconnecting with Balaji is what leads to recovery.

## 2.5 The Effects of New Money

### *The Miracle of Jobs and Rising Property Values*

A key claim I make in this chapter is that Marwari patronage in the early 1990s, itself arising in tandem with neoliberal reforms, provided the formative boost that made Salasar into a premier pilgrimage site. Although Marwari VIPs are the group most often linked to Salasar, in fact the majority of visitors are average folk—farmers and townspeople—who come from the surrounding region that extends as far as the states of Punjab and Haryana in particular. Many visitors come by vehicle, but an increasingly substantial number, mostly young men, nowadays walk in groups from their home areas, which may be 200 kilometers or more from Salasar. Twenty years ago hardly anyone came to Salasar on foot, except perhaps for an occasional sadhu. The many thousands who make this foot journey ostensibly do so as a kind of austerity for making a wish to Balaji, or very often simply as an adventure. When asked how this change came about, many devotees cite the availability of *dharmśālās* in Salasar, and the general availability of facilities, such as places to eat, which make a long foot journey seem plausible. This section will discuss how the economics of property, and the infrastructure built upon it, has helped produce the infrastructure for a pilgrimage destination. Furthermore, a glance at the financial arrangements behind this infrastructure suggests that practices for sheltering income from tax liability, which remained pervasive in the neoliberal era, may have entered Salasar too.

Earlier, I mentioned that the rise of pilgrimage has provided employment for the locals from surrounding villages who serve as clerks in the *pujārīs'* shops near the temple, and that they consider this to be Balaji's greatest miracle. Although the temple is officially the property of



Balaji, the *pujārīs* have the advantage of being its hereditary managers; hence, they also run the temple's guiding committee (in conjunction with some Marwari or other prominent advisors), which has allowed them to control how the surrounding property is to be used. In addition to the shopping area, the temple owns farmland (totaling 52 *bhigas*, or 629,200 square feet) that provides food for local Brahmins and their employees. A very generous hereditary rental arrangement with the temple allows the *pujārīs* to keep paying historically low rents (in effect, a kind of rent control) to the temple for their shop spaces—a mere ten rupees (22 cents) a month, which is one seventh of the cost of one standard meal (70 rupees) at any of the food shops that they run for pilgrims.

Nowadays, because of the influx of visitors, the actual value of the land far exceeds what the *pujārīs* are paying the temple in rent. If one of the hereditary *pujārī* shopkeepers were to sell the rental rights to his shop space near the temple, the new renter would be expected to pay him 15,000 rupees for that alone (Figure 2-4). Locals proudly informed me that purchasing a space near the temple outright costs 10,000 rupees per square foot, which purportedly surpasses the rate of 4,000 rupees per square foot that they say is the norm for highly desirable farmland sold for industrial development in Gurgaon District, which is adjacent to Delhi.<sup>88</sup> Like employment, the fantastic rise in Salasar's real estate values is ascribed to the blessing of Balaji, the presiding *kuldev*.<sup>89</sup>

Shops selling religious supplies and souvenirs in the vicinity of the temple have proliferated outwards along the roads that bring the pilgrims here. Near the temple, the shops, which are aimed at pilgrims, sell coconuts, *cūrmā* (the Rajasthani sweet), and other supplies for ritual offerings, as well as religious-themed toys, devotional CDs, framed portraits of deities, and ritual handbooks. The most popular items appear to be orange plastic flying Hanuman figurines to be

hung from car rear-view mirrors, along with bearded Balaji images to be installed on the dashboard (which are useful as a guarantee against road accidents, insofar as many Indians have little sense of need for seatbelts), and neck pendants depicting a troll-like Balaji face to keep away evil influences.<sup>90</sup> Other shops sell meals, soda pop, ice cream, shampoo, and other goods



Figure 2-4. A souvenir shop in Salasar.

desirable to visitors. As we move away from the temple, we find hardware stores, photo studios, bicycle repair shops, pharmacies, and other establishments geared more to locals. Side streets reveal the impressive new homes of the *pujārīs* before extending into other caste-specific neighborhoods in which older homes predominate, and beyond them expanses of scrub.

Even far from the center of town, real estate speculation has pushed up land prices. A Jat man who had returned to Salasar after several years working in Saudi Arabia told me that 50 years ago his grandfather had bought the land under his modest home near the edge of town for 500 rupees, but now property developers were offering him 50,000 rupees for it. On farmland just beyond the confines of Salasar, plans have been made to build new homes or condominiums. Some of the more affluent pilgrims visit Balaji from far-off cities as often as once a month, which has spurred a market for new housing in this otherwise remote place. On the edge of town, I noticed signs posted in front of empty fields promising upcoming luxury flats in the god's name. One sign read: "Balaji ki Dhani ['Balaji's Village' (the name of the housing development)]: Ethnic Luxury Villas & Plots with all Facilities at Salasar Balaji ... 400 meters [ahead] ..." while another signboard promised: "Balaji Village: Plots, Flats and Villas COMING SOON! ...."<sup>91</sup> (Figure 2-5). Both signs included a depiction of bearded Balaji, who seemingly endorses the project. The sign's mention of "ethnic" residences appears to be an allusion to a Rajasthani aesthetic, which suggests spiritual purity to Marwaris from the big city. And yet, these are intended as luxurious residences, as befits a moneyed clientele. Web sites similarly promote such projects. One online video gives a tour of a decidedly upscale, gated-community condominium complex incongruously situated in the middle of scrub, but nonetheless down the road from Salasar.<sup>92</sup>

As money from devotees throughout India has found its way to their *kuldev* in Salasar, the deity has been brought into closer alignment to the Hindu ideal of pan-Indian Hanuman. One aspect of this has been the promotion of religious colleges. A well-to-do Marwari family recently sponsored the foundation of a Sanskrit college near to Salasar to make sure that young *pujārīs* gain a proper education in classical knowledge.<sup>93</sup> This brings to mind Nanda's point



about the proliferation of religious education as part of the movement to make public life more expressly Hindu. A commemorative yearbook from this college indicates that all its trustees are Marwari donors and *pujārīs* from Salasar, again pointing to their intimate patronage relationship. The yearbook tells us that the college’s founders represent a “prestigious merchant family”



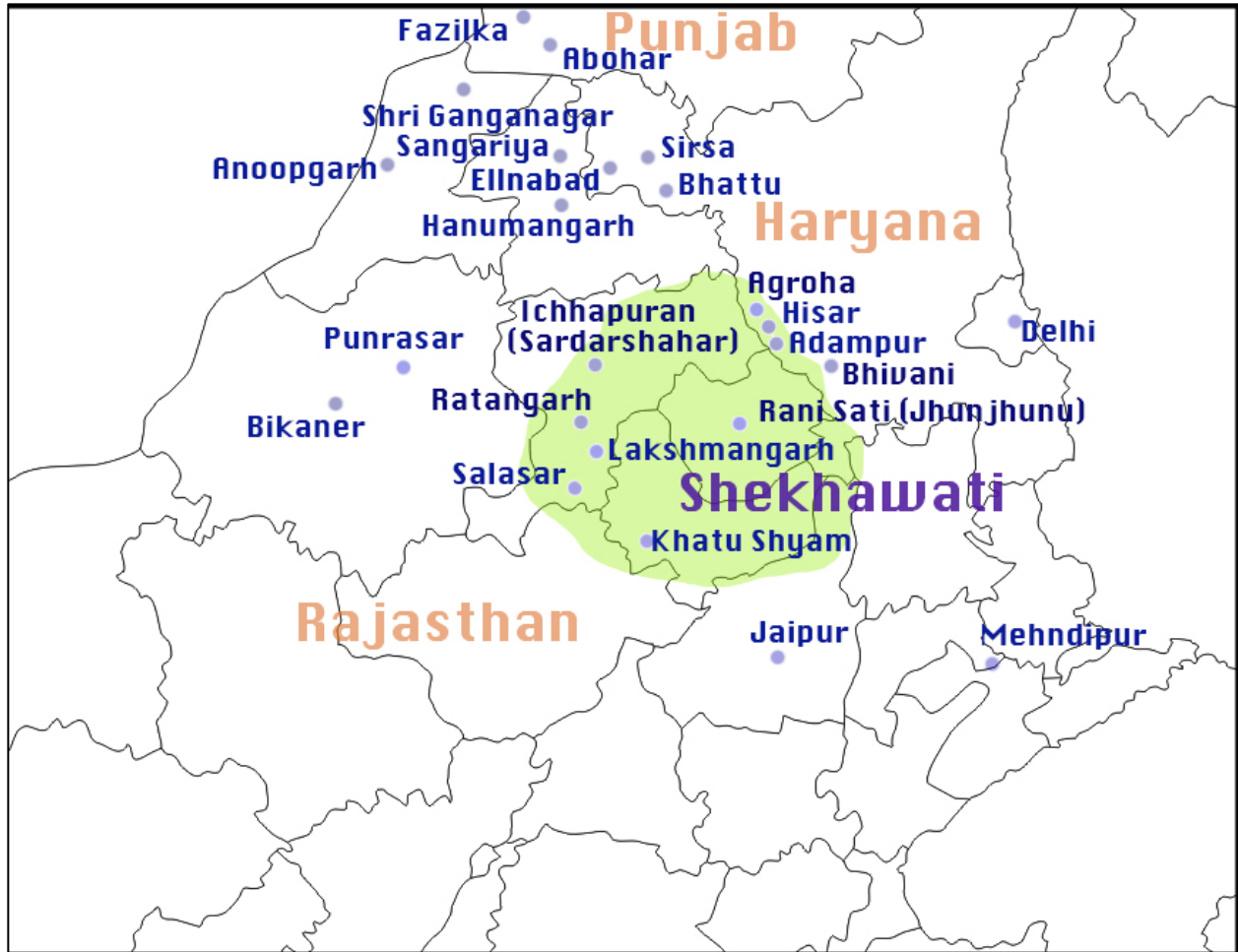
Figure 2-5. A sign announcing future construction near Salasar.

[*pratiṣṭhit vaiśya parivār*] in the Punjab-Haryana border area, and that, as so often happens, they have relocated to Delhi.<sup>94</sup> A photo insert shows an extended family smartly dressed in silk *kurtās*, suits and ties, and gold-brocaded saris, suggesting prosperous urban life. In sponsoring this Sanskrit college, this Marwari family has repaid their lineage deity for their good fortune,

in the process reconfiguring him as an upholder of Sanskritic knowledge and normative Hinduism. It seems fitting, then, that the college yearbook tells us, “Hanuman is the inspiration for youthful energy [*yuvāsakti ke prerak hanumān*],” due to his heroic, selfless, chaste practices. In this sense, Balaji thus participates in the larger reform of Hindu society.

### *Dharmśālās and “Number Two” Money*

I have suggested that inasmuch as Marwaris discovered (or rediscovered) Balaji at a time when many of them were prospering from—or at least hoping to take advantage of—economic deregulation, this fostered a culture of affluent patronage at Salasar. According to locals, as recently as fifteen years ago there were few if any *dharmśālās*, but as devotees saw the benefits of Balaji’s blessings they started to have such facilities built in dedication to his importance in their lives. The 50 or so current *dharmśālās* are not indifferent places to stay; most of them are named after the home cities of devotees, thereby delineating the locales in which devotion to Balaji is strongest. Some of the place-name *dharmśālās* known to me are Sirsa (2 rest houses), Abohar, Ellnabad, Ganganagar, Adampur, Fazilka, Bhattu, Dabwali, Fatehabad, Padampur, Jhunjhunu, Hisar, Bhiwani, Jind, Anoopgarh, Hanumangarh, Ratangarh, and Sangariya (Map 2; Figure 2-6). It is also possible that using such names is a business strategy for assuring a clientele. Once work began on one *dharmśālā*, as more devotees started coming, enterprising Marwaris or groups of likeminded locals from adjacent areas followed suit by forming organizations to sponsor a rest house representing their home area as well. Some of these organizations may have been comprised of the more prosperous Jat farmers, in addition to Marwari merchants. The names of these *dharmśālās* correspond to districts and sub-districts [*tehsil*] in the Rajasthan- Punjab-Haryana border region from where the overwhelming majority



Map 2. The Shekhawati region (shaded in green).

of foot pilgrims, particularly Jats, originate, and where devotion to Balaji is demographically densest. This area largely includes Shekhawati is much broader, stretching all the way to the border with Pakistan. However, in this chapter, in which the main focus will be on the Marwari presence in Salasar, the more restricted scope of Shekhawati will be more germane because this, not the wider region of devotion, is their ancestral homeland.

In addition, there are *dharmśālās* named after Mumbai, Delhi, and Kolkata, and probably other major cities, indexing a few of the far-flung Marwari communities. Some *dharmśālās* are simply named after the caste lineages of their founders, such as Agrawal, Jajodia, Dalmiya,



Goenka, and others—all Marwari *baniyā* names. There is also one *dharmśālā* named after Moolchand Malu, a well-known Jain Marwari tycoon now living in Delhi who subsidizes the Brahmins and recently built a grand temple known dedicated to Icchapuran [“wish fulfillment”] Balaji on one of the main pilgrimage roads to Salasar. Reminiscent of the Birla temples, it has



Figure 2-6. A rest house in Salasar.

grown as a road stop for miracles for pilgrims on their way to Salasar. We will return to Malu in Chapter 4 as an example of a benefactor who has helped develop networks of pilgrimage to Salasar. I asked devotees the significance of having *dharmśālās* named after home regions. The main advantage, particularly from the standpoint of the thousands of young men who walk to

Salasar during the Dashehra holiday, and at other times, is that they are a place to meet friends from one's hometown. And, during busy festivals, proprietors promise never to turn away those arriving from their designated region. At such times, the *dharmśālās* resemble crowded train stations, with hundreds of pilgrims sleeping on the open-air roofs and other floor space until they can go to *darśan* in the morning. Better-off pilgrims from the cities may choose from several posh new hotels with extravagantly appointed rooms (blue chandeliers and extra-large wall mirrors) to avoid the crowd.

At first glance, the construction and naming of *dharmśālās* seems like a straightforward phenomenon. However, in talking with the caretakers of various *dharmśālās*, I was told a number of times that these establishments serve as tax shelters for the wealthy. As the story goes, there are two kinds of income, “number one” and “number two,” corresponding to the terms “white money” and “black money.” Locals speaking in Hindi always used this one/two numbering system, whereas the black/white association seems to be more common in scholarship or formal economic literature. “Number one” money refers to money that is legitimately earned and reported for taxation, whereas “number two” money has either been derived in suspicious circumstances or invested without reporting it to the government, thereby hiding it from taxation. Although donations for religious establishments, including pilgrim rest houses are already exempt from taxation, they potentially serve as covers for various slights-of-hand. One example would be producing receipts that state an amount exceeding what was actually donated, thereby removing the donor's income from taxation.

VIP devotees, the ones most likely to be making large donations at Salasar, never brought up the subject of “number two” money with me. However, one anecdote suggests that at least some of them are familiar with this system, no matter whether they practice it. On the edge of town is



a new *dharmśālā* said to be the most luxurious and expansive of them all. In addition to stately air-conditioned rooms at a remarkably modest rate, it offers an on-site Ayurvedic pharmacy and an immaculate new Rama temple on the premises equipped with a fulltime priest. This *pujārī* supplements his regular duties by providing horoscope readings, often by phone.<sup>95</sup> A Marwari donor of a prominent clan has installed a photograph of an older male relative in the inner shrine along with the gods; the *pujārī* informed me that that this man is a “high-status individual” [*uncā ādmī*].<sup>96</sup>

With these amenities and influential connections, it is fair to say that this *dharmśālā* complex frames devotion to Balaji within the kind of pan-Indian, Rama-centered Hindu revivalism that has gained sway in present-day upwardly mobile Marwari or middle class life. A dedicatory plaque set into a wall near the entrance to this complex tells us that the benefactor of the temple (and *dharmśālā*) is an Agrawal Marwari from a major city in central India.<sup>97</sup> The *pujārī* of the Rama temple informed me that this man gave 10 million rupees for the temple.<sup>98</sup> The plaque indicates not only his name but also the industrial conglomerate that he owns. All very well, but a newspaper article from 2011 indicates that despite his piety he has had trouble with the tax bureau. Four years after this *dharmśālā* was completed, the Indian tax bureau conducted several raids on this benefactor’s company headquarters in the city specified on the plaque and uncovered:

[H]uge unaccountable income ... in the form of stock investments and dubious financial transactions ... a possible tax evasion. The group [corporation] is accused of holding large numbers of bank accounts in the name of employees [of this corporation] for hiding black money [that is, number-two money] and is charged with running almost two dozen briefcase (bogus) companies for ‘chanellising’ black money ... used to transfer large sums of untaxed income in between them for evading tax.<sup>99</sup>

Although the article does not mention temple donations, it specifies the corporation and the donor of the *dharmśālā* mentioned above. Judging from this vignette, there are potentially subtexts behind the infrastructure of Salasar, not always spoken openly, that have underwritten its growth as a major religious destination. And, although it is a familiar theme, we should not forget that alongside the theological explanation that miracles make fame (which increases devotion), the influx of new money also seems to have had a significant formative impact on the development of devotional culture at Salasar, as at countless other shrines. What makes Salasar particularly interesting, though, is that its moneyed donors publicly state that it has a special significance for them as the god of their ancestors. For this reason, it arguably best exemplifies what new money can do for devotion in the neoliberal era.

## 2.6 Marwari Shrines in Regional Perspective

### Marwari Gods

Although many Marwaris regard Balaji as their primary divine guardian, he is just one of several deities in Shekhawati who have received such attention. All of these shrines have dramatically grown in popularity within twenty years, and at least some of them have attracted a growing number of pilgrims on foot from the adjacent region. In this final section, I want to shift the focus to these shrines to show that Salasar is in fact part of a larger trend among Marwaris to revere certain deities from their ancestral homeland that offer miracles. Besides Salasar, the main Marwari-patronized shrines of Shekhawati of which I am aware are: (1) Rani Sati, the abode of a goddess of that name who, as a Marwari woman, had thrown herself on her deceased husband's funeral pyre; (2) Punrasar where, an emanation of Balaji is especially popular with Jains; (3) Khatu Shyam, where a local version of Krishna is revered; and (3) Agroha Dham, a shrine for Lakshmi that is regarded as the originating place of all Agrawal Marwaris. All of

these shrines have developed in ways reminiscent of what we have seen at Salasar, even though each has its particularities too.

The proximity of a particular shrine to a Marwari's ancestral home in appears to be the best predictor as to whether it will be embraced as a lineage deity. As Marwaris tracing ancestry to various towns of Shekhawati now live in distant cities, images of the deities that represent their ancestral locales are frequently brought together at public religious events, known as *jāgrans*, which have become popular in these urban communities. For instance, at a *jāgrān* in Surat, I saw an image of Punrasar Balaji on stage with Salasar Balaji, Khatu Shyam, and several pan-Indian deities (Rama, Krishna, Hanuman, etc.). Some members of the devotional group sponsoring the *jāgrān*, were Jain merchants hailed from the Bikaner area, where Punrasar is located, so they made sure to include that deity. The inclusion of a deity at such an event signifies the representation of a corresponding constituency that identifies with a homeland, even as Marwaris also regard these deities to be manifestations of the pan-Indian scriptural deities.

I would argue that in order to understand how these Shekhawati shrines became compelling to the Marwaris, we should venture to the Marwaris' current homes in cities around India. We will indeed do that in Chapter 6. But, as a preliminary note for this chapter, I think Milton Singer's study of urbanization in southern India (also to be discussed in Chapter 6) offers a theoretical framework for understanding religious identity formation in cities. Although Singer never mentions the Marwaris, due to his different regional focus, his findings could nonetheless apply to them. In the 1950s and 1960s, Singer examined how urbanization in southern India gave rise to new configurations of public devotion, as groups living in this socially diverse setting sought to reconstitute their sense of belonging as a community through large-scale religious performances that alluded to a common rural home. In constructing these religious identities,

Singer's respondents had adopted the idiom of tradition to assert continuity with the past, even though these urban identities were in fact different from the ancestral culture.<sup>100</sup> Urban Marwaris, uprooted from Shekhawati for decades or even generations, are likewise defining themselves in reference to a faraway homeland, which strengthens their social solidarity within the city and provides a moral anchor in the shrines purported to have served their ancestors.

Rani Sati may be the only one of these shrines that has been much noticed in Western scholarship, primarily in Anne Hardgrove's work on Marwaris of Kolkata (to which I will return in Chapter 6).<sup>101</sup> Locally printed booklets available at the shrine tell us that a fourteenth-century Agrawal Marwari woman committed *sati* [self-immolation] on her deceased husband's funerary pyre, which brought her immense wish-granting power in the afterlife.<sup>102</sup> She also became a *kuldevī* to many Marwaris, who nowadays visit and make wishes at her shrine, as many would do for Balaji. Because this shrine is in the middle of Jhunjhunu, one the larger cities of Shekhawati, the kinds of changes ascribed to new money at Salasar are less clearly perceptible here. However, the shrine receives substantial Marwari patronage, judging from the long list of donors with Marwari surnames on the entrance gate. And, the shrine is surrounded by an expansive *dharmśālā* erected through such donations.

Since Punrasar Balaji is located in a remote, small village, the contrast between the well-funded temple and the surrounding rural area is striking. Punrasar Balaji's origin has certain resemblances to Salasar Balaji's early history (to be described in Chapter 3). In 1717, during a time of famine, the deity's image appeared fully formed and of its own volition to a Jain merchant of the Bothra clan traveling through a nearby desert, and told him to bring it back to Punrasar, his home village. Local conditions soon improved, and the deity bestowed on this man's lineage the privilege of serving as his permanent *pujārīs*.<sup>103</sup> Nowadays, not only has a

new-looking temple but also a grand-sized *dharmśālā* has gone up for the many Jain pilgrims that come for the prosperity and wellbeing that the deity promises. But, I saw nothing in the shrine alluding to its devotees' Jain affiliation. Indeed, in a nod to Rama-worship, Punrasar Balaji has been allotted a subsidiary niche in the temple, while the main niche is left empty for his master, Rama, who has gone back to heaven (Figure 2-7). Compared to the temple itself, the surrounding village looks neglected. The locals, of which only a few individuals are Jains, seem to have no great interest in this shrine, apparently because it remains operated by and targeted to Jains from far away. This temple exemplifies a very unexpected problem that is evident at most, if not all, of the miracle shrines to be discussed in this study. That is, as locals more often express ambivalence towards presiding *pujārīs* or faith healers presiding over such shrines.

This disjuncture is even more obvious at shrines where faith healers work. This situation problematizes the assumption that a shrine would somehow represent the devotional habits of the surrounding population. If Punrasar Balaji had been so popular all along, why would so few people in the host village have taken much interest? These miracle shrines have gained a name for themselves from the conviction among urbanites from afar that the deities of these sites are their ancestral guardians rediscovered, or that they are especially efficacious. In many instances, locals are mostly just onlookers during the Marwari discovery of a shrine as a place of miracles. In cases where some of the locals are able to share in the benefits of pilgrimage, as at Salasar, they are more likely to support the elevation of the shrine to a central place in village life. Otherwise, the locals may look on *pujārīs* or faith healers with suspicion.



Figure 2-7. Punrasar Balaji.

### *Khatu Shyam: An Ally of Balaji*

Of the other Marwari shrines, I had the most experience with Khatu Shyam, located 107 kilometers from Salasar in the direction of Jaipur. Remarkably, Khatu Shyam, like Balaji, is represented as a bearded head without a body. Khatu Shyam's resemblance to an old-time Rajput king makes more immediate sense here than at Salasar: the hereditary owners of the shrine are not Brahmin priests but a family of Rajputs, and Khatu Shyam is said to be a warrior from the *Mahābhārata* named Babrik to whom Krishna subsequently gave the boon that he should always represent him to save humanity in the Kali Yug. So, although it would be highly unusual to represent the usually boyish Krishna as a mature, bearded man, here it makes perfect theological sense (Figure 2-8).

Krishna is said to have placed Babrik's head on a mountain so that he could watch the famous battle of Kurukshetra ensue. After that, the head fell off the mountain and was carried in a stream all the way to Khatu Shyam, where it became known for performing miracles. It was housed in its present temple in 1720, as described in souvenir books sold here.<sup>104</sup> I have found no reference to Khatu Shyam in any Western scholarship, suggesting the relative newness of this god in the landscape of Indian devotion. Regardless, Khatu Shyam is now the preeminent representation of Krishna in Shekhawati, and therefore for the Marwaris. Although Balaji and Khatu Shyam are allies in helping humanity, a shopkeeper in Khatu Shyam (the name of both the town and the deity) claimed that Khatu Shyam has more comprehensive powers than Balaji. That is, whereas Balaji does not help sinners, Khatu Shyam will do even that:

It is natural to sin in the Kali Yug [*kali yug 'natural' meṅ pāp hogā*], but only one deity, Babrik [Khatu Shyam] will listen to sinners, and hence he is the real savior of this era!<sup>105</sup>



Thus, even while Balaji is an upholder of morality, Khatu Shyam’s devotees have found a way to describe him as exceeding that in scope. Similarly, in Chapter 4, we will find rhetoric among devotees at Salasar that builds up Salasar Balaji as a peer of the somewhat more famous Mehndipur Balaji. As at Salasar, the Marwaris have been joined in recent years by pilgrims



Figure 2-8. Painting of Khatu Shyam on a wall in a Hanuman temple in the area of Anoopgarh, Raj. Salasar Balaji is depicted next to him.

from other communities, including many arriving on foot. However, the walking distance has now been standardized as a 17-kilometer stretch from the neighboring town of Ringas; up to that point, most arrive by vehicle. Khatu Shyam’s devotional heartland, from which pilgrims arrive, is somewhat south and east of Balaji’s area, in other words southeast Haryana—from Bhiwani



District eastwards, whereas Balaji's region goes from Bhiwani westwards. At Khatu Shyam, as in Salasar, the Marwaris do not really mix with other devotees, who are mostly Jats. Likewise, locals seem to regard the Marwaris as Khatu Shyam's privileged, original devotees, while the Jats and others are simply following their lead, as they too aspire for prosperity. So, I would note that Salasar and Khatu Shyam share the same trajectory, in which Marwaris with money provide the initial impetus for the rise of the shrine. This sequence is essential for the model of shrine growth that I offer in this study. Concurring with the idea that Marwaris started the process, a local Brahmin schoolteacher in Khatu Shyam told me:

Ten years ago, just rich people [Marwaris] came here, but now everyone's getting rich, so they all come!<sup>106</sup>

In this era of globalization, when people are seeking to further their education and move to the city for jobs, shrines like Khatu Shyam (and Salasar Balaji) are also increasingly the preferred sites of devotion. The above statement also summarizes the common claim, also made at Salasar, that these shrines are for VIPs and the upwardly mobile who aspire for that status. Within the last ten years, as the Marwari VIPs' prosperity has become more visible to the people of the surrounding region. The population of the region has increasingly joined in the rush for prosperity, and so they have started coming more frequently, even on foot (at least for the final part of the journey). This is the sequence that I argue applies to Salasar as well. To some degree, the earlier hierarchy, in which the VIPs were the original devotees, is still imprinted in local attitudes about who comes to Khatu Shyam, and when. That is, the anticipated schedule for different social groups to arrive at Khatu Shyam's annual festival in March correlates with their historical order of embracing Balaji:

[Each festival season] the “good people” [*acche log* = well-heeled Marwaris, from afar] come first, and the last visitors in the festival are the locals, who disturb the situation [because of misbehavior]. So, you [speaking to me] should arrive on March 12, in advance of the final day [of the festival], March 16.<sup>107</sup>

This observation flips the Jat narrative of suspicion about Marwaris that I documented at Salasar earlier in this chapter. Now we see that from the opposite direction, Marwari VIPs regard the Jats as being ill behaved. This attitude matches a common negative perception about Jats, which has prompted their own modern-day counter narratives (to be discussed in Chapter 4). At Khatu Shyam, as at Salasar, there is also some grumbling about the temple authorities too, but those in control here are *Rajput* landowners. The common accusation among locals is that these Rajputs squander the proceeds from donations at the shrine on drinking and other debaucheries. Regardless of whether these views have validity, they follow the mindset at Salasar that those who live in Rajasthan to the west of that village are more likely to be “backwards”—a code for Rajputs and tribals who eat meat.<sup>108</sup> As for the *pujārīs* of Khatu Shyam, they are merely employees hired by the Rajputs from outside, and therefore have none of the power that their peers in Salasar have.

### *A God of Prosperity*

Marwari attention during the last two decades has transformed Khatu Shyam, like Salasar. Land prices have risen sharply as Marwaris from afar seek holiday condominiums near their *kuldev*. During the Holi festival, numerous real-estate offices spring up to meet the VIPs, and young men holding colorful site plans are sent to stand on the street corners to accost the bourgeois visitors. The brochure for one of these developments, consisting of seven large multistory buildings collectively known as “Shyam Raj Residency,” describes it as

An exclusive apartment complex at Khatu Shyamji ... a delightful blend of modern lifestyle with subtle, spiritual hues, Shyam Raj is the devotee's dream come true.<sup>109</sup>

Given that this shrine is located in a bucolic backwater, there would be no compelling point in living here besides patrilineal reverence for Khatu Shyam. Mindful that the modern VIP seeks a lifestyle commensurate with upwardly mobile urbanity and the ideology of free choice that money makes possible, the condominium's brochure additionally promises such spiritual facilities as "meditation/yoga hall, pure veg *bhojanalay* [restaurant or cafeteria], Vedic spa, temple in the premises, [and] construction as per *vastu* [the Vedic science of constructing buildings according to dharmic spatial laws]," as well as less obviously spiritual amenities such as "rainwater harvesting system, doctor on call, vitrified tiles/marble flooring, badminton court, convenience shops," and many other benefits of the good life. As an adjunct to Khatu Shyam, the housing complex thus models what the ideal modern devotee can hope to gain from this god. As at Salasar, in the era of financial deregulation new money has evidently found its way to Khatu Shyam. The common element is Marwari affluence, or at least the desire to emulate it.

As in Salasar, so too in Khatu Shyam, the last two decades have seen much growth in the number of *dharmśālās*, and as at Salasar the names of these establishments recognizes the places from which the devotees come. But here the *dharmśālās* are overwhelmingly dedicated to the major Marwari urban centers—Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai, Hyderabad, and so forth. I saw no evidence of shrines from the southern districts of Haryana and Punjab, from where the majority of Jat pilgrims (many coming on foot) originate. I was told that 15 years ago there were only "five to ten" *dharmśālās*, but now there are "five to six hundred."<sup>110</sup> Echoing this rhetoric of overnight change, another devotee said: "Ten years ago thousands came, now it's hundreds of thousands!"<sup>111</sup> During the festival, many of these *dharmśālās* host lavish *jāgrans* [public

religious song performances], attended entirely by family groups of Marwaris immaculately dressed in white *kurtās* or elegant silk eveningwear.<sup>112</sup> Like the urban *maṇḍals* that I will describe in Chapter 6, these are events where the Marwari society comes together in solidarity.

This new wealth has also been good for the numerous small Hanuman temples in and around Khatu Shyam. One of them, Baori [“well”] Hanuman Temple, has been notably successful in attracting better-off visitors. According to a *pujārī* at this shrine, it had initially been no more than a Hanuman image set under a tree, but around twenty years ago a merchant prayed here and gave a small donation, after which “he got completely wealthy from Balaji” [*Bālājī se khūb dhān milā*]. While this *pujārī* acknowledged that success “depends on faith [*viśvās*],” he also suggested that prayer involves a calculation of the relative gain involved in making a donation as an investment with the expectation that one will get more in return: “If you give some money to God, then he will increase your wealth.”<sup>113</sup> And yet, this *pujārī* seemed a bit cynical about this pursuit of benefits: “As long as the temple can produce miracles, there will be faith in heaven ... If [pilgrims] couldn’t get any miracles, then why should they come?!”<sup>114</sup> This statement sums up the pragmatic view of devotion at Khatu Shyam and Salasar; the deity needs to consistently produce desired results to justify his popularity. We might argue that this results-oriented mindset is well suited to the famous Marwari ethos of making a profit. I think it is clear, then, that Salasar and Khatu Shyam share in a regional economy of miracles.

### *Agroha and Marwari Redemption*

Lastly, we turn to Agroha, located just across the Rajasthan-Haryana border in Hisar District. Throughout this chapter I have emphasized the effect of Marwari money in the development of a devotional culture. The Marwaris have not been indifferent to the viewpoint that they are merely interested in wealth, and so they promote their own self-valorizing caste narrative. The history

of Agrasen thus underlines a redemptive caste journey towards constituting itself as not only modern and mercantile but also pious and generous. Marwari individuals and organizations have found one vehicle to this end in rediscovering their origins in a hitherto semi-mythical 4,000-year old kingdom in the Shekhawati-Haryana border area. According to literature sold in Agroha, King Agrasen, the ancestor of all 18 of the current Agrawal Marwari clans, ruled over this realm, which was known for high-minded ideals and ethical laws.<sup>115</sup> Due to the bad effects of the Kali Yug it deteriorated after Agrasen's passing. Like Balaji, the divine king of Salasar (and Khatu Shyam), Agrasen supplies an ancient and aristocratic underpinning as a counterweight to the popular image of crass Marwari life. And, as we have seen at the other sites discussed in this chapter, only within the last twenty years has Agroha grown into a major public attraction.

Although classical Hindu social theory would seem to broadly include all the merchant lineages of India within the single category of *vaiśya* [merchant], in modern history it is just the Agrawal clans and certain allied merchant castes tracing ancestry to the Shekhawati region who are known as Marwaris. It is not yet clear to me whether, or to what extent, non-Agrawal Marwaris might owe any allegiance to Agroha, although diverse visitors come to the site. The geographical term Marwar itself refers to a large portion of western Rajasthan, not necessarily including Shekhawati, and irrespective of merchants. However, locals in the Salasar area now commonly refer to their language and ethnicity as “Marwari,” taken to mean Rajasthani, so the use of this term among Agrawals and other merchants originating in this region may be a modern rhetorical way of identifying with Shekhawati without privileging the Shekhawat clan, which comprises the original Rajput rulers of the area.

Consisting of some scattered brick ruins, Agroha was only affirmed as the Agrawal ancestor shrine in recent decades, after thousands of years of obscurity. Like the other shrines described, it has become a major pilgrimage destination under Marwari patronage, which has produced an impressive Lakshmi temple, a large *dharmśālā*, a colossal Hanuman statue, and various souvenir shops. Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity, is acknowledged here as the Marwari *kuldevī*.<sup>116</sup> And, here too, the Marwaris have found noble antecedents in Agrasen. Interestingly, this knowledge involves a historical caste transformation; as a king, Agrasen was a warrior, but after the downfall of his kingdom, his descendants became merchants. Babb's main point about Marwari identity formation was that they historically defined themselves as the *opposites* of royals in embracing vegetarianism in contrast to the royal prerogative of taking life. The recent discoveries of Marwari noble-associated ancestral shrines (after all, Hanuman was a warrior too) might problematize Babb's assertion.

The history books of Agroha correlate its resurrection to the modern-day journey of the Marwaris towards achieving national recognition for their role as patriots in the struggle for Indian independence and in the ongoing rejuvenation of nationwide Hinduism. Consider this statement attributed to Union Minister S. K. Patel: "During the independence movement, it was only from the Marwaris [and no one else] that we could only get 20 million rupees."<sup>117</sup> The Marwari reputation for leading a money-centered way of life has thereby been reimagined as self-sacrificing heroism for the sake of emerging India. As the example of G. D. Birla showed, this includes activism in growing India's economy and beneficence towards national religiosity. Agroha is a site for this historical revision as well. In 1995, this culminated in a cross-nation public procession, carrying a sacred flame representing the enduring spirit of Agrasen, to publicize the rejuvenation of Marwari society. Perhaps this had been inspired by L. K. Advani's

famous cross-country *yātrā* to revive the concept of India as a Hindu state. Swarajamani

Agrawal, the author of a history of Agroha, comments:

It is a shame that after independence was attained, [the Marwaris] were not recognized ... [they] who brought such vigor to the fields of economics, religion, and politics ... by means of a *jyoti yātrā* for Agrasen [a sacred flame representing him], efforts to raise political and social consciousness of this society was inaugurated ... in 1995, the *rath* [vehicle] *yātrā* set out from Agroha to Haryana, Rajasthan, Gujarat [and many other states] and covered 50,000 kilometers ... This *rath yātrā*'s [pilgrimage on chariot] main aim was to spread knowledge of [Marwari] history and Agroha, and to integrate society ... Nowadays every corner of the nation is immersed within this society's service ... Agrawal *dharmśālās*, orphanages, temples, Agrasen reading rooms ... scholarship, schools, colleges ... [and many other public projects] ... Mahatma Gandhi himself, expressing his indestructible faith, confided: 'There is [both] wealth and love in Marwari society, charity [*dān dene kī bhāvanā*], a modern outlook, repentance, and faithful action' ...<sup>118</sup>

In short, Agroha and the many other patriotic or pious projects sponsored by the Marwaris in the last twenty years are to be understood within a narrative of societal uplift, which has been facilitated by their wealth, as Gandhi noted. This trajectory counters the common critique of the Marwari desire of wealth and their alleged seeking of tax loopholes. We see contesting discourses around the pursuit of wealth and relevance to national culture; have the Marwaris made valuable contributions or not? As will be clear in subsequent chapters, the spirit of this study is to present such contending narratives to gain the vantage of a larger perspective of the recent development of devotional culture. As one of the preeminent sites for Marwari religious activity, and at the same a magnet for Jats and some others, Salasar is ideally suited for these intersecting discourses.

It has been my aim in this chapter to demonstrate the pivotal role of the Marwari merchants in Salasar's rise as a popular shrine. The implicit historical model here is that the moneyed class bestowed attention on this site, due to its own socioeconomic imperatives, and this patronage

facilitated the growth of infrastructure that made possible a larger devotional clientele. At the same time, the perception that the moneyed class was doing well with Balaji was broadened as Jats and others increasingly sought such benefits. The neoliberal era brought a particular confluence of money, ambition, piety, and interest in Rajasthan as an ancestral land that was not quite matched in earlier times. Certainly, any number of shrines in other areas have grown dramatically in recent times, but outside of the Shekhawati area none of them can lay claim to being the places of lineage deities and ancient homelands of India's dominant economic class. This is what makes the particular narrative of Salasar and its allied shrines different. However, it was not only the Marwaris but also their relationship of patronage with the Brahmins of this temple that was critical to its development, and to the rise of Balaji as a god of miracles. In the following chapter, then, I will discuss the Brahmins—the other half of this relationship.



## Chapter 2 Notes

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<sup>44</sup> For further discussion of the supernatural relations between images representing deities in juxtaposition to each other, see Gell. In Chapter 2, pp. 12-27, he introduces the concept of such images as social agents acting on humans and even other images, inasmuch as these images are animated with the charisma of their respective deities.

<sup>45</sup> Dempsey, p. 8.

<sup>46</sup> Interview 11-1-2010.

<sup>47</sup> Interview 10-4-2010.

<sup>48</sup> Balaji also personally protects as much as he inspires businessmen. Standing at the *prasād* counter in the temple courtyard, I met a rotund middle-aged Marwari stockbroker and his wife who had flown there from Kolkata the previous day and would return later on the same day. He stated that he had embraced Balaji twenty years ago after hearing of his miracles from a fellow businessman. The deity protects this man in his business dealings. Along with this, Balaji has enabled a personal transformation. When this man first came to Salasar his faith was “only one percent” of what it is now; his prosperity has convinced him of the god’s efficacy.

<sup>49</sup> Dempsey, p. 9

<sup>50</sup> “*Ātmāviśvās hī bhāvī unnati kī pratham sīdhī hai.*” Prajapati, p. 6.

<sup>51</sup> “*Īśvār meñ śraddhā na hone se dhīre-dhīre ātmāviśvās khatm ho jātā hai.*” Prajapati, p. 7.

<sup>52</sup> Interview 9-5-2011.

<sup>53</sup> Interview 9-5-2011.

<sup>54</sup> In the European context, Bourdieu theorized personal habits as an outcome of class background; see Bourdieu, pp. 78-87.

<sup>55</sup> “*Is yug meñ kisiko paise cāhiye!*”

<sup>56</sup> Lochtefeld, p. 228.

<sup>57</sup> Lochtefeld, p. 7

<sup>58</sup> Eliade, Chapter 2, pp. 51-92.

<sup>59</sup> According to some locals in Salasar, it is common for a donation to avoid rounded numbers and instead include an additional one or one hundred rupees, which signifies the devotee’s boundless generosity (that is, no holding back) as a reflection of sincere faith in the deity.

<sup>60</sup> Tambiah, pp. 195-200, discusses the contemporary popularity of Buddhist amulets in Thailand, and their magical powers.

<sup>61</sup> As the Brahmins explained to me, the term “*savāmani*” refers to a quantity of sanctified food that a devotee will charitably present as a ceremonial feast for Brahmins, or perhaps just other devotees, in recognition that the god has fulfilled a wish. One *mani* indicates 40 kilograms; so, one *savā* of that amount (a *savā* means 1.25 in Hindi) means 50 kilograms, the amount of food to be donated.

<sup>62</sup> In theorizing the public sphere in the West, Jurgen Habermas suggests a way of looking at media that might remind us of the practice of broadcasting devotion to Balaji in public spaces. On page 52, he notes that popular opinion, constructed with the rise of newspapers and other public instruments of the rising bourgeois class, challenged the older social structures that had kept feudal relationships in place. We might similarly see in the announcements of Marwari patronage a signal that they have moved up in societal esteem as pious donors.

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<sup>63</sup> For Weber's method of looking for the cultural roots of economic practice, see Chapter 1, pp. 13-38, where he lays out his theory of the evolution of capitalism.

<sup>64</sup> “*Voh sāmne jo mūrti hai, voh aslī mūrti nahīn ... us hī ke nice hai, ‘underground’—voh jo mohan dās jī ne dekhī thī. Sāmne jo mūrti, us hī ke andar ... mañc ke nice jānā hai ... ām ādmī nahīn jā saktā. Jo paisevāle, voh dekh saktā hai ... āj kal ārthik yug hai ... paise kā ṭaim hai! Pujāriyon ko lālac ho gaye ... koī paisa degā, to usko darśan karvāegā ... to ek lākh ... do lākh ... pāñc lākh unko degā. [Pujārī log] ‘VIP’ log ‘direct’ andar ḍālte haiñ, vahāñ unkī hāthoñ se pūjā karvāte haiñ. Agar thoḍā paisā detā hai to darśan karvāte pāñc miniṭ, aur nikālte ... aur paise denevāle ko zyādā ‘ṭaim’ miltā hai.*” Interview 2-17-2011.

<sup>65</sup> Interview 4-6-2011.

<sup>66</sup> I recall once chatting with an elderly Jat man during the Dashehra festival, as he was about to go into the temple with a group from his village. When I noticed him re-emerging later, he was visibly angry and muttering about how the *pujārīs* had tried to extract money from them (to go through a shortcut?). But, they were not willing to pay, and so they were made to wait a long time in line.

<sup>67</sup> Lutgendorf (1994), pp. 211-217.

<sup>68</sup> The move to reform Hinduism as a cohesive world religion goes back to native reactions against nineteenth-century missionaries that disparaged India's allegedly backward traditions (the most famous being the immolation of widows, child marriage, and caste restrictions).

<sup>69</sup> Nanda, p. 140.

<sup>70</sup> Interview 10-6-2010. “*Amerika ke ‘superman’ aur ‘spiderman’ ‘totally’ kalpanīya kahā ... lekin hamāre India kā ‘superman / spiderman,’ voh ‘real’ hai, aur usmeñ śakti miltī hai logoñ ko, ek cīz jo hamāre granthoñ men miltī hai. Voh hamāra vardān jo hamāre bīc ‘present’ hai. Jab tak surya rahega, tab tak Superman-Spiderman-Balaji Maharaj hamārā dhyān rakheñge.*”

<sup>71</sup> Nanda, p. 197.

<sup>72</sup> Tushar Dhara and Cherian Thomas, “In India, tax evasion is a national sport,” *Businessweek.com*, July 28, 2011.

<sup>73</sup> Gupta (1992), p. 47.

<sup>74</sup> Kumar, p. 44.

<sup>75</sup> Lutgendorf (2007), Chapter 8, pp. 333-396

<sup>76</sup> See Harvey for a general discussion of neoliberalism.

<sup>77</sup> Kumar, pp. 117-118.

<sup>78</sup> See Banerjee and Piketty, for a discussion of income distribution in the early years of neoliberal reform.

<sup>79</sup> Kumar, pp. 55-71.

<sup>80</sup> Kumar, p. 170.

<sup>81</sup> Kumar, p. 102.

<sup>82</sup> Kumar, p. 123.

<sup>83</sup> Interview 9-7-2011.

<sup>84</sup> Reader, Chapter 5, pp. 178-205, discusses the benefits accrued from shrine worship.

<sup>85</sup> Juneja, p. 47.

<sup>86</sup> Interview 10-2-2010.

<sup>87</sup> “*Ek yātrī thā ... voh ‘basically’ chāpar kā, lekin voh ‘bombay’ shift ho gayā. Vahān unkī bacchī, voh kāfī bīmār thī. Aur, doktor ke pās voh le gayā ... bombay kā sab se ‘top’ hospitāl ... voh kāfī paisewale bhakt the ... Unhoñne chāpar [meñ rištadhār ko] fon kiyā ki ‘āp sālāsar meñ bālājī ko jā ke vahān merā ek mehnat kā nāriyal vahān caḍho. Merī bacchī ko thīk karegā’ ... to chāpar se kāpindra ko fon āyā. Kapindra jī ko bolā: ‘āp mandir meñ jā ke aur koī yātrī hai, un kā ... nāriyal kā mehnat khūd bāndh karte.’ [Lekin kapindra ne kahā ki] ‘khūd hī karnā paḍtā hai. Jis kā nāriyal hai, voh man meñ kī sthiti hai.’ ‘Hospitāl meñ ‘admit’ hai, voh ā nahīn pāegī. Is lie us ke lie yeh kām āp kar lo.’ Unhoñne voh mandir jā ke ...voh bālājī ko bolā: ‘voh, āp kā bhakt hai, bombay meñ us kā ek ‘treatment’ cal rahā hai, aur us kī ‘serious condition’ hai. Āp us kī ‘help’ karo.’ Phir pāñc din bād meñ us bacchī ne ūṭh ke apnī māñ se ‘request’ kī, rāt meñ, das baje, hospitāl meñ, ki ‘mamī, mere hanumān cālīsā la ke ā do.’ Us ne ghar ko fon kiyā, ki hanumān cālīsā ke lie bolā ... bacchī ne voh hanumān cālīsā pāṭh kiyā. Us ke ‘next day,’ rāt meñ, do baje us bacchī ko, jo ‘ward’ thā ... us ko [sapne meñ] itnī tez ‘light’ kī āñkh nahīn kol saktā hai ... aur usko āvāz sunāī dī, ki: ‘tum roz hanumān cālīsā paḍhā kar, aur tu bilkul thīk hai. To tu yahān se jāne ke bād, sīdhe sālāsar jānā, aur vahān pe bālājī ke darśan karnā.’ Voh bacchī ūṭhī huī ... apne āp ... mamī ko jagāyā: ‘mamī mujhe sālāsar le ke calo! Maiñ bilkul thīk huñ!’ Us kī mamī ne bolā ‘kyā ho gayā?’ ... Ghar se voh [mamī ke sāth] sālāsar ā gayī. Chāpar meñ ‘relative’ [jo nāriyal le gayā thā], usko bhī le ke āye. Voh bacchī yahān āne ke bād ... kapindra jī kī dukān pe āyī. Kapindra jī se voh kabhī nahīn mile pehle. Jo chāparvāle ‘relative’ unhoñne kahā ‘āp kā nāriyal jinhone bāndh unse mile.’ Us bacchī ne kapindra jī ko parinām kiyā. Pranām karne ke bād, us ne bolā: ‘āp kā nām kapindra!’ Kapindra jī ne pūcchā: ‘merā nām kaise jānte ho?’ Voh batāye ki ‘mereko ek rāt meñ sapnā āyā thā. Aur mereko roś dikhāyā dī thī kāfī. Us roś meñ mereko bālājī ke darśan ho gayā, aur sapne meñ ap ke darśan ho gayā ... aur bālājī ne batāyā ki jinhone mehnat kā nāriyal caḍhāyā, bāndhne ke lie, voh yeh hai ... āp to sālāsar āo, aur roz hanumān cālīsā pāṭh karo.’”*

<sup>88</sup> Interview 10-11-2010.

<sup>89</sup> Local Brahmins say with satisfaction that all this land speculation under Balaji’s watch has made Salasar “the most expensive site in India,” outranking even Mumbai!

<sup>90</sup> Large plastic clubs [*gadā*], Hanuman’s emblematic weapon, are also popular souvenirs often seen in the hands of children walking away from the temple with their parents.

<sup>91</sup> Photographs 7-19-2011.

<sup>92</sup> With the rise in land prices, property speculation is now pervasive. One evening I came by car with a Brahmin friend on a dirt road to survey a large dusty field destined to become dozens of new homes. My friend pointed out several dozen lots (separated by imaginary boundaries), a few of which he was considering buying as an investment to be sold later, given the assurance of spiraling demand. Having tantalized us with the promise of high returns, the developer then led us to a little farmhouse amidst the loneliness of the stubby fields, where an amiable elderly Jat farmer served us tea, apparently untroubled by the impending transformation of his farm.

<sup>93</sup> See Dadhich.

<sup>94</sup> See Dadhich, inscription below photographic insert adjacent to p. 36.

<sup>95</sup> The horoscope calendar [*pañcāṅg*] that Shrivallabh Maniram annually issues is the version preferred among Salasar’s Brahmins.

<sup>96</sup> Interview 9-6-2011.

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<sup>97</sup> Photographic documentation 9-6-2011.

<sup>98</sup> Interview 9-6-2011.

<sup>99</sup> “Cignet Group Yields Crores in IT Raids,” *Daily Bhaskar*, Indaur, November 5, 2011.

<sup>100</sup> Singer, pp. 67-68.

<sup>101</sup> For a discussion of the practice of sati, including references to Rani Sati, see Hardgrove (1999). She mentions that the dates for Rani Sati’s life remain uncertain, although the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her birthday was officially celebrated in 1996; Hardgrove, p. 725.

<sup>102</sup> For a prose Hindi version of Rani Sati’s personal story, see Murarka.

<sup>103</sup> Jairam, n.p.

<sup>104</sup> See the two Satsangi books for a verse history and also a *cālīsā* rendition in archaic Hindi with a modern Hindi translation. Sharma (2006) provides a detailed prose history of Khatu Shyam; for the founding of the present temple, see p. 22. Sharma (2008) provides information about the present-day ritual protocol at the temple.

<sup>105</sup> “*Kali yug ‘natural’ meñ pāp hogā. Sirf ek bhagvān, bābrik, pāpī se suntā hai, is lie voh hī is yug kā satya avatār hai.*” Interview 2-1-2011.

<sup>106</sup> “*Das sāl pehle sirf amīr log ā rahe the, lekin ājkal har ādmī ‘rich person’ hoñge, is lie sab āte haiñ.*” Interview 2-1-2011.

<sup>107</sup> “*Sab se pehle acche log darśan ke liye āte haiñ, aur sab se akhir ‘local’ log āte haiñ, jo is sthiti par ‘disturb’ karte haiñ. Āp ko bārah tārikh ko ānā cāhiye, solah tārikh se pehle.*” Interview 2-1-2011.

<sup>108</sup> Also on the subject of diversity at Khatu Shyam (versus the supposedly more restrictive morality of Salasar Balaji): the singers who routinely serenade the god in the temple every day are not Brahmins but a hereditary Muslim caste that formerly served the Rajputs in the age when kings ruled.

<sup>109</sup> English-language brochure: “Shyam Raj: The Project.” Obtained in March 2011.

<sup>110</sup> Interview 2-1-2011.

<sup>111</sup> “*Das sāl pehle āyā hazāroñ meñ, ab lākhoñ meñ.*” Interview 2-1-2011.

<sup>112</sup> During the annual festival at the time of Holi (March), several Marwari Khatu Shyam devotional organizations from Delhi and elsewhere sell large glossy magazines dedicated to the god. Loaded with advertisements for businesses located in the Haryana area and farther afield, these magazines nonetheless provide a fascinating glimpse into Marwari society. Articles in these magazines give advice for pursuing an affluent modern lifestyle, such as how to cut down on obesity, along with photographs from events where awards were given in recognition of businessmen who have been making charitable contributions, discussions on the significance of peacock feathers, and of course information about Khatu Shyam himself.

<sup>113</sup> “*Āp bhagvān ko dān deñge to voh āp kā dhān baḍegā.*” Interview 2-2-2011.

<sup>114</sup> “*Jab tak camatkār mañdir se nahīñ hotā hai, svarg par viśvās nahīñ hotā hai ... Camatkār na milā hai to log āte kyoñ hai?*” Interview 2-2-2011.

<sup>115</sup> In addition to a number of books sold at Agroha, I also acquired a useful comic book history of Agrasen’s kingdom, *Mahārāj agrasen*.

<sup>116</sup> Lakshmi apparently has the power to grant wishes in the same way Balaji does, but with an emphasis on wealth, making her an appealing go-to for those for whom finance is a way of life. An anonymously authored handbook that I picked up, *Dhan Lakshmi prapti ke upayevam totke*

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[Wealth-granting Lakshmi's magic spells for material acquisition], gives detailed instructions on how to call on Lakshmi for prosperity.

<sup>117</sup> “*Jab āzādī kā āndolan cal rahā thā tab ham logoñ ko do kroḍ rūpiye keval marvāḍī logoñ se milā thā.*” See the chapter titled “*Chaṭhveñ sañskaraṇ kī bhūmikā*” [Forward to the Sixth Edition], n.p.

<sup>118</sup> “... *Usne svatañtratā-prāpti ke bād deś meñ apnī koī pehcān nahīn banāī, yeh khed kā viṣay hai ... jiskā ārthik, dhārmik aur rājñitīk kṣetroñ meñ sarvatra varcasva banā huā hai ... Agrasen jyoti-rathyātrā ke mādhyam se is samāj meñ rāṣṭrīya evaṇ sāmājik cetanā kā śaṅkhnād jagāne kī kośīś kī gaī hai ... 1995 se agrohā kī dhartī se prārambh kī huī yeh rathyātrā ab tak hariyāñā, rājasthān, gujarāt ... 50,000 kilomīṭar kī dūrī tay kar cukī hai ... Itihās aur agrohā ke bāre meñ jānkārī dena tathā samāj ko saṅgathit karnā hī is rathyātrā kā pramukh uddeśya hai ... vartamān meñ bhī deś kā konā-konā is samāj kī sevā se āplāvit hai ... Agravāl dharmśālāeñ, anāthālay, mañdir, agrasen vācanālay ... is samāj kī sevāeñ praśaṅsanīya aur anukaraṇīya hai ... Svayam mahātmā gāndhī ne ... agravāl jāti par apnā aṭuṭ viśvās vyakt karte hue likhā thā – ‘mārvāḍī kaum meñ dhan hai, prem hai, dān dene kī bhāvanā hai, ādhunik pravrtti, ātmśuddhi aur karmarakṣā kī bhāvanā hai.’” See Agrawal, chapter: “*Chaṭhveñ sañskaraṇ kī bhūmikā*” [Forward to the Sixth Edition], n.p.*

## CHAPTER 3: THE BRAHMINS' INHERITANCE

### 3.1 The Scope of a God's Work

#### Divine Services

In this chapter, I will examine the ritual protocol of Salasar, and what it can tell us about the nature of Balaji himself. Analyzing Balaji's system of worship will be important for understanding how it has spread because, as we will see, the way the god operates has much to do with the socioeconomic context of those who worship him. In this chapter I will restrict attention to the vicinity of Salasar. In subsequent chapters, we will look at what happens to this model of worshipping Balaji when we shift to the surrounding countryside and in distant cities. Within Salasar, then, the way that Balaji operates in relation to his devotees is not simply a matter of established doctrine but has much to do with the ongoing imperatives of the Brahmins that formally represent him. For the *pujārīs* [priests], maintaining the present regime of worship in Salasar is critical to perpetuating their relationship with the Marwaris and other patrons, who in turn may expect the *pujārīs* to facilitate special ritual services for them. Two key tenets in this system are that Balaji is a hereditary *kuldev* for many Marwaris, whose ancestors came from this land, and also that the god historically endorsed the *pujārīs* to mediate his miracles. Since Balaji is effectively the *pujārīs'* livelihood, their songs, their rituals, and their attitudes, all provide evidence of this divine arrangement.

When discussing Balaji with *pujārīs* and pilgrims in Salasar, I was often drawn into revelations of the god's miracles. But, as they always affirmed, there is one kind of treatment in

which Balaji will not be involved, nor allow others to practice within Salasar: exorcism for spirit possession. For exorcism, they said, I would need to go to Mehndipur Balaji. The two deities work in opposite ways: Salasar Balaji infuses the devotee with divine blessings, while Mehndipur Balaji extracts bad influences. These opposite ways of action seemingly configure the two Balajis as polar partners in an encompassing divine system. An analogy that devotees typically use to explain the co-existence of the two deities is that a patient goes to one doctor for one kind of ailment and another for a different one. In fact, this conception of deities representing polar characteristics is common in Hinduism, but, since both Balajis only became known outside their locales in recent decades, I would question any claim that they are matched in an eternal ontological opposition, even in opposition to each other. Rather, any eternal relationship, even in opposition, is a retroactive theological framework for assigning each god its own place as a peer matched to one another, inasmuch as they are currently the two foremost Balajis.

I argue that these Balajis, like many other deities bestowing miracles, some of whom we will meet in this study, may have existed in obscurity for many years but have assumed their current form in relation to the conditions of recent history. As noted, most miracle shrines in Shekhawati have only become famous within the last twenty years. This means that oral accounts and supplementary investigation, more so than references to ancient tradition, will tell us how these two Balajis became the way they presently are. Hence, while it is important to know that these Balajis represent two archetypal poles of divine power, theological rationales do not fully explain why or how they developed in these particular ways. To uncover this line of development, we need to consider the local setting. Therefore, this chapter will focus on how

Salasar's *pujārīs* imagine the divine, and how this vision relates to their own society, while in Chapter 5 I will present parallel developments in Mehndipur.

Regarding the theological polarity of Salasar and Mehndipur, the latter might never have come up in my conversations with Salasar's *pujārīs* if I had not persistently asked them about it, and about spirit possession, faith healers, and exorcism. Mehndipur is a distant and somewhat unsavory place to them on account of the exorcism that goes on there. More to the point, like many Indians, including even many at Mehndipur itself, Salasar's *pujārīs* dismiss faith healers, who typically oversee exorcisms, as necromancers or charlatans, even though at least a few of these *pujārīs* admitted to having sought such services when vexing problems could not otherwise be resolved. Mehndipur Balaji, then, represents the sinister side of miracles and faith—he is the shadow of Salasar Balaji, which Salasar's *pujārīs* would sooner push away than celebrate as an equal of their Balaji.<sup>119</sup> Hence, the *pujārīs* often warned me not to accept *prasād* [consecrated sweets] available in Mehndipur Balaji's temple because it was likely to be infected with, or attract, any of the many exorcised spirits wandering about there. It is not that Mehndipur Balaji is to be avoided in his own right, but rather that he attracts occult spiritual beings because of the nature of his work. Even though studiously ignored in Salasar, Mehndipur, and the kinds of worship that it represents, is contrastively integral to Salasar's *pujārīs*' discursive construction of themselves as upholders of normative, morally upright Hindu culture involving the recitation of Sanskrit scripture.

Although Salasar Balaji's benevolent nature is in line with mainstream Vaishnava scriptural deities, devotees of Hanuman throughout northwestern India, regardless of the site where he manifests, know that he often plays a special role in the management of spirits. This means that Hanuman is the deity most likely to be invoked (along with some goddesses) in exorcism



ceremonies. So, Mehndipur Balaji's connection to exorcism is not really an anomaly. Further, in the Shekhawati region and beyond, a multitude of Hanuman-Balaji temples, most of them established within the last twenty years, consider exorcism as a valid option in treating all sorts of troubles. The presiding religious specialists of these shrines determine what the deity does or does not do, and the protocol for winning the deity's assistance, which necessitates their priestly services. Therefore, Salasar's *pujārīs*' statement that their Balaji does not engage in exorcism needs to be interrogated; I contend that the god's present nature is an adaptation to the socio-historical context. Accordingly, in this chapter I will discuss Balaji's *pujārī*-endorsed theological history, but then I will ask whether there might be other, "subaltern" histories of the divine submerged within that narrative.

Before we focus further on Salasar's *pujārīs*, I will briefly distinguish them from other types of religious specialists, such as those who perform exorcisms (as is common in Mehndipur). Brahmin *pujārīs* are normally expected to have some knowledge of Sanskrit texts so as to ritually look after the gods and of course insure their continued good will towards devotees. In short, they are formal upholders of the classical tradition of scriptural Hinduism, although whether they are actually well versed in such scriptures depends on their own training. By contrast, faith healers are not restricted to any one caste, inasmuch as their work relies on the charismatic ability to call forth various miracle-inducing spirits, often into their own, or their clients,' physical body (hence, possession). They will likely revere Sanskrit texts, but make relatively little use of them for treating clients. Although I call these specialists "faith healers," devotees would refer to them by such terms as "*guru*," "*svāmī*," "*bābā*," and other terms. Since these words refer to religious specialists in diverse contexts, including non-faith healing settings, I call them "faith healers" to restrict my reference to those who solve problems by summoning

spirits. In contrast to the typical *pujārī*'s formulaic recitation of scriptures for spiritual benefit, faith healers are likely to stage dramatic, emotionally engaging encounters with the divine. However, since many *pujārīs* at shrines in Rajasthan and elsewhere also employ some faith healing-like techniques for their clients, there is some crossover, which makes the particular absence of faith healing in Salasar stand out more starkly.

Given that faith healers generally only minimally use Sanskrit, and often have no formal priestly training, the Brahmin *pujārīs* of Salasar and elsewhere more often regard them as uneducated interlopers who falsely represent Hindu tradition. Such *pujārīs* and faith healers may treat the same symptoms—illness, a business failure, domestic discord, and so forth—but a Brahmin will probably make a diagnosis of bad karma, which he is best qualified to treat with purifying scriptural rituals. Faith healers are more likely to diagnose a problem as arising from a possessing spirit who is trying to draw attention to some unmet need, or that has been sent to attack the client by someone with whom he has had a falling out. The faith healer's objective will be to induce the spirit to start talking through the afflicted person or someone else in that person's household so as to find out what it wants as a prelude to negotiating a resolution. In this chapter, I will be emphasizing the *pujārī* perspective on worship and ritual.

### *A Discursive Understanding of Balaji*

Inasmuch as we are looking at the *pujārīs* as ritual intermediaries, I want to draw attention to their discursive construction of Balaji. To them, he is “the divine king of Salasar,” and with that authority he has endorsed the lineage of the Suntwal Dadhich lineage of Brahmins as his permanent caretakers in Salasar. In the introduction to an edited volume on oral epics of India, Stuart Blackburn and Joyce Burckhalter Flueckiger highlight kingly heroism as a core genre of this tradition.<sup>120</sup> On account of his famous exploits, Hanuman would therefore seem like a

perfect subject for oral literature. As a local manifestation of Hanuman, Balaji is thus the subject of many pan-Indian *bhajans* [religious songs] adopted into Salasar's Brahmins local discursive practices. However, many of these songs for Balaji are fairly new, albeit composed in imitation of a traditional poetic style from this part of Rajasthan. One particularly prolific Brahmin, who often sings with the other Brahmins in Balaji's temple in the evenings, showed me a songbook of more than two hundred *bhajans* he had written, which the Brahmins use as a stock for public performances in celebration of Balaji. These song events are one way in which a particular Brahmin perspective on the nature of the god is publicly reproduced; in fact, some of these events are attended mostly or only by Brahmins.

The *pujārīs*' ideology of Balaji as the ultimate power of Salasar, best approached through their own priestly mediation, might bring to mind Eliade's theory of the sacred center of the cosmos (as mentioned in Chapter 2), through which the divine is ritually contacted. But, I think it would be misleading to think of Balaji as an all-powerful being in line with dualist Western theories of sanctity lying beyond human (or profane) experience because Balaji is fundamentally accessible to the world. In the same intellectual lineage as Eliade, theological theorist Rudolf Otto had described the sacred center as a place beyond rationality, while morality arises in human mediation.<sup>121</sup> Otto's idea of the *numen*, the sacred beyond earthly experience, could conceivably describe a pre-*avatār* higher Hindu divine being (Brahman, or even Narayan) but certainly not Balaji, since he takes an interest in faith and moral behavior, which he rewards with miracles. Accordingly, Balaji is quite rational, notwithstanding his capacity for miracles. For instance, as mentioned, many devotees believe he will only grant wishes if the devotee meets him half way as a demonstration of individual effort, which keeps one from wishing for

impossible outcomes. In the *pujārīs*' discursive production of Balaji, then, he is actively involved in looking after their lineage and local history as a *kuldev* [lineage deity].

We might find a theoretical framework for the *pujārīs*' narratives of Balaji's attributes in the functionalist approach famously theorized by sociologist Emile Durkheim. In Durkheim's work on Australian aboriginal religion, he remarks that gods, in the form of totems, are essentially projections of social structure, therefore their worship regulates human relations.<sup>122</sup> In a sense, the image of Balaji could be posited as a totem, which represents a system of religious authority in Salasar that organizes the *pujārīs* and devotees. We could imagine that in his role of upholding Hindu morality in the Kali Yug, Balaji models ideal Hindu society.<sup>123</sup> But, notwithstanding the tidiness of a functionalist reading of Balaji in theological discourse, I would like to consider possible ruptures in the *pujārīs*' narratives. For instance, I have mentioned Jat critiques of Marwari and Brahmin privilege, the Brahmins' dismissal of faith healers, and everyone's complaints about the problems of the Kali Yug as an "era of money." In this study, then, I will question the presumption that Balaji presides over an always-stable devotional system.

With these theoretical parameters in mind, I would point to Peter van der Veer's work on the sadhus and priests of Ayodhya as a potential model for this chapter. Van der Veer examines how these two kinds of religious specialists adapt to changing times, in which the old aristocratic regime of patronage has given way to the new moneyed elite—upwardly mobile classes—who want to have their own say in directing the construction of temples and rest houses.<sup>124</sup> Van der Veer's aim is to problematize orientalist scholarship that privileges Brahmin ahistorical narratives predicated on theological truth; instead, he favors an anthropological investigation of identity formation (of sadhus and priests or *paṇḍās*).<sup>125</sup> As he states, these orientaling

theological narratives are “a great detriment to anthropology” because they obscure the social relations that underlie them.<sup>126</sup> Writing in the 1980s, Van der Veer anticipates the changes of neoliberalism that are central to my own study, as he notes the rise of new economic forces. However, within the period of his study, he cannot yet see these changes in the broader global context that is more obvious nowadays, as it was only in the 1990s that the phenomenon of Indian neoliberal reforms came into full force. My study of Balaji therefore takes up where Van der Veer leaves off—the arrival of new money in the 1990s.

However, a problem I see in Van der Veer’s study of social identity and difference among religious specialists is that he does not admit much individual variation within these groups. By contrast, I try to emphasize my respondents’ personal interpretations of norms more than the norms as inherently real entities; that is, discursive agendas (e.g. narratives of Marwari prosperity, Jat heroism, the *pujārīs*’ divine endorsement) are only as substantial as my individual respondents allow them to be. And, in each case, these narratives are set against counter-narratives (Marwari corruption, Jat backwardness, *pujārī* greed) that are no less valid. Hence, a Jat speaker dismisses the *pujārīs* as opportunists, and a *pujārī* speaks similarly about faith healers. Each party has its shadow, and defines itself through difference as much as positive attributes. In this way, I differ from Van der Veer; I do not banish the theological perspective, but consider it as one among multiple valid, competing narratives. Hence, I give voice to both the Brahmin “eternalists,” so to speak, and to their social critics (Jats and some locals from Salasar) so as to produce an understanding of the total picture of intersecting discourses on devotion to Balaji.

This chapter, then, will present several narratives. We will start with some of the *pujārīs*’ judgmental anecdotes about faith healers, and consider some of the undercurrents within that

rhetoric. Then we will look at the *pujārīs*' accounts of Balaji's origins, which reveals much about the *pujārīs* as well. This will segue into a look at rituals by which the *pujārīs* maintain their special connection to Balaji. Following that, we will look at the exclusion of Brahmins originating outside the *pujārī* lineage from any role in the management of Balaji, and how these non-*pujārī* Brahmins nonetheless negotiate a livelihood within that regime. And finally, we will consider some shreds of history and current practice that point to the multiple paths by which a deity such as Balaji may develop a particular divine identity.

### 3.2 The Discourse of Possession in Salasar

#### Spirit Offense

While exorcism is officially off-limits in Salasar, I discovered that the problem of spirit possession—*pitṛ doś*, or “spirit offense” nonetheless arises. Looking at how this is handled provides a test for gauging the dominance of the *pujārīs*' discourse on the exclusion of exorcism or faith healing in the worship of Balaji, and exceptions to this rule. Because wandering spirits are doctrinally banished from Balaji's geographical territory, for one to admit to such an experience in Salasar is inherently controversial. As a starting point, I will outline how spirits that possess arise.<sup>127</sup> As told to me, God measures out a suitably long, predestined lifespan for each person at birth. If, due to some bad karma that lifespan is unexpectedly cut short, such as by accident or disease, the deceased person is liable to become a wandering *ātmā* [soul] bereft of physical form for the amount of time remaining in his God-intended life span. People dying as children, or without male heirs that can conduct their funerary rites (hence the common preference for sons in Indian society), are particularly prone to this fate. The lingering *ātmā* will often seek residence in a living body (causing possession); the victim is likely to be someone who was known to the deceased while alive, such as a relative.

Whether the *ātmā* of the deceased behaves helpfully or harmfully towards its living host depends on the virtuousness of that *ātmā* while still alive as a person. People who were always respectful to their elders, read scriptures, and worshiped deities will continue with this disposition as *pitṛs* or helpful ancestor spirits, while those who behaved in an objectionable way while alive are liable to become troublesome spirits, or *bhūts*; no matter which, possession may take place. If properly enshrined and consistently honored in its family home, a *pitṛ* may become a protective household presence for many generations, including guarding the living against other, harmful spirits.

Whichever deity the deceased had worshiped as his *iṣṭadev* [most favored deity] while alive will become the ongoing source of *śakti* [divine power] for the *pitṛ* after death.<sup>128</sup> As Hanuman is understood to have the particular task of managing *ātmās*, it is through his empowering intervention after death that an *ātmā* takes the crucial first step towards becoming a *pitṛ*. This step might depend on whether the deceased had accumulated sufficient inner power through austerities [*tapasya*] or devotional practice. In some cases, even an *ātmā* can practice austerities in the afterlife and thereby win *pitṛ*-hood from Hanuman as a boon. If a family unwittingly treats the *ātmā* or *pitṛ* in a neglectful way—in other words *pitṛ doś*—the spirit may cause trouble as a way to get proper attention, requiring the intervention of a Brahmin or a faith healer to set the matter straight (and usually entailing the prescription to build a home shrine for the spirit and give it offerings). On the other hand, if a *pitṛ* accomplishes wondrous acts in the service of its living relatives, neighbors and friends may start coming to it with the hope of also getting assistance.

*Tāntriks* [sorcerers] also often play a role in the actions of *ātmās*. They scavenge cremation grounds for human ashes and the remains of bones to call forth the *ātmā* still hovering nearby in

the hours immediately following ritual cremation. The *tāntrik*'s aim is to enslave the *ātmā* as an invisible instrument for hire if a client seeks to cause supernatural harm to enemies.

Notwithstanding the potential usefulness of *ātmās* (or *pitṛs*) to humans, in the event that they cause trouble the ultimate objective for those treating them is to facilitate their *mukti* or spiritual freedom, which releases *ātmās* from wandering the earth and allows them to go to heaven and later take rebirth in proper physical form. As it turned out, spirits do appear in Salasar, even if this is sometimes a touchy subject.

### Negotiating Possession in Salasar

Sitting one afternoon in the lobby of one of Salasar's luxury hotels with a *pujārī* named Atmaram, who works as its manager, I found out how Brahmins handle spirit possession, even though keeping faith in Balaji should technically be enough to avoid such trouble. It comes down to how we impute divine will in misfortunes. In Chapter 2, I mentioned the example of a Marwari from Nanded whose factory had burned down, leaving only a framed picture of Balaji. The message for that man was clear: he needed to start worshipping Balaji with more intensity to win the god's blessings. Karma, the positions of the stars, and similar natural factors can influence our lives regardless of faith in God. With this in mind, the Brahmins say that the ignorant mistakenly imagine ghost possession as the cause of their misfortune when they should be praying to Balaji to resolve their trouble. Atmaram had such a viewpoint, and was therefore skeptical of possession, although he was willing to concede that a *tāntrik* could instigate a spiritual attack. He attributed most so-called cases of possession to depression and mental problems, adding:

We set souls free with scriptures [*śāstra*]. If I couldn't read the scriptures, then what good could I [as a Brahmin] do for you? ... Small-town doctors are rather ignorant ... so if they treat you, anything could happen—you could feel fine, or you could be worse



... they'll give you *nīm* leaves. In the same way, those who claim special powers will tell you 'do this, do that, worship your ancestors and you'll have peace at home—this is scriptural treatment ...' No, that is not scriptural treatment! It's just a lot of make-believe. You could get better, or you could get worse. In this way, [people go to] many places to make requests of their gods, ancestors, family spirits [*pitrs*] and ghosts [*bhūt-pret*] and make offerings—ten rupees, a hundred rupees. [A guru] says many times do this in this way or that, but he doesn't know anything ... this is all superstition [*andhāviśvās*].<sup>129</sup>

In this passage, Atmaram favorably contrasts normative brahminical knowledge based on scripture with the more pragmatic, non-scriptural approach common to faith healers. Indeed, Atmaram is dismissive of these would-be healers because they falsely claim to know scriptures—an affront to his authority as a Brahmin. And to make matters worse, faith healers expect clients to give money for such wrongheaded actions; they are no better than ignorant rural doctors who cure by luck. In further discussion, I found that Atmaram had had a personal experience that informed this viewpoint. Previously, he had had two sons, both of whom died young because “they had no kidneys.”<sup>130</sup> He and his wife went to doctors in Sikar, then Delhi, Chandigarh, and finally Mumbai, to see what was wrong, and the doctors told them that they would only bear children with this fatal condition. Then his relatives sought help from a *lāl bābā*—a man who wears the red robes of a *tāntrik*, the color of which signals his particular devotion to Hanuman and his acquisition of occult powers. At that time, it so happened that this *bābā* was visiting a *dharmśālā* in Salasar. The *bābā* informed the man's relatives that someone had cursed [*tāntrik prayog kar diyā*] the would-be parents, preventing them from having normal children. He told the relatives to bring this childless *pūjārī* to him and he would find a cure.

Atmaram said he stubbornly refused to go to the *tāntrik*, reasoning, “If I go to the *tāntrik*, then what's the use of living [close to Balaji] in Salasar?” So, he instead went to Balaji and prayed for a son, after which he practiced certain necessary austerities [*vrāt*] to insure success—fasting

every Tuesday [Hanuman’s sacred day] for 17 years. This approach worked, as his wife bore him two healthy sons after that. As he reached the conclusion of this narrative, Atmaram opined that the *tāntrik* had fabricated the story about someone having cursed him as a ruse to make some money from his misfortune. Confirming this suspicion, he later checked the horoscopes of his dead sons, and found that they had already been destined to die young, which seemed to make moot the *tāntrik*’s claim about a curse. Atmaram reiterated that only faith in Balaji can change the course of life as predestined at birth, by destroying bad karma. This vignette exemplifies the Brahmin discourse that would hail Balaji’s devotional regime as pure and effective and would-be healers as false and deceptive.

In following, I will supply another story of possession told by a Brahmin in Salasar, this time much more equivocal about how to resolve the problem. This story describes an integration of normative brahminical protocol and faith healing, while reaffirming the temple’s distance from spirit possession:

Twenty years ago a family from Bihar came to Salasar. The wife died and was cremated, but her life was not complete [because] after her death, her kin did not revere her. She became a ghost [*ātmā*], since they offered no coconut in her memory. So, the Bihari woman’s spirit came into the body of my *bhānjā*’s [sister’s son’s] wife [because of this mistake—i.e. *pitr doś*]. [My *bhānjā*’s wife] started talking in a Bihari dialect [because of the ghost’s ethnic background]. So, her husband’s family asked the spirit, “How can [we help] you find peace?” [*kaise tu śānt hogī?*] At first the spirit was unwilling to consider departing the young woman, but then it told them to perform “*piṇḍ-dān*” [making an offering for the soul of the deceased] for it in Hardwar [site of the sacred Ganga River], and then it wouldn’t bother anyone again. Otherwise, they’d have to take the woman to Mehndipur ... Whenever my *bhānjā*’s wife would go to Balaji’s temple in Salasar, the spirit would leave her body at the entrance of the temple and wait. When my *bhānjā*’s wife would exit the temple the spirit would enter her again [*praveś karegī*]. Here [in Salasar’s temple] no *ātmā* can go inside [*yahān koī bhī ātmā andar nahīn jā saktī hai*], [whereas] in the Mehndipur temple, they take [the *ātmā*] in—that’s the difference [from Salasar]—there they put [the possessed] in chains! That spirit came in our home, so we believe in it, [but] others here don’t. The family took my *bhānjā*’s wife to a *bābā* [faith healer] in Sinwali village, near Lakshmangarh [Salasar area]. You bring a coconut to him, and then you take it to Hardwar. The *bābā*

himself [extracted the spirit from the young woman and] trapped the spirit in the coconut in the family's home and then took it to Hardwar to liberate it [*mukti*]. The *ātmā* had chosen to enter my *bhānjā*'s wife because it surmised that this would offer the best chance for its freedom. You see, the young woman had weak willpower [*'willpower' kamzor hai*] ... women are weaker [so they're more likely to become possessed].<sup>131</sup>

This story tells us several very interesting points relevant to this study. A family seeks the assistance of a faith healer for possession, and he advises them to follow the standard practice of going to Hardwar to pray for the liberation of the deceased at the Ganga River. The faith healer first draws out the spirit and traps it in a coconut, a common procedure in this kind of work. In this case, the faith healer then takes the coconut to Hardwar. The offending spirit is not even related to this family but came into contact when the deceased's family moved to Salasar. It enters the woman because it intuits that she has "weak" willpower, allowing it to control her for its purpose of winning ultimate freedom from this world. The fact that the possessed woman speaks in a dialect not normally her own proves to any observer that this possession is authentic, not feigned. The need to demonstrate through magical effects the veracity of possession, and also the spiritual powers of the faith healer, is the key element in faith healing and exorcism, and will be documented throughout this study.

While the family of the possessed woman accepts the reality of this supernatural event, it sees that this cannot coexist with Salasar Balaji. Hence, whenever the possessed woman in the story goes into Balaji's temple, the spirit leaves her but waits to re-enter her when she departs the temple. This vignette thereby illustrates how those afflicted with possessing spirits negotiate with the dominant *pujārī* narrative that Balaji does not oversee exorcism. In terms of the broader narrative of this study, this points to the centrality of the Brahmins in the production of Balaji's particular ontology. The fact that a spirit must leave the body of a person while in Balaji's

presence is conceptually equivalent to the aims of exorcism at any other shrine. That is, whether through a faith healer's mediation or simply by the direct presence of Balaji (mediated by the *pujārīs*) the power [*śakti*] of the divine drives the spirit out.

### Salasar as Sacred Space

We might wonder how these Brahmin narratives about what Balaji does and does not do in relation to spirit possession becomes common knowledge among the devotional public. Once one arrives at Salasar, the basic elements of worship are all on display—one buys *prasād*, gives it to a *pujārī* in the temple, circumambulates, and possibly attaches a wish coconut, and so forth. But, since spirit possession cannot take place here, a pilgrim becoming socialized to the ritual regime of Salasar learns only the absence of possession. By contrast, in Mehndipur the possessed can be seen all over, so it is easy for anyone to observe how to behave in that state. Wanting to know more about this, I asked a Brahmin in Salasar if it is conceivable for pilgrims to manifest symptoms of possession while in the vicinity of Salasar Balaji's temple, despite its doctrinal implausibility. He said that once in a while a visitor might “pretend” to be possessed due to delusion, but, as everyone knows, no spirit can withstand the presence of Balaji in his own space. Further, I was told, if such an act were to take place, the temple's guards would immediately eject the offending devotee. So, possession is actively discouraged.

Since Balaji rules as divine king of Salasar, he protects the whole village against ghosts. This does not stop some locals from privately experiencing problems with spirits, but they are conscious that Salasar's formal boundaries set it apart from the surrounding impure countryside, with its whiskey shops, goddess shrines, and faith healers. Whenever a Salasar resident departs across this boundary, as when driving to a nearby town, he will raise his right hand to his forehead to invoke Balaji's blessing and gain his permission to exit, as leaving the god would

expose the devotee to the spiritual dangers of the outside world. When entering Salasar, too, a local will acknowledge the divine king, as one would revere an elder upon stepping into a home. This mindset of territoriality has become common sense among pilgrims. The following account from a young *paidal yātrī* [foot pilgrim] met in Salasar illustrates that the *pujārīs*' narrative about the exclusion of spirits in Balaji's territory has become normal among pilgrims as well:

It was my third time going by foot to Salasar. I was with my *jījājī* [older sister's husband] on the road, and I started having this strange feeling. There was another young man, about 20 years old, from Anoopgarh [a sub-district of Shri Ganganagar District; see Map 2], behind me, along with another man and a woman. Two friends and I crossed an intersection [*cauk*], and this feeling came to me again. The group behind us started laughing. The two young men were joking: they were saying to the woman, "If you come here, I'll give you some *barfi* [a milk sweet]," without actually saying the woman's name. At that moment, I realized a bad spirit [*būrī ātmā*] was invisibly there next to these people, so I instantly started reciting *Hanumān cālīsā* to myself [to ward it off] because I was worried about what it was, but the group behind me kept joking. I walked on for three hours until I reached a sand dune [*tilā*], where there was a tractor parked with refreshments for the *yātrīs* [pilgrims]. I then took a nap, and the three who had been behind me arrived. I woke up to the sound of a woman screaming. Those three were sitting at a small Balaji shrine at this rest stop, with a *jot* [sacred flame] burning in front of the [makeshift] shrine, and I heard someone shrieking: "Why are you screaming?" Then I realized what had happened; I had been carrying a flag [of Balaji] so I had been protected, but the bad spirit had gone into the woman at that intersection. After the group recited *Hanumān cālīsā* in front of the flame the woman became peaceful again. But, the next morning she started shouting in a really foul way [*būrī tarah*], so we all invoked Hanuman's name and started reciting the *Cālīsā* again. Then, as we got near to Salasar, the spirit left the woman's body [because of the proximity of the deity], and she was peaceful once more. We knew it was a woman's *ātmā* because the woman spoke in a female voice.<sup>132</sup>

As in the previous story, this vignette tells us that spirits cannot penetrate Balaji's territory, but whereas in their previous story the spirit stayed inside the woman up to the point of entering the temple, in this one it departs at the entry gates to Salasar. This is how the prevailing view among *pujārīs* that faith healers are suspect and must not be allowed to practice in Salasar translates into the phenomenology of possession. As I will discuss in the following sections,

however, in tandem with this doctrine, the *pujārīs* have an imperative to retain their economic monopoly as sole mediators of the divine, which excludes faith healers and possession, their stock-in-trade. A contestational discourse is thus embedded in the theological “just so” explanation that possession is excluded from Salasar because of Balaji’s divine nature.

Taken as a phenomenology of possession on the road, the above story will also offer some useful points for our exploration of possession at shrines in the following chapters. First of all, we see that in times of danger the preferred antidote is to recite *Hanumān cālīsā*. As a short recitation (around 15 minutes in total), it is fairly easily memorized, and is treasured as an all-purpose invocation of the divine. This recitation, along with the sacred fire set up at a roadside shrine in the above story, temporarily subdues any possessing spirit, which is why the woman becomes calm when sitting before the fire. Once the effect has later worn off, she starts behaving erratically again due to the resurgent spirit. Also, a common reason for spirit invasion is revealed. If one requests that someone else come close without specifying that person by name, any wandering spirit in the vicinity is likely to interpret that as an invitation for it to enter someone there. As described above, this is especially a danger at intersections, where spirits tend to gather. Additionally, the narrator tells us, women are perceived to be more susceptible to spirit possession; this will be particularly evident in Chapter 5, when we go to Mehndipur. These are some of the elements constituting an idiom of possession that has become standardized in the public mind as increasing numbers of pilgrims visit shrines in the Shekhawati region.

As far as I could ascertain, the same exclusion of spirit possession and exorcism applies to the other major Marwari-Jain shrines of the Shekhawati region (discussed in Chapter 2—Rani Sati, Punrasar, Khatu Shyam, Agroha, etc.). I recall observing the effect that a *dhām*’s [religious shrine’s] boundary gate can have on possession when I attended Khatu Shyam’s greatest annual

festival during Holi, when thousands of pilgrims arrive on foot. A group of around 20 people were accompanying a middle-aged woman carrying a large brush of peacock feathers, which signified that she had magical powers. When they had approached to within a few feet of the large whitewashed entry gates that straddled the road, she began to dance wildly and then swooned, after which she started to speak with the voice of a possessing spirit so as to give the assembled listeners instructions for proper conduct during their pilgrimage. Once this crowd had passed through the gate, the woman quietly resumed her identity as a revered guru and devotee of Khatu Shyam. As in Salasar, within this territory no spiritual authority may operate besides Khatu Shyam and his designated allies, such as Hanuman.

Given that exorcism is common in the shrines of Shekhawati, how should we theorize the lack of possession within not only Salasar but also these other Marwari-patronized shrines? From the standpoint of ritual authority, at first glance these shrines are quite diverse. Although my research on them was only adjunct to my primary focus on Balaji, I did learn, for instance, that Khatu Shyam is owned by a lineage of Rajputs who make a good living off of Marwari patronage, and hire *pujārīs* as ritual functionaries (who therefore have little authority). Punrasar is operated by a lineage of Jain caretakers. I did not find out details about Rani Sati, but it seemed that the *pujārīs* are also hired, as at Khatu Shyam. What these shrines have in common, then, is not one kind of priesthood, but rather predominant Marwari patronage.

I would argue, then, that while temple authorities enforce religious doctrine, the nature of that doctrine has to do with patronage. As we will see in Chapter 5, Mehndipur has a rather diffuse structure of religious authority; this has allowed patronage to be channeled into innumerable private endeavors, which has permitted a doctrinal free-for-all, with faith healers operating as

autonomous agents in the name of Mehndipur Balaji. For this reason, the cult of Mehndipur Balaji has expanded along different social pathways than Salasar Balaji.

In this study of Salasar's Brahmins as caretakers of Balaji, we need to stay cognizant of their reliance on Marwari patronage. The *pujārīs* provide special ritual services for them, and affirm the deity as their permanent protector through their mediation. The following sections will illustrate how this is discursively accomplished, and how the mediation takes place.

### 3.3 A Priestly History

#### God and His Mediators Enter the Picture

In this section, I will describe how Salasar's *pujārīs* became the privileged guardians of Balaji, which will help us to understand their continuing importance in Balaji's devotional regime. When looking at Salasar's official history, as locally recited or rendered in souvenir books sold in the market, the most striking point is the precise detail on specific individuals and places involved, and even many dates, such as the founding of the shrine (1754). Not only are the activities of the *pujārīs'* ancestors carefully documented, but also various local potentates and villages in the vicinity are named. One gets the impression that Balaji's story is completely grounded in the locale, hence unassailably factual, although it is permeated with miracles that anticipate his modern appeal. This matter-of-factness in Balaji's history makes clear that his endorsement of the authority of the *pujārīs* is not legend but very real. Not surprisingly, Balaji's coming-into-being story is universally known in Salasar, so the whole village knows why the *pujārīs* run the shrine.

As commonly told in Salasar, this narrative begins not with Balaji but with the Dadhich clan from whom today's *pujārīs* are descended. Indeed, the origin of Balaji is subsumed within the history of the Dadhich *pujārīs*, and explains how they received their divine prerogative. In



following, I will give a brief overview of this history.<sup>133</sup> The narrative starts with the birth of the boy Mohan Das into a Brahmin family in the village of Rulyani, around halfway between Salasar and the district capital of Sikar. Due to this boy's virtuousness in previous lives, Hanuman secretly blessed him, which predisposed him to become a firm devotee of the god; at one point in childhood he even had a vision of the god in a field. Mohan Das's older sister, Kanhibai married Sukhram Suntwal, a member of the Dadhich Brahmin clan; they became the direct ancestors of the present *pujārīs* of Balaji's temple. The newlyweds moved to the husband's home in the area of Salasar, where they had a son, Udairam.

The villagers of Salasar had moved from an adjacent village that had contained a well with bad water, which was possibly inhabited by a spirit, to which I will return later in this chapter. The new village was named after a Rajput chief named Salam Singh who was based in the nearby village of Juliysar.<sup>134</sup> Sukhram soon died, leaving Kanhibai with her young son, so Mohan Das came to live in Salasar to assist her. One day, when Kanhibai was feeding Mohan Das and her son, a beggar showed up asking for food but she made him wait while she fed her household. When she had finished she looked everywhere for the beggar but he had disappeared. Realizing that the beggar was "Balaji" (so named for the first time), Mohan Das set off into the scrub to find him, finally catching up with him and grabbing at him by one foot (Figure 3-1).<sup>135</sup> When Mohan Das caught hold of Hanuman-Balaji's cloak from behind, the god was so moved by this testament of devotion that he agreed to return with him to his home. There, Balaji was given *cūrmā* and treated as a revered guest. As described in Chapter 2, *cūrmā* nowadays remains Balaji's preferred offering at the Salasar shrine, reproducing this primal gift-giving in return from blessings that took place in the home of the present-day *pujārīs'* ancestors. Balaji's story

thus makes clear that the *pujārī* lineage has always been integral, and is privileged as his first devotees.<sup>136</sup>

From the time of this meeting, Mohan Das's clairvoyant powers developed as a result of his ascetic devotion to Balaji. He soon felt that it was time to build the god a temple, and he told the



Figure 3-1. The sant Mohan Das begs Hanuman to come to his home. Wall painting in Balaji's temple, Salasar.

local chieftain, Salam Singh, of the need for an image to represent Balaji. A short time later, a Jat farmer of the nearby village of Asota uncovered a large stone while plowing his field. His wife cleaned the stone and saw that it was an image of Hanuman holding Rama and Lakshmana on his shoulders. The fact that the image was found fully formed or “self-made” [*svarūp*] was

taken as evidence of its inherent power, beyond anything that could be made by human hands.

These days, both in Salasar and in other pilgrimage sites such as Mehndipur, the fact that the god inhabits a self-made image—the statues of both Balajis have this status—is seen to indicate that the deity has a superlative capacity to fulfill wishes, justifying his popularity.<sup>137</sup>

Upon the discovery of Balaji's image in the field, the god came to Mohan Das in a dream and told him that he would induce a local chieftain to bring the image to Salasar in an oxcart. When the oxen reached the field where Mohan Das had had his first vision of Hanuman as a child, they refused to go further, so the image was enshrined there. As is commonly known, the deity first proved his healing power by ridding the chieftain of a boil on his back. In gratitude, the chieftain donated five rupees for the upkeep of the shrine, setting a precedent for patronage ever since. Following this, numerous other miracles were documented. With the welfare of his widowed sister's son in mind, Mohan Das requested to Balaji that this boy and all his descendants should serve as the deity's priests (Figure 3-2).<sup>138</sup> In this way, Balaji became a *kuldev*.

These days, two old-looking wooden carts, at least one of which had presumably carried the image of Balaji to his present spot, are kept on view on each side of the entrance to the courtyard adjacent to the main shrine, making Balaji's temple a kind of museum for documenting the authenticity of the story. But, it was not clear to me why there should be two carts rather than one. I am tempted to think that these are thus modern installations positioned as a pair to symmetrically flank the pilgrim entering the temple. A useful analogy for the temple as historical documentation would be Pierre Nora's expansive *Realms of Memory* [*Lieux de Memoire*], in which he examines French projects of monument building as a way of reclaiming a history that has otherwise become distant from everyday lived experience.<sup>139</sup> That is to say, memory is always subject to revisions, and authority uses various instruments at its

disposal to construct a memory—national or otherwise—that suits the imperatives of the present. Nora sees a rupture in modern social memory, whereby the sense of intimacy to the (pre-urbanized) past has been lost. This prompts the setting up of these “realms of memory” as reconstituted narratives. With similar attention to the rewriting of history, Christian Novetzke has examined the continually replenished and revised hagiographic public memory of the thirteenth-century devotional poet Namdev, as seen in the production and recitation of the poet’s work from notebooks probably produced not during but after his lifetime.<sup>140</sup> With this malleability of history in mind, I would like to suggest that notwithstanding the Brahmins’ certainty about Balaji’s history, they might have retroactively inscribed the current socio-economic relations and miracles that bring Marwari donors to Balaji.

In Chapter 2, I mentioned that, according to the *pujārīs* of Salasar, Balaji was discovered as a god of miracles around two decades ago when a Marwari merchant from Kolkata came to the temple for relief from an ailment after he had unsuccessfully sought treatment in the US. The reference to the US confirms the recentness of the god’s rediscovery. But, two centuries before this turn of events, the formal history of Balaji tells us that merchants and others experienced the god’s initial miracles. That early history, as recounted in souvenir books sold in Salasar, anticipates the contemporary relationship of patronage between the *pujārīs* and Marwaris and other VIPS on the basis of Balaji’s miracles.

What happened during the two centuries between the passing of Mohan Das and the modern-day growth of Salasar? The period following Mohan Das’s lifetime is relatively hazy. One resident of Salasar, Shriram Kaushik, a non-*pujārī* Brahmin, published a Hindi-language history of Salasar in 1978, which makes it the earliest know (to me) modern text to discuss Balaji. He tells us of the formative events of Mohan Das and Balaji, and then makes sporadic references to



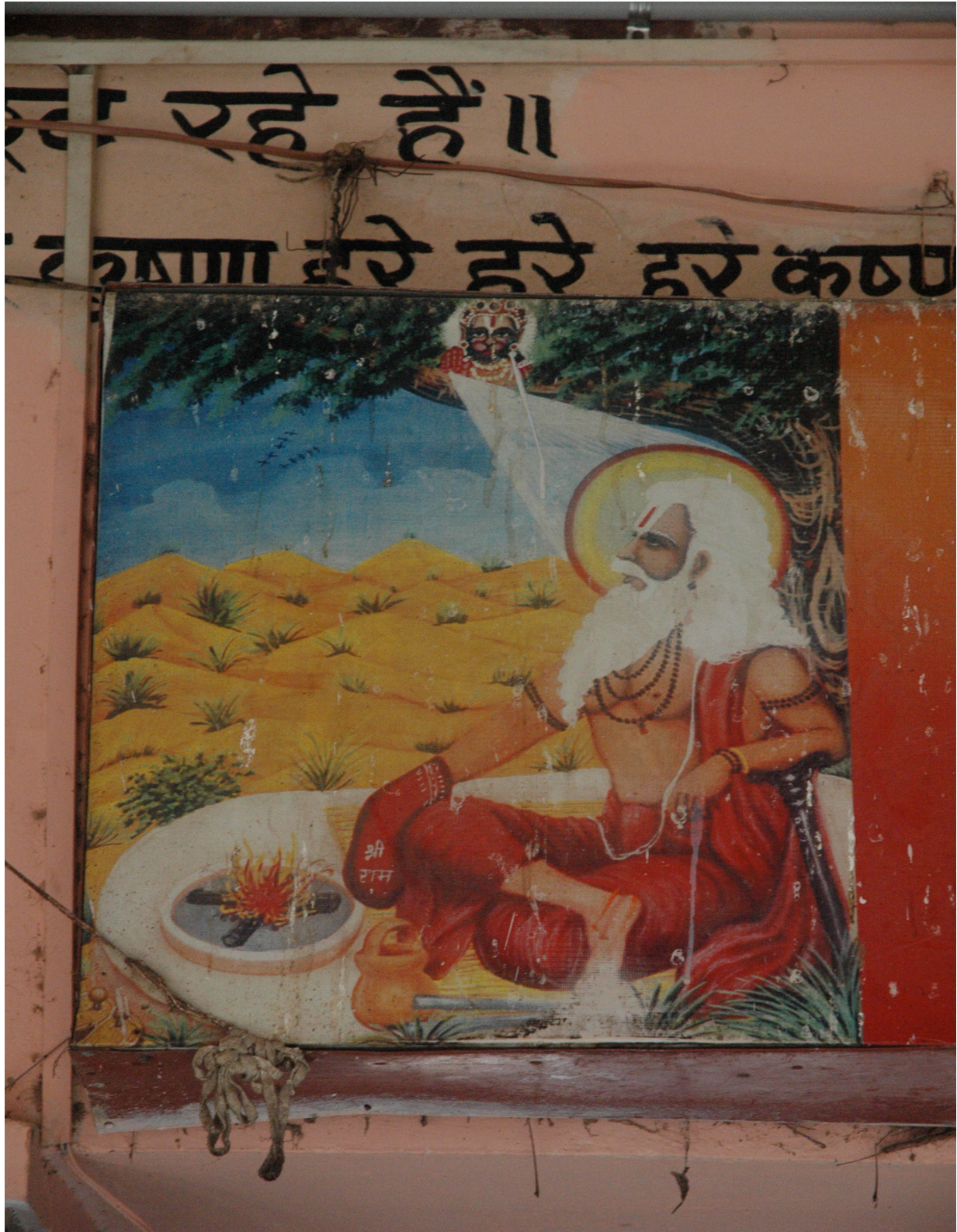


Figure 3-2. Hanuman blesses Mohan Das. Wall painting in Balaji's temple.

local Brahmins and *sants* who were in Salasar during the following decades. In fact, most of Kaushik's book takes a Brahmin-like concern with the performance of *bhajans* and recitation of scriptures in the temple. At its core, Kaushik's history is not much different than the souvenir books now sold in Salasar. But, the souvenir books include elaborations that Kaushik's work does not. Oriented towards convincing the contemporary pilgrim, including Marwaris, of Balaji's powers, the souvenir books give a descriptive tour of various shrines in Shekhawati—some only recently established—and include far more anecdotes of Balaji's miracles, as well as more discussion about the ghost of a man who died in or near a well, to be discussed later in this chapter. It appears that these newer histories are aimed at a general audience, rather than Kaushik's Sanskritists. In highlighting miracles, these neoliberal-era versions of history seem to embody the recent societal trend towards seeking magical treatments that I have noted. In short, reminiscent of what Novetzke has found, local history has been modified to meet the times. The history of Salasar in the 2000s looks a little bit different than in 1978, before the culture of miracles had gained so much momentum.

Although no scholarly monograph on Salasar Balaji has ever been published in the West, anthropologist Lawrence Babb gives us a glimpse of possible early Marwari-*pujārī* relations in a very brief discussion of the deity's early history, as taken from a souvenir book, in his study on the pre-modern formation of Rajasthani merchant identity.<sup>141</sup> Although he never mentions the recent of Salasar, he usefully suggests that the *baniyās* of Rajasthan historically constituted themselves as a social group not on the basis of the classical Sanskritic doctrine of *varṇā* or social class, but rather through their ongoing socio-historical relations. Those relations involved kings and Brahmins. *Baniyā* identity coalesced in the Marwari embrace of non-violence and vegetarianism, which sets them apart from their overlords, the meat-eating Rajputs. We may

suppose that for the Marwaris to associate themselves with the vegetarian *pujārīs* would have been consistent with this development.

In Babb's telling of Salasar's early history, bandits waylaid a wealthy *baniyā* of Shekhawati, but, being sworn to non-violence, he simply prayed to Balaji and was miraculously saved. In gratitude, he constructed a more expansive temple for the deity in place of the previous small shrine. Thus, Balaji's miracles were integral to the discourse of Marwari identity. Is this not also the case nowadays? However, I have not found the vignette to which Babb refers, either in Kaushik's work or in the souvenir books. In my view, the story Babb cites is nonetheless consistent with the proliferation of miracle stories in history since Kaushik's time; I can only suspect that Babb came across a recent miracle story that might not always appear in the multiple versions of the history. The Marwari patrons Babb cites appear to be mostly from local market towns, whereas nowadays they primarily come from the pan-Indian urban diaspora. But, the meta-message that I would also find in the vignette Babb cites is that Marwaris from afar have found their ancestral homeland, proven by the fact that Balaji performs as their protective *kuldev*. My own hypothesis of Balaji's history is that after a lapse of two centuries, in the 1990s the new economic regime and rising public devotion to Hanuman and other Vaishnava deities (Rama, Krishna, and so on) increased Salasar's appeal to Marwaris and others. As such, there was a need to elaborate a history of miracles prefiguring the deity's present-day cult. Along the lines of Nora's realms of memory, Balaji's history of miracles bridges sparse period between his origins and the rising culture of patronage that obliges a theological explanation.

### *Balaji as King of Salasar*

One important point remains from Balaji's history: how his image got its characteristic appearance—a large bearded face with a mustache whimsically curled upwards in the manner of

a Rajput king, along with a pair of rudimentary-looking upstretched arms. I would suggest that this particular configuration of the god exemplifies a “localization” of the pan-Indian Hanuman, as a more human-like Shekhawati ruler. Balaji’s distinctive appearance means that any reproduction of his image is immediately apparent to devotees as a referent to Salasar and no other place, whereas the generic scriptural Hanuman is not tied to any one shrine.<sup>142</sup>

Continuing with Balaji’s history from where we left off, we learn that on a Tuesday—Hanuman’s sacred day—Mohan Das came to the image to perform a special *pūjā*, applying orange *sindūr* paste to it in reverence. The image in its original form had depicted the monkey god standing in his normative monkey-like form while supporting the godly brothers Rama and Lakshman on his shoulders. Having inadvertently obscured this original depiction by covering it with *sindūr*, Mohan Das painted over the *sindūr* with his own rendition of Hanuman in his current form as Balaji, without Rama and Lakshmana. Ever since, several times a year, the *pūjārīs* repeat this process of applying fresh *sindūr* to the image and copying Mohan Das’s visual interpretation of the deity. Although locals maintain a social memory of the original image, they say that no living person has ever seen what actually lies under the accumulated layers of *sindūr*.<sup>143</sup>

In characterizing Balaji as a localization of pan-Indian scriptural Hanuman, it would be instructive to recall the structuralist approach to village religion in India that was popular the 1950s. The trend in the anthropology of Indian religions at that time was to look beyond the long entrenched bias towards religious texts, which had privileged ancient Sanskrit “high culture” as the norm in Indian history. Scholars started looking at folk life as a site of cultural formation. McKim Marriott’s 1955 study of northwestern Indian village took this direction in theorizing village deities as the outcome of the interplay between trans-regional and local factors.



It is easy to see where Salasar Balaji might fit in this scheme, being both the local Balaji and the pan-Indian Hanuman of classical scripture. As Marriott theorized, such a cultural process entails a continual interplay between “little communities”—non-Sanskritic village life—and “the great tradition,” or pan-Indian Sanskritic culture.<sup>144</sup> The pull between these opposite cultural streams causes either “universalization” or “parochialization.” Again, on the face of it, it is easy to imagine Balaji in these terms. Using an Internet analogy, we could say that universalization involves the uploading of local practices into the expanse of pan-Indian Sanskritic culture, while parochialization amounts to downloading (localizing) elements of high culture from the broader culture into the village setting.

Interpreted within this paradigm, Balaji could be said to have moved in both of these directions—up (universalization) and down (parochialization)—at different times in his history, in tandem with the shifting relations between his Brahmin caretakers and their devotional clientele. The god’s history would thus progress as follows. More than two centuries ago, pan-Indian Hanuman, normally appearing as a monkey, manifested in Salasar in local terms as “Balaji” through the miraculous discovery of his image in a field. Once ensconced in this local domain, the image of the deity as a monkey became reconfigured in a strictly local physical form by the intention of Mohan Das, becoming a large, roughly drawn face with a substantial beard and mustache like a local king. And, from that time, according to the *pujārīs*’ history, the deity started to demonstrate his local significance in his role as a *kuldev* by providing miracles for certain Marwaris and other locally-originated communities. This entire sequence would amount to a parochialization (or localization) of *pan-Indian* Hanuman into *local* Balaji.

Jumping ahead two centuries to the past twenty years, we see a new wave of attention for the deity now coming from pan-Indian urban Marwaris, as well as Jats from the Rajasthan-Punjab-

Haryana border region. This outside attention in the context of the nationwide turn to publicly demonstrative devotion amounts to a re-investiture of normative pan-Indian religiosity in the worship of Balaji. From this time, in the mid 1990s, we start to see major donations from urban elites for improvements in Salasar's religious infrastructure. At this time also, devotees sponsor the non-stop recital of the *ā* in a room adjacent to the temple. Marwari donors sponsor the founding of a Sanskrit college near Salasar. Popular devotion in the form of pilgrimage on foot is on the rise. The Brahmins of Salasar offer a wide array of ritual services for moneyed devotees from the cities. Religious donations in Salasar are on the rise, allegedly to avoid tax liability under national laws. In line with this nationwide attention, local Balaji is re-imagined as a deity of pan-Indian stature in keeping with his identity as Hanuman. He offers miracles said to be unparalleled by other deities. In short, the god has moved in the direction of pan-Indian scriptural Hanuman once more.

I am suggesting this model as an analytical experiment. It admittedly reifies a Sanskritic scriptural tradition and a non-Sanskritic village tradition as two perpetually opposed cultural streams that interact to produce everyday popular religion. Marriott's approach might not hold up in the current turn in scholarship towards questioning such meta-streams. In considering this model, I have deliberately left aside the narrative dissensions implicit in my respondents' testimonies—for instance, that the Brahmins unfairly monopolize Balaji to gain profit from elite donors; where does economic opportunism enter the model? I aim to emphasize individual narratives rather than supposing interactions between impersonal cultural waves. But, I find Marriott's structuralist approach interesting as a way for retaining the *pujārīs*' own theological narratives of Balaji's coming into being while subjecting them to a more sociological analysis.

## Becoming Balaji

Returning to the details of Balaji's history, it is striking that Mohan Das would choose to efface an image of Hanuman that shows him supporting the high gods of scriptural Hinduism's famed epic, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, in favor of a kinglike face of Balaji alone. I never felt that I had heard a perfectly convincing explanation for this choice of action. Countless other Hanuman statues in shrines small and large receive *sindūr* without being redrawn as an altogether different image. Nonetheless, what I heard was that Mohan Das reconfigured Balaji in his *own* image, a bearded *sant*, because that was the face most familiar to him! Others would explain that the mustache and beard is a symbol of the deity's "power" [*vīr*], like a Rajput king would have looked in the old days; the idea was to depict Balaji's heroic nature. It would not be inconsistent to imagine the god in this way, since Hanuman is also textually known as Mahavir [great hero] in *Hanumān cālīsā* and other texts.<sup>145</sup>

The fluidity of an image's appearance and its history are hardly unusual in Indian religious practice, where image-worship is so ubiquitous. For example, I would point to Ramchandra Dhere's study of the rise of Vitthal of Pandharpur as a "folk god" (hence commensurate with Balaji as a local god). Dhere notes present-day controversies about whether the image of the deity corresponds to its description in old texts recounting the deity's origins (in other words, *Māhātmya* texts).<sup>146</sup> As in Novetzke's discussion of a saint's evolving biography, Dhere's investigation of a divine image's history uncovers an ongoing religious pragmatism as devotees reconfigure the Vitthal image when the conditions of its worship change.<sup>147</sup>

Inasmuch as images in worship are commonly covered in sandalwood paste and fine clothing as a mark of veneration, which is said to increase the deity's power, we could say that the continuous attention that Balaji receives, which alters his appearance, actually reinforces his

divine power. The deity's ability to grant wishes is the most important consideration of all, so any action that enhances that is desirable. A comparable instance would be Karunamaya, also locally known as Bungadyah, a manifestation of the Buddhist deity Avalokiteshvara revered in the Kathmandu Valley. Bruce Owens observes that periodic reconsecrations, evident in the addition of *sindūr* and accouterments such as clothing, strengthen Karunamaya's divine power.<sup>148</sup> The ongoing ritual re-application of *sindūr* to Balaji's image several times a year (so I have been told) also affirms the privileged agency of Salasar's *pujārīs* as his caretakers, as they reenact the precedent of their forbearer, Mohan Das, in redrawing the appearance of the deity.

In changing Balaji's appearance Mohan Das effectively revised Hanuman, the idealized devotee of God (here represented as Rama on one shoulder), into a miracle-granting local power—arguably “God” [*Bhagvān*]<sup>149</sup>—in his own right. The god as a devotee of God became God as king of Salasar—a change in the scale of his authority.<sup>149</sup> As king of Salasar, Balaji thus assumes a social significance that is specific to his locale, hence no longer the same as Hanuman of the pan-Indian *Rāmāyaṇa*. Locals say that since Balaji is the divine ruler of Salasar, he sees all that happens there, so his subjects must always be careful about their actions. In his temple, a gold crown has been affixed to his image to indicate his local status. Being surrounded by silver and gold utensils and other divine images, he looks more like an enthroned royal than the selfless devotee so often shown bowing before Rama in pan-Indian imagery. This is why, in order to understand what “Hanuman” as a deity of a specific place means, we need to consider him as more than a reflection of a nationwide scriptural character. One Hanuman is not another Hanuman.

According to some of the Brahmins in Salasar, Balaji's name likewise refers to his identity as a king. Or rather, they say, Balaji is not a name but a title [*padavī*] meaning “leader” [*mukhya*]

or king. Balaji appeared to Mohan Das as a king—*bhuk* in in the local language, hence some Brahmins told me that he is also known as “the *bhuk* of Salasar.”<sup>150</sup> This association with rulership parallels the similarly bearded Khatu Shyam. Despite Brahmins’ assertions of Balaji’s kingly status, supposedly reflected in his name, many devotees say the god’s name originates in the Hindi word *bālak* or child. This is also the prevailing view of devotees about the identity of Balaji in Mehndipur. The implication of addressing the deity as a child is that the devotee cultivates a relationship of intimacy, as one would with one’s own child. Cultivating such a relationship will help win the deity’s blessings. So, we have at least two interpretations of the deity’s name, which suggest rather different kinds of deities: warrior king versus adorable child. As a king, Balaji indexes the Brahmin dominance of Salasar, but as a child he indexes the pilgrim’s narrative of approaching a beloved deity in a spirit of *bhakti* [devotion] to pray for *āśirvād* [blessings]. In the following section I want to further explore the notion of Balaji as a kingly figure who is cared for by the *pujārīs* in investigating how they ritually reproduce this relationship.

### 3.4 *Pujārīs* in Practice

#### *Pujārīs in Modern Life*

I have suggested that the *pujārīs* have shaped the memory of Balaji in line with their own ritual primacy in Salasar and also their dependence on Marwari donors; these two factors inform the main features of the god’s history. In this section, then, I will turn to the *pujārīs*’ present-day ritual regime and their relationship to the Marwaris. There are 450 living members of the Suntwal Dadhich lineage that comprise Salasar’s *pujārī* community, out of Salasar’s population of 5,000.<sup>151</sup> These *pujārīs* have prospered more than other caste groups in Salasar, due to their special role in mediating Balaji to his VIP patrons. The *pujārīs* often maintain lifelong

hereditary relationships with Marwaris in cities across India, to whom they regularly give spiritual advice by phone for their day-to-day domestic and business concerns. In return, the Marwari VIPs materially support the *pujārīs* and have started building posh mansions in the vicinity of the temple. One manor down the road, which might pass for a hospital on account of its grandeur, comprises five separate residences for the families of five brothers. Over the middle of each entrance, we see “*Jai śrī bālājī*” in bold red letters. Meanwhile, across the street, one of my *pujārī* respondents has been spurred to put up an equally grand new home equipped with elevators.

*Pujārī* prosperity due to wealthy benefactors is not new in Indian life, but Salasar’s *pujārīs* seem to be particularly blessed nowadays, more than ever before, so this development is not simply more of the usual. The notion that this prosperity has largely come about only since the early 1990s, when Marwaris learned of Balaji’s powers, prompted me to look for possibly similar narratives elsewhere in India. Christopher Fuller gives us a very intriguing before-and-after story of the Brahmins of Minakshi Temple in Madurai, based on earlier research in the 1970s and a newer look in the early 2000s. In his earlier research, he concluded that the economic outlook for the Brahmins was grim, due to the temple’s takeover by the egalitarian state. Yet, most recently he remarks that the Brahmins have been doing well, “as a result of rising middle-class affluence produced by India’s economic liberalization ... [which] accelerated from 1991—assisted by the Tamil Nadu government’s religious policy...”<sup>152</sup> This economic trajectory is already familiar to us. However, the Tamil Nadu government’s takeover of the Minakshi Temple is not yet paralleled in Salasar, where the *pujārīs* are nowadays fighting off government attempts to reduce the *pujārīs* to being salaried employees of the state.

In this neoliberal climate, Fuller sees an underlying tension between traditionalists and modernists within the Brahmin community, often correlating with levels of education. I saw less evidence of high education in Salasar, partly because it is only a village, unlike a major city like Madurai. However, the Marwari sponsorship of the Sanskrit college near Salasar was said to be for the purpose of helping young Brahmins to maintain high standards. This is more critical now that Balaji is a peer within the modern Hindu pantheon, and is receiving nationwide sponsorship. In Fuller's study, the international diasporic Tamil community is a commensurate source of translocal patronage.<sup>153</sup> Fuller makes the interesting observation that better educated Brahmin priests are able to make more money, and will often try to abandon their duties in the temple for jobs overseas.<sup>154</sup> Performing as ritualists in the temple is low-paying and less desirable, but the more ambitious "professional" (well-educated or trained) priests can make much better money performing rituals on commission in communities distant from the temple, in addition to running their own businesses. As Fuller notes, then, the Brahmins are fully aware of economic pragmatics and strive to position themselves in an advantageous way.

Fuller's description fairly well matches what I saw at Salasar, where education and seniority had much to do with who is delegated with what tasks. Teenagers were generally put to work as functionaries in the inner shrine (wearing a red outfit—Balaji's color—consisting of a tee shirt and a *dhoti* lower garment, and performing *ārtī*, administering the distribution of *prasād* to pilgrims, removing the husks from coconuts destined for the sacred fire, etc.). Householder *pujārīs* and their children more often operate shops in the vicinity of the temple geared towards pilgrims. Older men spend their days chatting with their peers in the temple's courtyard. More enterprising *pujārīs* make a good living as officiators of rituals for Marwari events in cities around India. With this lifestyle in mind, some of the *pujārīs* remarked that they live an "easy"

life [*ārām kā jīvan*], which they consider to be a blessing of Balaji. Behind the scenes, though, financial maneuverings are going on. Although not apparent to a casual visitor, the *pujārīs* comprise two sub-lineages, which take turns serving Balaji and administering the temple every other year. This arrangement is fundamentally about money and labor; it is said to have come into being “around 125 years ago” because of disputes between these two branches over retaining donations received from devotees.<sup>155</sup> Hence, the *pujārīs* have an economic stake in closely managing the ritual arrangement of Salasar’s main temple.

But this maneuvering around money is also happening on a grander scale. Since the income of many of the *pujārī* families has grown much in the last two decades, the Indian government has started to pay attention, in accord with its policy of taxing citizens who make more than 250,000 rupees annually. Whereas the government is said to have nationalized “90 percent” of temples across the nation, Balaji’s temple remains in the private control of the Dadhich lineage. Shortly after independence, the Indian government took over most major temples, but as Balaji’s temple seemed so insignificant in those days it was left in private hands. Now that prosperity has come to Balaji’s temple, there is talk of a government takeover. When I asked a *ī* about this delicate matter, I got a rebuttal in the strongest language that I had heard that whole year. As he reminded me, to serve as a *ī* in this temple is the God-given hereditary right of the Dadhich clan. Looking back at Balaji’s history, then, it becomes clear that history makes a difference to the present-day realities of the temple.

A government takeover would mean that *pujārīs* could be hired from outside as salaried employees, which would eliminate the current priestly autonomy in determining ritual services, and might undermine the special relationship developed between the Dadhich *pujārī* lineage and the Marwaris. And, my *pujārī* friend argued, a takeover would mean indifferent management,



which would cause a decline in services that the temple committees oversee from donations, such as paving roads, supporting schools, and sponsoring facilities for pilgrims. These social services, like Balaji's endorsement, justify the *pujārīs*' continued financial and ritual stewardship. The *pujārīs* remain sensitive about this, since locals not directly involved in the pilgrimage industry grumble that they take income from patrons but do little for the development of the area.

Adjacent to one of the two entrance halls to the temple, the *samādhī* [memorial] for Balaji's first devotee, the *sant* Mohan Das, and his sister Kanhibai, from whom the Dadhich *pujārīs* are descended, serve as a public reminder of the intertwined histories of Balaji and his caretakers. The *sant* and his sister had died in *jīvit samādhī*, which is to say they consciously chose the moment in which their souls would depart while in meditation. In the *samādhīs*, they are now each represented by a pair of footprints in marble, in the typical Rajasthani fashion. Leaving the world in such an auspicious way as *jīvit samādhī* produced spiritual power so potent that it still remains at this site and fulfills prayers. As if to remind us of the connection between past and present, a large family tree posted on the wall behind the *samādhīs* graphically traces Kanhibai's progeny up to the present-day *pujārīs*.

In recent years, with increased patronage from moneyed out-of-towners, the *samādhī*, like Balaji's own shrine, has become more overtly imagined in terms of pan-Indian Hinduism. For instance, temple *sevaks* [employees] sit next to the *samādhīs* every day to read the sacred *Rāmāyana*, a preeminent text of Vaishnava piety.<sup>156</sup> But, despite this statement of intimacy between the *pujārīs* and their ancestor Mohan Das, most pilgrims, such as the Jats (who dismiss the authority of the Brahmins), ignore this spot as they walk by on their way to Balaji's shrine. For the most part, only local Brahmins come to the evening *ārtīs* at Mohan Das's shrine.

## A God of One's Own

The *pujārīs*' intimate relationship with Balaji as their *kuldev* is reproduced throughout the year in their schedule of ritual events. I will discuss how we might theorize this ritual agenda. As Catherine Bell has noted, one conventional way of describing "ritual" is as a medium for invoking a relationship between a "human being in the here-and-now and non-immediate sources of authority."<sup>157</sup> In the context of this study, that would be a way of saying that ritualized events construct a relationship between the *pujārīs* and Balaji. Insofar as I argue that the continual reproduction of this relationship is of paramount importance for the livelihood of the *pujārīs*, ritual thus may be vital to understanding how the *pujārīs* interact with Balaji. Bell seems to favor "practice theory" as an analytical approach (writing in the 1990s), in which ritual is theorized as a "creative strategy" for reproducing a "cultural environment."<sup>158</sup> As distinct from the static relationships of structuralist analysis, practice theory is more pragmatic, and even suggests intentionality (e.g. reproducing a divine relationship) in religious practice. Translating this into our study, we could say that the *pujārīs* stage performances of devotion to Balaji as a conscious affirmation of their all-important relationship.

We could apply practice theory, as described by Bell, to the three major local holidays in which the *pujārīs* celebrate their connection to Balaji. These holidays are only performed at Balaji's temple, and usually involve a *jāgrāṇ* featuring praises in the local Marwari dialect to Balaji, Mohan Das, and sometimes other deities such as Krishna, until early morning (Figure 3-3). Although the occasional pilgrim might stand and watch for a few minutes, it is primarily local Brahmins who participate in these events. The same *pujārīs* that routinely sing in the temple in the evenings, and some of their older male relatives, are the principle performers in these events. In the practice of these events, then—the local language, social participation

limited to *pujārīs*, invocations of the *pujārīs*' own ancestors, and the history of Salasar, the *pujārīs*' produce a cultural solidarity that translates into, and is arguably critical to, participation in their joint livelihood. But, beyond this, the ritual, that is to say repeated, nature of the event reminds Balaji of the *pujārīs*' role as his mediators. In this sense, the event pragmatically builds a relationship with the divine.



Figure 3-3. A *jāgraṇ* in commemoration of the founding of Balaji's temple.

I will elaborate further on relationships forged in these periodic *pujārī* holidays, which extend both between humans, and also humans and the divine. The first annual holiday is the anniversary of the founding of the temple [*mandir kā sthāpanādivas*], or Sawan Suchinavami (or

Sruchinavami), which, as the title suggests, occurs in the Hindu month of Sawan (July). The second holiday of Salasar's *pujārīs* is known as Osra, in which the two major branches of *pujārīs* formally exchange their duties and ritual objects (such as *dīpak*, bell, sacred red clothes, and so forth) for the coming year in front of Balaji's image in the inner shrine. This event, which I witnessed, is truly a family matter, as female Brahmins make a rare public appearance to watch their young sons exchange the ritual attributes of adulthood and responsibility in their lineage's livelihood. The ancient social regime sanctioned by Balaji is also reenacted in this event; by tradition, a mahajan (moneylender), a Rajput (secular ruler), and a farmer are called to witness. Relationships are thus affirmed, and the god endorses these interconnections.

I would like to also bring in a second way of looking at the *pujārīs*' public events, which would lessen our dependence on social structure as a basis of analysis. Don Handelman's very intriguing introduction to his edited volume, *Ritual in Its Own Right*, considers ritual as having a psychic effect on practitioners based on its internal spatial configuration. As he sees it, the degree to which the event dislocates participants from everyday life (ritual as an "inwardly curving structure") is proportional to its transformational effect.<sup>159</sup> He thereby provides a tool for looking at the phenomenology of ritual experience. In the context of Salasar, we might use Handelman's approach to analyze ritual as transformationally positioning the *pujārīs* in a relationship with Balaji. From this standpoint, the nightlong *jāgrans* and other ceremonies, as described below, entail a process in which the *pujārī* participants invoke and personally experience the vitality of their bond with Balaji.

Although I am only providing a brief summary of this ceremony, we could consider Handelman's approach in looking at the event as a "self-organized" structure. The ceremony physically moves the old group of *pujārīs* out, and ushers in their replacements, and it thereby

magically transfers the right to represent Balaji in the exchange of ritual objects. But does it represent a transformative break from conventional reality, insofar as the *pujārīs* are already closely attached to the temple? We might say that the transformational element involves a rite of passage (reminiscent of Turner's mode of analysis), since each year it is the youngest *pujārīs* who go through the ceremony, which invests a new level of responsibility in them to represent Balaji to the public, and ritually serve him. They thus adopt the position of their forebears in their perpetual privilege to serve the deity.

The third and final major annual *pujārī* event is Mohan Das Shraddh (in October), the commemoration of the *pujārīs'* sant ancestor, whose life started the history of Salasar into motion.<sup>160</sup> On this holiday, coming at the end of Shraddh, the annual period in which Hindus are expected to honor their ancestors, the *pujārīs* charitably feed villagers from surrounding villages, as well as visiting sadhus, who sit as honored guests in front of Mohan Das's *samādhi*.<sup>161</sup> It is said that on this day the spirit of the sant himself makes an appearance, and conveys a blessing to his present-day relatives, the *pujārīs*. In this sense, the *pujārīs* ritually reproduce their lineage's mission to look after Balaji's temple. Keeping in mind the ritual's transformation of participants' perception, we might say that this event positions the villagers as recipients of the sant's (and Balaji's) blessings, feeding them both spiritually and substantially.

Now, I will revisit my earlier theme of self-referential narratives in these *pujārī* events. At a minimum, the *pujārīs* (or more inclusively, the Brahmins) sing three revered songs on these three holidays and at more informal gatherings in the *pujārīs'* homes in gratitude to the deity for a wish fulfilled. All of them thus take place on occasions for *pujārī* solidarity. These three songs are: (1) *Balaji Vinati* [Prayers to Balaji], a description of Balaji's history, appearance, and powers; (2) *Pornu* (meaning "to sleep" in Marwari), a song in which Rama is put to bed for the

night (although the song itself focuses on Krishna, not Rama, suggesting a ritual parity between Rama/Balaji and Krishna/Khatu Shyam); and (3) *Lawanya*, a long, slow ballad recalling Mohan Das and the story of Salasar.<sup>162</sup> *Lawanya*, the third song, which the *pujārīs* said a man of Didwana (in nearby Nagaur District) had composed “long ago” in a mix of Marwari and Hindi, recounts the history of Salasar from Mohan Das’s meeting with Balaji onwards. During *jāgrans*, the *pujārīs* may hand out small booklets containing this song. The opening lines are as follows:

In Salasar, the place where Hanuman reigns, Brother Mohan Das came for the sake of [his sister] Kanhi Bai. With his arrival on this auspicious occasion, the people of thousands of villages came in devotion to [see] their beloved one [Mohan Das]. Having revered Kanhi Bai, whose family is incomparable [*apārjī*], Mohan [Das] obtained freedom [*samādhī*] from hundreds of thousands of rebirths [while sitting in meditation] before a sacred flame.<sup>163</sup>

This song, which moves at a very slow, measured pace and can take some hours for completion, illustrates the importance of Kanhi Bai and her brother Mohan Das, the first devotee of Balaji, to the subsequent history of Salasar. Kanhi Bai’s “incomparable” family is a reference to Salasar’s own *pujārīs*, who are her descendants. As mentioned, Mohan Das and Kanhi Bai are now worshiped at their *samādhī* shrines near the entrance to the main temple in Salasar. The rest of the song goes on to mention various localizing and historical elements: the local kingdom of Bikaner; entreaties for Balaji’s assistance in removing troubles of the world; a reference to the Dadhich Suntwal as Balaji’s *pujārīs*; narratives mentioning Rulyani, the village where Mohan Das had been born; the names of Kanhi Bai’s descendants, and so forth. With all these connections made between the present-day *pujārīs*, Mohan Das, and Balaji-Hanuman, the song shows how deeply invested the *pujārīs* are in upholding the memory of their special role in Salasar Balaji’s temple.

### The Economics of Ritual Services

Following from our discussion of ceremonies and texts that mark the solidarity of the *pujārī* community, I will now shift the focus to the *pujārīs* livelihood as Balaji's designated ritualists. Supplementary to this point, I will mention instances in which inspired devotees have tried to bring new texts as valid instruments of efficacious ritual, albeit with limited success. As an example of a *pujārī* in Salasar who makes a living as a ritualist, consider Abhishek, 30, who helps his family run a souvenir shop next to the temple but has made a name for himself in flying across the country to officiate at Marwari weddings and other events requiring a *pujārī's* ritual authority. I had met him during Salasar's Dashehra Festival, after which I accompanied him when he was commissioned to preside over a Balaji *jāgrāṇ* hosted by a group of young Jain cloth merchants in Bangalore whose ancestors had originated in the Shekhawati region. At that event, Abhishek tended the sacred fire to bestow blessings on all the guests in the name of Balaji. His presence clearly added authenticity and probably a greater likelihood of wish-granting efficacy.

Months later, I brushed my way through orange plastic Hanumans dangling from the ceiling as I entered Abhishek's shop in Salasar to find out more about what he does as a ritualist. He is frequently summoned to events in the prospering Marwari-Rajasthani communities of such cities as Guwahati, Kolkata, Delhi, Hyderabad, Mumbai, and Jaipur. All travel and living expenses are paid for him, and he receives a generous donation for his services. When not attending these functions, Abhishek also takes phone calls from clients requesting spiritual advice on challenges in business and family life. Speaking in the assured voice of someone accustomed to giving directions, he said that he typically prescribes reading a particular scripture, to be repeated for 11, 21, or 41 days (all auspicious numbers), depending on the severity of the problem. If the client cannot find the time for this, Abhishek can do this himself as a proxy. If a client needs to request

a favor of Balaji, Abhishek may tell him to bring a coconut wrapped in a red cloth to the temple in Salasar. I wondered how Abhishek decides on a course of action for any given problem. He does not always follow a fixed system but silently asks Balaji for guidance, and the deity then responds by planting *prerānā* [inspiration] in his heart, which enables him to spontaneously prescribe a particular spiritual regimen.<sup>164</sup> While he professed some Sanskrit scriptural expertise, he emphasized that psychological insight, especially the ability to listen closely and pick up on small cues, is critical to helping the client.

Just as *pujārīs* such as Abhishek have benefited from a rising public interest—at least among the upwardly mobile with money to spare—in magical remedies for common misfortunes and maladies, so too some devotees have taken the initiative of producing new adaptations of famous scriptures. This might be for financial profit, but also as a way of gaining spiritual merit. A challenge faced with such new texts is that they do not have the endorsement of the *pujārīs*; therefore, they are more like souvenir books than ritual texts. Nonetheless, authors of new religious texts may incorporate some archaic Hindi words or sentence structures to simulate the discursive tradition of the old texts. One noteworthy instance of new textual production would be *cālīsās* [a kind of devotional text] for a wide range of deities, seemingly modeled on *Hanumān cālīsā*.<sup>165</sup> Salasar Balaji now has his own *cālīsā* too, with references to Salasar and even Mohan Das. In fact, one of the *pujārīs* of Salasar’s temple of Anjani Mata, Balaji’s mother, composed an *Anjanī mātā cālīsā*. Even a separate *cālīsās* for Mohan Das is now available.<sup>166</sup>

Here is an excerpt from *Sālāsar bālājī cālīsā*:

Hail, hail, hail, Salasar Dham [shrine], sacred, beautiful, delightful realm! Like holy Mathura, Kashi [Banaras], blessed Pushkar, Kurukshetra, Avadhपुरi, the Ganga, and Hardwar, Salasar is thought auspicious! ... All should go to the Brahmin Mohan Das, a treasure of pious knowledge. Once, when [Mohan Das] had gone with Uday [Udairam, his nephew] to harvest the field, Hanuman appeared ... Those for whom the auspicious



full moon is suitable will get Salasar's auspicious divine audience! Having come and offered a flag, a coconut, cane sugar, and *cūrmā* [a Rajasthani sweet], [and] having chanted Hanuman *bhajans*, will please Salasar Hanuman! Having bowed in reverence in this way, you will get all your heart's desires! ...<sup>167</sup>

This new *cālīsā* summarizes the main points of the contemporary worship of Balaji, while describing Salasar as a peer of northern India's most famous pilgrimage centers. Despite this promise, I observed stacks of these still unused booklets in the new Rama temple adjacent to a luxury *dharmśālā* mentioned in Chapter 2. The *pujārī* there explained that the publisher had given him these booklets, but he and his clients are waiting for evidence of miracles. In an effort to promote this new *cālīsā*, the publisher also makes some more overtly magical claims for this text, as if it were already equal to the superlative *Hanumān cālīsā*. I noted the following promotional statement on the back of the booklet containing this *cālīsā*:

Devotees experiencing troubling circumstances, ghosts and demons, obstructions, sickness, domestic strife, business downturns, lack of success in any undertaking, bad fortune, lack of peace in the heart, etc., should recite the miraculous *Sālāsar bālājī cālīsā*, created by the faithful Indrajit Prabhakar. Made happy by the faithful reading of this scripture, Lord Balaji will fulfill any wish. See for yourself the reality of Balaji's miracles. *Sālāsar bālājī cālīsā* is available everywhere in Salasar...<sup>168</sup>

Getting rid of ghosts and demons is one of a large number of magical benefits from reading this as-yet untested text. I highlight this text because despite Salasar Balaji's (or rather, the *pujārīs*') doctrinal rejection of faith healing, it offers almost identical benefits as shrines where exorcism is the norm. This is why I argue that the *pujārīs*' claims about Balaji's ontological nature are not simply theological tradition but also a marginalizing effort against equivalent ritual service providers. When we shift to other shrines, such as Mehndipur, the system of authority is altogether different, so the gods of those sites are not surprisingly imagined rather differently. As mentioned, at a number of shrines owing allegiance to Salasar Balaji in the

Shekhawati region the presiding faith healers nonetheless incorporate exorcism in their ritual protocol, despite its absence in Salasar itself. Thus, ritual protocol is quite adaptable in different social contexts, even when the same deity is invoked.

### 3.5 Non-*Pujārī* Brahmins

#### *Working in the Shadow of the Pujārīs*

Even though the Brahmins have kept faith healers away from Salasar, inequality remains within their own ranks because the *pujārīs*' ritual monopolization of Balaji leaves out the other Brahmins. Only those who are descended from Kanhi Bai, the sister of Mohan Das (the first devotee of Balaji), may formally serve the god in his inner shrine and publicly represent him. In this subsection, I will explore how these other Brahmins have managed to make themselves integral to Balaji's supernatural powers and Salasar's pilgrimage industry, despite their apparent exclusion from the inner workings of the shrine; this discussion, as above, shows the economic underpinnings of a theological system. In the broader context, this discussion of the contrast between Salasar's *pujārīs* and non-*pujārī* Brahmins will serve as a prototype for analyzing the coexistence of *pujārīs* and non-*pujārī* (and non-Brahmin) faith healers in Mehndipur. In that instance, the faith healers conduct their work as a kind of magical outdoor supplement to the more routine ritual work that the *pujārīs* do inside Balaji's main temple and adjunct shrines (to be discussed in Chapter 5).

The question of how different Brahmin groups nowadays coexist in the setting of unequal ritual and economic privilege also relates to the issue of how Brahmins adapt to their changing social status in an officially egalitarian nation state. Writing on "modern" Brahmins in Karnataka, Ramesh Bairy says that, constrained to reject the old casteist days, these Brahmins have been "turned into a value detached from the fact of birth."<sup>169</sup> They may still construct an

identity by association (or livelihood), even if not by virtue of lineage, and seek validation in their good upbringing and higher education, and in their performance of respectable jobs (as teachers, for instance). Still, Bairy's analysis tells us very little about the state of relations *between* Brahmin lineages, as at Salasar. Balaji's temple exemplifies a situation where Brahmins might need to compete in supplying adjunct services for the expanding market in rituals for miracles.

While the Brahmins of Salasar generally embrace egalitarian ideals, the *pujārīs*' historically closer connection to Balaji means that inequalities persist. *Pujārī* identity remains strong in Salasar. From an early age, most of Salasar's *pujārīs* play cricket together every evening in the largest dirt lot, which is at the edge of town; boys from other castes who live in the adjoining neighborhood sometimes watch from atop the surrounding cement walls but never join them. The fact that the field is at the edge of town allows these *pujārīs* a chance to showily drive their family vehicles there and back. Another regular cricket club comprises a cohort with both *pujārīs* and non-*pujārī* Brahmins, along with one Jat, who is apparently the wealthiest of that caste in town. At most events, social segregation remains the norm. When the Rajputs in Salasar had a Teej festival, a procession led through town to the Rajput *mohallā* [neighborhood]; no Brahmins showed up. Likewise, an annual celebration at the Ramdev temple in Salasar attracted only the lower-caste inhabitants who lived nearby. In this environment of caste consciousness, being a Brahmin but not a *pujārī* still has its own meaning.

In the spirit of nationwide Hindu rejuvenation, and heading off potential tension between the two main groups of Brahmins, some of the non-*pujārī* Brahmins of Salasar have promoted a movement for pan-Brahmin unity in creating the Shri Vipr Seva Samiti ["Brahmins' Service Society"], which tries to promote a proper Sanskrit education for all Brahmins and "awaken a

sense of unity among the entire [*samast*] Brahmin brotherhood.”<sup>170</sup> Accordingly, this society has spearheaded the annual celebration of Dadhichi Jayanti Mahotsav, which commemorates the saintly ancestor of *all* the Dadhich Brahmins, both *pujārīs* and otherwise. The main event takes place in a second Balaji temple, at the edge of town, in which they have installed an image of Dadhichi Rishi for worship. In attending the society’s annual event, I learned that this society was in fact promoting Parshurama, a warrior-like avatar of Vishnu and Brahmin ancestor, who signifies an even broader Brahminhood than the Dadhich clan. Parshurama, depicted in a booklet published by the society’s chairman as a vigorous, muscular albeit gray-bearded man, is a deity whose worship (like Dadhichi) bridges the divide in Salasar’s Brahmin population.<sup>171</sup>

In recent decades, as Salasar has become a major pilgrimage destination, more Brahmins have arrived from other villages. In addition to non-religious jobs, some of these non-*pujārī* Brahmins have found an economic niche in offering adjunct ritual services for devotees. These adjunct ritualists compensate for being excluded from serving in the inner shrine (because they are not *pujārīs*) by offering greater dedication to the recitation of Sanskrit and archaic Hindi scriptures, which they perform by commission for moneyed devotees hoping to elicit divine favor. These non-*pujārī* Brahmins say that nowadays many people struggle with insufficient faith [*viśvās*] in God, due to the pernicious effects of the Kali Yug. For this reason, devotees need to hire these Brahmins to carry out rituals and recitations that will increase the level of certainty [*nīścitatā*] that Balaji will hear their prayers and grant their wishes. The non-*pujārī* Brahmins have parlayed this anxiety about God’s responsiveness into fulltime work.<sup>172</sup>

By contrast, most of the *pujārīs*, except perhaps some that offer services for hire in distant Marwari communities, seemed to me to be less enthused about mastering Sanskrit. The typical *pujārīs* of Salasar are content to perform a limited number of prescribed rituals in the temple

according to their hereditary right, in addition to their mercantile activities. The non-*pujārī* Brahmins who serve pilgrims in this peripheral economy of ritual services strive harder for ritual mastery, since their work comes by skill as much as heredity. By offering supplemental spiritual services for those who have money to spare, non-*pujārī* Brahmins have expanded the scope of devotional culture at Balaji's temple. Similarly, non-normative specialists such as faith healers who invoke Balaji or spirits acting in his name at religious shrines elsewhere in the Shekhawati region have thereby broadened the god's role in popular devotion.

### Performing Transformation

In this sub-section, I will explore in detail some of the ritual services that the non-*pujārī* Brahmins of Salasar offer, which they have developed into their own *métier*. A dozen or so of these Brahmins can almost always be found in the area of the temple, usually looking much busier than the *pujārīs*, who sit at leisure in the verandas adjacent to the courtyard. The *pujārīs* have even allotted to these adjunct Brahmins an office of their own, although it is no more than a small, windowless cell at a distance from the courtyard and the *pujārīs*' expansive rooms. Here, the non-*pujārī* Brahmins generously supplied me with tea and information about their activities. Throughout these meetings, they would come and go between sessions of leading music-and-song performances of *Sundarkāṇḍ*, the lengthy chapter from the *Rāmcaritmānas* that describes the heroic exploits of Hanuman in service of Rama. Their recitation of *Sundarkāṇḍ* is their core service for hire; since this reading takes two and a half hours to complete, which is too long for a devotee to perform alone, they are commissioned to perform it for their sponsors.

The purpose of these performances is to make Balaji happy [*prasanna*], which ideally results in the granting of a wish or some generalized boon (such as domestic happiness or prosperity). Or, they may perform in recognition of the prior granting of a wish. Hence, this act

acknowledges some transformation, past or future, for the devotee. Certainly, we could locate a scholarly lineage for theorizing emotional transformation at the core of religious experience going back to Durkheim's work on effervescence in tribal events, which he described as acts of social bonding.<sup>173</sup> But, this line of analysis has undergone decades of iterations in ritual studies. A more recent approach that I would note, put forth by Timothy Nelson, adapts Erving Goffman's theory of "frame analysis," in which ritual produces the practitioner's changed perception of the surround (not unlike what Turner was theorizing). But, with a new twist, Nelson tries to replace the theorist's omniscient view of ritual with a cultural insider's theological perspective: that is, it is not social structure but the "spiritual frame"—the divine—in this experience that is transformed.<sup>174</sup> At the Salasar temple, in reciting *Sundarkāṇḍ*, the god Balaji himself is likewise emotionally transformed—made happy—which brings the desired supernatural outcome for the devotees.

The non-*pujārī* Brahmins can be seen performing in a cavernous room adjacent to the temple courtyard; they both sing and play accompanying music (harmonium, drums, cymbals, and *kartāl* or rattle] (Figure 3-4). The sponsors or even passing pilgrims may sit around them and try to follow along; a Brahmin at the door passes out print texts as they enter.<sup>175</sup> On a typical day, I would see 30 or more devotees and Brahmins at the *Sundarkāṇḍ* performance. A few women might discreetly sit towards the back and sing with the predominantly male crowd. In many instances, attending such a recital is a highlight of visiting Balaji. For instance, while attending a *jāgrāṇ* in honor of Mehndipur Balaji in Delhi, I met several middle-aged Hanuman enthusiasts, employees of the city's high court and main post office, who were planning a pilgrimage bus tour to Salasar for around 40 devotees on a Saturday evening.<sup>176</sup> The next morning, after *darśan*, they were to take part in a group reading of *Sundarkāṇḍ* led by one of the non-*pujārī* Brahmins

in the familiar recital room next to the temple courtyard, before returning home. Like *Hanumān cālīsā*, not only reciting but also listening to *Sundarkāṇḍ* has magical effects; a *pujārī* reported to me that a chronically ill young boy had been brought to the temple and was made to listen to one of these *Sundarkāṇḍ* recitals, after which he recovered.<sup>177</sup> In this way, the non-*pujārī* Brahmins have made themselves agents in the economy of miracles.



Figure 3-4. Brahmins at a religious song recital in Salasar.

The non-*pujārī* Brahmins also offer a large number of Sanskrit recitations—mantras, *jāps* (arrangements of mantras), and *stotras* (longer invocations)—for resolving various troubles of life. The wide range of problems that they treat includes ghost possession, although they of

course resolve that through recitation only, not dramatic exorcism. As with the recitation of *Sundarkāṇḍ*, it is not strictly necessary for the sponsoring devotee to be present at these performances. Most of the Brahmins' clients are the proverbial "Marwari businessmen" willing to pay to get an extra boost towards easing some trouble.<sup>178</sup> The Brahmins may expect some payment in advance, and in any event the balance will be expected after the magical treatment has had a successful effect. The Brahmins take their work seriously, but also seem bemused by moneyed devotees' preoccupation with seeking divine intervention. The Brahmins suggest that if these clients were less beholden to buying results they would probably just realize that they could do without the service and pray directly to Balaji. One Brahmin observed with a shrug that when it comes to money, the devotee is "never satisfied—this hunger has no end"—this being the Kali Yug and Arth Yug [money era].<sup>179</sup> But, the Brahmins accept this outcome, the key to their livelihood, as Balaji's blessing.

Like the *pujārīs*, these Brahmins assess their work in financial terms. And, as elsewhere in this globalized neoliberal era, the upwardly mobile hope that their new money can facilitate them a fast track to spiritual boons for a higher standard of living. On the international level, just one instance among many would be Rachele Scott's *Nirvana for Sale?*, in which she gives a twenty-first century update of Tambiah's famous pre-Asian Tigers era (1970s) study of the cult of amulets that the wealthy seek from forest monks (as described in Chapter 2). In Scott's study, the Dhammakaya Buddhist sect has brought "the forest tradition to the *suburbs*."<sup>180</sup> This sect publicly promotes reports of miracles attributed to the magical value of the amulets that it sells. Beyond this, this sect also offers ethical and meditative instruction for the modern, globally citizen as a holistic spiritual package—which some scholars have called "prosperity religion."<sup>181</sup>



We could say that such gentrification is also happening at Salasar, as devotees embrace Balaji as a path to making a good life.

### *Making Magic the Brahmin's Way*

Because of the bewildering intricacy of rituals to treat various problems, the mediation of the non-*pujārī* Brahmins is necessary, just as faith healers skilled in spirit-conjuring occult practices keep themselves critical to their clients by mystifying the process. In contrast to the across-the-board good effects of *Sundarkāṇḍ*, the Brahmins' other ritual services are dedicated to specific outcomes. In interpreting such acts, we might ask whether Frits Staal's assessment of Vedic Sanskrit invocations, in which the perfect enunciation of chains of sacred syllables is vital to efficacy, would have any purchase here. In Staal's thinking, these invocations are "meaningless," mechanical or instrumental acts dependent on form rather than meaning.<sup>182</sup> When it comes to ritual acts for Balaji himself, however, *bhakti* [devotion] presumably entails more of a sense of meaning, in the sense that one needs to cultivate a feeling of faith in the deity to accomplish tasks. The way around this analytical disjunct (faith versus mechanism in ritual) is to consider that the Brahmins use two different types of divine invocations. Hindi texts such as *Sundarkāṇḍ*, taken from the poet Tulsidas' famous *Rāmcaritmānas*, necessitate devotional sentiment, which is replicated in new devotional texts, such as *Sālāsar bālājī cālīsā*. The shorter Sanskrit *jāps* and mantras that these Brahmins also use are not necessarily directed at Balaji but other deities; some of these, in the Vedic mold, serve ritual in a more mechanistic way, with less emphasis on faith.<sup>183</sup>

The match between the themes of particular texts and types of problems for which they are suited resembles a kind of homeopathy. For instance, for physical ailments, the non-*pujārī* Brahmins who work at Balaji's temple might prescribe a reading of *Hanumān bahuk*, which the

poet Tulsidas is believed to have written while he was suffering from shoulder pain to entreat Hanuman for relief.<sup>184</sup> For advice in resolving political problems (therefore popular with some VIPs), recitations of *Kiṣkindhākāṇḍ*, a chapter of Tulsidas's *Rāmcaritmānas* (like *Sundarkāṇḍ*), may be prescribed, since it discusses the political intrigues among Hanuman's monkey brethren.<sup>185</sup> The Sanskrit texts, such as the *stotras*, which are more substantial than simple mantras, likewise offer a resolution to the problem in correlation with the characteristics of the deity invoked. For example, to spur material prosperity, one should recite *Lakṣmī stotra*, suitably named for the goddess of wealth.<sup>186</sup>

Most often, the Brahmins' recitation of mantras in praise of deities entails a huge number of repetitions over a long period of time to bring about the desired outcome. I was informed of seven classes of problems for which the Brahmins offer such solutions: (1) conception of a child [*santān samasyā*], (2) obtaining a husband or a wife [*vivāha samasyā*], (3) educational success [*padhāi samasyā*], (4) financial distress [*ārthik samasyā*], (5) relief from financial loans [*ṛn or karjā samasya*], (6) problems of ancestral spirits [*pitṛ doṣ*], and (7) other problems that are less frequently presented but treatable. These services do not compete with Balaji's *pujārīs*, but complement them. For instance, to obtain a child through divine intercession, once the couple has directly approached Balaji in the main shrine, they might additionally go to a non-*pujārī* Brahmin, who will recite the Sanskrit *pāṭh* [scripture] known as *Santān Gopāl Stotra* once a day for 41 days. Alternatively, a Brahmin can recite a Sanskrit *jāp*, which is said to be "1,000 times more powerful" than a *pāṭh*, for 40 *mālā* [rosaries of 108 beads each] repetitions per day for 41 days.<sup>187</sup> For even stronger efficacy, these recitations can be performed together. Most of the temple's *pujārīs* seem not to carry out this kind of work; it therefore becomes the domain of the non-*pujārī* Brahmin ritualists.

In following, I will describe the whole procedure for divinely inducing conception, which demonstrates how the non-pujāri Brahmins have integrated themselves into the *pujārī*-dominant ritual structure of Balaji's temple. After the invocation for a child mentioned above, seven Brahmins are needed to set up and maintain a sacred fire [*havan*] either on the premises of Balaji's temple or in the devotee's home for seven days, without which the recitation would be "only ten percent effective."<sup>188</sup> The devotee must then bring a coconut to Balaji's temple and give it to a *pujārī* in the inner shrine room, who will open it up and fill it with ghee (clarified butter). He will then close it up once more, and tie it with a red string, thereby purifying the wish. Henceforth, the coconut containing ghee and enclosing the wish is referred to as a "*ghaṭ*" (or *citki* in the Rajasthani dialect), signifying that it conveys the heart or soul of one's being.<sup>189</sup> This ritual act is cognate to the common practice among faith healers of opening a coconut offered by a devotee seeking relief from a problem, which allows them to divine the inner quality of the person's soul and assess the likelihood that an attending spirit helper can make the problem go away. The coconut to be offered to the fire in Balaji's temple encapsulates the devotee's wish to conceive a child. At the moment that the coconut is put in the fire, the Brahmin will recite an additional mantra, and the fire will deliver the request for resolution of the problem to Balaji and presumably any other deities invoked.<sup>190</sup> In placing the coconut in the fire, the devotee is said to induce *pūrṇā āvati* — "fulfilled aim." The seven attending Brahmins then give *prasād* to the wife, which will convey the god's blessing, causing her to conceive.

Sometime after the child is born, the parents will bring it to Salasar for the ritual *muṇḍan*, or haircutting by one of the temple's resident barbers, and the child will then be introduced to the Brahmins, and periodically brought again. In this way, a child of devotees is socialized into the core creed that Balaji is his lifelong, hereditary protector. When the child is brought to the

Brahmins, the parents will presumably make a donation in gratitude. This, in effect, is the economy of miracles that is facilitated by Brahmins in the name of Balaji.<sup>191</sup> In this process, the non-*pujārī* Brahmins and the *pujārī* Brahmins in the inner shrine, collaborate in bringing the ritual to fruition. The former are likely to carry out most of the mantras, but the latter will preside over prayers to Balaji within the shrine. Earlier, I described the historical bifurcation in the Suntwal lineage of the Dadhich *pujārī* community as two separate working groups for the sake of equitably pocketing income from devotees' donations. Similarly, the *pujārīs* and non-*pujārī* Brahmins have recently negotiated a way to operate services for better-off devotees in a way that enables their respective livelihoods.

### 3.6 Towards an Alternative History of Salasar

#### *The Spirit of the Well*

Anyone in Salasar will agree that Balaji's historicity is proven by references to his connection with historical personages and events, along with material artifacts, such as (replicas of?) the original cart used to transport him to the temple site. At the same time, the *pujārī* Brahmins are invested in reproducing a particular historical truth about Balaji that positions their own lineage as his representatives. Even the non-*pujārī* Brahmins collaborate in that regime in filling an economic niche in the temple. Some locals may complain about Brahmin authority, but no one contests the history that justifies that system. Therefore, the divine king's endorsement of the Dadhich *pujārīs* remains intact. Here and there we may find minor differences in caste perspectives on Balaji's history. For instance, the standard history tells us that Balaji's first miracle was healing a boil on a local king's back; a Jat man insisted that this first miracle actually took place with a Jat woman [*jāṭinī*], not a king. Considering the diverse array of Hanuman temples in Shekhawati, I surmise that were it not for the presence of the Dadhich

*pujārīs* and the relationship of patronage that they have cultivated with the Marwari VIPs, a different sort of Balaji might have come into being.

In this final section, I will consider the possibility that there could have been other divine histories in the making that were muted when the present-day *pujārīs* became entrenched as Balaji's caretakers or as his representatives to the Marwari *baniyās*. This is not to say that Brahmins were ever absent from the picture; rather, their position as guardians of Balaji had not yet solidified, Balaji's identity was more fluid, and perhaps less was economically at stake. I have mentioned that religious specialists at most Hanuman shrines in the Shekhawati region either facilitate exorcisms or at least allow faith healers to bring their clients to these shrines. Since such shrines are more often an outgrowth of the heightened public interest in miraculous solutions, we cannot take them to represent unbroken ritual continuity. Instead, they offer testimony of the diverse outcomes that are possible in the relationship between religious authority and patronage.<sup>192</sup>

The evidence that Salasar Balaji was ever anything other than he is now is incomplete at best, but I will mention a couple of points to at least open the possibility of future research on a "subaltern" or alternative history of Shekhawati that widens the scope beyond the Brahmin (or royal) narrative. By analogy, in the Bengal region, Ranajit Guha has taken such a direction in uncovering peasant insurgencies in colonial times. The main problem that Guha addresses is that such insurgencies were historically mentioned only in relation to the colonial power, hence they were "denied recognition as a subject of history."<sup>193</sup> Guha thus seeks to recognize the peasant as "the maker of his own rebellion."<sup>194</sup> Bringing this perspective back to Salasar, we could look for signs of village religion that are not necessarily limited to the *pujārīs'* linear trajectory of rulership. Of course there is overlap between normativizing and marginal religious histories.

For instance, Mohan Das was known to heal snakebites, much like popular village deities of Rajasthan, such as Tejaji, Gogaji, or Ramdev.

A contemporary example of the mainstream normativizing of popular religious traditions would be the well-documented upper-caste appropriation of lower caste shrines. The attraction of miracle shrines such as Salasar among urbanites might follow this pattern, if we suppose that Marwaris were not always the main devotees there. Such a change has also been described as the so-called Vaishnavization of village shrines, whereby objectionable older practices such as offering alcohol or animal sacrifices to the deity have been stamped out in favor of mainstream scriptural Hinduism (favoring vegetarianism, for example), including Brahmin values.<sup>195</sup> J.J. Pallath has written about the recent appropriation of the worship of a goddess in Kerala, southern India, by higher-caste devotees, and the attempts they have made to expunge the goddess's notably rough associations, such as bawdy songs sung about her by lower-caste devotees. Recalling the story popular among Jats that the original image of Balaji is kept hidden so as to be shown only to high-paying VIPs, we might ask whether there could ever have been a time when this was the not the popular perception (true or not)? In other words, when did Balaji become a god for VIPs? I have suggested whereas some level of affiliation may have been in place for decades, it became substantially concretized as the 1990s got underway, due to the mutual benefit it had for the Brahmins and Marwaris.

One possibility for opening another avenue in Balaji's history, which I will explore in this section, is the spiritual significance of wells. There is a well in the Salasar temple that supplies healing water. But, it seems that there was once an earlier well nearby that had some spiritual consequence in Balaji's story. As I heard from a non-*pujārī* Brahmin elsewhere in Shekhawati, long ago there had been a well in a village near Salasar with water that was cursed, so anyone

who drank from it would die. I was told that Mohan Das put some *bhabhūti* [sacred ash] in the well, after which the water became good [*miṭṭhā*] to drink. It was only after I had returned to the US that I found a similar story about a cursed well near Salasar inserted at the beginning of Balaji's history in the souvenir books I had collected from Salasar. The *pujārīs* had never mentioned this to me, instead always starting with the appearance of their ancestor Mohan Das, which postdates the vignette about the well. The story goes as follows:

Five hundred years ago, in the village of Gandason ki Dhani [near Salasar] there was a terrible drought ... the villagers suffered greatly and wondered who could save them. Just then a sadhu arrived offering a solution to this problem. He pointed out a spot where suitable water would be found, but he said that one living person would need to become a sacrifice [*balidān*] in exchange for it, as whoever would dig this well would soon die. Hearing this, the villagers decided that they would need to look somewhere else. This matter came to the attention of the village's *pujārīs*, and one of them, the ancestor of [Salasar's present] *pujārīs*, whose name was Motiram, said, "If just one person would sacrifice himself, then it's no great matter ... I'll offer myself as a sacrifice for it." The villagers tried to dissuade him, but he dug the well ... soon he felt a stomachache. He tottered ... fell on the ground ... and breathed his last. His wife ... from the village of Khamyad in Nagaur [district], who was making yogurt [elsewhere] at that moment, suddenly fell into a convulsion [and had a premonition that], "On this day I have become a widow!" ... She came to Salasar and found out that this was indeed true ... having bowed at the feet of her husband [during his cremation], she [threw herself on the funeral pyre and] became a *satī* [self-sacrifice for her husband]. Prior to this cremation ceremony, Motiram's inner spirit [*divya śakti*] came to the villagers and told them that his death had not been in vain. [But] the man's spirit warned them not to ever drink from this farm well [*jāṭ jal kā kuān*] or else ... their entire lineage [*vamś*] would be destroyed. But the farmers [*jāṭ*] of this village did not obey, and gradually the village died out. However, the Taitarwal branch of Jats obeyed this command and started a new small settlement [nearby] and dug a new well ... In the end, this settlement became known as Salasar<sup>196</sup>

Interestingly, in Kaushik's 1978 history of Salasar, the deaths of the Brahmin and his wife are included without reference to their ghosts. Was he ignoring already-known folklore, or are the ghosts a recent insertion aimed at pilgrims who are nowadays attracted to an efficacious *pitṛ* in shrine worship? The above story, taken with or without ghost references, could be a kind of

palimpsest from a now obscured part of local history. Note that the main inhabitants are Jats, the typical farmers, and it is they who founded Salasar when the old village dies out because of the cursed well. Somewhere along the line, the Suntwal Dadhich Brahmins arrived, but their actual level of authority in those early days remains unclear. The idea that one of their own ancestors would be the *pitṛ* of the well is reminiscent of the typical scenario at most healing shrines these days, where the spirit of a deceased former resident now speaks through the mouth of a surviving relative. Was there ever a time when the Brahmins might have channeled this spirit? This is still unknown.

In the standard history of Salasar found in souvenir books, there is no explanation for this episode, but its inclusion may hint that supernatural events in the vicinity had prefigured Balaji's appearance to the *pujārīs*. Their ancestor seemingly became the spirit [*divya śakti*] of the well, who speaks out to protect the villagers as a *pitṛ* would. As with modern *pitṛs*, the selflessness of the Brahmin while alive is transmuted into his benevolent role after death. When the Jat villagers disobey his request, however, they come to a bad end, just as modern-day devotees presenting problems at spirit shrines frequently learn that the reason for their trouble is that they have neglected to honor a family *pitṛ*. So, while this vignette presents some unresolved questions, it may also remind us of Novetzke's investigation into the continual revisions of local history.

The Brahmin's wife who becomes a sati supplies another interesting spiritual dimension. When she sacrifices herself, she too in effect becomes a *pitṛ*, inasmuch as she has died an untimely death. This doubles the divine power available to the villagers at that site. Taking one's own life in this way might even generate a power greater than a typical *pitṛ*. Rani Sati, was such a satī, and thanks to Marwari patronage she has gone from being a powerful *pitṛ*-like



being to a full-fledged goddess. This process is ongoing. In the village of Bamaniya, 22 kilometers from Salasar, a woman committed *satī* in 1955, which led to a nationally famous court case, as the woman's male relatives were jailed for abetting the deceased wife in that effort. But, despite official efforts to the contrary, the site was made into a shrine where locals now come to make wishes. The act of self-immolation as a kind of *tapas* [ascetic act] so greatly purified the woman's soul that her *ātmā* gained the power of a deity. Directly facing this sati shrine, an adjunct shrine for Hanuman has been built; this makes sense, since he is the deity who manages spirits.

The reference to a *pitr* in a well coexists uneasily with the Brahmin doctrine that Balaji is the superlative healing power and they are his mediators. The exact relation of that spirit to the Dadhich clan remains unclear, but questions concerning the *pujārīs*' narrative of their divine inheritance sometimes surface. In Rulyani (around 25 kilometers from Salasar), the village where Mohan Das originated, some patrilineal descendants of the sant's male relatives today say that the Dadhich *pujārīs* have unfairly neglected to give them a share of the profits from Balaji's shrine; the Dadhich *pujārīs* claim a relation to the sant only through his sister. The upshot of this preamble to Balaji's history is that there may be multiple folkloric stories circulating about Salasar, perhaps including Mohan Das and Balaji, that have yet to be fully explored or integrated in the established history that undergirds Salasar's current devotional system.

### *When a Well Becomes a Shrine*

In the story of the well, the eventual fate of the spirit remains unknown because the narrative shifts to the founding of Salasar nearby. In this final subsection, however, I will describe what can happen when a *pitr* in a well subsequently receives devotional attention and becomes sought after by contemporary devotees looking for magical effects. This story provides a model for

what could have developed in the vicinity of Salasar had it had a slightly different *pujārī*-donor relationship. In this particular case, the spirit of a well located in the village of Malasi, around 13 kilometers from Salasar, is said to be a manifestation of Bhairu (or Bhairav), a deity who is revered in multiple forms throughout Rajasthan (Figure 3-5).<sup>197</sup> This story also demonstrates how a family *pitṛ* crosses over to becoming a public god; as the *pitṛ* becomes known within a community for performing miracles, those from outside the family eventually come to it as well.

At the Malasi shrine, there is no image of the god; the well itself is the object of veneration. A stone slab has been installed as an altar for this “well *pūjā*” [*kueṅ kī pūjā*]. Unusually, a Rajput family that owns the land also serves as the shrine’s *pujārīs*. In speaking with one of them, a college student home for vacation, I learned the story of this place. Around 800 years ago, a local king’s young son died. After the boy’s cremation, his *ātmā* hovered in that area for 12 days, which gave a local *tāntrik* [sorcerer] an opportunity to enslave it. The king learned of this and tried to have the *tāntrik* killed, but he ran away and stored the child’s *ātmā* in a stone. However, a soldier pursuing the *tāntrik* unknowingly threw the stone in the well that has since become the shrine. The *tāntrik* had put a spell on the stone that if it were ever to receive blood (as a sacrifice), then miracles would take place. Much later, the sister of a young Jat farmer who was named Bhairu teased him while he was getting water from the well, which caused him to become flustered. He fell in and died, thereby giving blood to the stone in the well, which brought into being the well’s miraculous powers. The potential parallel with Balaji’s story of the well is obvious. But, Malasi’s well was discovered in recent years as a miracle shrine, whereas the well of Gandason ki Dhani fell into obscurity while Salasar Balaji became the main attraction.



Figure 3-5. Bhairu's well in Malasi.

Because of Bhairu's early death and blameless life, he became a *pitr*, which united with the *ātmā* of the princely child in the well to make a more powerful miracle-granting presence. Later, another man fell in the well but he survived, which proved its miraculous power. This well began attracting not only devotees but also many thousands of *ātmās* from deceased people all over India. Perennially hungry, these *ātmās* were drawn here by the promise of *prasād* [offerings] that devotees brought for routine devotion. In fact, it is said that if one now accepts the *prasād* consecrated by this shrine, he is fated to come back for one's whole life due to its magical pull. This story gives us an idea of what a *pitr*-inhabited well can do when it gets proper devotion.

Like Balaji, Bhairu specializes in granting children. At midnight on the night before the full moon each month (the god's special night), young families bring their newborn babies to the spirit of the well in gratitude for having answered their prayers, as at Salasar. On this occasion, the village square is full of cars with Haryana and Delhi license plates. Some also reportedly come from more distant places, such as Kolkata and Mumbai. Many visitors combine a journey here with nearby Salasar, where the major day of prayer is the full moon, which would be the day that follows the night of visiting Bhairu. Although it was not clear whether all visitors originate in this region, I was informed that several of Bhairu's devotional communities in Delhi "are all Rajasthani people" (Marwaris?) who have moved to the city.<sup>198</sup> While presenting the baby at the edge of the well, which is now completely enclosed within the temple, devotees customarily offer a live goat in return for each child obtained (Figure 3-6). The attendants swiftly haul off the goats in a truck to sell in the market. Until a few years ago the goats would have been killed at the shrine, but due to the Vaishnava movement against animal sacrifice, in





Figure 3-6. A devotee with his child and goats in Malasi.

which some of the *pujārīs* of Salasar have also been active, the goats are now presented as a symbolic sacrifice only. However, devotees reportedly still carry out this work at home, and for the time being they continue to offer whiskey to please Bhairu, as still happens at some goddess shrines in this region.<sup>199</sup>

At the Malasi shrine, unlike at Salasar, devotees may enter into a state of possession.<sup>200</sup> As at Mehndipur, faith healers bring their followers here and even talk with the voice of their own guiding spirit in the presence of Bhairu, foretelling the future and giving directions to resolve problems. Or, Bhairu himself possesses visitors to give their family members advice. Those who are possessed often come here under the command of a family *pitr* because those spirits would prefer to live here instead of in the family's home, due to the abundance of devotional attention and offerings, as is the case at Mehndipur. In such a case, a faith healer might perform a ritual to transfer the spirit from the possessed person to the well. The openness to possession at Bhairu's shrine relates to the *pujārīs* themselves. As Rajputs, they are not Sanskritists; their interest is not to perform magical rituals as a livelihood but simply to extract some regular income from those who visit for miracles. The particular ritual orientations of the *pujārīs* at Salasar and Malasi transfer to the deities' respective natures. As an upholder of mainstream *dharm* [religious law], Balaji favors Sanskritic recitations, while Bhairu does not, but compensates in allowing dramatic possession.

As it so happens, however, the Rajput *pujārīs* do not engage in exorcism; they simply perform the basic priestly work of assisting visitors in making offerings. Although these Rajputs are the caretakers, they are dismissive of possession as mere "drama" [*nāṭak*] put on by deluded city people! The *pujārī* with whom I emphasized that nobody in the area puts any stock in these possession performances; it is predominantly those coming from the cities who believe in

possession and the efficacy of this spot. This brings up a surprisingly common sentiment in communities that have miracle shrines: locals may regard such pilgrimage as a business opportunity, but if the presiding faith healer or *pujārīs* do not permit the locals a piece of the economic pie, then they turn indifferent or outright antagonistic to the shrine's authority. This situation is echoed at Khatu Shyam, where a lineage of Rajputs are the owners and pocket the donations (with much complaint among locals), while hiring Brahmin *pujārīs* to oversee the inner shrine. The *pujārīs* of Bhairu say that he lived 800 years ago, but given that the locals do not share much in the temple's activities, and those who do revere Bhairu come from elsewhere, I would conclude that Bhairu of Malasi, like Salasar Balaji, is a recent discovery of outsiders craving folk cures in the holy land of Rajasthan.

### *Religious Specialists, Patronage, and Divine Nature*

The histories and current ritual regimes of Malasi and Salasar are similarly suggestive of the importance of patronage, in an era lacking in old-time royal sponsors but as having an increasing number of upwardly mobile urbanites, as an impetus for religious specialists to locally enforce a particular system of worship. This system produces the public perception that a god such as Balaji has a particular nature. That is, while Balaji grants many miracles to his devotees, he does not countenance faith healing or exorcism in his physical domain. As we have seen, this territory corresponds either to the god's temple or to the entire village of Salasar, which is bounded by formal entry gates over all the main roads. While possession and its treatment, exorcism, are therefore problematic within Salasar, these phenomena are commonplace at the many miracle shrines that have arisen in the Shekhawati region in the same period in which Salasar became famous. Locals, such as the Brahmins, sometimes seek help from faith healers outside of Salasar

to treat troubles, while at the same time embracing the official viewpoint that faith healers are unnecessary because faith to Balaji should handle any problem.

At the most basic level, this local discourse about faith healing as a reprehensible act points to an underlying imperative for the Brahmin *pujārīs* to maintain a ritual monopoly in Salasar, which precludes other religious specialists such as faith healers who might otherwise bring their clients there and profitably mediate resolutions to problems. Balaji's divine capacities thus correspond to the scope of the *pujārīs*' own work. To illustrate that point, this chapter has described the various ceremonies that the *pujārīs* regularly carry out, and the history of the site that they and all locals accept as standard. This history justifies the ongoing ritual hierarchy in which the *pujārīs* are paramount. And yet, certain local accommodations are made. Some of the Brahmins of Salasar who are not hereditarily entitled to participate as caretakers of Balaji offer themselves as Sanskrit ritualists for services inadequately covered by the *pujārīs*. The two groups have worked out an economic arrangement in which moneyed devotees seeking extra help will worship Balaji through the *pujārīs* in the shrine while hiring the non-*pujārī* Brahmin ritualists for adjunct rituals.

Inasmuch as the Brahmin *pujārīs* have arguably shaped the history of Salasar to entrench their present-day mediation between Balaji and Marwari or VIP donors, the question arises as to whether there may be other narratives of Salasar yet to be given full attention. Using the precedent of "subaltern" history, this chapter has considered the existence of other nascent shrines based on spirit worship before the coming of Balaji, which were subsequently lost within the dominant Dadhich *pujārī* narrative. Accordingly, this chapter has provided a brief vignette of Bhairu, a spirit in a well near Salasar, as an analogy for the kind of history that could have occurred in or close to Salasar itself, had different religious specialists been in charge of Salasar.



In sum, then, our knowledge of the nature of a deity's powers depends on the imperatives, economic or otherwise, of those who mediate it to the public.

## Chapter 3 Notes

<sup>119</sup> Whitmont, pp. 12-19.

<sup>120</sup> Blackburn et al, p. 5.

<sup>121</sup> Otto, pp. 5-7.

<sup>122</sup> Durkheim, p. 208.

<sup>123</sup> We could also translate Durkheim's theory of collective effervescence, whereby public religious events serve social cohesion by producing emotional uplift, into the belief that devotees should periodically visit Balaji, their *kuldev* (or *iṣṭadev*), in thanks for his permanent protection. See Durkheim, p. 218.

<sup>124</sup> Van der Veer, p. 271.

<sup>125</sup> Van der Veer, p. 57.

<sup>126</sup> Van der Veer, p. 57.

<sup>127</sup> In the marketplaces of the shrines cited in this study, formal literature on the subject of spirit possession is relatively uncommon, but texts relating to tantric exorcism can certainly be found in Mehndipur. I would highlight just one weighty Hindi-medium book, *Marottar jīvanah tathā evam satya*, by Shriram Sharma, which was given to me by a former faith healer met in Mehndipur. This book fully explains the ins and outs of dealing with all types of spirits. However, it is beyond the scope of this study to discuss this book in depth; I will leave that for future articles.

<sup>128</sup> Interview 4-6-2011. The special day for worshipping *pitṛs* is Amavasya, the monthly night of the new moon, when their power (to fulfill wishes) is at its greatest level.

<sup>129</sup> “*Jo mokṣ nahīn huā hai ... ham karvāte ... voh śāstra meṅ. Agar main śāstra nahīn paḍtā, to main āp ke lie kyā karūn? ... Choṭā doctor toḍā agyān, usko ... voh agar koī davā degā, to koī bhī ho saktā hai—ārām se jāe, aur ho saktā hai ki pareśān se jāe ... nīm ke patte degā. Is prakār se, aur jo viśeṣ śakti hai, voh yeh batā degā, ki yeh karo, voh karo, śrāddh karnā cāhiye ... is se tumhare ghar pe śānti mukti hogī. Aisā śāstra kā vidhān hai? Voh śāstra kā vidhān nahīn! Voh tantra-mantra kā hai. Us ke lie ilāj bhī ho saktā hai, aur us ke lie nuksān bhī ho saktā hai. Aisa, jagah-jagah sab koī apnā devatā, apne purvaj, piṭṛ ko yā pret ko ... unse pūchte haiñ ... das rupiye, sau rupaye caḍhāī dete. Voh bār-bār kehete haiñ ki is prakār karo, us prakār karo, lekin usko jānkārī kuch bhī nahīn hai ... yeh sab andhāviśvās hai.*” Interview 9-7-2011.

<sup>130</sup> Interview 9-7-2011.

<sup>131</sup> “*Bihār se ā ke parivār rehte the yahān par kariban bīs sālon se. Un kī ‘wife’ kā ek khatm hogī, aur unhone unko jalā diyā ... lekin us se jaise nāriyal kā kām hote, voh nahīn karvāyā ... samān nahīn kiyā, uskā koī pūjā pāṭh nahīn karvāyā, to voh ātmā lag gayī. Aur, hamāre pujārī parivār ke ek bhānjā ... uskī “missas’ ke andar praveś ho gāī, uske sāth rehne lage. Voh aurat bihārī se bolne lage. Hamāre parivār meṅ, usne purā bol diyā, ‘tu kaise śānt hogī?’ To pehle us ne manā kar diyā, yahīn rehūngī ... yahān acchā khānā miltā hai, ghar meṅ rahe ārām se. Phir usne bola ki ‘mereko haridvār pe merā piṅḍ-dān karvā do, aur kisīko pareśān nahīn karūn.’ Nahīn to, mehndipur lā jāte ... Voh ghar se jāte mandir ke andar to ‘boundary’ se āne se pehle voh mandir jā ke, vāpas jāte to us ke sāth jāte thī ... yahān koī bhī ātmā andar nahīn jā saktī. Mehndipur meṅ mandir ke andar nikālte haiñ. Baba us mandir ke andar le jāte ilāj karte haiñ--voh ‘difference’ hai—yahān ‘chains’ bāndh karte. Voh ātmā yahān pe ghar ke andar āte, is lie ham mānte ... [lekin] yahān ke log viśvās nahīn karte. Voh bābā, sinvāle ke, usne sāre kām kiyā,*

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haridvār hote ... nāriyal ke andar us ātmā ko le gaye ... 'lady' nikal gayī. Usne mukti ke lie praveś kiyā ... us ātmā ne sochā ... us hī ādmī [bābā] usko mukti karvā de sakte haiñ. Us aurat kā 'willpower' kamzor hotā hai ... auraton meñ zyādā kamzor hotā hai." Interview 9-4-2011.

<sup>132</sup> "Jab main tīsri bār sālāsar jā rahā thā, tab main apne jījājī ke sāth ... Main acānak ek rāste se cauk āyā. Us rāste se main jab niklā tab mujhe kuch 'feel' hotā hai, ajaib tarikā kā ... aur tīn sāth-sāth jā rahe the to kuch anūpgaḍh ke 'side' se yātrī the, hamāre picche ā rahe the. Jab main aur cauk se pās mainne 'cross' kiyā, tab mereko vahān pe phir kuch alag tarikā 'feel' huā ... Voh piche tīn meñ kuch hānsī mazāk karte ā rahe the ... Tīn piche se ā rahe the, to ye do laḍke aur un meñ ek 'lady' aisa mazāk kar rahe the: 'agar tu mere pās āegā, yā mere sāth hogā, to main tere ko barfī duñgā. To us samai kisī kā nām liyā thā, voh [ātmā] us samai gujarte ho ... to voh bhūt-pret, who būrī ātmā thī. Isko pehle mainne mehsus kiyā vahān pe, mainne dikhāi nahīn detā ... mereko mehsus huā ki kuch hai. Mereko kyā lenā-denā thā, mainne to hanumān jī kā nām liyā. Piche phir se mazāk kar rahe the, tīn ek dusre se ... us hī samai us ke andar praveś kiyā. To mainne safar kiyā, tīn ghante ke ho – to jab main vahān pe śām ko sādhe nau baje lagbhag rukhnā, laṅgar par to vahān ek ṭilā ... vahān pe ek traktor ... pānī ke lie. Main so rahe the, tabhī mainne ek cīkh sunnī. Jo voh tīm [tīn log] vahān pe baiṭhī thī, aur yahān pe jot ho rahī thī. Ek mandir rakhā, choṭā sā, sāth meñ calte, voh. Tabhī mainne ek cillane ek aur cīkhne ke bād sunnāī dī, to main so rahā thā. Phir bt kar rahe the, sāthvāle pūchā, 'yeh cīkh haim kaise thī, kiskī thī, kyā huā?' Tab bole patā nahīn. Voh [aurat] cali jātī, voh sahī ho rahī thī ... to main soc rahā thā ... voh picche rahe the ... mere hath meñ hanumān jī kā jhaṅḍā ... to voh [ātmā] piche hogī ... vahān pe cillā rahī thī, usmeñ būrī ātmā ghus gaī thī, cauk se. Us ke bād vahān pe jot kiyā, hanumān jī kā paṭh kiyā, voh [aurat] śānt ho gayī; voh [ātmā] vahān se calī gayī. Lekin subah uṭh gayī, voh vāpas āī usmeñ ... voh cillā rahī thī ... voh būrī ātmā se kar rahi thī. Ham sabhī hanumān paḍh rahe the ... sālāsar pāūncne se pehle –pehle, voh ātmā usko chor ke nikal gaī, phir bād meñ usko ekdam sahī. Ham keh sakte haiñ zarūr 'lady' kī ātmā thī, jaise voh bol rahī thi, voh aurat." Interview 6-18-2011.

<sup>133</sup> This recounting was initially based on oral renditions, and confirmed in Kaushik (1978), pp. 6-19; Sharma, pp. 16-36; Bedharak, pp. 10-51. One of Salasar's non-pujārī Brahmins, R. K. Kaushik, has produced a very informative cartoon-style history of the life of Mohan Das, which corresponds to the main part of Balaji's history (minus any miracles after the *sant's samādhi*). An article in the weekly magazine *Raṣṭradūt*, "Sālāsar ke bālājī," gives a good albeit brief overview of Balaji's history.

<sup>134</sup> Bedharak, p. 10.

<sup>135</sup> In the *pujārīs'* oral telling of the story, the name Balaji and Hanuman are used more or less interchangeably until the image of the deity is discovered, whereupon he clearly becomes Balaji. In the local history handbook and the comic book that I obtained, the story of the beggar marks the first time the deity is referred to as Balaji rather than Hanuman, although the name Hanuman reappears whenever the god is mentioned outside the context of Salasar.

<sup>136</sup> Interestingly, the story device of Balaji disguised as a beggar potentially has kinship with the film *Vārī jāūñ bālājī's* depiction of a sadhu who mysteriously appears at the beginning and end of the film to inform the main characters of Balaji's miracles (in providing children to childless couples).

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<sup>137</sup> Human-made images can of course be vehicles for divine power once they have undergone brahmanical ritual initiation.

<sup>138</sup> Mohan Das himself consciously left the world in a state of meditation [*samādhi*] in 1793. From this point onwards, the *pujārī* lineage was in charge of Balaji's shrine; see Bedharak, p. 47.

<sup>139</sup> See the forward by Lawrence Kritzman, in Nora, pp. ix-xiv, for an overview of the main points of Nora's three-volume work.

<sup>140</sup> Novetzke, p. 110-131.

<sup>141</sup> Babb, pp. 37-44.

<sup>142</sup> Because of Salasar Balaji's unique appearance, the taboo against fashioning duplicate statues is easy to maintain.

<sup>143</sup> Interview 9-7-2011. The *pujārīs* told me that 50 years ago water started dripping from the ceiling and washed away the *sindūr*, exposing the original image, after which it was reapplied and the bearded face restored.

<sup>144</sup> Marriott, pp. 197-201.

<sup>145</sup> See *Hanumān cālīsā*: “*Mahāvīr vikram bajraṅgī / kumati nivār sumati ke saṅgī //*”

<sup>146</sup> Dhere, pp. 114-120.

<sup>147</sup> Dhere concludes that the deity's original image was replaced after a nineteenth-century attack on the shrine damaged the image, rendering it unfit for continued use in worship; see Dhere, pp. 113-114.

<sup>148</sup> Owens (1995), p. 202.

<sup>149</sup> The notion of creating the god through human artifice brings to mind religion theorist Jonathan Z. Smith's *To Take Place*, in which he argues that the sanctity of religious sites is a social construct that can be improvised to suit the historical context. Smith cites the miraculous, portable Ark of the Covenant as an example of constructing the divine to match a preexisting social need for mobility in a time of wandering. The nature of the divinity matches social structure, and is not inherent to a permanent site. Hence, Mohan Das reshaped the deity's identity, and the *pujārīs* subsequently maintained this newly localized god as their private domain. Smith's discussion is set up as a critique of Eliade's theory of the “eternal return” (described in Chapter 2), in which the religious faithful depend on access to a primordial power center to meet the divine. In the case of Balaji, the divine is discursively produced in the ways described in this chapter (songs, rituals, holidays, histories), along with the staging of visual cues of an imagined ancient past (such as two carts on display in Balaji's temple to represent the one used to bring his image to Salasar). See Smith, pp. 24-73, for a discussion of cultural constructs of the divine.

<sup>150</sup> Interview 9-4d-2011.

<sup>151</sup> I was told that there are 450 living male *pujārīs*, but I was informed that they comprise 11 percent of Salasar's total population of 5,000. During my limited period of research, I was not able to resolve the obvious discrepancy in these numbers.

<sup>152</sup> Fuller, p. 4.

<sup>153</sup> Fuller, pp. 5-6.

<sup>154</sup> Fuller, pp. 55-56.

<sup>155</sup> Interview 10-1-2010. The importance of this historical division is graphically illustrated by the detailed genealogical wall hanging behind the *samādhis* of Mohan Das and Kanhi Dadi. The

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tree has two diverging trunks representing the two main *pujārī* subgroups. These trunks extend into branches containing the names of various past and present *pujārīs*,

<sup>156</sup> I was told that twenty years back, beyond the *samādhi* there had been a cremation ground, which was later moved to the outskirts of town as the temple grew. According to the *pujārīs*, the *samādhi* seemed scary in the dark of early dawn due to its proximity to the cremation ground. Therefore, it was established that the daily routine of morning *ārtī* [public worship of the deity] would first be conducted at Balaji's main shrine at around 5 a.m., and then half an hour later, when the auspicious power of Balaji (and daylight) had been invoked, a second *ārtī* would take place at the *samādhi*. In the evenings the order was to be reversed, starting first at the *samādhi* when it was still light and then moving to the main shrine as light dwindled. This close coordination of worship timings is still strictly followed, further demonstrating the intimate relation between the *pujārīs*' lineage and their chief deity.

<sup>157</sup> Bell, p. xi.

<sup>158</sup> Bell, p. 76.

<sup>159</sup> Handelman, pp. 10-17.

<sup>160</sup> An additional holiday in Salasar, known as Krishna Janmashtami, is nationally celebrated. But, it also has local significance, as the *pujārīs* take an image of Krishna in a procession to an auspicious pond and then bathe it. Following this, they set up the image on a platform and locals walk underneath it to heal any illness.

<sup>161</sup> Interview 9-7-2011.

<sup>162</sup> Balaji Vinati tells of a man who lived 100 years ago in the nearby town of Lachmangarh. He had been sentenced to hang, but called upon Balaji in his jail cell. He composed this scripture as an act of devotion, which resulted in his miraculous release. Interview 9-4-2011. The comment on the appearance of Krishna in Pornu is derived from interview 9-5-2011.

<sup>163</sup> “*Gāoṅv sālāsar meṅ virāje dhaure par hanumānjī / bāī kānhī ke bhāī mohan dās ke hit ānjī // Āte hazāroṅ grām ke nar nār bhakti thānjī / kāraj sakal kā siddh karte dās apnā jānjī // Bāī kānhī kī pūjan dhār, huā jinkā parivār apārjī / lakh ke mohan saṅsār asār, jyot meṅ mile samādhī dhārjī //*” Recorded 10-5-2010; also obtained from a songbook composed by Vishwanathji, p. 1, which is available at Salasar Balaji's temple.

<sup>164</sup> Interview 9-7-2011. Abhishek may also conduct a prayer of short *mantras* of Sanskrit words in the Brahmins' office space in the temple to beseech Balaji's help on the client's behalf. He says he prefers to use *mantras*, which are short incantations, but other *pujārīs* may draw a yantra, a religious diagram based on the swastika symbol, in colored chalk on the floor, as a way of bringing about divine assistance. *Yantras* are drawn separately for each client, and are normally erased at the end of the day, leaving the floor space in the temple office available for the following day's work

<sup>165</sup> A collection of 51 *cālīsās*, each for a different divinity, can be found in shops at Salasar and other shrines. See 51 [*Bāvan*] *cālīsā pāth saṅgrah*. Some of the *cālīsās* seem quite new, such as one *Śrī pitar cālīsā*, pp. 206-210, which asks a generic *pitṛ* for blessings, and even states that Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and Sikh *pitṛs* are “all worshiped as brothers” [*sab pūje pitar bhāī*].

<sup>166</sup> For *Aṅjanī mātā cālīsā*, *Mohan dās cālīsā*, and *Kanhī baī cālīsā*, see their separate references in the bibliographic section.

<sup>167</sup> “Jai, jai, jai sālāsar dhāmā / pāvan rucir lok abhirāmā // Jimi pāvan mathurā aru kāsī / puṣkar kurukṣetr sukhrāsī // Avadhpurī, gaṅge, haridvārā / sālāsar śubh varaṇu vicārā // ... Mohan dās vipr sab jānā / bhagati bhāv guṇ gyān nidhānā // Udai saṅg le khet kamāye / ek bār hanumad taḥaṃ āye // Mañal pūnam jo man bhāye / sālāsar śubh darśan pāye // Dhajā nāriyal ān caḍhāye / khāṅḍ cūrmā bhog lagāye // Hanumat bhajan karai man lāī / sālāsar hanumān manāī // Ehividhi āī dhok lagāī / man icchā phal sab jan pāye // ...” See Prabhakar, pp. 4-11.

<sup>168</sup> “Jo bhakt asamayik pareśānī, bhūt pret, bādhā, bīmārī, gṛh kalah, vyāpār meṅ hānī, har nawīn kārya meṅ asaphaltā, bhāgya kāsāth na denā, citt meṅ aśānti ādi se grasit hai, unheṅ śraddhāpūrvak indrajīt ‘prabhākar’ dvārā racit—camatkārī sālāsar bālājī cālīsā kā nitya pāṭh karnā cāhiye. Śraddhāpūrvak kiye kiye gaye pāṭh se bālājī mahārāj prasanna ho bhakt kī har manokāmanā pūrṇ karte haiṅ. Āp svayaṃ śrī hanumān kṛpā kā pratyakś camatkār dekheṅ. Sālāsar bālājī cālīsā sālāsar meṅ sarvatra upalabdh hai...” Back cover, Śrī hanumān cālīsā, Roomal Bookseller, Chaumu, Jaipur, Rajasthan.

<sup>169</sup> Bairy, pp. 242-243.

<sup>170</sup> “Sālāsar parikṣetra ke samast vipra bandhuoṅ meṅ ekatva kī bhāvanā jāgrt karnā.” From section: in Kaushik, *Brahma darshan*, p. 15.

<sup>171</sup> The forward to a booklet of prayer that the chairman of the society has written hints (in Sanskritized Hindi) at the distinction between the Brahmins who are *pujārīs* and those who are not: “From this compilation [of prayers to Balaji], young pujaris will be able to properly maintain their ancient traditions through these recitations from years gone by that were formerly learned by heart, while devout Brahmins [i.e. those who are not *pujārīs* but are nonetheless devout] wanting God’s *darśan* will accordingly find benefit from this within the scope of their daily practice.” [*Is saṅkalan se jahān ek or yuvā pujārī varg varṣoṅ se gayī jānevālī vāṅī ko kaṅthasthakar purāṅī paramparā ko yathāvat jāri rakh sakegā, vahān dūsri or śraddhālu vipravarg tathā darśanārthī bhī dinācaryā ke anusār uskā anupālankar lābh prāpt kar sakegā.*] See Kaushik, *Śrī sālāsār bālājī nitya kāryakram*, p. 3.

<sup>172</sup> Interview 9-4-2011.

<sup>173</sup> Durkheim, pp. 218-220.

<sup>174</sup> Nelson, pp. 22-23.

<sup>175</sup> The preferred edition is not surprisingly the spiritually efficacious archaic Hindi version, published by Gita Press.

<sup>176</sup> Many Balaji devotional groups that have formed in Rajasthani-Marwari communities in cities around India started as weekly *Sundarkāṅḍ* recital clubs. Hence, the social dimension of this reading is a core factor in the formal growth of Balaji “fandom” across India in the last two decades.

<sup>177</sup> Interview 10-1-2010.

<sup>178</sup> Interview 9-4-2011.

<sup>179</sup> Interview 9-6-2011.

<sup>180</sup> Scott, pp. 64-65.

<sup>181</sup> See Peter Jackson’s article on the proliferation of cults in Thailand of the 1990s, where he uses the term “prosperity religion.” For an exploration of a religious movement that offers a more ethical (that is, less magical) approach to making a modern citizenry, see Daromir

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Rudnyckij’s work on Indonesian Islam. Rudnyckij found Islamic values used as an instrument to increase industrial efficiency and worker morale to compete in a global market.

<sup>182</sup> Staal compares Vedic *mantras* to formulaic musical notation; both must be performed precisely for the best effect; see pp. 165-190.

<sup>183</sup> Additionally, there are texts potentially of interest to faith healers, or *tāntriks*—practitioners of black magic, which are seldom used in Salasar. These texts nonetheless may accompany the direct application of sacred ash as a protective talisman [*kavac*], before the faith healer or *tāntrik* engages in direct dialogue with the spirit believed to have entered the victim. In the case of Bajrang Ban, a well-known text in Mehndipur-oriented shrines which the Brahmins in Salasar acknowledged could be used to get rid of one’s enemies, I was warned that if I were to use this I would first need to recite *Rāmraṣṣā stotra* to neutralize its potentially dangerous effects on me because the text mentions Hanuman’s role in removing *bhūt-pret* [ghosts]. Interviews 9-6-2011 and 9-9-2011.

<sup>184</sup> *Hanuman Bahuk* is sold as a small booklet in Salasar’s market. As is often the case with religious texts sold to pilgrims, the copy I purchased comes in the original archaic Hindi, with a translation in modern Hindi.

<sup>185</sup> The favored edition of *Rāmcaritmānas* in Salasar (and Mehndipur as well) is from Gita Press, Gorakhpur, which includes the archaic Hindi and translations in modern Hindi.

<sup>186</sup> Many of the texts, such as the various Sanskrit stotras, are available in the market for enterprising devotees willing to try them on their own at home. However, I did not see much evidence of this, since the ritual protocol to insure efficacy makes a Brahmin’s expertise indispensable.

<sup>187</sup> Interviews 9-9-2011, 9-9-2011, 9-9-2011. I was told that the Sanskrit *jāp* to be recited in this case is: “*Dev kī sut govindaḥ vasudev jagatpatai dehi [?] me tanayām.*”

<sup>188</sup> Interview 9-9-2011.

<sup>189</sup> Kumar, Vol. 3, p. 283.

<sup>190</sup> Hence, I was told, “Your matter will be fulfilled; the fire will convey the matter [*āvati*] to Balaji” (“*Āp kā kām pūrā ho jāegā; agni ke dvārā āvati milegī bālājī ko*”).

<sup>191</sup> While ten percent of the *śakti* [power] inherent in the magical jap recited over many days to bring about a resolution to the problem remains in the fire, the other 90 percent of the *śakti* is carried to God.

<sup>192</sup> The bigger new Hanuman shrines in the cities of southern Punjab-Haryana and on the roads to Salasar, which are set up as branch shrines for Salasar Balaji, seem not to permit faith healing at all, apparently in deference to the protocol of the temple in Salasar.

<sup>193</sup> Guha, pp. 3-4.

<sup>194</sup> Guha, p. 4.

<sup>195</sup> Earlier, I mentioned that Ann Grodzins Gold’s has discussed Vaishnavization in Rajasthan; see “Deep Beauty: Rajasthani Goddess Shrines Above and Below the Surface.”

<sup>196</sup> *Āj se lagbhag pānc sau varṣ pūrv sthānīya gaṇdāsoṅ kī dhāṇī meṅ bhīṣaṅ peyjal kā saṅkaṭ utpann ho gayā thā, jiske kāraṅ sāre grāmvāsī dukhī trāhe-trāhe karne lage kiparivāroṅ ko pyāsā marne sekaun bacāegā. Tabhī us gāṅv meṅ ek sādhu kā āgaman huā. Usne is kaṣṭ ke nivāraṅ karne kā upāy batāyā. Voh ek sthān par rukkar bola ki yeh sthān pānī ke lie upayukt rahegā, paraṅtu is sthān par kisī jīvit vyakti ko apnā balidān denā hogā kyōṅki jo bhī vyakti is*

*kueñ ko khodegā, uskī mṛtyu ho jāegī. Yeh sunkar grāmvāsī ... kahīn aur se jal kī vyavasthā kā upāy socne lag gae aur man se kuān khodne kā vicār nikāl diyā. Yeh bāt grām ke pujāriyon ko vicalit karne lagī, tabhī vartamān pujāriyon ke pūrvaj śrī moṭārām jī bole ki bhalāī kā kārya karne meñ yadi ek vyakti kī bali ho jātī hai to koī bāt nahīn ... Maiñ apnī bali de dūngā. Gānv vāloñ ne unheñ bahut manā kiyā, parañtu unhoñneñ khudālī lekar kuān khodnā śurū kar diyā. Thoḍī der bād un ke peṭ meñ dard hone lagā. Voh laḍkhaḍā miṭṭī ke upār gir gae aur ... apne prāñ chor diye. Udhar unkī dharmpatnī jo ki nāgaur ke khāmyād gānv meñ dahī bilo rahī thīñ unke śarīr ko acānak jhaṭkā lagā ... ve bolīñ, āj ... vidhvā ho gaī hai ... jaise hī voh sālāsar ke pās pahūncī unheñ satyatā kā patā lag gayā. Voh ... pati ke caraṇōñ ko chūkar śrī moṭārām jī ke pārthiv śarīr ke sāth satī hokar śakti meñ vilīn ho gaīñ. Sañskār se pūrv śrī moṭārām jī ne apnī divya śakti grāmvāsīyon ko samjhāyā ki merā balidān vyarth jāegā ... aur yadi tumheñ jal hī pīnā hai to tumheñ jab tak gañdās śākhā ke jāṭ jal nā pilāēñ, tum is kueñ se dūr rehnā. Yadi is bāt kā pālan nahīñ kareñge to unkā vañś naṣṭ ho jāegā. Jātoñ ne is ādeś par dhyān nahīñ diyā aur gañdās kṣetr meñ is jāṭi ke jāṭ dhīre-dhīre naṣṭ hone lage aur ek din gānv khālī ho gayā. Phir taitarvāl śākhā ke jātoñ ne is ādeś kā pālan kiyā. Unheñ choṭā gānv ke nām se prasiddhi milī. Unhoñneñ is hī gānv meñ ek nayā kuān banāyā ... antar meñ iskā nām ‘sālāsar’ paḍ gayā.* Sharma, pp. 14-16; also see Bedharak, pp. 9-10, for a slightly shorter version.

<sup>197</sup> Lindsey Harlan, pp. 135-148, discusses Bhairu in relation to Rajput society. Interestingly, she describes Bhairu as a kind of generic, deified hero, which would fit the image of Bhairu in my study as the *pitṛ* of a once-living person. Her point about the multiple versions of Bhairu, black and white, not to mention his many other manifestations (52 in total, I was told) could parallel the polarity between Salasar Balaji and Mehndipur Balaji; I will discuss this further when we come to Mehndipur. A chief message of my study is that both Balajis have evolved in relation to very recent cultural trends towards miracle shrines. In addition to Harlan’s work, Yogesh Atal has written a useful article on the origins of several Bhairus worshiped in a Bhil village of southeastern Rajasthan.

<sup>198</sup> Interview 9-10-2011. Rajasthan communities worshiping Bhairu were said to live in the Paharganj, Kotputli, and Karolbag areas of Delhi, at least.

<sup>199</sup> Unlike at Salasar, where devotees may sing praises to Balaji or recite *Hanumān cālīsā*, and where the *pujārīs* revere their god at gatherings throughout the year, the Bhairu shrine privileges no songs or scriptures; devotees need only make an offering in good faith to get their wishes granted.

<sup>200</sup> *Bhairav cālīsā*, one of many devotional texts for many deities that have become popular in this era of divine miracles, refers to the deity’s proclivity to destroy *bhūt-pret* [ghosts and demons]. So, he is more or less on par with Mehndipur Balaji in this regard, and, like Hanuman, a good fit for a shrine offering exorcism services.



## CHAPTER 4: PILGRIMAGE AS A NEW TRADITION

### 4.1 Balaji in Regional Society

#### The Formation of Pilgrimage Culture

On Balaji's sacred days of Tuesday and Saturday each week, and especially on the full moon, when the monkey god's efficacy in granting wishes is greatest, one can see groups of pilgrims, most often of the Jat caste, walking along the roads to Salasar. Most of them are young men, but sometimes there are a few older men, and women, who have set out from their homes as far as 200 kilometers away to pray for assistance with such aims as passing an exam, getting a job, healing from illness, and bearing a son. As they walk, many boisterously sing *bhajans* [devotional songs], and some play songs from CDs through loudspeakers perched on the autorickshaws and pickup trucks that inch along with them. Urban families in cars loaded with luggage impatiently weave through them on their way from the city to see Balaji. Pilgrimage is an age-old tradition at many famous sites, but in the village of Salasar, even twenty years ago comparatively few visitors came here. In this chapter, I argue that pilgrimage to Salasar is not so much the continuation of an ancient tradition as a recent innovation rooted in religious and socioeconomic change of the last twenty years. In other words, it is a "new tradition," borrowing from and conforming to preexisting Indian traditions of devotion and pilgrimage, but modernly produced.

In this chapter, I build on the previous two chapters, in which I highlighted the patronage relationship between Marwaris and Brahmins as the key factor in Salasar's rise to fame. I

theorize that in the years since Salasar had been established as a beneficiary of Marwari prosperity, stories of miracles spread in other communities, such as the Jats, the traditional farmer caste that lives in the region to the north of Salasar, which extends into Punjab and Haryana. During that time, Jat society itself underwent socioeconomic developments that contributed to their embrace of pilgrimage to Salasar and other shrines that had become prosperous from Marwari patronage. By the end of the 1990s, a modern tradition of pilgrimage had taken shape.

In Chapter 2, I cited a local observer in Khatu Shyam (in the same region as Salasar) as saying that the Marwaris had come first, and after some years, as communities in the countryside had gained sufficient income (and leisure time), and had become enthused with the idea of getting on the fast track to a better life, they increasingly came too, so as to receive the god's benefits. As I also mentioned in that chapter, the Brahmins of Salasar similarly characterized the Marwaris as pioneers in discovering Balaji. As my Jat respondents reported, it was only when technology and the infrastructure for pilgrimage had taken shape—the numerous rest houses near the temple, the wider availability of motor vehicles in rural areas, and the development of volunteer organizations to assist travelers on the road—that widespread pilgrimage from the broader region adjacent to Salasar became the norm. Prior to that, for the most part just nearby villagers and the occasional wandering sadhu came here.

In this chapter, then, we will initially shift our focus to the rural areas within and adjacent to Shekhawati where the Jats predominate. As in previous chapters, this chapter demonstrates the application of oral accounts to construct a regional history, inasmuch as the entire sequence of events described here occurred within recent memory. The temporal focus will fluctuate between the present culture of devotion to Balaji and recollections of past developments that led

to the rise of pilgrimage, along with impressions of how life has changed in the intervening years. Well-to-do Marwaris will also enter into this narrative, as some of them, along with local devotional organizations, sponsored lavish temples dedicated to Balaji along the roads leading from Punjab and Haryana to Salasar in the late 1990s and early 2000s. These new temples further substantiated this new tradition of pilgrimage, as they effectively served as religious rest stops promising miracles to those already on their way to seek benefits from the god of Salasar. And so, as this chapter progresses, we will follow Jat villagers as they prepare for pilgrimage and then arrive in Salasar. The journey will culminate in the grand annual festival of Dashehra, when so many pilgrims converge from the countryside on foot and perform ritual prostrations for the final kilometer leading up to the temple as a way to show gratitude for wishes fulfilled or to entreat Balaji to grant further wishes.

### *“Hanuman was a Jat”*

In the following discussion, I will explore the idea that Hanuman—locally represented as Balaji—is a kind of Jat cultural hero. The scope of this association extends beyond Balaji’s performance of miracles; it points to a linkage between caste and divine identity. A look at this cultural connection will allow for a theorization of pilgrimage to Salasar as a broader cultural phenomenon that encompasses faith in miracles as evidence of the god’s efficacy, but is ultimately grounded in Jat society itself. To gain a better sense of Balaji’s cultural importance in the Rajasthan-Punjab-Haryana border region where he is intensively worshiped, I spent a number of months interviewing locals in the villages of area. Typically, my respondents—primarily men of varying ages—would lounge outdoors or in their homes on stools and rope-and-wood cots. Dressed in their characteristically white smock-like *kurtās*, they would continuously pass around a hookah (water pipe), which they gurgled with full gusto as I drank the sugared tea that

someone's wife would bring (Figure 4-1). Children might pass by leading corpulent water buffaloes to their corrals or to bathe in the village watering hole. Women and girls carried home metal trays full of dung collected on the roadside to dry for fuel. I found that many Jats regard Balaji or Hanuman as embodying Jat characteristics. It is not just that Jats emulate Balaji's



Figure 4-1. A Jat village, Sirsa District, Haryana.

exemplary behavior, but that Balaji also reproduces their own self-perceived behavior. Hence, some Jats go so far as to claim that Hanuman himself was a Jat, as exemplified by his actions in the epic *Rāmāyaṇa* and his helpfulness in answering prayers. The first time someone told me

this I thought it might be an outlying opinion, but I heard this viewpoint enough times over the course of year to see that it was pervasive.

Some Jats, not to mention non-Jats, dismissed the notion that Hanuman was a Jat, saying that he is for all people, not only for Jats, which sidestepped the matter of what meaning he might have within Jat society. The Jats who dismissed the idea appeared to be uncomfortable with identifying a major deity with a particular caste, as this mindset is officially taboo in contemporary public culture. Such casteist allusions would bring to mind regressive, feudal, colonial-era social restrictions. Ironically, as I will describe later, there may have been a time when Jats were likewise restricted from going to Balaji's temple, which was associated with Marwari merchants, although opinions differ. Still, I regularly heard the viewpoint that Hanuman is (or was) a Jat from respondents of various ages and backgrounds. Consider the following comment from an elderly Jat man met at a wedding in the district of Fatehabad, southern Haryana:

We [Jats] only worship Hanuman ... it's a tradition. Ninety percent of [Jats] here make *khīr* [a sweet] from buffalo milk and offer it to Hanuman each *pūrṇimā* [full moon] ... Hanuman was [*thā*] a Jat. He fought to save the dignity of Sita. Only a Jat can do this ... no other caste will come [to assist one in need]. Jats are a "helping community"—they help anybody, whether known or unknown to them; Hanuman behaved like a Jat.<sup>201</sup>

There are several revealing elements in this statement. First, Jat worship of Hanuman is regarded as a tradition, regardless of the apparent newness of Balaji as a major figure. Further, Jats are characterized as dairy farmers who obtain milk from buffalos (and presumably cows), an activity that is commonly associated with rural Haryana. According to respondents, 38 percent of the population of Haryana is Jat, but we can assume a greater percentage in the southern part of the state, nearer to Salasar, where Jats and devotion to Balaji predominate. And, according to

this speaker, Jats currently worship Hanuman above all other deities, as he is an exemplar of the traits that many Jats associate with themselves (being a “helping community”). Note that the speaker describes Hanuman in the past tense, as he is referencing Hanuman as an historic hero of the *Rāmāyaṇa* more than as a representation of timeless religious principles. Or rather, as the speaker explains, Hanuman’s selfless devotion to his master Rama demonstrates a willingness to help others, which makes him like a Jat. This last point would probably win agreement from even an avowedly anti-casteist Jat, since it merely states a resemblance, not an equivalence of identity. The Jats’ idealization of Balaji suggests that he also endorses their agrarian livelihood. By comparison, no Marwari devotee ever described Balaji as promoting the values of urban mercantilism, although he looks after Marwaris and grants them prosperity.

### *The God of Wells and Wrestlers*

There is a further dimension for understanding how Balaji could be equated with Jat agrarian cooperation (cooperation being a normal value in agricultural communities where labor often needs to be pooled for large projects). Within the Jat region of this study—the Punjab-Haryana-Rajasthan border area—it is commonplace to see small shrines for Hanuman next to wells. I was not able to determine the antiquity of the practice, but saw some shrines that may have been at least a few decades old. It was explained to me that Hanuman insures that there will be sufficient water for the fields, thereby guaranteeing the harvest, and this is why Jats (as farmers) worship Hanuman.<sup>202</sup> I was even told that Hanuman is “the god of water.” I had more than once heard that Jats had not particularly revered Hanuman until around twenty years ago or less, so it was not clear to me whether this practice of building Hanuman shrines next to wells had preceded that transformation. It may be that Hanuman in the more generic, pan-Indian sense was associated with wells before Balaji of Salasar came to be important to Jats.



Needless to say, drilling a well is a major effort that mobilizes “Jat cooperation.” In a field near the village of Bani, Sirsa District (southern Haryana, near the Punjab border), I once came across several men using a large machine to drill a tube well. About twenty feet away they had set up a makeshift shrine to Hanuman with a tiny enclosure by leaning three bricks together



Figure 4-2. Digging a well in a field. Bani, Sirsa District, Haryana.

(Figures 4-2 and 4-3). A small piece of red cloth, perhaps containing some *prasād* [consecrated food] received from a priest, had been placed on top of the bricks, and a red flag with Hanuman’s



image in gold had been stuck in the ground next to it. When funds are sufficient, such small shrines may be rebuilt as full-fledged temples. Salasar Balaji's temple and some other miracle shrines are also built around wells, from which water is taken to magically cure ailments.

As it turns out, the agricultural connection goes beyond wells. Although pilgrims come to



Figure 4-3. A Hanuman shrine in a field. Detail of Figure 4-2.

Salasar every day of the year, the greatest volume arrives at roughly the same time as the two major annual agricultural harvests of the Haryana region. These harvests coincide with two pan-



Indian Hindu festivals, Dashehra in October, and Hanuman Jayanti in April. Thus, in October, some pilgrims say, Jats arrive to obtain Balaji's blessing as a follow-up to, or preparation for, harvesting the ripened wheat from the fields. They may visit Balaji again in April around the time of harvesting chickpeas [*canā*] and other crops, although fewer than in October, as the weather will be getting hotter. During these festivals, thousands of Jat pilgrims arrive on foot in Salasar, and the town becomes a raucous scene as some members of these many walking groups perform *pet pālāniyā* (as it is known in the local dialect) or *ḍaṇḍavat* (in Hindi), meaning repeated prostrations, in the street leading to the temple. At first glance, this is all "traditional," but, as Jats informed me, this was hardly happening as recently as twenty years ago.

In the region of southern Haryana that constitutes the primary domain for allegiance to Salasar Balaji, anywhere from 70 to perhaps 90 percent of local Jats say they have been to Balaji's temple, often many times. I say this based on estimates that Jat villagers themselves provided me, and my own empirical tallies of schoolchildren (middle school and lower high school), where the large majority raised their hands to affirm that they had already been to Salasar with their families. How important, then, was Hanuman in Jat life before he became popular as Balaji? When my Jat respondents said that until twenty years ago Hanuman was not so much worshiped, they also noted that if he was worshiped, this was primarily done in the home. Indeed, in reflecting on the numerous Hanuman-Balaji temples that I encountered in the countryside or towns in the region where Salasar Balaji is worshiped, I could find scarcely a single establishment that predated the last twenty years. So, we may be looking at a process in which domestic worship of the god has been externalized as public devotion. We can see this trend in the rise of pilgrimage to Salasar, and also the god's higher profile in national religious

discourse (such as being invoked as a symbol of Hindu resurgence, and being depicted in the form of colossal statues in public places across northern India).

Scholarship of earlier Jat society provides nothing to dissuade us from concluding that a transformation has taken place. For instance, Stanley and Ruth Freed's detailed ethnographic study of Hindu festivals in a predominantly Jat village in Haryana, near Delhi, based on fieldwork conducted in the late 1950s and late 1970s, suggests a muted presence for Hanuman. The Freeds mention one small local festival known as Dev Uthani Gya ("waking the gods") in October, which comes after the *kharif* [summer-autumn] harvest, and is connected to Dashehra. At this time, the villagers run about with burning rags to reproduce the famous incident in which Hanuman burned Lanka.<sup>203</sup> The Freeds also show sketches of Hanuman that Jat women draw on the ground on this occasion. On the whole, though, Hanuman seems to have a very minor role at best in the myriad Jat village festivals and national religious holidays documented.<sup>204</sup> Salasar and Mehndipur unmentioned in that study, and there is little indication that Hanuman was the preeminent god in Jat religion, unlike what villagers nowadays so often state. As Jats themselves told me, a cultural shift has taken place.

There is yet another level on which Jats identify with Balaji or Hanuman. They informed me that this region of India—Shekhawati and southern Haryana—supplies the largest contingent for the Indian army, which is indicative of a Jat military tradition. After all, Balaji/Hanuman is not a farmer but rather a brave warrior who fought the demon king Ravan to help rescue Rama's consort Sita. So, Balaji personifies a Jat self-narrative of bravery, which is one element in a broader Jat appreciation for physical culture. Jat respondents told me that 42 percent of India's athletes come from Haryana, which they state is attributable to the Jat presence. Indigenous sports like *kabaddī* and *khokho* (games of tag that involve tackling) and wrestling are popular in

the region. As one Jat man said, “Hanuman is strong, and so are the Jats ...”<sup>205</sup> When frequenting these sporting events in southern Haryana, I often noticed youths wearing Balaji amulets around their necks, indicating that they had made the journey to Salasar, probably on foot. Sometimes young men walking to Salasar dress in color-coordinated (perhaps orange, Hanuman’s color) tee shirts and shorts like a sports team. The more athletic youths perform *pet pālāniyā* prostrations with a special display of vigor, as if coming to the shrine of Balaji in this way would show their physical resemblance to super-strong Hanuman.

As is well known, Hanuman is the divine patron of wrestlers and body builders in general, so it makes sense that he would be popular in Jat physical culture. I note, however, that in Joseph Alter’s ethnography of wrestling (1992), based in Banaras, Jats are never mentioned. In fact, he points out, wrestling transcends caste identity.<sup>206</sup> The preponderance of young men in foot pilgrimage to Salasar suggests not simply a reflection of Jat caste organization but more properly a youth culture involving physical challenges. The participation of young Jat men of southern Haryana in sports or other practices of physical development (admittedly widespread elsewhere too) appears to extend to walking with peers in a spirit of adventure with the ultimate aim of winning the divine endorsement of Balaji, the masculinized, bearded patron deity. What remains to be seen is the process by which Jat society as a whole went from revering Hanuman the pan-Indian monkey deity of the *Rāmāyaṇa* to regarding Salasar Balaji as his primary local manifestation, and therefore object of pilgrimage.

### Jat Caste Narratives

I would theorize that before Balaji of Salasar became regarded as a powerful—even supreme—deity, he more or less resembled any number of minor Hanumans of the sort seen in shrines near wells. From the 1990s onwards, publicly visible Marwari patronage in Salasar

substantiated stories about Balaji's efficacy in supplying miracles of prosperity and wellbeing, which raised the god's profile in the surrounding region. Also at that time, the gradual economic uplift of Jat society may have emboldened them to identify with Balaji as well. This shift, which seems to have occurred in the early-to-mid 1990s, initially resulted in increased Jat pilgrimage to Salasar by vehicle, and later foot pilgrimage as well. The following statement from a Jat schoolteacher in Banmandori, a village (described as 80 percent Jat) of Sirsa District, Haryana, suggests the sort of transformation that I have theorized:

People now go to Salasar on foot because they have more faith [*āstā bad gaī*] and their wishes have been coming true, and also because now they [have the affluence to] take provisions [*jugāḍ*] for the journey. Twenty years ago very few [Jat] people went there, and then everything changed. Previously, there were only two castes [at Salasar Balaji's temple]: Brahmins [*paṇḍit*] and *baniyās* [Marwaris] ... [that is,] the Agrawal [clan]. Other [castes] didn't go there. Then other people saw that [the Marwaris] were profiting [*faidā*] from Balaji and started coming. Nowadays Shekhawati society is slowly forgetting caste distinctions. It used to be that castes worshiped their own specific gods ... Gogaji, Ramdev, Krishna ... the Brahmins wouldn't allow the lower castes to enter [Balaji's] temple, but in twenty to twenty- five years all that's changed ... the Jats used to worship other gods ... Pabuji, Tejaji, Ramdev ... [They] mostly worshiped Krishna—not much Hanuman ... [but, nonetheless] Balaji was a Jat! ... In this village, people go to different shrines for different needs; [nowadays] about seventy percent go to [this village's] Balaji [Hanuman] too.<sup>207</sup>

The speaker tells us that the Jats did not originally revere Balaji as their main deity, but that when Marwaris came onto the scene around two decades ago, Jat interest grew due to the observation that he was bestowing good fortune on them. In Chapter 2 I suggested that the Jats might have had some low-key connection to Salasar Balaji for years before he became famous, inasmuch as the deity's origin story emphasizes his discovery by a Jat. But the Jats in Balaji's early history were from near Salasar—not a hundred kilometers or more in distance like most of the Jats who now walk there. The respondent above states that twenty years ago, as now, the Marwaris were Balaji's privileged devotees, and that the Jats did not much come to Salasar at

that point. But, based on what the Brahmins themselves have said (in Chapter 2), few Marwaris came to this temple either until around twenty years ago. When the Marwaris made donations in gratitude for their prosperity, which I have theorized was doubly attractive to them as a tax shelter after economic liberalization got underway, others may have clamored to see Balaji as well, which undermined any lingering caste restrictions at the temple.

The above statement thus alludes to two social narratives: (1) rising Marwari prosperity and (2) Jat caste emancipation, which intersected in the 1990s and supported a rise in Jat pilgrimage to Salasar. There are some ambiguities in this trajectory. The Indian government had already abolished caste restrictions for entering temples soon after independence, yet the statement above implies that some restrictions remained until around two decades ago. Other Jat villagers of Haryana subsequently even claimed that caste restrictions at Salasar were relaxed only in the last five years (!), after which all castes could go to Balaji's temple.<sup>208</sup> I could not confirm such a recent change in caste rules at Salasar, if indeed they existed. A low-caste shop clerk who lives at the edge of Salasar once said that in "the old days," the lower castes were not permitted to enter the temple, and instead were expected to worship Balaji at a separate, outdoor shrine. But, he was referring to colonial times, not recent years.

It is clear that the Jats' socioeconomic position within Haryana has improved since national independence, and, according to their own testimony, improved economic standing and leisure time proved to be critical to the development of a new tradition of pilgrimage. Technological improvements in agriculture transformed the rural economy in much of Haryana from subsistence to a market orientation from the mid 1960s on. A new high-yield variety of wheat was introduced; being primarily wheat farmers, Jats obviously benefited. In a study on the Green Revolution in Haryana, the Freedts argue that contrary to "Dependency Theory," which

holds that in times of sudden economic improvement only the elites benefit, in this case virtually all levels of society saw improvements not only in agriculture, but also in education, health, and “comfort” (or leisure).<sup>209</sup> So, judging from this assessment, by the time devotion to Balaji expanded in the early 1990s, the Jats thought of themselves as an up-and-coming but perhaps still comparatively disadvantaged caste. Consequently, Jats and their rural compatriots were drawn into public discourses of attaining prosperity in the era of neoliberalism. The appeal of miracles as a pathway to that prosperity brought the Jats to Balaji. To these Jats, the fact that scriptural Hanuman was also on the rise throughout northern India made Balaji all the more compelling.

If the Marwaris had asserted that Balaji was their *kuldev* or protective lineage deity, perhaps the Jats could match that with a theological claim that the deity was in fact their own *kuldev*. At some point the Jats began to refer to Hanuman as “Balaji,” although I do not know if that practice started only since they embraced Salasar Balaji, or if it had long been their custom to call Hanuman by that name. At least some Jats now regard Balaji as their *kuldev*, which suggests a claim of ancestral reverence, and locals from other castes likewise sometimes also described Balaji as a “*kuldev* of the Jats.” However, Jats and others would just as often mix the term *kuldev* with *iṣṭadev*, meaning a deity that a devotee electively favors based on magical efficacy or other considerations, rather than by heritage.

### Jat Cultural Recuperation

Despite their socioeconomic advances, Jats remain notorious in popular lore for being rude and unruly (although I did not personally find this to be so). Therefore, saying that Hanuman is heroic like a Jat might be part of a broader, informal project of cultural recuperation that is commensurate with their rising economic fortunes.<sup>210</sup> Although the Indian government very

recently promised to reclassify the Jat caste as “Other Backwards Caste” (OBC), which would entitle them to affirmative action in education, jobs, and political representation, they had long agitated for improved status. Jat-connected writers in India are likewise predisposed to recast Jat identity in more favorable terms. For example, Hukam Singh Pawar’s work on Jat history (1993; published in Rohtak, Haryana) fancifully locates heroic Jat warriors in the vanguard of not only the earliest Indo-Aryans but also various other warrior cultures everywhere from Anglo-Saxon England to Chinese Turkistan. Place names such as Jutland in Denmark and Gothland in Sweden are taken as lasting linguistic evidence of an ancient Jat presence.<sup>211</sup> Other scholars, basing their findings on firmer historical evidence, nonetheless highlight Jat dedication to military service.<sup>212</sup> It is easy to see how Hanuman, and therefore Salasar Balaji, would be a good fit for a project of Jat social emancipation in the late twentieth century. The fact that Jats often gripe about the money-centric Marwaris and Brahmins evidently does not stop them from appreciating the potential rewards of this particular manifestation of Hanuman.

In following, I will briefly consider some of the theoretical dimensions of caste self-representation to broaden the discussion of how the Jats changed from being outsiders with possibly less interest in Balaji, compared to the Marwaris, to devotees who identify closely with the deity. At first glance, Louis Dumont’s famous structuralist theorization of caste in Indian society (1966) might provide a model for upward mobility of the sort seen in Jat history. In Dumont’s view, hierarchical relationships are maintained on the basis of perceptions among caste groups of their relative purity or pollution.<sup>213</sup> Lower castes aspire to raise their status by emulating the higher castes, which tends to conserve the normative Brahmanical system in which they all participate. This theory correlates with the early work of Srinivas on Sanskritization, in which he posited that lower castes adopt Sanskritic culture as a way to raise their status.

Secondary to relative purity, in Dumont's approach, wielding authority constructs its own hierarchies; so, two paradigms (purity and power) together establish myriad local caste relationships.

The system of relations that Dumont theorized could be considered as pre-modern, insofar as he grounds his findings in a long history of caste relations. But, my investigation of Balaji points not to ancient contestations, but to those between caste groups in the recent historical setting of neoliberalism. I have argued that social change in the Rajasthan-Punjab-Haryana region has had an effect on the worship of Balaji, and so I would consider the likelihood that caste identity has likewise been affected. In these changing times, caste groups may understandably wish to raise their status, much as Dumont had observed, but the impact of new wealth, should be taken into account. As Jat farmers worked for better living conditions over several decades, they promoted commensurate narratives that valorized Jat character in the spirit of agrarian cooperation. I previously suggested that Marwari patronage at Salasar guaranteed that they would be exalted as the pioneers who discovered Balaji in recent times, and made him known to a wider audience. I would therefore suggest that discourses of caste position currently have at least as much to do with perceptions of relative prosperity as purity; or rather, that wealth purchases its own social difference.

In Adrian Mayer's (1996) chapter on caste change in a central Indian village from 1954 to 1992, he observes flux more than stability. This might come closer to what I have described at Salasar. Locals bluntly tell Mayer, "there is no caste left," although some regulations (for instance, on sharing food) remain.<sup>214</sup> He notes that modern access to education and salaried work were already upending traditional hierarchies; this could describe the Jat situation as well. Further in the same direction, and chronologically later, Dipankar Gupta (2005) says that the old



vertical caste hierarchy justified on the basis of purity has broken down into a kind of post-modern free-for-all, with multiple would-be hierarchies contesting for dominance. That is, different groups preferentially place themselves at the top, and so argue for their respective hierarchical visions. Gupta thus examines how caste groups attempt to define themselves through such self-emancipating narratives.<sup>215</sup> Here in particular, I see a commonality with my investigation of Jat self-representation.

Even more recently, anthropologist Bruce Owens documents different caste groups' contesting accounts of their respective roles in the staging of a festival in Nepal, a situation that he characterizes as a "multifocal polyphony."<sup>216</sup> We could apply this model to caste contestations involving Marwari privilege, Jat social emancipation, and the embrace of Balaji as a preeminent deity. That is, Jat narratives of emancipation in which Balaji behaves like a Jat allow Jats not only to claim dignity but also to dismiss Marwari devotional privileges as the result of corrupt relations with the Brahmins (rather than high moral standing). The Jat self-narrative has found a way to outdo the Marwari narrative, as to them patronage may not measure up to heroism and agrarian cooperation—Balaji's "true" characteristics. Jats say of themselves that, like Balaji, they "only give rather than take" (hence, Jat cooperativeness) while Marwari merchants are allegedly "takers" who worship Balaji only for personal gain. Alleged Marwari greed even rubs off on Balaji's *pujārīs*, who likewise "only take rather than give."<sup>217</sup> In this sense, it is vital for Jat emancipation that Balaji either be a Jat or be like a Jat.

## 4.2 Balaji in the Village

### *The Scope of Balaji's Domain*

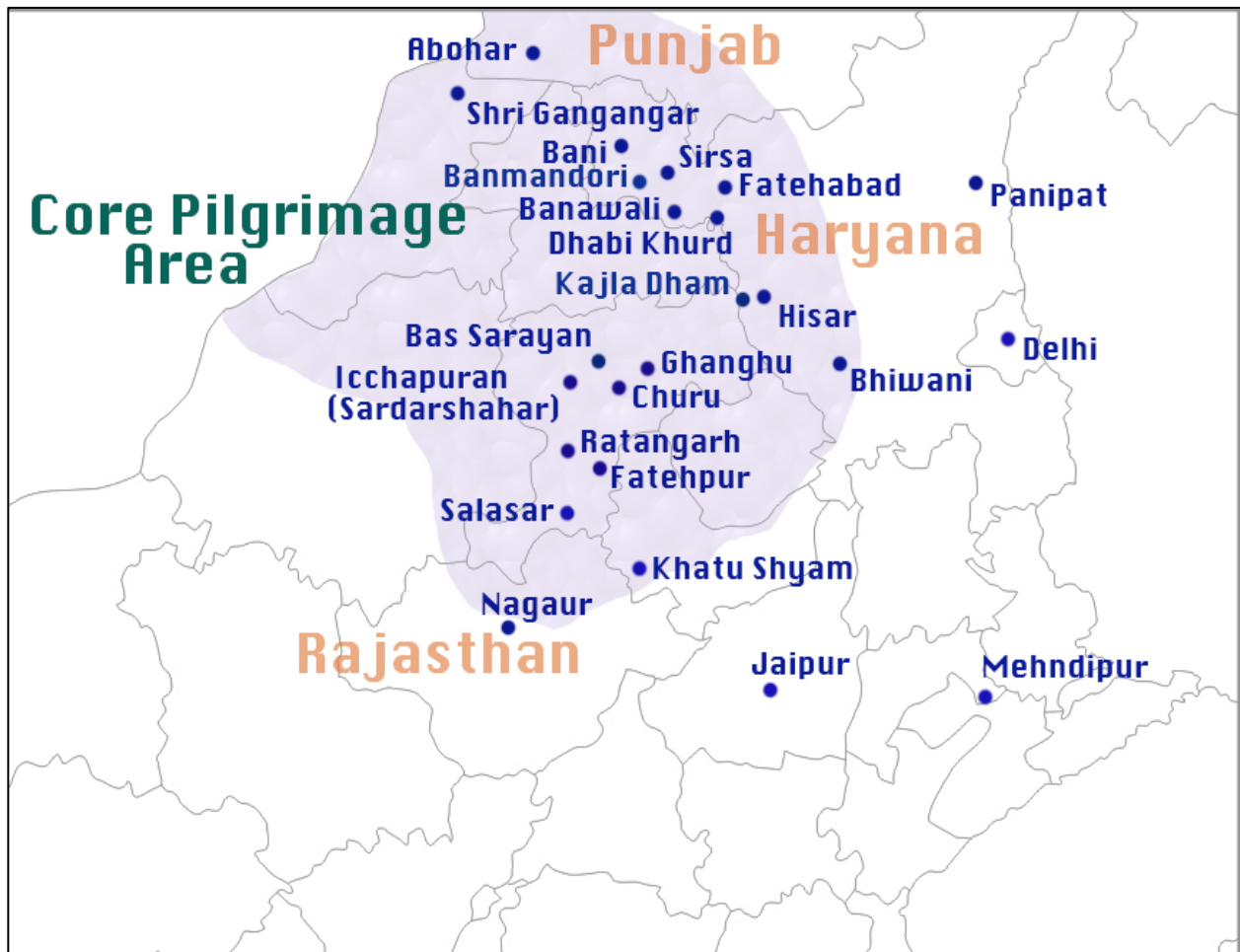
Up to now I have discussed the history and current state of Jat discourse that assigns Salasar Balaji, or more broadly Hanuman, a special place in devotional practice. From this point

onwards, I will provide evidence on the ground for Hanuman-Balaji's centrality in everyday Jat religious life as a prelude for investigating how pilgrimage to Salasar came to be and is now carried out. While Hanuman is very visible in Jat life, Salasar Balaji as a distinct god is less obviously present because in Jat villages Hanuman-Balaji is materially represented in the form of the pan-Indian Hanuman rather than in the form that is specific to Salasar. And yet, Jat worship of Hanuman-Balaji necessarily leads to Salasar, more than any other place associated with the monkey god, as the ultimate place to meet with the divine, and to give gratitude for miracles.

This narrative of Jat village faith will take us through several stages on the way to Salasar. In this section, we will start with a look at the worship of Hanuman in some Jat-dominant villages and towns in southern Haryana-Punjab, with an eye towards locating Salasar Balaji. From there, we will embark on the road from the Jat village to Salasar. This will entail a discussion of some of the new temples encountered on the roads to Salasar, which have supported the growth of pilgrimage. The narrative will end with Dashehra, Salasar's greatest annual festival, when thousands of pilgrims repeatedly prostrate themselves on the way to Balaji's temple. Our journey to Salasar will investigate how, within less than twenty years, this "new tradition" has become integral to Jat life.

As a prelude to examining the worship of Hanuman-Balaji in villages, and the phenomenon of pilgrimage to Salasar, I will define the core area in which Salasar Balaji is revered. This geographical zone comprises a region around 300 kilometers wide and 350 kilometers long, from the Pakistan border of Shri Ganganagar District in Rajasthan southeastwards along both sides of the Punjab-Haryana-Rajasthan tri-state border region to approximately the middle of Bhiwani District in Haryana, which is the penultimate district before Delhi (Map 3). This is also the area where most *paidal yātrīs*—pilgrims coming to Salasar on foot—originate. From a demographic

standpoint, this is also the zone most densely populated by Jats. Outside of this area in all directions, going even further than Delhi itself, devotees of Salasar Balaji of Jat and some other caste backgrounds can also be found, but their numbers gradually ebb with distance from Salasar. As a pan-Indian scriptural deity, irrespective of his identification with Salasar Balaji, Hanuman is revered more or less equally throughout Hindu populations of northwestern India, if not beyond, and especially in Jat communities. Most of my visits to the homes of Salasar Balaji's



Map 3. The core region of foot pilgrimage to Salasar.

devotees were in the Jat-dominant villages and towns of Sirsa, Fatehabad, and Hisar districts of Haryana, a region that is adjacent to Rajasthan and Punjab.

Interestingly, Balaji's core zone of devotion is roughly coterminous with the area of the Bagri dialect, which is intermediate between Haryanvi, Marwari (Rajasthani) and Punjabi. Linguist Lakhan Gusain has produced a handbook of Bagri, but I have not come across research that discusses this language in its social context.<sup>218</sup> However, James Wilson's gazetteer of 1882 for the district of Sirsa (at that time a sub-district of Hisar) distinguishes two kinds of Jats—Bagri Jats and Sikh Jats.<sup>219</sup> In other words, Bagri is not only a linguistic marker but also a cultural referent for non-Sikh (Hindu) Jats of this area, who constitute a significant proportion of southern Haryana's population, and are now Balaji's primary devotees. Bagri itself has no official status, but I occasionally heard references to it among devotees of Balaji. In a public performance of religious songs at Salasar during Dashehra, a singer from Amritsar (Punjab) solicitously asked the audience if she should sing some Bagri songs in honor of Balaji, in recognition of the fact that it was their native language.

Before looking at temples, I will mention some vernacular evidence for the current worship of Balaji in Jat villages. Take, for instance, the small settlement of Dhabhi Khurd in southern Fatehabad District, from which many pilgrims set out for Salasar each year. On a stroll through the dusty streets, we will notice that the older homes are typically built like miniature fortresses, with sturdy double wooden doors opening into an inner courtyard. Newer homes may be more modest in size—an indication of subdivided family land—and will have double iron doors. The entranceways to many of these homes, both old and new, are topped with a statue of one or another favored deity, generally understood to mean a *kuldev*, or lineage deity. The name of the chief householder is often molded into the plaster on the wall below. The most frequently seen

image is Hanuman, always in his full-bodied monkey form, rather than in the form specific to Salasar Balaji. These Hanumans sometimes carry a mountain in one hand, in reference to the famous scene in the *Rāmāyana* where the monkey god brings healing herbs to Rama's wounded brother Lakshman. Or, the god may be represented as a simple standing image (Figure 4-4). On the newer homes, the statue is replaced by a standardized image of the god on a large factory-made tile.

Looking around the village, we will find statues of some other deities, such as youthful Krishna playing the flute, the elephant god Ganesh, and Ramdev, the Rajasthani deified hero on horseback. The dating of these entrance images correlates with the time period of Hanuman-Balaji's rise to popularity. These images are not for worship in the sense that images in a shrine would be, but they make clear to passersby that the inhabitants of the home seek the protection and blessings of that deity. The earliest dated entranceway statue of Hanuman that I found indicated a foundation in 1990. The tile Hanumans I came across date from around 2000 on. Based on the relative incidence of these deities, it appears that Hanuman has the widest primary allegiance of any god in the village. The chronology of these images suggests that, as elsewhere, Hanuman became an object of public devotion by the early 1990s.

If Salasar Balaji is nowadays regarded as the primary manifestation of Hanuman in this region, why not represent him instead of the generic Hanuman? How would we know if or when scriptural Hanuman was subsequently reimagined as Balaji the regional deity? The metamorphosis is fuzzy because there is a popular taboo against making duplicate statues of Salasar Balaji, whereas there is no ban on making generic images of pan-Indian Hanuman. However, there is no injunction against simply placing a two-dimensional picture of Balaji (typically called a "*photo*" in Hindi, even when it is a painted or drawn image) next to a statue of

Hanuman, as frequently happens. Further, within the “Bagri Jat” villages surveyed in this study, Hanuman in whatever form may often be referred to as “Balaji,” so the image of pan-Indian god locally indexes the god of Salasar.



Figure 4-4. Gate of a home with Hanuman image in Dhabi Khurd, Fatehabad, Har.

As my respondents repeatedly stated, the reason for the taboo on making images of Salasar Balaji is that the image of this god, like those of the presiding deities in certain other shrines, is a *svarūp* [a self-formed] statue, meaning that it emerged as an already-complete image from the earth by its own will and at a time of its own choosing.<sup>220</sup> This indicates more inherent magical efficacy than a man-made image would possess. As devotees’ testify, Balaji’s miracles have

confirmed these special powers. The image of a god made by human artifice may also grant miracles, but to make that possible a Brahmin must first ritually imbue it with divine power, and after that devotees should worship it with great faith to encourage the god to reciprocate in kind. Given this limitation on representing Salasar Balaji, I needed to rely on interviews more than material evidence to ascertain how Hanuman “became” Balaji.

### *A Balaji Temple in the Center of the Village*

This section will substantiate that although Salasar Balaji is never represented in the form of a statue in Jat villages, he is understood as the chief local manifestation of Hanuman, in essence ruling over all these smaller Hanuman shrines and channeling divine power to devotees through them. The fact that Salasar Balaji gets so many thousands of pilgrims every year while these shrines serve only their immediate locales is proof of his higher stature. Devotees in Salasar readily point to long lines to get into Salasar Balaji’s shrine as evidence of his divine power. The only exception to Salasar Balaji’s preeminence is when a local Hanuman shrine is identified with Mehndipur Balaji, the other major manifestation of Hanuman in Rajasthan (to be discussed in later chapters). There is perhaps no local Hanuman shrine anywhere that simultaneously references both of those Balajis, but either of these Balajis may of course also index pan-Indian Hanuman. One always knows which god is invoked through the Hanuman-appearing image because the presiding *pujārī* or faith healer will ascribe his power to one or the other major Balaji, and will generally supply a narrative that explains his own position of authority in relation to Salasar or Mehndipur.

As an example of a village Hanuman temple erected in line with the rise of pan-Indian Hanuman and Salasar Balaji, I will mention one in the Jat-majority village of Banawali, in southern Fatehabad District (Haryana). Worship at this temple is the villagers’ chief connection

to Balaji when they are not visiting Salasar. The *pujārī*, a man of around 60 from Uttar Pradesh, gets up by 5 a.m. each day and plays devotional CDs through the temple's audio system loud enough to be heard in the central area of the sleeping village. As is typical for village shrines, the locals hired this Brahmin from afar to serve as a salaried ritual functionary. I had already been awakened to the sound of this *pujārī's* routine the previous day, so I resolved to observe the whole operation on the following day, a Sunday. Having gotten up in the chilly darkness before a December dawn, I slipped out of my host's home into the empty cobbled street with a blanket draped around me. I initially sat next to a tree in the *cauk* [village square], and was quickly surrounded by stray dogs, which began to yowl as a voice intoned over the loudspeakers:

Hail, Lord Balaji, Dear Son of Mother Anjani, Remover of Obstacles, Five-Headed Master! All of those living in the village receive blessings from Lord Balaji. Through my mediation all raise their hands in prayer and exclaim 'Rām rām.' It is five o'clock: those of you who are diligent in your work, it's time to get up! Hail, Balaji!<sup>221</sup>

After this invocation, the *pujārī* put on a recording of *Hanumān cālīsā*, probably the most widely revered and magically efficacious hymn in northern India. When the recitation came to an end in around fifteen minutes, other devotional songs came on for about a half hour. At this point, I walked up the steps to the temple and sat facing the *pujārī* amidst the loud din of music. Before us, the central niche housed an image of Panchmukhi [five-headed] Hanuman (Figure 4-5).<sup>222</sup> The *pujārī* recited a Sanskrit prayer to Ganesha and opened an immense copy of *Rāmcaritmānas*, the Hindi-language version of the classic epic *Rāmāyaṇa*. Finding where he had left off the previous morning, he started reading aloud through the audio system, occasionally stopping to explain the story in everyday Hindi to the slumbering villagers. After around 40 minutes, the *pujārī* closed the big book, and pronounced some closing benedictions. I then introduced myself and asked how this Hanuman temple came to be. He told



me that he serially reads from a scripture each day until he has reached the end. Marking the end of the reading, he will then perform a *havan* or sacred fire ceremony to please the god and thereby increase blessings for the villagers, before selecting another scripture for ongoing readings. Although a Brahmin, the *pujārī* had formerly worked as a milkman, and was hired to



Figure 4-5. Panchmukhi Hanuman. Banawali, Fatehabad District, Haryana.

serve in his present position when construction started on the temple—February 28, 1992. This year of establishment aligns the temple with the systemic rise of devotion to Hanuman that underlies this study. This *pujārī* is also keeping up with the times. He moonlights as a salesman of Right Concept Marketing products, which he described as a cheaper version of Amway, the

global marketing firm for the upwardly mobile. In a village of fairly prosperous peasants, he has had some success with what he calls “the direct selling method.” Neoliberal capitalism has comfortably intersected with rural piety.

From the time any Hanuman temple has been built, like the shrine of any other deity, an important concern is to discern what magical powers this particular deity may have to offer for the benefit of villagers. After all, Banawali’s Hanuman-Balaji was human-made, unlike Salasar Balaji; therefore, his powers are not inherent but must be ritually imbued and then demonstrated. Indeed, events made clear that Banawali’s Balaji has special powers. According to the *pujārī*, before the temple was started, there had been an extreme cold spell, and the villagers promised Balaji that if he would make the cold weather go away, they would build a temple for him. Their wish was granted, and so in gratitude they collected 900,000 rupees to make this Hanuman-Balaji temple. The villager who was overseeing the work went by train to Jaipur to commission the main Hanuman image for the temple. On the way, he met a *sant* [holy man] who told him to get a five-headed Hanuman, a variant of the monkey god that has started to appear in temples in recent years but is still relatively rare. In describing these events, the *pujārī* was not entirely sure why a five-headed Hanuman would be better for this temple. He only knew that multiple heads endowed the god with a greater array of powers to vanquish evil, as evidenced in the story of his victory in five-headed form over Ahiravana, brother of the demon king Ravana.<sup>223</sup>

Once the image had been installed, two men embarked from the village for Hardwar, site of the sacred Ganga, to ritually carry holy water from that place back to Banawali on foot for the new temple, an act of devotion known as *kāñvar yātrā*. At 11 p.m. on the night of the day the men left, a large snake entered into the temple and stayed there for three hours. The *pujārī* saw this as an auspicious sign that the Balaji of this temple had the power to answer prayers. Later,

the *pujārī's* wife was sick because of a malevolent spirit [*ātmā*], but from praying to this Balaji she was miraculously healed. The *pujārī* reflected that ultimately this Balaji and the one in Salasar were equal in power: what counts, he said, is not the location but the faith of the devotee, which activates the power of the god.

The chronology of this Balaji temple corresponds to the placement of Hanuman statues over village homes that I described in the previous section, which is suggestive of the broader turn to Hanuman in Indian society. And yet, despite the *pujārī's* words, Hanumans are not necessarily interchangeable. Most of the Hanuman temples built in Jat villages in the 1990s have remained relatively obscure to the outside world, while Salasar has gained a wide following. These divergent fortunes depend on patronage, location and social context, not to mention a demonstrated ability to provide miracles. It may seem ironic that Jats should go hundreds of kilometers to Salasar, the favored site of rich people and financial wheeling and dealing, while new Hanuman temples of their own villages remain comparatively quiet. From a socio-historical standpoint, the difference has to do with the Jat perception of the Marwaris' moneyed lifestyle. Although Marwari prosperity or *fāydā* may be morally suspect, it also testifies that their patron deity Balaji is probably also the best one for others to attain good results. This was the point that my Jat respondent stated in the block quote on the history of Salasar presented earlier in this chapter. Most of the small village shrines constructed under the direction of local Jat committees and managed by Brahmins hired for the job have little chance of eliciting Marwari attention. These shrines provide magical services, but they are largely adjunct to Jat village life.

Reflecting on the Hanuman-Balaji temple of Banawali, I was impressed that in scarcely twenty years it had become the village's dominant spiritual resource. The *pujārī's* daily announcement publicly affirms the villagers' faith in this god and the blessings they can expect

in return, and reminds them of the *pujārī*'s mediation in this relationship (whether or not they are fully awake during his broadcasts). But, as mentioned, this temple is an instrument of the village rather than priestly authority in its own right. It appears that village *pañcāyats* or governing committees exert close control over village resources, which would include temples. According to Gupta, Jats not only dominate the local politics of these villages but also are renowned for their pan-Indian nationalism.<sup>224</sup> As is well known, Hanuman has become an important symbol of national (or Hindu) revival in the face of perceived “outside” threats, such as Muslim Pakistan, so the fact that this Hanuman temple would assume centrality in Jat village life arguably relates to this larger movement. At the same time, the cult of Hanuman centered on this temple in Banawali discursively directs villagers’ attention to “Balaji,” so named, as the representation of Hanuman. And, Balaji, of course, ultimately resides in Salasar.

### *Multiplying Balajis*

In most of the villages I visited, Balaji-Hanuman had effectively become the primary deity, or one of the most important deities, and his shrines have become ubiquitous. When multiple Hanuman shrines have gone up in the same vicinity they may offer specialized services, depending on the inclinations of the patrons and priestly caretakers. This diversity shows the adaptability of Balaji on multiple levels of worship, whether in bestowing simple blessings or providing exorcism. For instance, in and around the Jat village of Ghanghu, Churu District (Rajasthan), there are several Hanuman temples, of which I will mention two. A few miles down the road from the village, a temple was dedicated to Balaji seven years ago. It contains a statue of a standing Hanuman who holds his emblematic club-like weapon, the *gadā*. Here, ghost [*bhūt*] possession problems are especially treated. A *pujārī* touches possessed devotees on the head with a brush made of peacock feathers to drive out bad spirits. A local carpenter [*jangiḍ*]

caste association jointly sponsored the temple, although anyone can come here for treatment. Due to its patronage, a large poster of Vishvakarma, the patron deity of engineers, has been installed on one wall. This is a decidedly non-elite temple.

In another temple, constructed a few years ago on the side of a small road passing through the fields, at the edge of Ghanghu, an image of Hanuman holding the mountain is backed up by framed images of Salasar Balaji and Khatu Shyam, the main Shekhawati manifestation of Krishna. This kind of representation of Balaji does not violate the taboo on duplicating the god's image as a statue, and still invests this Hanuman temple with some of Balaji's power (in his picture) and reminds the visitor that this temple is in essence a satellite of Salasar. The salaried *pujārī* explained that this is not a “village temple” [*gāōnv kā mandir*] but rather a “merchant's temple” [*seth kā mandir*], supported by a local merchant who moved to the city (Figures 4-6 and 4-7). The former type of temple would indicate local collaboration, while this one suggests the personal interests of a better-off donor. As with Salasar, the kind of patronage in effect lends itself to the god's own nature.

As usual, this temple promises miracles; several silver umbrellas suspended from a red string over Balaji will start to shake if one's prayer is destined to come true. Or, short of that, the *pujārī* typically tells a devotee to read *Hanumān cālīsā* to make a wish come true. Although somewhat different in orientation from one another, these two temples and others draw from a basic toolbox of traditions, such as brushing a devotee with a peacock feather as a form of blessing, or prescribing *Hanumān cālīsā* to bring good fortune. Within two decades, these have become the normal recourse for villagers needing resolutions for day-to-day troubles. When such small-scale interventions are insufficient, or when one needs to invoke a higher-level of divine power, a journey to Salasar is the obvious choice.



Not only in religious practice, but also in discursive culture, Balaji has become a fixture of life. For instance, villagers may frequently gather in evenings to sing in praise of Balaji and popular gods (such as Ramdev, Gogaji, and others). The following short song (here abbreviated), which I heard in a local dialect (Bagri or Haryanvi) from a Jat man in southern Haryana, treats Balaji as an honored guest:



Figure 4-6. “The merchant’s temple,” Ganghu, Churu District, Raj.

Come to Haryana, Balaji! ... We will be at your service ... You will have water poured [in a bucket] for bathing. You will have pure ghee, sweet *cūrmā* and milk to drink ... For your vehicle, take the tractor and sew seeds in the field! ... [And] when you start to feel drowsy, then please just go to sleep, God [*bhagvān*]<sup>225</sup>

The song indicates the kind of intimacy that villagers in Haryana feel towards Balaji as their favored god, and the pride taken in receiving him as a guest. As I had mentioned earlier, *cūrmā*, the sweet mentioned here, is what one would offer to a visitor (which I also often received). Also of note, the song suggests satisfaction with owning a tractor, an object personally familiar to farmers who would partake in singing or listening to such a song. As we will see later in this



Figure 4-7. Interior detail of the merchant's temple. Hanuman is flanked by Balaji and Khatu Shyam.

chapter, tractors frequently serve the important purpose of hauling provisions for *paidal yātrīs* going to Salasar, and are seen as evidence of divine favor.<sup>226</sup>

Amidst this regional allegiance to Salasar Balaji, shrines for Mehndipur Balaji have also gained some favor, but the circumstance of their founding is entirely different. Whereas I have cited village organizations or other social groups as the key agents in setting up Salasar Balaji-oriented temples, Mehndipur Balaji temples are set up solely by the initiative of individual faith healers, who thereafter preside over them. To give one example, the father of the young man whose home I visited in Banawali (cited earlier) had formerly been an alcoholic. Although he had gone to Salasar a number of times, for a problem like this it was deemed best to obtain personal help, which he got from a faith healer who had set up a small Hanuman shrine known as Sankat Mochan Hanuman Temple in a nearby village. Under the guidance of this healer, the father discovered that possession by a bad spirit [*būrī ātmā*] had induced him to drink. For this man's treatment, the healer also ordered him to go to Mehndipur as a follow-up act of devotion. As this man affirmed, the healer proved his spiritual powers by being able to charismatically divine knowledge about his clients at first sight.<sup>227</sup>

The healer himself likens this shrine to a branch hospital [*choṭā hospitāl*] which serves as an adjunct for Mehndipur itself: "Small afflictions can be treated here; as for major problems, I bring them under 'control' here, and then once [clients] have gone [to Mehndipur], they'll be fine."<sup>228</sup> He accepts money for his services, which he says he uses for the upkeep of a *dharmśālā* that he runs in Mehndipur (where his clients may stay for a fee). So, Salasar Balaji and Mehndipur Balaji, both regional manifestations of pan-Indian Hanuman, are in turn represented at the village level. However, Salasar Balaji is understood as the "normative" Hanuman, in the sense that he equates with conventional Jat social identity and religious practice, whereas Mehndipur Balaji is more likely sought when specific problems arise, especially involving troublesome spirits.



### *Pitrs and Balaji in Ritual Alliance*

In the previous chapter, I discussed how Hanuman traditionally manages the spirits of the deceased. And so, the rise of new Balaji-Hanuman shrines over the last two decades has been matched by the increasing visibility of *pitrs* or ancestor spirits behaving as gods, more often in alliance with Balaji-Hanuman but sometimes even other locally popular deities. The presence of a *pitṛ*, usually channeled by a living relative, adds a further level of mediation that can be drawn from to facilitate miracles. Hence, many new shrines offering faith healing may involve the following chain of divine power: Rama-Hanuman/Balaji-*pitṛ*-faith healer-devotee. I will discuss the practices of these faith healers at length in Chapter 7, but at this point I want to mention a case where *pitrs* and Balaji have been integrated in one temple, which exemplifies how these two divine components have mutually reinforced their popularity, as they work together to produce miracles.

The temple I will discuss is located in the predominantly Jat village of Bas Sarayan (Churu District in Rajasthan). The villagers are not surprisingly by and large devotees of Salasar Balaji; indeed, I first came there to see a *jāgrāṇ* [public religious song event] in honor of Balaji in gratitude for his protection of a boy who had reached the age of three. Although the village itself is small and remote, it boasts an impressively large *pitṛ* temple built around ten years ago. As this temple was established at a time when Salasar had already become an important pilgrimage site, the inclusion of Balaji-Hanuman must also be considered in the context of his increasing regional importance, with Salasar as his most prominent residence. In fact, for many years the *pitrs* were only worshiped in a small shrine in a neighboring village, until outside funding moved them to this village and gave them a grand place of worship.

This large temple enshrines seven *pitrs* in two niches (Figures 4-8). Upstairs two additional niches contain standardized statues of Hanuman and Krishna, the latter accompanied by multiple pictures of Khatu Shyam.<sup>229</sup> The *pitrs* in the niches are aniconically represented as a series of small house-like enclosures. Each niche is equipped with a pictorial panel of the pan-Indian pantheon from a local perspective—Shiva-Durga, Ram Darbar, Radha-Krishna, and of course bearded Salasar Balaji. Tellingly, an inscription tells us that a devotional group from Surat donated these panels—undoubtedly an indication of Marwari patronage. Pictures of Hanuman in his mountain-carrying pose have been placed on either side of the *pitr* abodes in each niche, along with a model horse as a vehicle for the spirits. This arrangement thus suggests that Hanuman is central to the worship of these ancestor spirits.

I will add a word on the protocol of worship in Bas Sarayan to elaborate how Balaji enters this practice. A faith healer who treats possessed visitors oversees the shrine. It was reported to me that he is the grandson of one of the men who had died and become *pitrs* here. Hence, the spirits predictably work through this living relative. This temple has a monthly *jāgrāṇ* at the time of amavasya, the night of the new moon, when *pitrs* are customarily worshiped. At that time, the healer sits in the temple while the performance goes on outdoors, and at certain moments one of the *pitrs* will enter him and call forth any of the audience members based on a clairvoyant knowledge of their problems. At such moments, the music will come to a sudden halt as the *pitr* acting through the healer carries on a dialog with the devotee. The *jāgrāṇ* itself entails a special variety of Rajasthani music known as *rāgaṇī* that is said to be only for the worship of *pitrs*. I had a chance to see the temple's major annual festival, and noted that Balaji is a highlight of the event. Although the *bhajans* mostly focused on the *pitrs*, the singers frequently exclaimed praises to Balaji. The highlight of the night was when large groups of



Figure 4-8. Interior of an ancestor deity temple with pictures of Balaji and other gods. Bas Sarayan, Churu District, Raj.

young men painted black to resemble Bhairu—another fighter of spirits and demons—ran about in a circle. Some carried chains to flagellate themselves, thereby demonstrating that the *śakti* of the *pitṛs* had entered them. A few of them were painted orange and carried Balaji’s emblematic *gadā* (Figure 4-9).

The story of how these *pitṛs* came to be is a bit folkloric, as I heard multiple variations. As is generally agreed, 40 years ago a conflict arose between villagers over whose cow’s turn it was to graze in a field. The ensuing conflict left three brothers, a nephew, and a son dead. Later, their angry *ātmās* showed up, and they enforced certain rules of behavior among the villagers; for instance, no one could drink alcohol without facing harassment by the *pitṛs* as punishment. Later, the *pitṛs* were responsible for the sudden death of a youth whose *ātmā* they needed to assist them. Since these unstable *ātmās* of the dead men were worrying the villagers, a remedy was needed. A Brahmin *pujārī* from the area had known the men while they were still alive, and so their *ātmās* asked him to perform a ritual that would allow them to become *pitṛs*. This would give them a sense of purpose in the afterlife—protecting the wellbeing of their relatives and neighbors. In the procedure for converting the *ātmās* from Bas Sarayan into *pitṛs*, the *pujārī* used mantras to supernaturally place them in Hanuman’s lap [*god*]. The god’s purifying power thereby rendered them as *pitṛs*. I heard this kind of account in regard to *pitṛs* in other places too. So, even aside from Hanuman’s well-known disposition to fight evil spirits, his centrality in the process of making *pitṛs* keeps him important at a time when *pitṛs* have been gaining a new public stature as granters of miracles.

I wondered, then, to what extent Hanuman’s role in the formation of *pitṛs* was standard in Hindu theories of the supernatural before the rise of *pitṛ* shrines in Rajasthan during the 1990s. In a 1903 study of *śrāddh* ceremonies in Gaya for the spirits of the deceased, L.S.S. O’Malley





Figure 4-9. Young man dancing as Hanuman in Bas Sarayan.

never mentions Hanuman. So too, in describing rituals for the dead in the lead-up for *pitr*-hood, Knipe (2008) says nothing of Hanuman. In discussing possible allusions to the worship of *pitr*s in the classical *Mahābhārata* and *Harivaṃsa* (1999), Saindon also says nothing about Hanuman. Nor have I seen references elsewhere of Hanuman's role in the passage to *pitr*-hood.

Interestingly, Saindon describes *śrāddh* ceremonies are being destined for fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers.<sup>230</sup> Certainly, such individuals may become *pitr*s in modern practice too, but in actuality, as my respondents described the category of *pitr*, it seems to refer to any protective family spirit who was once the *ātmā* of a family member that had led a morally upright life. It is clearly not absolutely necessary that a *pitr* be the direct ancestor of those who mediate them. Based on the increasing incidence of public *pitr*-based shrines as places to seek miracles in the last decade or more, I suggest that *pitr*s have gained new, broader significance in line with a societal shift to embrace folk practices as an idealized Indian heritage, and that this has gone hand in hand with the rise of Hanuman in popular culture.

### 4.3 Jat-Marwari Devotional Intersections and Roadside Temples

#### Balaji as a Pan-Caste Regional God

I have discussed the construction of new Hanuman temples in Jat-dominant villages as local adjuncts of Salasar Balaji, who is in turn a local version of pan-Indian Hanuman. But, I want to also discuss another class of Balaji-related temples, which are very overtly oriented to pilgrimage to Salasar. Along the main roads between the villages and towns of the Bagri Jat heartland and Salasar, Marwaris or devotional organizations of local townspeople sponsored numerous new, often lavish temples dedicated to Balaji from the mid to late 1990s and onwards. Some temples for Balaji were founded at the starting point of these roads in cities of the region surrounding Salasar. As I found, these new temples have effectively becoming gathering points for large

contingents of pilgrims from these cities' respective districts. They visit the new Balaji temple of the city before setting out on foot or by vehicle for Salasar. I visited impressive Balaji temples of this sort in Shri Ganganagar (Rajasthan) and Abohar (Punjab), which of course offer miracles.

As these various new temples were constructed with the idea of attracting pilgrims already destined for Salasar, they constitute what I would call a “second generation” of Balaji temples. The temples strung along the road to Salasar serve as rest stops—sometimes even providing cafeterias and lodging—and promise miracles, in line with Salasar. Pilgrims describe stopping at such shrines for Balaji on each day of the journey to Salasar. Although these developments were magnets for Marwari patronage, like the temple and *dharmśālās* in Salasar, they arguably benefited all pilgrims, and in this sense they exemplify the intersection of Marwari and Jat devotion within a larger regional identity centered on devotion to Balaji. In this section, then, I will explore this roadside culture as a counterpoint to the often-heard Jat complaint that Marwaris unduly receive privileges in Salasar. I would argue that the two classes are in a sense mutually dependent, and the outcome of this dynamic relationship is the expansion of Balaji's domain of devotion.

As a way of tracking this posited inter-caste relationship, I will initially mention the parallel chronology of a locally published monthly magazine known as *Shekhāvaṭi*. The history of this magazine suggests a shift in focus from Shekhawati as the Marwari homeland to a broader allegiance to Balaji as a god that represents a more generalized Rajasthan. This change may correlate with the rising traffic of Jat pilgrimage to Salasar by the end of the 1990s. In Fatehpur, a town of picturesque old merchant mansions around 50 kilometers north of Salasar, a Jat who counts Balaji as his *kuldev* started to publish *Shekhāvaṭi* in 1992, which would align perfectly

with the inauguration of Marwari patronage in the region at that time. Notwithstanding the publisher's roots in local Jat society, the magazine's board of trustees primarily consisted of Marwaris, and some Brahmins, including some hailing from Kolkata and Mumbai. The Jat publisher described *Shekhawatī* as a "culture" magazine, sometimes touching on Salasar Balaji, but just as often on other regional topics such as agriculture, household traditions, folk music, and so forth. Some articles directly addressed Marwari society, discussing it more in terms of Shekhawati history and culture than present-day Marwari life in distant cities. At the start of each magazine, the publisher states that few regions in India can claim such pride in local culture as Shekhawati.

By the late 1990s, Jat pilgrims coming from the north were increasingly arriving in Salasar on foot, not to mention by vehicle, and Fatehpur was a major crossing point for several of the main pilgrimage roads from Haryana. On the whole, Marwaris had never practiced *paidal yātrā*, so the predominance of Jat visitors on this road would have balanced the previous attention of many Marwaris, who looked to the region of Fatehpur as their old home. The publisher continued to print the magazine on Shekhawati, but by the early 2000s he observed rising enthusiasm for articles on Balaji. He noted that there was little in the way of popular literature on Balaji-Hanuman outside of scripture, so he decided to fill that gap for the broader devotional population that "didn't have much time to read" by publishing a magazine focused on Balaji. In 2005 he started publishing this new magazine, known as *Jai śrī bālājī*, which privileged Salasar Balaji as the preeminent deity, but also included numerous other Balajis from this part of Rajasthan, including Mehndipur Balaji, and frequently Hanuman's overlord Rama. This shift from Shekhawati to Rajasthan as a wider region of multiple Balajis also corresponds to the evolution of urban Marwari devotional circles for Balaji. In their public religious events in the cities (to be



discussed in detail in Chapter 6), Marwaris typically install reproductions of various Balajis as a way of describing a more inclusive, less caste-driven Rajasthan as a homeland for the entire population in the pan-Indian diaspora that is descended from this region. This integrative tendency matches the evolution away from the relatively narrow magazine on Shekhawati towards the more inclusive focus on Balaji as a god of Rajasthan.

There was an economic dimension to this shift too. Instead of *Shekhāvaṭī*'s crowded list of Marwari and Brahmin trustees, for the first year or more the *Jai śrī bālājī* magazine listed only two, Moolchand Malu, a wealthy Marwari businessman living in Delhi, and his son. It was around this time that Moolchand is known to have embarked on several years of high-level religious donations (for temples, rest houses, and Salasar's *pujārīs*), which included supporting this magazine. Not surprisingly, for the first several years the back cover of virtually every issue of *Jai śrī bālājī* had a full-page advertisement for the salty snacks [*namkīn*] and tape cassettes and CDs of religious songs that Moolchand markets under the brand name Kuber. For several years every front cover of *Jai śrī bālājī* featured a picture of Salasar Balaji, along with a small inset of Icchapuran Balaji ["wish-fulfilling Balaji"] the god in a temple on the road to Salasar that Moolchand had established. There were still some articles of particular relevance to Marwaris, but they were all subsumed within the narrative of faith in Balaji, such as one on a devotional group for Balaji from Surat. After around a year of publication, a larger cohort of Marwaris and Brahmins from cities like Mumbai, Kolkata and Nagpur, started to appear as trustees. When Moolchand was no longer the only trustee, his advertisements disappeared from the back cover.

In 2008, the publisher discontinued *Shekhāvaṭī*, as it could no longer compete with *Jai Shri Balaji* as the main object of attraction. He has continued to publish the Balaji magazine up to the

present. The publisher prints 2,000 magazines each month, and sends them to locals, such as Brahmins in Salasar, and some Marwaris. But, even though Jats may not be the primary recipients of the magazine, the demographic fact that the large majority of pilgrims coming through Shekhawati are now Jats contributes to a broader regional culture of devotion. This allows the Marwaris to sidestep the issue of their caste-separateness in worshipping Balaji, which is socially undesirable in the era of government support for the advancement of less advantaged castes.

### *Moolchand and His Wish-Fulfilling Roadside Temple*

The story of Moolchand Malu (introduced in the previous subsection), a Jain *baniyā* who was born in the small city of Sardarshahar (Churu District, Rajasthan), but lives in Delhi, and the temple he founded in the name of Icchapuran Balaji on the road to Salasar, brings together several themes introduced at the start of this study that I argue contributed to the popularization of Balaji (Figure 4-10). These themes are: the tax troubles of upwardly mobile merchants, the sponsorship of religious sites or activities to reduce that liability (due to the tax-exempt status of such donations), divine benefits in conjunction with these activities, and a resulting consolidation of pilgrimage culture. In this particular subsection, we can see these themes in the building of new temples dedicated to Balaji along the roads leading to Salasar. The presence of such temples has facilitated a rise in predominantly Jat pilgrimage from Punjab and Haryana to Salasar, as these sites serve as rest stops along the way. Particularly during festival times such as Dashehra, when many pilgrims walk to Salasar on foot, these temples augment the numerous *bhaṇḍārās* [tented rest stops offering free food] set up along the roads to Salasar by volunteer organizations. Thus, in conjunction with changes within Jat society, a spread ethos of seeking rapid advancement, and the spread of stories about miraculous shrines, the construction of

roadside temples by Moolchand and others constitutes one more element in the production of a new tradition of pilgrimage.

The story of Moolchand, told to me in fragmentary form by numerous locals in the Salasar region, has a folkloric quality, as different narrators interpret the sequence of events in their own



Figure 4-10. Pictures of Ichapuran Balaji and Salasar Balaji in a shop at Ichapuran Balaji's temple, near Sardarshahar.

terms. Everyone is in agreement on the main points, however. Moolchand is well known in Salasar and elsewhere in the region not only for the grand roadside temple he established but also for subsidizing the Brahmins and their temple in Salasar in gratitude for divine benefits granted. Indeed, I was told that Moolchand's name appears on a plaque inside the entrance to Balaji's

temple in Salasar, like the Marwari benefactors discussed in Chapter 2. In fact, Moolchand's story involves not just Balaji but several divine personages that appeared to him at key moments in his personal trajectory of faith and prosperity. Initially, he was a merchant of average means with a desire for greater wealth. A *sant* from Sardarshahar came to Moolchand's home in Delhi but remained silent for two days. On the third day, the *sant* started to speak, and gave him a magical axe [*kulhāḍī*]. He advised Moolchand to start his own business, prophesying that he would become very wealthy. The *sant* soon died, and Moolchand sponsored a grand Shiva temple near Sardarshahar in his memory.

After receiving the *sant*'s boon, Moolchand initially prayed to Kuber, the Hindu god of wealth [here called “*dhān dev*” or “wealth god”], and soon became a multimillionaire [*krodpati*] from selling religious CDs, packaged salty snacks, and chewing tobacco mix [*guṭkhā*], and other unspecified business ventures. In recognition of his divinely-bestowed good fortune, he named his company “Kuber,” his present-day home “Kuber House,” his ancestral farmhouse near Sardarshahar “Kuber Farmhouse,” and the VIP-caliber hotel that he later founded across the street from his new temple-to-be “Kuber Palace.” As the main regional protector of Jain Marwaris in the area, Balaji, too, received Moolchand's patronage. The connection to Kuber augmented rather than replaced this ancestral affiliation. I had also been told that Moolchand had sought advice for financial troubles from a Muslim ascetic [*faqir*] that had been meditating in the area for some years. The ascetic seldom spoke, and was dismissive to Moolchand, saying only: “Go! Go eat [*Jā! Khā tū! Khā tū!*]” Moolchand took this odd statement as a reference to the chewing tobacco that he had in his pocket—*guṭkhā*—and so decided to go into the *guṭkhā* business. Following this unintended advice, he then became wealthy. Later, the Muslim ascetic died in meditation.

As a consequence of his new wealth, Moolchand started having income tax problems with the Indian government. Seeking a resolution, he walked 124 kilometers from Sardarshahar to Salasar as a demonstration of his faith. After deeply concentrating [*dhyān kiyā*] on Balaji in the god's temple in Salasar, Moolchand was visited by him in a dream. Moolchand explained to Balaji that he had been experiencing “number two” tax problems [*do ‘number’ ke ‘paper’*]<sup>1</sup>—in other words, charges of money laundering. As we may recall, this is exactly the situation that some locals in Salasar alleged was common among patrons of the temple, *dharmśālās*, and other religious recipients there. But, the case of Moolchand expands on that narrative, as it provides evidence that as devotion to Balaji spread, and with it Marwari patronage of new temples related to his worship, tax problems likewise spread.

In Moolchand's dream, Balaji responded that he would help him, and so Moolchand stated in gratitude that he would build a huge [*visāl*] temple for him. From that time, Moolchand donated gold and silver decorations for Salasar's temple, now visible to the public in the innermost room of the temple. He also donated more than one million rupees, and has continued to generously support the temple ever since. In 1998, with the vow of also building a roadside temple in mind, Moolchand held a *lanḡotiyā* or loincloth (Hanuman's normal attire) in his hands, and actively visualized the future. He saw that his temple would be complete within seven years. He had already been hosting a *bhandhārā* here each year for pilgrims on their way to Salasar during Dashehra, so this construction expanded on that service to passersby.

Following Moolchand's vow to build a temple, the god came to him in a second dream, this time dressed regally and sitting on a throne, and assured him that if he would build a temple for him his tax troubles would surely be solved. This narrative outcome rhetorically valorizes the mundane practice of seeking tax abatement through making religious donations as if it were a

divine miracle brought through personal faith. Further miracles ensued. Moolchand decided to build his temple for Balaji on the spot where the Muslim ascetic had meditated and died, which was near his farmhouse, about 8 kilometers from Sardarshahar. When he surveyed the area, a monkey suddenly appeared, walked around the area, and then sat in the regal posture Balaji had previously assumed in the second dream. Moolchand decided that he would place the image of Balaji in that posture, and in this same spot. As with the tax advice, so too in planning the temple, circumstances are interpreted in supernatural terms.

Throughout the time that Moolchand's temple was being built, the monkey stayed at the site every day and watched all the activities. The monkey joined the workmen for lunch each day, and even beat them if they slacked off in their work. If the workmen made any errors in the construction, they would come the next day to find that the wrongly built section had been removed. After seven years, the temple was completed, and was formally inaugurated on February 13, 2005. A sacred flame [*jot*] was brought from Salasar to provide the animating power of this site. The temple was to be known after the deity here, Icchapuran Balaji; the name "wish-fulfilling Balaji" was obviously modeled after Salasar Balaji, the famous granter of wishes. This new temple was thus inserted as an additional stop in an enlarged domain for Balaji that would include not just Salasar but the land between it and the lands of southern Punjab and Haryana from where most devotees were arriving. Moreover, Moolchand's initial vow to build his temple in 1998 matches the chronology of the rise of Jat pilgrimage from these northern areas (late 1990s) that I have theorized. In other words, notwithstanding the narrative of miracles, one can also see pragmatic calculations in these developments.

As for the Hanuman-like monkey that oversaw the construction of the temple, he disappeared after the last day of work, as his duty had come to an end. Some time later, however, he was





Figure 4-11. The monkey's memorial shrine, Sardarshahar, Churu, Raj.

seen swinging among the rooftops in Sardarshahar, but he touched a live electrical wire near a power station in the vicinity of one of Moolchand's homes, and fell to the ground dead.

Moolchand thereupon sponsored the construction of a *samādhī* or memorial shrine for the monkey, where he is now worshiped, and which I visited (Figure 4-11). Meanwhile, Icchapuran Balaji's temple has fast become a popular stop-off on the pilgrimage circuit, and is starting to live up to its name for providing miracles. The Icchapuran temple's large lawns, which are kept manicured and green throughout the year, despite the arid climate, have made it a popular picnic place. Various shops lining the street sell the Kuber brand's religious souvenirs. With its impressive veneer of marble, the temple is reminiscent of the ones famously sponsored by the Birla family. Inside, images of the pan-Indian deities, including Kuber, share the space with elegantly garbed, crowned Icchapuran Balaji. Here, as in Salasar, Balaji is effectively an object of worship in his own right, more than simply a devotee of Rama and Sita. This temple exemplifies one way in which devotional culture centered on Salasar Balaji has expanded, particularly along roadways.

### *Mehndipur Balaji on the Road to Salasar*

As it happens, not only temples for Salasar Balaji but also those dedicated to other deities have benefited from the rise in pilgrimage to Salasar. In Chapter 7 I will mention the rise of independent faith healers and their personal shrines dedicated to Balaji in villages throughout the region, which appears to be another second-generation development of the late 1990s that builds on the preexisting popularity of pilgrimage to Salasar. In this section, however, I am specifically addressing roadside shrines, since these are the ones that are positioned to directly hail pilgrims on the way to Salasar. One particular pilgrimage-route site, the Ghata Mehndipur Balaji temple of the city of Ratangarh, lies halfway between Sardarshahar and Salasar on the main pilgrimage



road, and would seem to exemplify how a much earlier shrine has benefited and perhaps been reconfigured in recent years due to the increased public attention to this area due to the rising popularity of Salasar Balaji. Although Salasar Balaji is arguably the best-known deity of Shekhawati, this region and more broadly northeastern Rajasthan has become understood as a land of miracle shrines of all varieties.

Located in the heart of the of the market district, Ghata Mehndipur Balaji Dham is unusual in that it predates the 1990s, having been founded by a lineage of *pujārīs* under local merchant sponsorship in approximately 1854. From the time of Ratangarh's founding in the late eighteenth century, it has been one of the major urban centers of Agrawal or Marwari activity within Shekhawati, so we could expect it to share to some degree in the devotional trends of the region, propelled by Marwari patronage.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, I sometimes heard this temple mentioned as the third major Balaji shrine of Rajasthan (along with Salasar and Mehndipur), reflecting its stature as a long-standing establishment. As a market town of Shekhawati, Ratangarh has many picturesque *havelīs* [mansions] built by Marwari merchants in colonial days. Balaji's temple here is such a structure (Figures 4-12 and 4-13). However, this old structure has undergone change over the years. It now houses Krishna and Balaji as dual gods of veneration, whereas previously only Krishna was worshiped here. In the main worship space, the two deities face each other from opposite sides of the room. On the far side is Krishna, while facing him from the entrance side is Balaji, depicted as a monkey with a large pointed mustache not unlike Salasar Balaji and Khatu Shyam. Replicas of Mehndipur Balaji's divine helpers, Bhairu and Pretraj, peer out from niches on the two other walls. Their presence is consistent with Balaji, of course, but jarring in this particular temple because Krishna is normally absent in Mehndipur itself.

From the first day I came to this temple, the presence of *baniyās* was apparent, but unlike Salasar and the other Marwari temples, these merchants come not only from far away cities, especially Kolkata, but also from the surrounding city itself. And, while health and anxiety-related syndromes appear to be a common reason for devotees to come here, as at Mehndipur



Figure 4-12. Ghata Mehndipur Balaji's temple, Ratangarh, Churu, Raj.

itself, I encountered more devotees speaking of wealth-creation or relief from “money problems” than I had heard anywhere else except in the major Marwari-sponsored temples (Salasar and so forth). Thus, the Ratangarh temple is a hybrid of sorts—a long-established Marwari temple in Shekhawati that has nowadays expanded its outreach to more generally serve devotees seeking relief from troubles. The *pujārī*-proprietors similarly cross boundaries. Although they serve as



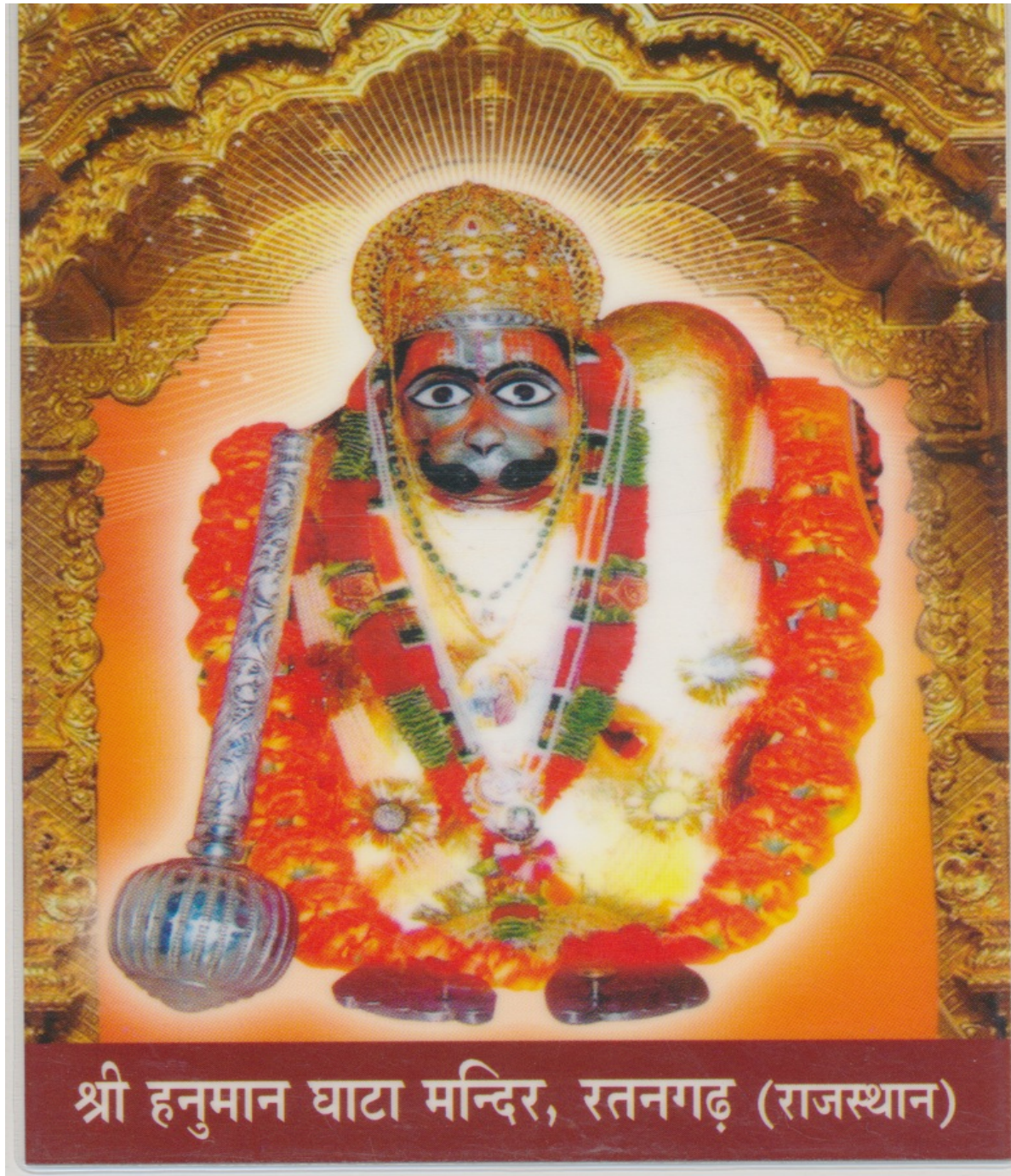


Figure 4-13. Ghata Mehndipur Balaji. Photo of an image obtained at the temple.

temple managers, and oversee several lower-level *pujārīs* hired to carry out the routine rituals, they also have some charismatic qualities, insofar as they directly advise visitors on occult

recitations to get rid of ghosts—something that would never occur at Marwari-sponsored temples like Salasar or Khatu Shyam.

I could only imperfectly discern the Ratangarh temple's history because the head *pujārīs* would not consent to be interviewed, leaving me to speak with the *sevaks*. Nonetheless, I learned that the *baniyās* had originally dedicated this temple only to Krishna, without reference to Balaji. The *pujārīs*, who came from the Joshi clan, ran the temple in service of these merchants [*baniyoñ ke pujārī the*]. It was only much more recently, when the head *pujārīs* acclaimed a personal connection to Mehndipur, that Balaji became installed as a co-deity. This fascinating turn, unique among the shrines of this study, prompts me to ask whether Krishna might have traditionally been more generally favored (rather than Balaji-Hanuman) as a primary deity—*kuldev* or otherwise—among the merchants of Shekhawati. According to a *sevak*, the major change in this temple happened around 70 to 80 years ago. The wife of the present *pujārī's* great-grandfather was very ill, and so the whole family went to Mehndipur by oxcart. Due to the monsoon season at the time, it was a very difficult journey, and the vehicle virtually broke down, but when they reached Mehndipur they were magically revived. The *mahant* in Mehndipur bestowed some of his *śakti* on this *pujārī*, who henceforth performed as not simply as a *pujārī* ritualist but also as a charismatic faith healer. This *pujārī* prayed to Balaji that his lineage would forever remain as the caretakers of the temple (similar to what transpired at the beginning of Salasar's temple). Consequently, the temple has gained a reputation as a place for treating ghost [*bhūt*] possession.

Although the addition of allegiance to Mehndipur Balaji supposedly took place at least 70 years ago, there is evidence that the *pujārīs* of this temple have also responded to more recent Rama-centered devotional trends in line with Salasar and Mehndipur, due to this site's pan-

Indian Marwari patronage. For instance, on the rooftop of this temple, since 2000 local devotees have been hired to continuously chant *Rām nām* in front of a similarly new Rama shrine. Such a sequence matches the addition of non-stop recitation of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in Salasar during the 1990s, and also the addition of a large Rama temple directly facing Balaji's temple in Mehndipur at the same time. From such a development, I would suggest that this shrine shared in a generalized upgrading of local pilgrimage to a more pan-Indian perspective when visitors from more distant cities started visiting in the 1990s. Certainly, the temple's management has been making every effort to attract visitors. They have opened up a huge *dharmśālā* across the street with rooms for 100 rupees, and they also offer "VIP rooms" for 200 rupees.

The Ratangarh temple's orientation to distant Mehndipur rather than proximate Salasar seemingly frees the *pujārīs* to offer personalized occult services not available in Salasar without the risk of conflicts over possibly misrepresenting Salasar Balaji as a god of exorcism. Since everyone acknowledges that Mehndipur Balaji is amenable to working with faith healers, these *pujārīs* thus benefit from being on the road to Salasar without really duplicating services for the Marwari populace that they share. The success of this temple has resulted in the founding of multiple branch temples that follow a similar protocol. As I was told, the father of the present *pujārī* in Ratangarh had four brothers, and each went on to establish a new shrine of one sort or another in this region in the 1990s. Not coincidentally, all these shrines are also situated near the main pilgrimage roads leading to Salasar. I visited one of these branch sites, Kajla Dham, which is situated in a village near the main road that goes through Hisar, where street signs direct passing pilgrims to Salasar.

I will give a sense of how the ritual protocol in the Ratangarh temple brings together Rama / Balaji and Krishna worship. Although casual visitors can come into the temple at almost any

time of the day, those wishing to treat troubles show up at around 6:30 a.m. to present *ārzi* or petition, similar to what is done at Mehndipur. Early in the morning they also expected to feed the pigeons on the roof as an act of charity to build positive karma. They then undertake a very long day of singing *bhajans* and participating in *ārī* or public prayer four distinct times during the day, under the attentive supervision of the head *pujārī*. During each prayer, all those assembled initially face Balaji's niche and sing, with the men always in front and the women in the back. After 20 minutes, the *pujārī* directs everyone to turn around to Krishna, and so the gender distribution switches, with women in front of Krishna's niche and the men behind. This spatial arrangement may inscribe a divine gender ideology. Due to Balaji's ascetic celibacy, women should not approach him too closely, while Krishna is famously prone to erotic pursuits with women, so he allows them closer. Interspersed throughout the day, devotees walk around the temple 51 times while chanting, "*Hari rām hari rām, rām rām hari hari, hari kṛṣṇa hari kṛṣṇa ...*" They also offer wish coconuts and drink sacred water. Such an involving protocol is necessary to magically rid visitors of their afflictions, whereas at Salasar a simple prayer and a blessing from the god would generally be sufficient.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, while faith healers typically rely on direct magical methods for treating spirit problems, *pujārīs* traditionally uphold the primacy of scriptures as instruments for seeking divine benefits. In the case of the Ratangarh temple, the *pujārīs* preside over standardized prayers for Balaji and Krishna, but at the same time they offer tailored services for possession, making the situation more complex. The head Ratangarh *pujārī* may direct afflicted visitors to pursue certain scriptural therapies within the temple, such as sitting in the corner to read from *Sundarkāṇḍ* (a mainstream Hindu scripture). Or, he may tell them to walk extra *parikramās* while reciting certain mantras (aimed at attacking ghosts). At the entrance to

the temple, a visitor is confronted with wall-length inscriptions of *Bajraṅg bān* and *Sankaṭ mocan hanumānāṣṭak*, two scriptures with occult associations that are used in ridding visitors of spirit possession.<sup>231</sup> I never encountered this degree of scriptural inclusion in visiting any of the faith healers at shrines in towns and villages in the Shekhawati region. I would surmise that the *pujārīs* of the Ratangarh temple started off more like those of Salasar, supplying Marwaris with non-occult rituals for Krishna, but as pilgrimage to both Salasar and Mehndipur increased, the *pujārīs* added faith healing services to meet the demand. I argue that this rise in demand for magical services and the general increase in pilgrimage stimulated the establishment of many faith healing shrines in the region in the late 1990s.<sup>232</sup>

#### 4.4 The Rise of Pilgrimage Culture

##### Models for Foot Pilgrimage to Salasar

One of the core points that I argue in this study is that pilgrimage to Balaji is less a continuous tradition than the modern-day construction of a culture of devotion arising in relation to specific socioeconomic conditions of the 1990s. Following from this, I have suggested that the elements of devotional practice now observed in pilgrimage to Salasar and similar miracle shrines in the region recombine common idioms of popular religious practice. As described in the previous section, once pilgrimage was on the rise, the construction of roadside temples aimed at these devotees further augmented pilgrimage culture. Certainly, there are precedents for devotion to Salasar in shrine worship elsewhere before the 1990s. While many pilgrims come to Salasar by vehicle, the growth of *paidal yātrā*, or pilgrimage on foot, since the mid-to-late 1990s has been the most visible manifestation of Salasar's upward trajectory as a center of pilgrimage. In this section, I will discuss some possible models for this kind of pilgrimage in Salasar, and devotees' own accounts of its historical and social significance.

When I asked *paidal yātrīs* [foot pilgrims] about the rise of foot pilgrimage to Salasar, they most often cited the precedent of *kāñvar yātrā*, a term for the long return journey made on foot from Hardwar to one's hometown in order to bring sacred water from the Ganga River. The protocol for *kāñvar* entails going by vehicle (generally train) to Hardwar and then walking several hundred kilometers back. One only walks from (not to) Hardwar because the ascetic act of walking needs to take place when carrying the sacred water. By contrast, *paidal yātrā* for Balaji only happens in the direction of (not away from) Salasar because that is when one needs to demonstrate faith in the deity for the sake of a wish. Following *darśan*, one is free to go home from Salasar by vehicle. No doubt, *kāñvar yātrā*, like foot pilgrimage to Salasar, has significantly grown in popularity in the last twenty years. Nonetheless, given Hardwar's much longer history as a pilgrimage site, *kāñvar yātrā* may have been a model for walking to Salasar. As at Salasar, this ritual act may serve at the same time as repayment for some divine boon.<sup>233</sup>

The *paidal yātrās* of Salasar and Hardwar both indicate a physical culture of the sort that I had noted in rural Jat life. Although it is not clear to me whether *kāñvar* itself is especially favored among any particular castes, it is overwhelmingly the domain of young men, just like pilgrimage on foot to Salasar. When Brahmins and devotees impress upon the visitor that Balaji currently attracts many thousands of visitors, they neglect to mention that young men are in fact the largest contingent; many of these young pilgrims became my research respondents. Founded in the sadhu traditions of asceticism, the long-distance *yātrās* from Hardwar, and now to Salasar and elsewhere, test one's physical endurance in walking, sometimes even barefoot, for up to several hundred kilometers, which tends to appeal to younger devotees looking for a physical challenge.

Some young men would state that they had not just walked but run to Hardwar and back! Upon closer questioning, this extravagant claim turns out to mean that they took turns running



for a few kilometers at a time while the others in their cohort followed in a personal vehicle (such as a pickup truck), a bit like an Olympic relay. Likewise, running in relay to Salasar has become a popular team project. Young men from the same *kabaddī* team may do this in matching sports uniforms. In this way, respondents would boast to me that they had “run to Salasar” in three days. Apparently, the use of a supporting motor vehicle does not lessen the ritual purity of the event because someone is always running. Relay running could be taken as an example of Jat cooperation that many of my respondents laud. Common to *yātrās* to or from both Hardwar and Salasar, although much more common on the roads to Salasar because of the shorter distance and proximity to the “Bagri Jat” homeland, devotional clubs set up stands where the walking (or running) pilgrims can stop for refreshments and food, and even sleep. The *yātrā* suggests a nascent youth culture in the idiom of male asceticism. This is consistent with the common situation in the village where young men may “hang out” in the all-male domain of the local shrine or hermitage, watched over by a resident ascetic.

Although many women and their families come to Salasar by vehicle, masculine predominance in *paidal yātrā* gives it gendered meaning. In a chapter about pilgrimage to Sabarimala, a shrine in Kerala (southern India) dedicated to a divine male ascetic known as Ayyappa, Caroline and Felipe Osella speak of the development of a “homosocial space” in this pilgrimage in response to “bourgeois neoliberalism” and Persian Gulf economic migration.<sup>234</sup> This pilgrimage tends to be restricted to men because only females of non-childbearing age are permitted entrance to the temple (due to notions of menstrual pollution). The Osellas theorize this pilgrimage as a chance for men to concentrate masculine strength and divine blessings within their bodies by identifying with Ayyappa the “hyper-masculine” celibate deity, while forging solidarity with other men. In the Osellas’ view, Sabarimala brings together the ideals of

renunciate and householder, as men who had previously gone out into the world (such as to the Gulf) now have a chance to reconnect with their peers in the home territory they had left. And, pilgrims gain access to a “mystical” source of power only available to men, which, although homosocial in its ascetic nature, actually reinvigorates their male potency as heterosexual masters in the home.<sup>235</sup>

Pilgrimage to Salasar may similarly involve a gendered performance, insofar as Balaji-Hanuman, like Ayyappa, is famously celibate, concentrates male power, and at least doctrinally (if not always in practice) requires that women be kept at a distance. Informing this ideology is the age-old conviction that asceticism enhances male power through the retention of semen, as a wrestler is expected to do. Could Balaji then serve as a model for the up-and-coming modern Jat male, especially the young man who aspires for the good life in the new economy and affirms his gendered mastery in the home? As I found, devotees commonly cite Balaji’s miracles for helping them to obtain an education and a job, and the god famously facilitates matrimony and children, which implicitly supports the patrilineal home life of his devotees.

Pilgrimage at other shrines in northwestern India, such as the goddess shrines in the Himalayan foothills, might also have served as a model for pilgrimage at Salasar or at least shared in the development of a common pilgrimage culture. Some of my respondents reported having also gone to these goddess shrines.<sup>236</sup> Writing about these shrines, Kathleen Erndl notes that the most famous among them, Vaishno Devi, was already annually attracting 900,000 visitors in 1977, up from 50,000 pilgrims a decade earlier.<sup>237</sup> As at Salasar, *ḍaṇḍavat* [prostration] is practiced at some of the goddess shrines, such as Naina Devi. As pilgrims approach Vaishno Devi and the other goddess shrines, they characteristically invoke the deity with a group shout of “*Jai mātā dī* (or *jī*) [‘Hail, Revered Mother’],” which rhymes with “*Jai*

*bābā kī* [Hail, Revered Lord],” the common invocation at both Salasar and Mehndipur. And, of course, there is the growing popularity of bicycle and motorcycle *yātrās* at all these sites. Young men coming by bicycle often nail to a tree a metal plate brought on the bicycle, inscribed with their place of origin, date, and perhaps an invocation of the deity. Leaving the plate signifies the completion of the vow of bicycling in exchange for a wish granted.<sup>238</sup> These are widespread practices, but they may circulate more easily within northwestern India, possibly starting earlier at Vaishno Devi, because many of the same people go to all these shrines.

### *Faith on the Road*

As numerous Jat pilgrims reported, the wider availability of tractors or other work vehicles has greatly facilitated the rise of *paidal yātrā* to Salasar. It might at first seem odd to think that the acquisition of motor vehicles would lead to an increase in travel on foot, but my respondents explained that tractors can carry provisions, which assures those walking that food and bedding will be available where they stop each day.<sup>239</sup> Others also cited the improvement of roads from Haryana to Rajasthan as a factor in the growth of pilgrimage. Additionally, the rise of volunteer groups setting up *bhaṇḍārās*, or rest stops serving free food at regular intervals along these roads has substantially fueled the growth of a *paidal yātrā* culture. This would seem to make a tractor *yātrā* unnecessary, but arranging food and bedding with transportation for one’s own group of *yātrīs* offers more autonomy, dedicated service, and certainty.

As a referent for the importance of tractors, consider the song I cited a few pages earlier, in which a farmer invites Balaji to visit his field on his tractor. Clearly this machine is something worth showing to a god. Or, note that in the block quote at the outset of this chapter regarding Jat social change, the respondent cited the ability to bring *jugāḍ*—provisions—as a primary reason for the rise of foot pilgrimage to Salasar. And, in this chapter’s opening paragraph I

observed the use of an autorickshaw to carry an audio system to broadcast devotional songs as pilgrims walked to Salasar. All of these vehicles, along with cars and motorcycles, have permitted the rise of new sub-cultures of pilgrimage that celebrate the pleasures of mobility. For instance, a group of young men in the city of Abohar (southern Punjab), where locals “very much believe in Balaji,” reported that they liked to spend their free time driving around town on their motorcycles. One day, one of them got the idea that they should all drive to Salasar as a way of answering Balaji’s “calling” [*usne bulāyā*], so they did. Such motorcycle *yātrās* have now become common as a personalized style of devotion.

Public records show that there was indeed a dramatic increase in the number of tractors during the years of Salasar’s initial growth. In 1980 there were 2,388 tractors in Hisar District (which lies within the zone of foot pilgrimage to Salasar); this had increased to 13,718 by 2000, when *paidal yātrā* was in full swing.<sup>240</sup> As sociologist Surinder Jodhka comments, once farmers acquired tractors, they were able to cultivate a much larger area of land, and produce a surplus of grain. The resulting profit permitted them to buy up more land from other farmers, leading to consolidation of land ownership and the improvement of previously marginal land, with resulting profit.<sup>241</sup> And this change had a social consequence, as Jodhka adds: “Apart from economic benefits, tractors also enhanced the social status of farmers ... in a few cases, status was one of the determining factors in deciding about the purchase of a tractor.”<sup>242</sup> For Jat farmers, having the means to own a tractor would also likely prompt a grateful visit to Balaji, the granter of good fortune (Figure 4-14).

Thinking of vehicle-supported *paidal yātrā* as a marker of rural empowerment, I would adopt the terms “iconicity” and “indexicality,” which Webb Keane uses in his work on the social meaning of material things.<sup>243</sup> In terms of *paidal yātrā*, tractors, trucks, and so forth, could be

read as icons of (that is, indexing) socioeconomic identity (or status). Whereas Keane finds Protestant ambivalence towards materialism as a corrupting influence (perhaps with Weber's frugal Protestant merchants in mind), Balaji's devotees enthusiastically accept tractors and other vehicles as boons earned through faith and good effort. An across-the-board desire for material



Figure 4-14. Pilgrims' tractor in Salasar.

gain brings together otherwise disparate groups. Jats disparage Salasar's priesthood and particularly the Marwari-Brahmin relationship, and Marwaris from distant cities usually feel distaste for walking to Salasar like country-folk, but both parties affirm the material rewards of

devotion to Balaji.<sup>244</sup> Tractors are conceptually equivalent to Marwari plaques at Salasar in announcing the fruits of faith and economic opportunity.

It appears that the availability of vehicles has also helped in the formation of a youth culture in which personal mobility is important, as seen in journeys to Salasar and possibly other shrines. For that matter, foot travel is also obviously part of mobility and autonomy. Many *paidal yātrīs* do not arrive with tractors, motorcycles, or autorickshaws but walk without backup vehicles and sleep and eat at *bhaṇḍārās* along the way. More leisure time at home is also a factor. Some young male *yātrīs* stated that nowadays they more readily go on these long walks to Salasar because there is less work to do on the farm, thanks to technological advances in agriculture. Indeed, better-off farmers hire labor from elsewhere. Also, due to wider public education and higher career expectations, most young people in villages would rather describe themselves as “unemployed” than as farmers. So, a large population of unemployed, educated young adults in towns and villages, ambitious to attain a better future, would gladly join their friends on a jaunt to the miracle shrine in Salasar.

Along the lines of this nascent devotional culture on the road, I would point to Brian Larkin’s work on the role of infrastructure and mass media in the growth of popular culture in Nigeria. With the development of transport infrastructure from colonial times onwards, a national culture took shape and flowed along these pathways.<sup>245</sup> Likewise, we could theorize a popular culture informally encompassing Salasar and other devotional shrines, by way of roadways and faith, that transmit common ideas and practices of religiosity in tandem with the rising flow of pilgrimage traffic. Within twenty years, as Jat and Marwari communities have increasingly come to Salasar, there has been some resulting friction (in Jat complaints of Brahmin-Marwari collusion) but also a broader, shared devotional culture.

## Narratives of the Kali Yug in Jat Pilgrimage

Alongside enthusiasm for pilgrimage to Salasar, and the sense that worshipping Balaji brings benefits, I also heard some ambivalence about the direction that this devotional culture has taken. This perspective draws from the understanding that we are living in the Kali Yug, when humanity is destined to moral degeneracy. A disjuncture becomes apparent in theological explanations of modern-day devotion. On the one hand, pilgrims say that we are living in a time of immorality. But, at the same time many people supposedly feel more faith now than twenty years ago, seemingly in reaction to this degradation, which explains the rise of popular pilgrimage. Thus, the good and the bad are imagined as two sides of the same phenomenon. While many *paidal yātrīs* say that they go in a spirit of enjoyment [*joś*], as befits the celebration of a benevolent deity, others—more likely older respondents—dismissively observe that only half them walk to Salasar (or go by vehicle) for spiritual purposes, while the other half are merely going for a “picnic.”<sup>246</sup> As one *pujārī* at a Hanuman temple in Abohar (southern Punjab) said:

Nowadays a lot of people just go [on foot pilgrimage to Salasar] to have a good time ... it's not a matter of faith ... they just want to have an adventure for ten days. In the old days, people were truly faithful [*pakkā bhakt*]. Twenty-seven years ago, 70 percent of people were happy and 30 percent unhappy, but now 99 percent of people are suffering; it's all messed up. Plus, people are greedy now. If someone makes ten rupees, he [still] won't be satisfied. [For instance,] I don't have a motorcycle, so I think I need one. That's modernity! Before, people said: work, fill your stomach—meaning, just getting by was enough in life, [but now] everyone wants more. [I ask if he's implicating the capitalist [*punjavādī*] or neoliberal system] ... Yes, that's right!<sup>247</sup>

In this mindset, many of those who go to Salasar have lost the ascetic spirit in which sadhus formerly walked to sacred spots. And, it seems, they have forsaken the older Nehruvian socialist ethic of foregoing personal gain for the sake of social (or national) advancement, as they (and the

rest of society) are caught up in individualistic materialism. The idea of just getting by, rather than getting ahead, as a virtue, brings us back to the key socioeconomic transformation in Weber's history of the Protestant ethic. As Weber says, workers formerly only wanted to produce enough to live on—in other words, subsistence—but in the capitalist system, one tries to make a profit from the excess production derived from controlling others' labor.<sup>248</sup> This is the change in Indian society, reflected in religious practice, and exemplified in pilgrimage to Salasar, that this *pujārī* laments.

My study of Balaji suggests that economic change, and more particularly the modern evolution of desire, is a factor in religious devotion, whereas Weber looked to religious culture as the origination of an economic system. But, rather than reify an economics-theology dichotomy, I investigate how Balaji's devotees reconfigure socioeconomic experience as theological truth from the knowledge that the Kali Yuga is unfolding as divine history. From an analytical standpoint, then, the culture of devotion to Balaji might resemble the theologically-informed philosophy of history famously theorized by G.W.F. Hegel, where an underlying divine will progressively makes itself known throughout history.<sup>249</sup> But, whereas Hegel imagined a Christian Day of Judgment at the end, Balaji's devotees see only a return to earlier eras of higher morality, with Balaji as the immortal presence who ties the whole system together.<sup>250</sup>

Related to the *pujārī*'s complaint that many pilgrims are not approaching Balaji with the right frame of mind, some respondents (including not only other *pujārīs* but also pilgrims) voiced the concern that increasing participation of women in pilgrimage to Salasar degraded the morality of the act. As mentioned, Hanuman-Balaji is famously known to be celibate, in keeping with his ascetic practice, and his power hinges on maintaining that status. The modern-day increase in women *yatrīs*, by vehicle if not on foot, challenges not only the deity's pure status but also the



ascetic purity of male *yātrīs*. One young man said that seeing girls [*laḍkiyāñ*] walking on the road would cause him to think “bad thoughts” [*galt soc*] (of desire), which violates the injunction to maintain celibacy in both mind and body on the *yātrā*, since the fulfillment of a wish is at stake. Notwithstanding such dour grumblings, most pilgrims do not think women are wrong to come to Salasar, since women, too, have faith in Balaji-Hanuman in the Kali Yug; rather, the mixing of the sexes seems to be the underlying trouble.<sup>251</sup>

## 4.5 Entering the Domain of Miracles

### Preparations for Salasar

I have put forward a number of explanations to account for the development of *paidal yātrā* within the broader backdrop of a hypothesized trend across India towards making devotion more public. Some of the manifestations of this trend are: colossal Hanuman statues, broader participation in pilgrimages, a rise in public exorcism ceremonies (described further in later chapters), increasing numbers of faith healers setting up new shrines, the staging of extravagant large-scale religious song performances, and so on. As Jat pilgrims generally concurred, before two decades back they predominantly worshiped Hanuman in the home more than in public shrines, so the act of pilgrimage to Salasar to pray to Balaji is arguably the ultimate step in a process of turning domestic or local worship into a public event. In this final section, then, I will discuss the phenomenon of pilgrimage to Salasar, particularly on foot, as a regional manifestation of a larger societal transformation.

The starting point for the *yātrā* is preparation within the hometown. The main occasion for *paidal yātrā* is the ten-day Dashehra festival in October. Ten days before embarking, locals from the same neighborhoods or other associations (such as sports teams) organize as a *samiti* [committee] or *paidal saṅgh*, in other words a walking club.<sup>252</sup> Members will go around the

neighborhood to secure promises to sponsor the effort. One person might give 100 kilograms of wheat, or up to 5,000 rupees according to ability; even those not going may contribute for those who are. Funds left over after Dashehra are used for projects to benefit the home area. A vital symbol of the group that must be brought on the journey is the triangular red flag depicting an image of Hanuman in gold outline. Manufactured at home from purchased cloth, the flag must be kept upright at all times, so that only the bottom of the stick portion touches the ground. On the road, it may be passed between members, but should always be displayed at the front of the group. The flag encapsulates wishes for the wellbeing of anyone still at home who may be ill, or more broadly represents the group's faith in Balaji. Once the group has gone into Balaji's temple in Salasar, the flag will be left there. Some pilgrims claimed that no other preparations for the walk were needed, but others said they might recite the sacred *Hanumān cālīsā* and perhaps even perform a weekly fast [*vrāt*] on each Tuesday, Hanuman's sacred day.

Before going on the *yātrā*, one may make a vow to carry out some devotional act if the god will grant a request. Different individuals vow to perform particular acts of devotion according to their own sense of what is within their capacity. Also, they may make it long before leaving for Salasar, immediately before, or even at the temple in Salasar itself. Even months before going to Salasar, a devotee might make a vow at home to Balaji in conjunction with reciting *Hanumān cālīsā*, stating that if the wish is granted he will come to Salasar by foot at the time of Dashehra, and perform *pet pālāniyā* or some other act. In Ann Gold's study of pilgrims in Rajasthan in the early 1980s, she notes the importance that devotees place on seeing some divine evidence—"proof" [*parcyā*]-before they would expect to perform the vow in repayment.<sup>253</sup> This custom may have evolved since the time of her research, as many *paidal yātrīs* now perform acts of austerity such as walking to Salasar before they ask for the boon. *Yātrīs*

informed me that this is due to anxiety about whether the deity will perceive that they are making a request with sufficient sincerity and effort. This could also reflect the common view that there is currently more competition for jobs, and perhaps more distress in general, which raises the stakes in getting a divine response.<sup>254</sup>

*Paidal yātrī* groups will plan on taking anywhere from several days to a week or more to get to Salasar. During the Dashehra festival, young, mostly Jat volunteers from villages and cities in the “Bagri Jat” region typically man the roadside *bhaṇḍārās*. During Dashehra, these *bhaṇḍārās* are set up both at roadside temples and at numerous other locations on the roads, independent of temples. Villagers stake out a site for their *bhaṇḍārā* and return there each year. A large *bhaṇḍārā* might require 60 men (as women are not allowed to join) and funding of 50,000 to 200,000 rupees collected from the local devotees, which not only supports provisions but also an audio system for a devotional “disco” (Figure 4-15).<sup>255</sup> Some young men volunteer in one *bhaṇḍārā* for a night or two and then walk for a day until arriving at another, volunteering there, and then move to other *bhaṇḍārās* until they reach Salasar. Like the relay running and tractor-enhanced walking that I described earlier, this is another example of innovative devotion in line with Jat cooperation in a burgeoning youth culture that stresses freedom of mobility.

Jat narratives of caste solidarity in devotion, played out in pilgrimage, lead me to ask whether Victor Turner’s famous theory of *communitas*, or spontaneous societal bonding in pilgrimage, would have analytical usefulness here.<sup>256</sup> As Turner put it, the social structure of mundane life is replaced by “anti-structure” when everyday competition gives way to a sentiment of meeting challenges together on the road. In the case of pilgrimage to Salasar, Jats normally walk there in groups, and some volunteer at *bhaṇḍārās*, both of which are clearly cooperative (hence *communitas*-like) activities, but they would insist that this exemplifies typical Jat social structure,

not the effects of pilgrimage. Aside from the services of the *bhaṇḍārās* and roadside temples, I did not observe explicit cooperation between caste groups, nor even much socializing among strangers. Shared enthusiasm for Balaji seemed to be contained within each group. In this predominantly young crowd, one's allegiance to one's group of friends—a kind of clique—



Figure 4-15. A *bhaṇḍārā* on the way to Khatu Shyam (similar to the journey to Salasar).

undermines the potential for bonding with strangers. The situation is no different for pilgrims arriving with families by vehicle. So, I would say that *communitas* is not really evident in the way that Turner meant it, but more as a performance of preexisting social structure.<sup>257</sup>

Anthropologist Alan Morinis' work on pilgrimage in Bengal, carried out in the 1980s, provides another useful comparison. He argues that Turner had mistakenly read pilgrims' psychological or emotional satisfaction in the journey as the dissolution of social structure.<sup>258</sup> As a corrective, Morinis theorizes cultural "roadmaps"—a "semantic approach," he calls it—whereby pilgrims are culturally predisposed, without fully being aware of all the reasons, to seek out places of divine power.<sup>259</sup> In this endeavor, normative social structure is maintained rather than dissolved. Morinis' idea sounds to me like a culturally-situated update of Eliade's theory of the mystical return to a primeval divine power source through religious ritual. Morinis seems to rely on more or less stable (or slowly changing) cultural values of sanctity as a driver of pilgrimage. By contrast, I emphasize contemporary pilgrimage to Salasar as a pragmatic development of the neoliberal era. I have suggested that pilgrimage to Salasar not only permits new devotional forms, but also supports the growth of new sub-cultures in line with Jat social narratives.<sup>260</sup> And, of course, in Salasar itself, pilgrimage is a dynamic business that involves negotiations between Brahmins and patrons.

### Arriving in Salasar

Throughout the year, most pilgrims try to schedule their journey to arrive at Salasar on the evening before Tuesday or Saturday, or the full moon, so that they can go to Balaji's temple early the next morning on the auspicious day before returning home by bus or other vehicle (but never walking home, since they have already performed their vow or preliminary act of devotion). Because of the modern workweek, Sunday morning has effectively become another popular occasion for prayer to the god.<sup>261</sup> Middle-class families are likely to eat at any of Salasar's food shops, which are all owned by the *pujāris* and offer the same fixed assortment of food at a single price (70 rupees in 2011). Groups of pilgrims arriving from villages will

probably cook their own meals in their rest house. During the night, they may sing devotional songs [*bhajans*] in anticipation of their morning meeting with God, as in the following passage heard from a group of villagers from Nagaur District (Rajasthan):

Hail, Son of the Wind! I shall devote myself to Balaji [*main vārī jāūn bālājī*]... Salasar is your splendid home ... playing drums, I shall devote myself to Balaji ... Baba, pilgrims come from far lands ... Hail to you! Das Mohan [Mohan Das, the sadhu] prayed [to you], Balaji ... Taking these many steps, I shall go to Balaji ... Red body, smeared red ... red langur [monkey], Bajr[ang Bali] with the fearsome body, trampler of demons, hail, hail, hail, Monkey God! You who ate the sun, our magnificent Balaji, your presence is paradise ... Our Balaji – I shall come into your presence. ... Your Salasar Dham [shrine] is incomparable, Beloved One ... Mehndipur Dham is incomparable, Salasar Dham is [also] incomparable, I shall come into our Balaji's presence ... Exalted One, your power, your image, along with Rama, Lakshmana, and Sita, will stay in my heart—God King! Salasar Baba, make our troubles go far away ... Beloved Hanuman, make our troubles go far away ... The world wouldn't move if it weren't for Rama; Rama couldn't take action if it weren't for Hanuman ... Since I read the *Rāmāyaṇa* there's something I've realized: Ravana couldn't have been killed if it weren't for Rama; Lanka wouldn't have burned if it weren't for Hanuman; the world wouldn't move if it weren't for Rama; Rama couldn't take action if it weren't for Hanuman ... Sita wouldn't have been found if it weren't for Rama; he wouldn't have known [of her whereabouts] if it weren't for Hanuman. Listen to the story of Sita's abduction, listen to the tale of Shyam Sundar [Krishna] ... Let the public praise Rama, let Brahmins praise Hanuman ... Rama wouldn't be happy if it weren't for Hanuman, Hanuman wouldn't be happy if it weren't for Ram ...<sup>262</sup>

This *bhajan* is one of many that might be heard among pilgrims in Salasar; it makes a good illustration for examining how devotees nowadays imagine Balaji. The song incorporates some references specific to the locale. For instance, the singers invoke the title of the Rajasthani film, *Vārī jāūn bālājī* (1990), which is the earliest modern-day documentation of devotion to Salasar Balaji known to me. The film centers on a childless couple that prays to Balaji for a child, and are then blessed with three children, but they forget to show gratitude by returning to the temple, and so various misfortunes arise until the widowed mother realizes her error twenty years later. Returning to the temple, she exclaims that Balaji is the true savior of the Kali Yuga before dying

in front of his image in the main temple. The inclusion of the title song in the *bhajan* may imply that the singers are announcing their fulfillment of their devotional obligation to return to him.

Also on the local level, the song refers to the sant Mohan Das, who was Balaji's original devotee, and founder of his shrine. This *bhajan* also interestingly juxtaposes Salasar with Mehndipur, the other major shrine of Balaji in Rajasthan, which I will discuss further in Chapter 5. Making Salasar a peer of Mehndipur (both being "incomparable") seems to work in Salasar's favor, since Mehndipur in fact gets appreciably more pilgrims than Salasar. In so doing, the song treats them as two halves of a larger realm of devotion to Balaji commensurate with pan-Indian Hanuman.

At the same time, this *bhajan* uses verbal cues to index popular knowledge of the beloved pan-Indian Hanuman, such as (1) eating the sun (a story from his childhood); (2) having a body smeared with red *sindūr* [a mixture of colored powder and ghee], an allusion to a story of his devotion to Rama; (3) the mutual dependency between Rama and Hanuman; and (4) the critical role Hanuman played in destroying Lanka and its demon king, Ravana. In this passage, Rama is also equated with Krishna, the other major *avatār* in Vaishnava doctrine, which again points to mainstream Hindu scripture.<sup>263</sup> Just as I had noted that Salasar and Mehndipur are rhetorically accorded parity, so too this song asserts the equivalence of Rama and Krishna. Certain divine relationships are thus maintained. The primeval setting of the epics is transported into historical experience when the narrator recalls reading the *Rāmāyaṇa*. This makes the song convincing as a personal testimony of faith.

### Audience with God

The group of pilgrims I had met at the *dharmśālā* set out on the 500-meter walk to the temple at dawn, when the god's power was strongest. Barefoot, they sang praises to Balaji with occasional references to Rama and Krishna. They also sang in the pattern of call and response

earlier mentioned in connection to Vaishno Devi and other popular pilgrimage shrines. One among the group exhorted them with a statement, whereupon the others would utter the same rejoinder each time:

[1] Come on, all! ... [2] Hail, Balaji [*Jai bālājī!*] ... [1] Say it loud! ... [2] Hail, Balaji!  
... [1] Say it with love! ... [2] Hail, Balaji! ... [1] Everyone say it! ... [2] Hail,  
Balaji!<sup>264</sup>

In this case, the pilgrims stated “*Jai bālājī!*” in the same rhythm as “*Jai mātā dī*” at Vaishno Devi. Balaji’s devotees also frequently chant “*Jai bābā kī*” [essentially, “Praise the Lord”] in moments of devotional intensity. “*Jai bābā kī*” is the preferred group chant in support of those devotees who repeatedly prostrate themselves in the street for the final stretch to the temple; it is also the normal chant at Mehndipur for driving out possessing spirits. The choice of phrase matches up to social identity; the typical pilgrim refers to Balaji as “Baba,” a title also commonly used for sadhus and faith-healing gurus. By contrast, Salasar’s Brahmins routinely state “*Jai śrī bālājī kī*” [Hail Glorious Balaji] upon meeting and departing, and when answering the telephone, in recognition of this clan’s shared closeness to the deity.

Just before entering Salasar Balaji’s temple, the pilgrims that I accompanied purchased *prasād* sweets to hand over to the *pujārīs*, who would sanctify it before the deity. A portion of the *prasād* would be returned to the devotees as the essence of the divine. They also purchased coconuts for making wishes. With offerings in hand, and the flag of Hanuman that they had brought from home, they assembled at the entrance of the temple and chanted:

I have brought this flag for you! Hail Bajrangbali [Hanuman]!<sup>265</sup> ... Hail Rama, hail Rama, hail, hail Rama!<sup>266</sup>



When the pilgrims had entered into Balaji’s inner shrine, they handed their *prasād* to a *pujārī*. Those wanting to make a request to the god also asked the *pujārīs* on duty to take their coconuts. Because of their coconuts’ particular purpose, they are known as “wish coconuts” [*manokāmanā kā nāriyal* or *mannat kā nāriyal*]. The normal request to the *pujārī* would be: “This is my coconut in application [for a wish to be granted]; please give it to Balaji and then return it to me.”<sup>267</sup> When the devotees had made this request, the *pujārī* took each coconut, passed them close to the image of Balaji, and then returned them to the devotees after tying a red string around each of them.<sup>268</sup> This action, known as “binding the coconut” [*nāriyal bāndhnā*], signifies that some part of the spiritual essence of the devotee has been transferred into the coconut, which allows Balaji to evaluate the devotee’s soul.

Standing before Balaji, each person who had come to make a wish then held their respective coconut while softly or silently stating: “Balaji, this is my wish ...”<sup>269</sup> These wishes would typically include a vow to carry out some act of devotion in repayment for their fulfillment. Following this request, the devotees then raised their hands in reverence to Balaji and proceeded to perform *parikramā* or circumambulation around the god’s inner cell. As they exited the inner shrine, they each rubbed a finger in sticky red *sindūr* smeared on the wall, and then daubed it on their own or each other’s foreheads as a mark of the deity’s blessing. As a final step, they used the red string around their coconuts to attach them to a wall (or in other cases a tree) set up nearby for this purpose, while saying, “Balaji fulfill my wish ...”<sup>270</sup> It is commonly said that the coconut will later fall to the ground when the wish has been granted, which could take months or years. While in the temple, the pilgrims arranged for one of the barbers employed there to perform *muṇḍan* or cutting the hair of one member’s young son. This was a way of offering thanks to Balaji for the child’s survival while requesting blessings for his future wellbeing.

Once a wish comes true, the devotees express gratitude to the deity by following through on the vow and returning to the temple. Those who have sufficient financial resources might perform *savāmanī*, in which Brahmins and possibly other pilgrims at the temple are ritually fed, as is typical at many temples. Insofar as the coconut is a material representation of oneself—and presents the wish brought to the deity—it magically submits the devotee’s quality of faith to the judgment of the deity in consideration of the request.<sup>271</sup> Following *darśan*, the pilgrims that I had accompanied returned to the *dharmśālā* for a meal of Rajasthani food (as they would not have eaten before *darśan*), which included the *prasād* consecrated in the temple that morning. This regional food, one of the pilgrims noted, is what Balaji and villagers most favor, namely *dāl bāṭī* [roasted wheat balls and yogurt sauce] and *cūrmā* [a kind of Rajasthani sweet, mentioned earlier]. Although, as I have said, pilgrimage to Salasar has greatly expanded in recent years, the various steps of worshipping Balaji and making wishes follow a protocol that is now more or less standard throughout popular Hindu shrines of northwestern India, if not beyond.

## 4.6 A Culture of Wish-Making

### How to Successfully Make a Wish

In Chapter 2 I described the kinds of wishes that Marwari pilgrims reported to me. Are Jat pilgrims any different? I heard more reports of wishes from Jats than Marwaris, but these were predominantly of the “education and job” variety. Marwaris more often told stories of businesses turned around, ending in prosperity. Devotees more often provided only cursory accounts of miracles, but this was enough for me to get a sense of their interests. Brahmins tended to provide the most in-depth stories, no doubt because they are particularly inclined to promote the powers of the god they represent. Jats and others in villages also often reported miracles from spontaneously invoking Balaji in times of trouble. Away from the temple, urban

Marwaris were the most likely to avoid sharing their wishes, typically saying that they should not be disclosed; I suspected this to be an indication that they felt some shame in revealing “irrational” wishes, as discussed in Chapter 2. Some pilgrims spoke of wishing for world peace, which seemed like a way of deflecting my question. Generally, if a wish does not come true, it indicates some deficiency of the devotee, such as bad karma from prior misbehavior [*pāp*], but the timeline for completion can go on for years, so patience is needed. On the other hand, faith healers promise more immediate results. When those results are not obtained as expected, healers typically accuse clients of some dishonesty or prior bad behavior, bringing some spiritual pollution, as a way of explaining their persistent ill health, domestic problems, or business failures.

The devotional literature sold to pilgrims in Salasar’s shops includes many testimonials from those who have discovered Balaji’s powers. They provide idealized, thorough accounts of what it takes to make a miracle, and what one must do in the aftermath, as in this example:

My name is Sunil Kumar Varma ... I’m a resident of Hamirpur District in Uttar Pradesh. I had come to see my uncle [*māmā*] in Jaipur [in Rajasthan] ... he was showing me religious sites [in the area], so we planned to visit Salasar Balaji. When we got there, I saw that people were making wishes, and those whose prayers had come true were making offerings of *prasād*. So ... I made a wish too, with full belief [*viśvās*]. I had been looking for work, with exams and interviews, but was frustrated [*pareśān*]. I prayed to Balaji: ‘If you would bestow your grace on me, I will make an offering to you when I receive my first paycheck.’ ... I had heard many stories about Balaji’s miracles from devotees’ own mouths, but I hadn’t personally experienced any miracle. It was Tuesday [Hanuman’s sacred day] when I arrived home. A letter for me had arrived from a bank where I had previously applied for a position. This was a surprise, as I had been disappointed because the interviewer had not been satisfied with my answers. But, when I saw the letter in my hand, I jumped for joy and shouted, ‘Hail Balaji!’ This was the first miracle in my life from him. A month later, after my first paycheck, I went with my mother and father to Salasar Balaji, and with much feeling I offered the paycheck at his feet. [Now] every year I come with my family ...<sup>272</sup>

As in the Marwari story of pilgrimage that I recounted in Chapter 2, faith is critical to the devotee's success. The upshot of the miracle is that the supplicant becomes a permanent devotee, engages his whole family in devotion together, and presumably makes some donation (his paycheck, in this case) in the name of Balaji. This sort of gratitude is what the mother in *Vārī jāūñ bālājī* had neglected, to her great detriment. These miracle stories might be taken to support Nanda's argument (in Chapter 2) that Indian society is actively re-enchanting itself in the neoliberal setting after some decades of secular (in the Western sense) public culture. But, we might look to the work of Jean and John Comaroff on "millennial capitalism" as an alternative to Nanda's preoccupation with Indian cultural exceptionalism. The Comaroffs suggest that magical thinking is in fact on the rise throughout much of the globalized capitalist world, so what Nanda is describing need not be made specific to India. Essentially, a consumerist culture produces an appetite not only for materialism but also for cultish services.<sup>273</sup>

It also strikes me that Nanda's critique of contemporary Hinduism borrows from Western Protestant discourses about miracles in post-biblical Christian life. Robert Mullin comments that since the Protestant Reformation, the miraculous has been suspect, as the age of miracles had supposedly ended with the age of scripture.<sup>274</sup> But, an underlying tension has persisted as Christian believers continue to anachronistically report such occurrences. In the Hindu theological context, the equivalent of an "age of miracles" could be construed as morally superior earlier eras, when life spans were longer and people upheld the universal dharma. As the immortal deity who lasts through all these eras, Balaji is the one best suited to maintain a culture of miracles during the subsequent Kali Yuga. Speaking from a Western rationalist perspective, Nanda seemingly dismisses this theological explanation for the rise of popular deities of miracles, instead seeing devotionism as an aberration in modern society. The Hindu

believer would say that we need these deities and their powers now more than ever because our lives otherwise lack the inherent goodness of ancient times.

In contrast to the education / job and business wishes that men most commonly cited, I would mention some variations on this kind of wish, as cited by women, and also those (of either gender) who spontaneously invoke the deity in moments of need outside of Balaji's temple. Two young Jat women in Fatehabad told me that women coming to Salasar allegedly make "selfish" and "emotional" wishes, by which they apparently meant something more like "empathetic" wishes, for the sake of their children and husbands (which would not seem selfish to a Western researcher).<sup>275</sup> Related to these domestic concerns is arguably the most basic domestic wish of all—to have a child, which Balaji, like many deities of miracles, famously grants.<sup>276</sup> The film *Vārī jāūñ bālājī* mentioned earlier depicts Balaji's ability to grant children as the chief evidence of his magical abilities. Wishing for a child probably amounts to asking for a son, given the well-known traditional preference for sons in this part of India.<sup>277</sup> Although not normally talked about due to government legislation against prenatal sex determination, divine intervention might even be sought in specifying the sex of the unborn child. In Chapter 7, I note an instance where prayer to Babosa, a manifestation of Balaji, was said to have facilitated changing the sex of a fetus from female to male.

A second kind of wish, typically recounted in Jat villages, involves being saved from accidents. This is obviously different from wishes made in Balaji's temple, which are premeditated and focus on ongoing problems. One man in the village of Chhapar (near Salasar) said that he was saved from an impending bus accident after visiting Salasar, when he heard Balaji's voice in the bus station telling him to wait for the next bus. Another man said he invoked the god when his motorcycle slipped in the rain, miraculously saving him from injury.

A third man from the same village prayed to Balaji when it started raining as he was taking a wagon of hay home; the hay miraculously stayed dry. One schoolboy in the village of Banmandori, Sirsa District (southern Haryana) said that his family's buffalo stopped giving milk, but recovered after they prayed to Balaji. On the whole, it often seems from such reports that Balaji's main reason for being is indeed to answer wishes in times of need. Devotees commonly mention that if it were not for the god's ability to grant miracles large and small, his popularity would soon wane. This prompts us to ask, then, whether the need to make wishes has grown in social importance over the last twenty or so years, presumably indicated in Balaji's heightened public stature. Devotees seem to feel that this is indeed the case. Their rationale for saying this, as we might guess, is that the Kali Yug drives people to seek Balaji and similar deities to substantially counteract misfortunes. These troubles of the world are more evident nowadays, due to rapid socioeconomic change, so it follows that deities offering miracles are in greater demand.

### *Keeping the Vow*

In this sub-section, I will discuss *pet pālāniyā* ["stomach touching" in the Rajasthani dialect] also known as *ḍaṇḍavat*, or ritual prostrations on the ground (Figure 4-16). At Salasar, some devotees perform this as they approach the temple of Balaji; it is known at other wish-granting shrines as well. This act could be the fulfillment of a vow or a demonstration to the deity of one's intense sincerity before presenting a wish. Either way, as a public act of devotion it has become emblematic of pilgrimage to Salasar. It is chiefly performed on a one-kilometer stretch of the narrow street leading from Salasar's Anjani Mata Temple, where Balaji's mother by that name is honored, to Balaji's own temple. In general, *pet pālāniyā* is only practiced by those who have arrived at Salasar on foot, not by those who come by vehicle, presumably because such

prostrations are a physical extension of the act of walking as a demonstration of faith. As mentioned, the large majority of those performing *pet pālāniyā* are young men—the same ones walking from the village—but I occasionally observed young women and older men doing it too. In any group of *paidal yātrīs*, only a portion—perhaps one or two individuals, or sometimes half



Figure 4-16. Prostrations on the road near Balaji’s temple in Salasar.

a dozen or more—will actually perform *pet pālāniyā*, while the rest of the cohort will walk alongside them and encourage them with exhortations in the name of Balaji. In the way it is performed, *pet pālāniyā* exemplifies a “traditionalization” of Salasar’s devotional culture in the manner of pilgrimage to various other miracle shrines. Granted, it may have been performed at

Salasar on some minimal level since old times, but all my respondents affirmed that it has only been widely practiced here within the last decade.

The procedure of *pet pālāniyā* goes as follows. After emerging from prayers in the Anjani Mata temple, devotees launch into prostrations. At the starting point, they may be approached by professional drummers who come from Delhi and elsewhere to offer sound accompaniment for hire along the way to the temple. While the prostrating devotee is in a standing position, an accompanying devotee carrying a bag of red chalk, the sacred color of Balaji, will etch a chalk line on the road several feet ahead, in the direction of the god's temple. The prostrating devotee will then slightly crouch and lunge forward so that he is lying on his stomach on the road. At the same time, acknowledging Balaji as the ultimate arbiter in the fulfillment of wishes, the accompanying group of walkers may exclaim “*Jai bābā kī!*” Each time the devotee extends himself on the ground he may rock his whole body ever so slightly to each side before settling into stillness, as if reflecting for a moment on the wish at hand.

After the prostrating devotee has extended himself on the road, he will reach slightly forward with one arm towards the red chalk line in the direction of the temple. He then makes a small circular twist of the hand in a clockwise direction. Once the prostrating devotee has fully extended his arm, he will lift himself up, take four steps forward, and dive forward once again. Alternatively, a devotee may continuously roll sideways rather than lunging. Individual styles of prostration are possible within these basic postures. While many devotees, weary from the long journey, move exceedingly slowly, some young men make a show of athletic strength, carrying out their lunges in much the same form as the calisthenics that they would practice in the rural or working-class urban gyms found throughout northwestern India. In those settings, a poster of a



muscular Hanuman typically serves as a model of chaste masculinity for youngsters engaged in bodybuilding.

No doubt adding to the appeal of *pet pālāniyā* for many young men, it also has an element of physical danger. Heavy, slow-moving camel carts, cars pushing aside the street crowd, and unobservant pedestrians all present hazards on the way to the temple. For this reason, each prostrating devotee is typically closely watched by at least one spotter-like companion, while the rest of the devotees may raucously dance in the street. One among the group, probably in front, will be carrying the red triangular flag emblazoned with the image of the monkey god, and will present it when they enter the inner shrine. Although at quiet moments, such as very late at night, a prostrating devotee may be able to move slowly and stop to rest at will, during the daylight “rush” the road to Balaji’s temple is more often a scene of many dozens of prostrating bodies each rising and falling in their own time. Bodily logjams frequently occur as hands from behind slap onto the heels of those ahead of them.

In some cases, a prostrating devotee will hold a coconut in his hand as he lunges, and then place it ahead of him on the asphalt road when he extends his arm, before picking it up again. This action suggests that the devotee expects to make a wish, rather than keeping a vow after a wish that has already come true. As one young man explained to me while sitting in near-exhaustion on the roadside between prostrations, “From this, the desire will be fulfilled!” [*Is se icchā pūrī ho jāegī*]. Prostration strengthens the likelihood of success. This practice follows the generally accepted model of the ascetic who wins boons from a deity through the practice of chastity and austerities. Similarly, Mohan Das, the sadhu who historically became Balaji’s first priest received religious authority as a boon from the deity after years of devotional austerities. These acts of austerity, the physical trials of *pet palāniya*, and pushing the coconut on the ground

in the direction of Balaji's temple, all signal to the god the devotee's strong desire for personal transformation through the miracle.

### *Bhupendra: A Case Study of Transformation*

In the setting of rising religiosity and economic ambition across India, miracles have become a reasonable strategy for getting ahead fast. Balaji, whose ability to provide wealth and happiness has been proven, is thus in demand. Coming to the god after he has bestowed a miracle completes a process set into motion when the wish was first expressed. In this closing section, I will illustrate that process with the case of Bhupendra, a Jat youth who arrived at my *dharmśālā* one afternoon during the Dashehra festival with around 20 young men from his village 220 kilometers away in the district of Sirsa, Haryana. Their arrival at the *dharmśālā* was plainly imminent when a tractor pulling a trolley piled high with blankets and food provisions pulled through the front gate into a parking area already packed with pickup trucks and white cars.

Announcing their arrival with cries of “*Jai bābā kī!*” a group of *paidal yātrīs* soon marched into the courtyard. By this time, their support staff was already rolling dough into *capātis* [flatbread] to be thrown onto a burner. The group had reserved two rooms in the *dharmśālā* consisting of mattresses laid side by side on the length of the floor. This party came every year out of a conviction that Balaji was their main deity. But for one of them, Bhupendra, 18, the visit had extra significance. After 6 months of waiting, he had been admitted for training into the air force, an outcome that his companions spoke of as a miracle. In gratitude for his success, he would pay the god a visit. In fulfillment of that vow, I was told, he had come prostrating on the ground the whole distance from his village, surrounded by his cheering peers and stopping only

to rest at night. As he recalled, each time his spotter would etch a red chalk-line in front of him as he stood facing the long road to Salasar, he would silently express his gratitude to Balaji.

Throughout the *yātrā*, Bhupendra performed *pūjā* for Balaji before each meal. Before we could eat, Bhupendra assembled the necessary ingredients for his *pūjā* on a metal plate: some freshly cooked yellow lentils; two *capātis*; a small oil lamp which he had lit for the occasion; five lighted, smoking incense sticks stuck into a lump of sweetened dough; a matchbook; a tiny, two inch-long edition of *Hanumān cālīsā*; and, nearby on the floor, a plastic bottle of water. Sitting with hands pressed together in the *añjalī mudrā* while reciting *Hanumān cālīsā* by heart, as he had been doing twice a day before each meal, Bhupendra sat facing this plate, and behind it a small-framed picture of bearded Salasar Balaji propped up on a red cushion (Figures 4-17 and 4-18).

Also in Bhupendra's gaze, leaning against the wall in the corner of the room, was the group's large triangular red flag of Hanuman that they had brought from home. After around fifteen minutes Bhupendra had finished reciting *Hanumān cālīsā*. He picked up the lighted lamp and slowly waved it in the circular motion of *ārtī* [worship] in front of the small, framed image of Balaji. He then broke off a piece of *capāti*, dipped it into the lentils on the plate, and held it up to the image to feed the god. Following this, he placed the piece of food on the plate, and repeated the process with one more piece. Only after this could we all begin eating.<sup>278</sup> In the late afternoon, the *pet pālāniyā* devotees were inching towards the temple. The narrow street was strewn with trash and cow dung. The length of the street from Anjani Mata's Temple to Balaji's Temple was lined with improvised booths blasting Bollywood-like devotional song-and-dance videos from monitors that shopkeepers had set up to pull in customers from the mostly young crowd, who impatiently pushed their way forward like battering rams. Some villagers

hovered by one booth, telling a clerk to insert a CD into the player, and then another, before they would decide on one that they liked. The total effect was an aural medley of competing disco-devotional CDs and dozens of simultaneously flashing screens in every direction. Passing motorcycles and cars impatiently tooted their horns as they pushed their way through, while



Figure 4-17. A prayer before prostrations in Salasar Balaji.

rowdy boys blew noisemakers. Most of the chattering masses scarcely noticed the solemn line of prostrating devotees.

Like most of those prostrating, Bhupendra was overwhelmed by the sensory overload. Perhaps this was the sort of liminal moment that Turner had in mind, when an African tribal





this vignette, I bring this chapter to a close, having surveyed the historical rise, and current practice, of pilgrimage to Salasar.

Following from what my respondents told me, I have noted that foot pilgrimage in particular, although long known at shrines in general, only became substantial at Salasar in the later 1990s, at least several years after Marwaris from distant cities began to acclaim Balaji as a granter of miracles. This chapter therefore chronologically completes the narrative arc started in Chapters Two and Three, which documented the formative role of the Brahmin-Marwari relationship of patronage in building an infrastructure of pilgrimage. As numerous Jat pilgrims asserted, the development of such an infrastructure—*bhaṇḍārās* along the roads, roadside temples on the way to Salasar, and *dharmśālās* in Salasar itself—also substantially contributed to the rise of a pilgrimage culture centered on Balaji. As I have also mentioned, Jat caste advancement, particularly in the domain of economic development, as evidenced in the wider ownership of tractors, all made long journeys a feasible choice of action for demonstrating devotion to a deity who famously grants miracles.

On top of all this, just as Marwaris were seeking advantages within the changing urban economy—all the more so as those who owned factories or other establishments were benefiting from the lowering of taxes and tariffs—so too farmers and average townspeople were increasingly drawn into public enthusiasm for getting ahead in the new economy. This imperative seems to have had particular resonance for young men seeking jobs, which would permit them to move beyond traditional livelihoods, such as farming. In the case of Bhupendra, Balaji offers an expedient towards achieving that aim. With the construction of Balaji-oriented temples in villages and along the roads to Salasar, in the years after the Marwari discovery of Balaji's miracles, the god's devotional domain was thereby expanded to include surrounding

areas where he may have been known since ancient times but had not much been visited until the 1990s. Having established the basic sequence of events that brought Salasar Balaji to fame in the 1990s, I will now turn to the other Balaji—Mehndipur Balaji. Already locally famous before the Marwaris entered the picture at Salasar, Mehndipur stands somewhat apart from Salasar, due to its location to the east of the Shekhawati region. And yet, as I have noted, devotees often compare the two Balajis. The following chapter, then, will attempt to integrate these two Balajis into a single narrative

## Chapter 4 Notes

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<sup>201</sup> “*Jāt log keval hanumān kī pūjā karte heiṅ. Pūrṇimā ke dīn, jis kī bhaiṅs hai, usko khīr carāte. Hanumān jāt thā ...*” The respondent’s other comments were in English. Interview 12-2c-2010.

<sup>202</sup> Interview 2-6-2011.

<sup>203</sup> Freed and Freed (1998), p. 166.

<sup>204</sup> The Freeds do mention that some Brahmins read *Hanumān cālīsā* and fast each Tuesday, the god’s sacred day, which is also common in villages I visited. Of religious practices relating to wells and irrigating fields, nothing is said. See Freed and Freed (1998), p. 178.

<sup>205</sup> “*Hanumān mazbūt hai, jāt bhī mazbūt hai.*” Interview 7-14-2011.

<sup>206</sup> Alter, pp. 198-213, discusses wrestlers’ worship of Hanuman. There may be a few Jats in Banaras, but Alter did not observe them involved in wrestling. On the other hand, Alter notes that the Yadav caste predominates among wrestlers, and that this caste has a longstanding association with both the military and milk production, like the Jats of Haryana. For this discussion, see Alter, pp. 45-46.

<sup>207</sup> Interview 12-10-2010.

<sup>208</sup> Interview 2-20-2010.

<sup>209</sup> Freed and Freed (2002), p. 263.

<sup>210</sup> The difference between the two sides can be summed up thus: a Jat schoolteacher in Salasar once explained to me that “J-A-T” is an English acronym for “justice-action-truth.” On the other hand, one of my Hindi teachers at the American Institute of Indian Studies in Jaipur stated that the word stands for “just-avoid-them”!

<sup>211</sup> Pawar, p. 82.

<sup>212</sup> For some examples of Jat histories, see Datta on Jat social emancipation and Hailes on the Jat contribution to the Indian military.

<sup>213</sup> Dumont, pp. 33-61, discusses the intersections between the two systems of purity and authority, which together constitute hierarchy.

<sup>214</sup> Mayer, p. 33.

<sup>215</sup> Gupta (2005), p. 139.

<sup>216</sup> Owens (2000), p. 702.

<sup>217</sup> Interview 9-28-2010.

<sup>218</sup> In the introduction to a handbook on Bagri, Gusain gives a very brief description of the geographic domain of this language; p. 1.

<sup>219</sup> Wilson makes this distinction throughout this gazetteer; see, for instance, p. 79.

<sup>220</sup> We might justifiably choose to describe this kind of image as “*svayambhū*.” However, none of my respondents ever used this term, whereas many indeed used “*svarūp*.” Use of the term “*svarūp*” may register a regional convention of speech.

<sup>221</sup> “*Bolo bālājī mahārāj kī jai, anjanī lāl kī jai, saṅkaṭ mocan pañc mukhī bābā kī jai to sabhī grām vāsiyoṅ ko bālājī mahārāj kī taraf śubh āśirvād prāpt ho aur merī taraf se āp sabhī ko hāth joḍkar rām rām svikār ho pāñc baje hai kām karnevāloṅ premī kṛpyā khade ho jāe!*” Recorded 12-5-2010.

<sup>222</sup> Based on popular books sold at shrines, it appears that Panchmukhi Hanuman may have tantric associations in many devotees’ minds. In a handbook for various Hanuman-focused



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incantations, Pramod Sagar, a self-described *tāntrik*, describes his miraculous discovery of a Panchmukhi Hanuman *sādhan* [method of spiritual practice] through a series of unexpected encounters with gurus. This *sādhan* helped him to get rid of bad karma from previous births. See Sagar, pp. 9-10. Lutgendorf (2007), pp. 380-388, confirms this god's relative newness in the devotional landscape, and his tantric connections.

<sup>223</sup> Lutgendorf (2007), pp. 380-388, discusses the origin of Panchmukhi Hanuman, with particular reference to Ahiravana.

<sup>224</sup> Gupta (1997), p. 102.

<sup>225</sup> “*Hariyānī meṅ āvo bālājī! Terī ṭahal bajāeṅge. Reh ke sevā karāṅge ... dāle kā pānī hogā nahāvaṅanā! Deśī ghī kā narm cūrmā dūdh kī ... khavāṅanā. Terī buggī ... ṭraikṭor lejyā khet bhuvāṅanā ... terī hār caḍe jab soīye bhagvān!*” Recording 12-5-2010.

<sup>226</sup> I am reminded of the system of exchanging gifts and hosting feasts in tribal cultures that Marcel Mauss famously theorized in *The Gift*.

<sup>227</sup> Indeed, when I visited with this man, the healer, who had a farm and a home adjacent to the shrine, looked at me and declared that my father had two wives (true, but sequentially) and that I had two brothers (actually, a brother and a sister).

<sup>228</sup> “*Choṭī bīmārī ho, to yahān pe ṭhīk ho jāegī—agar baḍī bīmārī yahān ‘control’ hoṅge—vahān jā ke ṭhīk hogā.*” Interview 12-4-2010.

<sup>229</sup> Locals explained Krishna's inclusion in the other niche as relating to his role in slaying demons; even so, as Khatu Shyam (represented in pictures in that niche) he complements his local peer Balaji.

<sup>230</sup> Saindon, p. 9.

<sup>231</sup> Salasar's *pujārīs* had previously warned me never to recite Bajrang Ban without first reciting *Rām stotra*, a Sanskrit text, to counteract the dangerous power unleashed.

<sup>232</sup> Within the last 15 years, this ritual regime has been transported to additional new temples founded along the main roads going to Salasar by several uncles of the current *pujārī*. Those temples likewise are oriented to Mehndipur, and at the same time are clearly aimed at pilgrimage traffic going to Shekhawati. One of them, Kajla Dham, is strategically located down the road from Agroha, the ancestral shrine of all Agrawal Marwaris (described in Chapter 2). It offers a full range of possession treatment.

<sup>233</sup> Formerly, mostly sadhus and other ascetics carried the water from Hardwar on bamboos poles [*kānvar*] over the shoulders. Then and now, it is performed only in the Hindu month of Sawan (around August), the sacred month of Shiva (who resides in the Himalayas, the source of the Ganga). These days, once the *yātrīs* have returned from Hardwar to their home village, they may store some of the water in their homes for auspicious uses, and the rest will go to a temple in the village. In many cases, a new journey is required each year to replenish the supply of water. Unlike *kānvar yātrā*'s seasonal nature, Salasar *paidal yātrā* is performed at all times of the year, although more so on religious holidays like Dashehra. Although carrying water is not part of walking to or from Salasar, I have noted that Balaji currently figures in the ritual inauguration of wells for the irrigation of fields, and I have heard Balaji called “the god of water.” The practice of *kānvar yātrā* has also been localized as a new tradition at a sacred pond known as Lohargal, in the region of Salasar. Locals describe it as “Mini-Hardwar;” like the original site, it comes alive in the month of Sawan, albeit on a considerably smaller scale. This pond, from which a stream

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emanates, has now been built up with adjunct shrines and shops. A large new “Jat *dharmśālā*” down the road from the pond seems to be the only such rest place of this magnitude so far. Some devotees even claim that rites for ancestors can be performed at Lohargal as an alternative to going to Hardwar, the usual site for this purpose. All this is to point out that *kāñvar* has made an impact on Jat life and on the region of Salasar.

<sup>234</sup> Osella and Osella, p. 145.

<sup>235</sup> Osella and Osella, see Chapter 7, pp. 143-168.

<sup>236</sup> Pilgrimage to Vaishno Devi, which is the most famous of these shrines, and one of the most popular in northern India, substantially gained momentum after national independence in 1947. Admittedly, some factors for the rise of Vaishno Devi are specific to its own setting and not like at Salasar. The fact that it is located so close to the border means that pilgrimage to this shrine, like the holy cave of Amarnath in adjacent Kashmir, had the extra significance of affirming the integrity of the Hindu-dominant nation vis-à-vis Pakistan, which claimed the area as its own. A good example of pilgrimage as nationalism would be Sudheendra Kulkarni’s description of L. K. Advani’s famous cross-country *yātrās* of national-political integration, which included Jammu and Kashmir.

<sup>237</sup> Erndl, p. 39. Even now, Vaishno Devi receives far more pilgrims than Salasar, as it is one of the most popular pilgrimage sites in India, so it may have made an impression on devotees who later went to up-and-coming shrines like Salasar.

<sup>238</sup> Another similarity is that at some of these goddess shrines, such as Chintapurni, one will see a sacred peepal tree festooned with coconuts wrapped in red cloth, signifying wishes made, much as pilgrims offer coconuts at Salasar, not to mention other shrines offering miracles.

<sup>239</sup> Interview 11-25-2010.

<sup>240</sup> Chauhan, pp. 103-104. Given Balaji’s ritual connection to wells, it would be interesting to know whether the incidence of tube wells had any impact on agrarian practices related to the monkey deity.

<sup>241</sup> Jodhka, p. 133.

<sup>242</sup> Jodhka, p. 133.

<sup>243</sup> Keane, p. 410-411.

<sup>244</sup> During my time in Salasar, I observed a parallel instance of *paidal yātrā* as a display of material means in reconnecting with the divine in Salasar *pujārīs*’ annual foot journey for 100 kilometers to the shrine of their *kuldevī*, Dadhi Mathi Devi, in neighboring Nagaur District. Starting around 17 years ago, and gaining momentum within the last decade, as increased pilgrimage to Salasar brought to the *pujārīs* of the Dadhich clan a more comfortable livelihood (as shopkeepers and ritual mediators), their sons, many still in high school, have been able to count on parental support to take off on a jaunt. Having joined them on this walk, I saw that hired conveniences made the journey safe. Several jeeps loaded with refreshments shadowed the group of around 90 youths as they trudged on dirt tracks through the wilderness. In the days preceding the journey, each person paid around 2,000 rupees to join. Although I was told of no caste restrictions, almost every participant was a member of the *pujārī* community in Salasar. The organizer, who was one of my primary respondents, called to Bikaner for a truckload of fresh orange juice to be delivered. They took me to a boutique in a nearby market town to get some fashionable shorts and caps for the three-day trek. At the end of the *yātrā*, I jokingly

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remarked that it had been a “super-deluxe *yātrā*.” My recognition of my hosts’ privilege delighted them, and the term entered their idiom; for the rest of the year they regularly asked me if I would be joining them on next year’s super-deluxe *yātrā*. So too with at least some Jats, then, the pilgrimage to Salasar carries the subtle statement that young people nowadays can afford to go off for a week on a trip with their friends. For a history of Dadhi Mathi and the shrine, see Tiwari.

<sup>245</sup> See Larkin, Introduction and Chapter 1.

<sup>246</sup> Interview 2-17-2011.

<sup>247</sup> “*Ājkal mastī ke lie bahut log jāte haiñ ... kāī log bhaktivāle nahīñ ... ghūmne kā śauk das dīn ke lie jāke āte ... pehle jo the bilkul pakkā bhagat the. Sattāīs sāl pehle log sukhe the—sattar ‘percent.’ Tīs ‘percent’ log dukhe the. Abhī ninyānave ‘percent’ dukhī haiñ; sārā gad̄bar ho gayā. Us ke alavā log lālsā icchā baḍ gaī. Jo vyakti das rupaye kamāne lāyā, voh soctā ... matlab, kisī ko santūṣṭī nahīñ. Mere ‘bike’ nahīñ, to icchā hogī, icchā baḍṭī jātī hai. Ādhunik samai. Pehle log ... to ṭhīk hai, kām karo, peṭ bharo—matlab khānā pīnā bas ṭhīk hai ... sāre logoñ ko īrsyā [Yeh puñjavādī vyavasthā ke kāraṇ?] ... hāñ, jī!*” Interview 7-26-2011.

<sup>248</sup> Weber, pp. 3-12.

<sup>249</sup> Hegel, pp. 146-151.

<sup>250</sup> By analogy, consider Weber’s point that in modern times the values of Protestant utilitarianism persist as cultural norms even after the religious underpinnings have withered away.

<sup>251</sup> Only very rarely did I see attempts to restrict women’s access to Balaji or Hanuman in the name of moral purity. At a goddess temple in the city of Abohar, southern Punjab, I saw the following sign posted in front of a statue of Hanuman: “Hail, Mother Goddess! Hail, Balaji! According to religious scriptures, girls and women should not perform circumambulation [*parikramā*] around Hanuman.” I am not aware which scripture succinctly states such a rule, but the message conveys the common perception that Balaji is a man’s deity. I visited this site 7-25-2011.

<sup>252</sup> Interview 7-26-2011.

<sup>253</sup> Grodzins Gold (1988), pp. 186-187.

<sup>254</sup> Ritual fasting, which I did not much observe, seems to be on the rise as a way to elicit divine assistance. Chowdhry, p. 402, suggests that this practice has expanded in recent years to Haryana and beyond from a core area of practice in Punjab. Decades ago, scholars already observed that the film *Jai Santoṣī Māñ* helped popularize women’s fasting as a way of eliciting divine boons from the 1970s onwards. Relatively few of my male respondents reported fasting, as it appears to have more appeal among women.

<sup>255</sup> Interview 12-20-2010.

<sup>256</sup> Turner’s use of the Latin term alludes to his observation of this phenomenon in Catholic pilgrimage. For a discussion of *communitas*, see Turner (1978), pp. 250-255.

<sup>257</sup> As mentioned in my notes for Chapter 1, Irawati Karve’s study of pilgrimage finds significant group separatism on the annual journey on foot to Palampur in Maharashtra. As she observed, caste identity guided pilgrims’ decisions about where to walk on the road, with whom to associate, and of course with whom to eat; see Karve, pp. 13-29. However, as I will describe in later chapters, when pilgrims come to faith healing shrines where exorcism is practiced, as

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opposed to Salasar, where only blessings (not exorcism) are available, they are strongly disposed to open to each other as they undergo treatment.

<sup>258</sup> Morinis, p. 260.

<sup>259</sup> Morinis, pp. 276-282.

<sup>260</sup> At certain points along the roads to Salasar, various inns and shops with names like “Balaji Boutique” and “Shri Balaji General Store” target pilgrims. In this way, the roads give rise to an economic sub-culture.

<sup>261</sup> Balaji’s temple in Salasar is open at all times, as devotees say that he is always available to assist anyone in need.

<sup>262</sup> [In Rajasthani dialect] “*Jai pavan kumār ... main vārī jāūn bālājī ... vārī jāūn bālājī ... balihāri jāūn bālājī ... sālāsar thāro bhavan viraje ... dhaul nagārā thār naupat bāje ... vārī jāūn bālājī ... dur deśān rā bābā āva yātrī ... main vārī jāūn bālājī thārī jai ... dās mohan kī vinatī bālājī ... charaṇa thok lagāyā vārī jāūn bālājī ... lāl deh lālī lase aru dhari lal laṅgur bajra deh dāvan dalan jai jai jai kapi sur. Tero suraj jeḍo mukhḍo mukhḍo cānd ro ṭukḍo mhār bālājī thār darśan karu sukhdhām mhārā ... mhārā bālājī thār darśan karasyā ... āja mhārā bālājī thār pal pal darśan karasyā ... thāro sālāsar dhām nirālo pyāro ... mehndipur dhām nirālo sālāsar dhām nirālo ... mhārā bālājī thār darśan karasyā ... he pūrṇ paramātmā thārā śakti tharā rūp rām lakhan sītā sahit hṛdai bashuṅ sur bhūp. Sālāsar bābā harno vighn mhāro dur, hanumān piyārā harne vighn mhāro dur ... duniyā cale nā śrī rām ke binā śrī rām nā cale hanumān ke binā ... jab se rāmāyaṇ paḍh lī hai main ne ek bāt samajh lī ... rāvan mare nā śrī rām ke binā laṅkā jale nā hanumān binā duniyā cale nā śrī rām ke binā śrī rām nā cale hanumān ke binā ... sītā nā mile śrī rām ke binā patā nā cale hanumān ke binā ... sītā haraṇ kī kahānī suno śyām sundar kī jubānī suno ... log kahe jai śrī rām kī śarmā kahe jai hanumān kī ...*” Heard 6-27-2011.

<sup>263</sup> This alliance between the two avatars of God, with Hanuman standing in for Rama, is also evident the murals of their respective epics, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, in Balaji’s temple.

<sup>264</sup> “*Āge calo! Jai bālājī! Zor se bolo! Jai bālājī! Prem se bolo! Jai bālājī! Sāre bolo! Jai bālājī!*” At Goddess temples, pilgrims would simply substitute “*Jai mātā kī*” (or its Punjabi version, “*Jai mātā dī*”) for “*Jai bālājī!*”

<sup>265</sup> “*Is jhaṇḍe ko hāth tumheṅ le kar! Jai bajraṅgali!*” Noted 9-6-2011.

<sup>266</sup> “*Jai rām jai rām jai jai rām!*”

<sup>267</sup> “*Yeh merā mehnat kā nāriyal. Bālājī ko yeh de do aur vāpas.*” Interview 9-10-2011.

<sup>268</sup> Interview 9-10-2011. Wish coconut = *manokāmanā ke nāriyal*.

<sup>269</sup> “*Bālājī yeh merī manokāmanā hai ...*”

<sup>270</sup> “*Meri manokāmanā bālājī āp pūrī karo...*”

<sup>271</sup> This is also a common practice at faith healing shrines, where the presiding guru opens and physically examines the coconut to clairvoyantly peer into the devotee’s inner self.

<sup>272</sup> “*Merā nām sunīl kumār varmā hai aur main uttar pradeś ke hamīrpur jile kā rehne vālā hūn. Main jaypur meṅ apne māmājī ke pās āyā hūn. Mere māmā ne jaypur ke ās-pās ke darśanīya sthal mujhe dikhāe. Sāth hī sālāsar bālājī jāne kāryakram bhī ban gayā. Vahān pahuṅkar mainne dekhā, log manautī māṅg rahe haiṅ. Aur jinkī manautī pūrṇ ho gaī hai, ve prasād caḍhā rahe haiṅ. Mainne bhī manautī śraddhā aur viśvās se māṅg lī. Main naukrī ḍhūṅḍh-ḍhūṅḍhkar,*

*parīkṣāeṅ aur sāksātkār dete-dete pareśān ho gayā thā. Ghar meṅ sabse baḍā hone ke kāraṅ merī jimmedārī bhī baḍī thī ... Maiṅne bālājī se prārthanā kī ki yadi āpkī kṛpā ho jāegī to maiṅ pehlī tankhvāh āpko arpaṅ karūṅgā ... Bālājī ke camatkār ke bāre meṅ maiṅne bahut sāre bhaktoṅ ke mukh se sun rakhā thā, parantu mujhe koī bhī camatkārī anubhav nahīn huā thā. Jab maiṅ apne ghar pahūncā, us din maṅgalvār thā. Mujhe ek ḍāk se patr milā, jo baṅk meṅ merī niyukti kā patr thā jise dekhkar maiṅ āścarya se bhar gayā, kyōṅki sāksātkār meṅ mere uttar se koī bhī adhikārī saṅtuṣṭ nahīn ho rahā thā aur maiṅ nirāś thā, parantu jab niyukti patr apne hāth meṅ dekhā maiṅ harṣ se uchalne lagā aur acānak cillane lagā, śrī bālājī kī jay ho! Bālājī kā mere jīvan meṅ yeh pehlā camatkārik anubhav thā. Ek māh ke bād pehlā vetan lekar apne mātā-pitā sahit śrī sālāsar bālājī ke darbār pahūncā aur bhāv vibhor hokar śraddhā-bhakti ke sāth bālājī ke caraṅoṅ meṅ pehlā vetan arpaṅ kiyā. Āj maiṅ vivāhit hūṅ aur tūn bacce bhī haiṅ. Har sāl bālājī ke darbār saparivār ātā hūṅ ...”* Sharma, *Chalo Salasar Dham*, pp. 51-52.

<sup>273</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, p. 295.

<sup>274</sup> Mullin, pp. 190-208, discusses the persistence of miracles in recent Western history.

<sup>275</sup> Interview 12-2-2010.

<sup>276</sup> For statistical background, I would note that in 1991, there were 874 female births to 1,000 male births in Haryana, and by 2001 this had gone down to 820 female births. See Chathley, p. 41, and Arnold et al, p. 759.

<sup>277</sup> Among books broaching gender discrimination in the Indian context, and more broadly women’s roles in a wide variety of settings (urban and rural), I would note Bumiller’s discussion on women’s lives.

<sup>278</sup> Given the perception of competition for jobs, Balaji’s support is valued. In his divine regime, any sincere individual can attain success, which would seem fairer to the devotee than human bureaucracy. On this subject, I recall once talking with a young acquaintance in the area of Bani, Sirsa District, near the Haryana-Punjab border, who was disgusted and angry because he had met all the requirements for entry into the army but still they kept him on a waiting list because his family had not paid a bribe—*riśvat*—to the recruiter. He was a professional boxer, trained every day, and was tall enough, he said, but they had put less qualified entrants before him because they had paid whereas he had refused to do so. These days, complaints of corruption are pervasive in everyday conversations, and Balaji is one way to deal with that problem.

<sup>279</sup> *Pet pālāniyā* devotees are allowed to go into the temple through a shortcut, like VIPs, and may each take with them one spotter to guide them, since many are near the end of their strength, while the rest of the group must wait in line. Bhupendra’s group had brought with them around 50 kilograms of sweet *prasād*—the amount of a *savāmani*, or 40 kilograms (equal to one *mani*) plus one quarter (a *savā*), to be blessed in the temple and taken home to their families. Once they have had *darśan*, Bhupendra’s village group walked through the passage for *parikramā* around the central niche, not bothering to stop in a side niche where a *pujārī* on duty tied red strings of blessing around wrists in return for a donation. They normally have little need for these Brahmins, as they prefer to directly worship Balaji.

## CHAPTER 5: TWO BALAJIS IN ONE

### 5.1 Making Sense of Two Balajis

#### Broadening the Narrative of Balaji

Walking past Balaji's main temple in Mehndipur, and any of the adjunct shrines around town, especially on Tuesday or Saturday (Balaji's sacred days), one is likely to come across any number of public exorcisms (Figure 5-1). Groups of pilgrims typically sing *bhajans* [religious songs] to invoke the god's presence. Sometimes orchestrated by faith healers, these events are intended to agitate and thereby dislodge spirits believed to be causing some misfortune—poor health, anxiety, domestic disharmony, and other afflictions—to one or more members of the group. Seeing such a scene in Mehndipur, anyone who has previously been to Salasar will immediately perceive that the two temples entail fundamentally different protocols of devotion. And yet, both gods are manifestations of Hanuman and both are known as Balaji. Devotees commonly imagine the two gods as representing two opposite poles of divine behavior, which in effect balance one another. Like Salasar Balaji, Mehndipur Balaji is situated in Rajasthan, but it is outside Shekhawati, and therefore does not enter into the Marwari social narrative of local ancestry and ongoing patronage. And yet, I would argue, it is possible to posit certain chronological equivalences in the development of these two gods. Additionally, following the theoretical vein of the previous three chapters, I will endeavor to demonstrate that differing socioeconomic contexts at the two shrines help to explain why their respective two Balajis offer such contrastive divine services.

Salasar Balaji may relieve a physical ailment, as Mehndipur Balaji does, but this is accomplished simply by coming into the presence of his divine energy [*śakti*], which instantly dissolves bad karma. The analogy offered by devotees is that one visits different medical specialists according to the nature of the problem at hand; hence each of these Balajis has his



Figure 5-1. An exorcism scene at an adjunct temple in Mehndipur.

natural place in the supernatural domain. If one believes that some sort of ghost is instigating one's troubles, then Mehndipur Balaji is the specialist of choice. It is also possible to gain benefits from Mehndipur Balaji without reference to ghosts, just as at Salasar. But, it is through

subduing ghosts that Mehndipur Balaji has demonstrated his efficacy, so this manner of work tends to dominate the narrative of his abilities.

Given these distinctions, is there a way to imagine the two Balajis in some theologically encompassing framework? When asked to differentiate the two gods, visitors at either site commonly say that Salasar Balaji is peaceful [*śānt*] and bestows blessings, while Mehndipur Balaji is fierce [*vīr*] or aggressive [*ugra*], and thereby vanquishes spirits believed to be causing devotees' troubles. Devotees also advance contextualizing social theories to differentiate the two deities. For instance, devotees in Mehndipur link Salasar to the affluence of some of its clients. One man said, "That's an area for wealthy people [*paisevāle 'area, 'voh!*]"<sup>280</sup> Meanwhile, devotees in Salasar may say that locals from the Mehndipur area cannot be trusted like those from within the interior of Rajasthan (such as Salasar's Shekhawati region) because it is so close to Uttar Pradesh, which in many people's minds represents dishonesty, riots, and crime. As a *pujārī* in Salasar warned me, Mehndipur is a place for "Dracula types," where I should refuse the *prasād* [consecrated sweets] routinely handed out at the temple because it could attract ghosts hovering about after exorcisms.

Alongside these narratives of difference, we can nonetheless find some similarities that draw the two Balajis together. After all, both are local manifestations of Hanuman so, like him, they are worshiped as upholders of morality, and as saviors of humanity in the Kali Yuga, the era of troubles in which we live. As stated in *Hanumān cālīsā*, the famous scripture that is faithfully recited by devotees of the monkey god as an exemplary devotee of God (Rama), Hanuman fearlessly fights ogres [*asurās* or *rākṣasas*] in his defense.<sup>281</sup> And, further, this scripture tells us that if we recite Hanuman's name (as Mahavir, or "great hero"), demonic spirits [normally collectively referred to as *bhūt-pret*] will stay away from us.<sup>282</sup> So, it is clear that the scope of



Hanuman's capacity for assisting devotees includes countering malevolent invisible forces. As at Salasar, devotees in Mehndipur have produced some new scriptures, such as a *Mehndīpur bālājī cālīsā*, along with *cālīsās* for Bhairu and Pretraj, Balaji's assistants at this shrine. *Mehndīpur bālājī cālīsā* highlights the god's particular strengths, such as his ability to destroy demons. This text also references the kinds of offerings that one is expected to bring to him, which are different than in Salasar.<sup>283</sup> However, as in Salasar, I saw little evidence to suggest that these new scriptures are much in use; they await popular acclaim of their magical efficacy.

As in Salasar, locals who work in Mehndipur consider their jobs to be a divine blessing, inasmuch as they are all dependent on the pilgrimage industry. My primary respondent in Mehndipur, a young man who commutes from a nearby village, had formerly worked as a plumber, but with the advent of wealthy visitors who have little time to spare, he has found a better career assembling and delivering deluxe offerings to Balaji's shrine several times a day so that those devotees will not need to spend time in line. As an insider of sorts, he is able to directly enter the temple like a VIP visitor. Despite the air of economic opportunism in this small but always busy town, the buildings remain rather scrappy-looking. There are ample potholes in the road, and none of the Brahmin mansions that surround Salasar's main temple. If we were to attempt to uncover an "original" Mehndipur from before it became a pilgrimage center by stripping away the shops, *dharmśālās* [religious rest houses], hotels, and administrative offices, we might not find anything at all. It is a relatively new establishment, without Salasar's claim of old habitation. The widening of the old Jaipur-Agra road into a double-lane highway around 22 years ago (1989) might have been a key change that brought more pilgrims and encouraged the building of more accommodation. And yet, Mehndipur remains a commuter town, with most employees, including those with religious duties, coming from surrounding

villages each day. In its present, built-up form, Mehndipur appears to be about the same size as Salasar, which is said to have a population of 5,000.

### *Mehndipur and Salasar: Some Major Contrasts*

In this subsection, I will point out some major contextual differences at the two sites that fundamentally affect how we would go about analyzing Mehndipur Balaji. First of all, unlike at Salasar, there are no merchant communities—Marwari or otherwise—tracing descent to the immediate region of Mehndipur. On the face of it, this would seem to eliminate the possibility of the narrative of hereditary devotion and patronage that I presented in the last three chapters. Mehndipur Balaji therefore seems not to be a *kuldev* [hereditary lineage deity] to any community.<sup>284</sup> At this juncture, it would be useful to review my main thesis: Marwari merchants in cities around India, claiming origins in the Salasar region, rediscovered the Balaji of that site as their lineage deity around 1990. These merchants proceeded to make generous donations to his shrine from rediscovered ancestral piety. I argue that in line with neoliberal economic opportunities, they were motivated to sponsor religious sites to reduce taxes. This was no doubt strongly conditioned by the pan-Indian enthusiasm at that time for Hanuman as a savior of modern Hinduism, paralleled by an increasing interest, especially among urban dwellers, in magical healing shrines that connoted rustic authenticity and ancient wisdom. Most of this formulation might also apply to Mehndipur, but the lack of a hereditary devotional community leaves open the question of how the shrine's authorities solicited patronage. So, one of my theoretical tasks in this chapter will be to explain how Mehndipur could grow without this hereditary mercantile connection, which was so crucial for Salasar.

The second half of the equation would be the *pujārīs* who serve the deity and represent him to the public. Although there is a *mahant* [religious leader] in Mehndipur who plays some

officiating role in the administration of the temple, he does not personally run the economy of Mehndipur in the same way that the Dadhich *pujārī* lineage collectively does at Salasar. The current *mahant* runs charitable projects, such as a local college for girls, but is said to only occasionally be in Mehndipur, as he prefers to spend his time in homes in Jaipur and Mumbai.<sup>285</sup> This is quite different from Salasar, where the *pujārīs* are closely involved in virtually every aspect of village life. One additional factor affecting each *mahant* here is that they must be *bāl brahmacārīs*, or lifelong celibates in emulation of chaste Hanuman-Balaji himself. The *mahant* is selected in childhood from within the family to be the god’s lifelong servant; this means an uncle-to-nephew line of succession.<sup>286</sup> These *mahants* are therefore not Brahmin householders but ascetics by vocation. Although I heard of one brother of the current *mahant* running a temple on the small hill adjacent to Mehndipur, there is no corporate community of *pujārīs* managing Mehndipur’s shops and holy places as in Salasar. The outcome of this lack of a large family of householders to manage Mehndipur is that authority is shared among unrelated locals from Mehndipur and the surrounding villages. This seems to have resulted in more indirect and diffuse authority, as none of these individuals feels hereditarily involved in the temple. As at Salasar, the government has not yet taken over the administration of Mehndipur’s temple.

*Pujārīs* do in fact exist in Mehndipur, but those working in the main temple are merely functionaries who are hired and fired by the temple’s governing trust at will. As a senior official in one of the administrative offices adjacent to the main temple said, “The *pujārīs* here are all salaried by the Trust ... if there is any inadequacy in their ‘service,’ they will be immediately thrown out [‘Service’ meñ agar koī kamī pāyegī, voh ‘immediately’ nikālā jāegā]!” The *pujārīs* serve the ritual needs of the deity and visiting devotees—accepting *prasād* on behalf of the god and reciting Sanskrit prayers at appropriate intervals, but they have no authority. In this respect

they are entirely different from Salasar's *pujārīs*, who can never be fired because they are running the whole operation by divine design. Therefore, without hereditary Marwari patronage, nor a matching lineage of *pujārī* householders who would work with them and manage the diverse interests of the temple, Mehndipur relies on a different binding ideology for devotion and patronage. The deity's ability to root out spiritual trouble—a service unavailable in Salasar—provides that alternative model.

It is also highly relevant that Mehndipur is located in an area traditionally inhabited by tribals, especially the Meenas, once dominated by the Rajputs, and that neither group has any special attachment to Balaji beyond the normal respect accorded to a deity. This is a strikingly different milieu than in the Shekhawati-Haryana–Punjab border region adjacent to Salasar, where Jat society, which is dominant there, identifies with Balaji not only as a primary deity but also as a kind of cultural hero. Hence, Mehndipur lacks a core devotional clientele that would walk to the shrine from afar each year, as happens at Salasar. As my respondents in Mehndipur explained, few people come here on foot, ostensibly because those who are disturbed by ghosts are not up to the task. But also, I would add, without Jat social organization there is no tradition of service to support those who would walk. In short, although the main constituents (Marwaris, Jats, Brahmins) of the three previous chapters do also come to Mehndipur (by vehicle), the nature of their connection is quite different than at Salasar. Still, if we look in the broad terms of rising pilgrimage, Mehndipur and Salasar together offer a case study in the parallel development of miracle shrines over the last twenty years.

Lastly, I will clarify some terms relating to the many faith healers who come to Mehndipur. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of them, regularly come to Mehndipur with their followers, but, remarkably, not a single one of them actually lives in the area of Mehndipur. Hence, despite

their seemingly integral connection to Mehndipur, they are in fact rather alien to the local culture but tolerated as a necessary evil, so to speak. Possessed pilgrims who come with faith healers or meet them here for spiritual treatment are equally odd to the locals, who are nonetheless accustomed to the sight of them acting out their inner demons in public places. The local young men who work in the many shops catering to pilgrims sometimes jokingly speculate about which of the girls walking by their shops every day might be possessed. The current pilgrimage culture that scholars might assume to have organically arisen within the local milieu is a modern spectacle produced through outside interest and local willingness to take advantage of this. The locals clearly do not emulate the devotional protocol of pilgrims; most of them might briefly pay respect to the deity when passing in the street, but little more. In this sense that Balaji exemplifies the recent intrusion of devotion from an outside milieu, the situation in Mehndipur somewhat resembles what I saw at Salasar, where Marwaris have transformed the site.

Throughout this study I will mostly use the term “faith healer” to refer to the religious specialists who come to Mehndipur to perform exorcisms and other kinds of healing or to give spiritual advice. There was no singular term that I always heard in reference to them. When discussing such individuals in and outside of Mehndipur, I may also use the term “guru,” “*sant*,” or “swami,” as devotees themselves do, especially when referring to religious specialists who may not be primarily associated with faith healing. Devotees often address their own gurus as “Baba” (meaning Lord) or Maharaj, both of which refer to any revered being with supernatural powers—human or divine. Additionally, followers in Mehndipur often use the term “*bhagat*” to describe these same faith healers.<sup>287</sup> Graham Dwyer categorically refers to them by this term, while Antti Pakaslahti simply calls them “healers.” In my opinion, the term “*bhagat*,” although authentic, is problematic as a categorical referent to faith healers because it really means any

devotee, even an ordinary individual. When someone refers to a faith healer as a *bhagat*, they are simply identifying that person as an exemplary devotee of Balaji who may have acquired special powers as a result of his faith. Referring to these specialists as *bhagats* potentially conflates them with others who may be equally pious and known as *bhagats* but have nothing to do with faith healing or exorcism.<sup>288</sup>

### *The Two Balajis as Divine Counterparts*

In this subsection, I will introduce a native theorization that potentially integrates Mehndipur and Salasar in one system of devotion. Deities with seemingly opposite natures who are nonetheless conceived to exist as a pair, possibly like the two Balajis, are known in popular Hinduism. For instance, Lindsey Harlan discusses the fact that Rajasthani goddesses—particularly in Rajput society—are often bifurcated as opposite counterparts. They may be coded by color, a white one being peaceful and domestic and a dark-colored one the bloodthirsty leader of soldiers on the battlefield.<sup>289</sup> In responding to a devotee's prayers, these counterparts may work together in the same shrine as two halves of one composite goddess. Harlan observes that this binary nature carries over to Bhairu, the deified hero common in Rajasthan (one local version of whom I discussed at length in Chapter 3), who may appear in white and black versions.<sup>290</sup> Two such Bhairus may respectively serve as the divine assistants of similarly opposite *devīs* [goddesses].

One instance of bifurcation that I personally observed, 90 kilometers from Mehndipur, is Kaila Devi, the most famous goddess in that part of Rajasthan, who is visually represented as two sisters but is typically referred to as a singular entity. One of the sisters traditionally requires a goat sacrifice and whiskey while the other is a peaceful vegetarian, although because of pan-Indian reformist agitation in recent years, sacrifice and alcohol must now be offered away from

the temple premises.<sup>291</sup> Not by coincidence, in Mehndipur, Bhairu in his fierce form, and Kali, the fierce form of the Goddess, are prominently worshiped alongside Balaji, and are invoked in exorcisms, along with Pretraj, another demonic deity who is regarded as an attendant for exorcisms.<sup>292</sup> All these deities are consistent with Mehndipur Balaji's proclivity to fiercely combat unwanted spirits.

Of course, as fierce as he might be, Mehndipur Balaji himself would never accept blood sacrifice or whiskey, because as Hanuman he has made an ascetic commitment to bodily purity. But he certainly works with occult forces. Thus, in Mehndipur we see numerous handbooks testifying to tantric practices involving the manipulation of ghosts and demons [*bhūt-pret*].<sup>293</sup> This characterization summarizes how most Indians acquainted with Mehndipur Balaji imagine him, given his fame in overseeing exorcisms. Philip Lutgendorf (whose work on Mehndipur Balaji I will return to later in this section) has discussed some of the occult literature sold in Mehndipur, which could be considered to be tantric.<sup>294</sup> Since *tāntriks* or necromancers are often cited as the perpetrators of spirit possession, it is logical that a tantric Hanuman should be the antidote—in effect a homeopathic fight-fire-with-fire response. In fact, Mehndipur Balaji is often considered the “chief tantric,” therefore suited to counteract human *tāntriks*.<sup>295</sup> The five-headed Panchmukhi Hanuman (mentioned in Chapter 4) is another application of this principle, as he is said to have assumed his multiple-headed form to fight off Ahiravana, a multiple-headed demonic relative of evil Ravana.<sup>296</sup> By contrast, virtually no occult literature is to be found in Salasar's shops, all of which are owned by the temple's *pujārīs*, who are committed to a more canonical mode of devotion that foregrounds the recitation of Sanskrit texts.

As Mehndipur has attracted ever more pilgrims from afar, it has become reimagined in the grander terms of pan-Indian Hinduism, as I have also noted in regard to Salasar. After all,

Mehndipur Balaji is also a manifestation of pan-Indian Hanuman, and therefore shares in his scriptural tradition. The shops around his temple stock many Gita Press editions of Hindu classics, as at any other major pilgrimage site. Thus, Mehndipur Balaji is more complex than just one half of a two-god binary. Relevant to this point, Lynn Foulston questions the tendency of many scholars to divide goddesses into the two camps described above, even though this may seem to accord with native theologies. She contends that scholars are reifying the notion that goddesses fall neatly into two camps: Sanskritic, mainstream, and pacific (and more often coupled with a male consort) versus non-Sanskritic, rural, and fierce (and uncoupled).<sup>297</sup> Instead, in analyzing goddesses in South India, Foulston would like to see an appreciation for a wider diversity in terms of attributes that cross these boundaries, so that we might speak of a greater range of configurations.<sup>298</sup>

In my view, one limitation of this binary theorization is that it assumes a stable divine nature that is somehow immune to changes in human interpretation and modification. Contrary to such a view, my study is predicated on the idea that divine nature changes in relation to social conditions. In Chapter 3, I discussed how the *sant* Mohan Das physically changed the appearance of Salasar Balaji, and I noted the impact of local ideologies (of Brahmin *pujārī* primacy) in shaping a native theology of Balaji's nature (for example, that he excludes exorcism). Notwithstanding the empirical evidence that some popular Hindu deities exist in pairs, I think we need to consider local interpretation as the critical element in the formation of the two Balajis' ontological status. In Mehndipur, the evidence of mediation is as follows. Several decades ago, an earlier *mahant*, known as Ganeshpuri, miraculously healed many devotees, which made both him and Mehndipur Balaji famous. At that point, devotees were acclaiming the efficacy of Mehndipur Balaji and the *mahant* in their own right, without special regard for Salasar Balaji,



who was not yet well known outside his locale. It was only later, after gaining momentum in the 1990s, that popular tantric literature, numerous visiting faith healers, *dharmśālās*, and devotees who had been healed and became patrons, popularized Mehndipur Balaji to a much broader audience. And only then, after Mehndipur Balaji and Salasar Balaji had each attained their respective reputations for miracles and had acquired large clienteles, pilgrims started to theorize what these two newly famous gods with the same name had to do with each other. I argue, then, that the two gods' polarity is a way of retroactively explaining how they both relate to a larger divine domain as manifestations of Hanuman.

The doctrine of paired opposites is useful in understanding how devotees theologically rationalize the coexistence of the two Balajis, but it does not explain why or how the deities of these two shrines became popular in the first place, nor why they assumed their present forms. These shrines each became popular in separate social milieux informed by the broader culture of devotion to Hanuman but without any formal links to each other. As I will examine in the remaining chapters, these two pilgrimage sites, although still the most prominent sites of devotion to Balaji, have in recent years been joined by a multitude of new shrines generally owing allegiance to either Salasar or Mehndipur. The practices at these new shrines are integrally linked to the inclinations of the founding gurus, *pujārīs*, or patrons, and therefore do not perfectly align doctrinally with either of the major Balajis. For instance, the gurus of some shrines oriented to Salasar Balaji actively practice exorcism, even though it is banned in Salasar itself.

## 5.2 Theorizing Mehndipur Balaji

### *Exorcism as Native Psychiatry*

Unique among the various shrines presented in this study, Mehndipur has attracted a fair amount of scholarship. In this subsection, I will briefly review this work so as to delineate what my study offers that would be new. In chronological order, I will mention a chapter on Balaji by Sudhir Kakar (within a larger study of faith healers; 1990), a journal article by Antti Pakaslahti (1998), a book on Mehndipur by Graham Dwyer (2003), and brief discussions of Balaji within separate books by Frederick Smith (2006) and Philip Lutgendorf (2007). I will mention a couple of other references to the site in the following section for their historical value in reconstructing the setting of Mehndipur several decades ago.

The reason for all this scholarly interest is clear enough. Mehndipur's famous public exorcisms make a visually exciting spectacle for Indians and Westerners alike. By comparison, relatively sedate (and not tantric) Salasar has received only one very brief discussion in a book by Lawrence Babb on Rajasthani merchants, and even then Babb only attends to the site's foundation myth while leaving out the shrine itself. Rani Sati, another major Marwari-patronized shrine in Salasar's region, comes up in the final chapter of Ann Hardgrove's study on Marwari identity in Kolkata. Khatu Shyam, the major manifestation of Krishna in Salasar's Shekhawati region, appears to be as yet unknown to scholarship. Likewise, the numerous smaller shrines and devotional cults to be discussed later in my study are completely absent from scholarship. None of the Marwari-identified shrines mentioned here offer exorcism, which inevitably makes them seem bland in comparison to Mehndipur. Most of the small new shrines of northeastern Rajasthan do allow exorcism in varying degrees, often at last as dramatic as that seen in Mehndipur, but because they are quite recent, they remain obscure.

Sudhir Kakar's chapter on Balaji indicates that at the time of his research Mehndipur was already famous, although my own respondents stated that pilgrimage here has grown dramatically only within the last twenty years (after Kakar's research). Following a psychoanalytic approach, Kakar interprets symptoms of spirit possession as a projection of repressed sexual impulses and hidden antagonism felt by the possessed individual towards the family.<sup>299</sup> Identifying Mehndipur's clientele as predominantly coming from an urban background, Kakar thus finds equivalence with Freud's Viennese patients.<sup>300</sup> In positing that the problem is within the devotee's mind, he undermines the native theorization that possession results from spirits lurking externally and invading the otherwise placid individual. Kakar's conclusion that possession is a response to oppression is actually common in scholarship. For a comparative reference, I would note the work of I. M. Lewis, in which he considers possession as a strategy for women to express personal needs through the authoritative voice of the husband's ancestors, thereby precipitating a resolution.<sup>301</sup>

Kakar negotiates between cultural particularism and psychological universalism. Do people in all cultures have similar cognition, and therefore perform possession for similar reasons? Without resolving this question, while delving into the hidden motives of possession, Kakar also highlights some contextualizing native theories to explain it. For instance, he notes, a spirit attacks because it has inadvertently been wronged or ignored. From that standpoint, unmet needs reside within the spirit, not the afflicted individual. When I first read Kakar's work prior to undertaking fieldwork, I suspected that he had unduly neglected the cultural integrity of his subjects. But, I found that at Mehndipur and elsewhere Indians themselves sometimes advance Freudian psychological interpretations of possession. It is not the case that revering Balaji requires acceptance of all practices performed in his name. A fair number of devotees dismiss

the notion of spirit attacks as delusion. From this perspective, visiting Balaji is still beneficial, since even a mentally deranged person without a ghost problem may be healed through faith in Balaji. My conclusion from this is that indigenous healing practices are not impervious to a changing world; Freud has already been adopted in many native narratives of possession.

The subtle tension between culture and psychology gets even more palpable in the work of psychiatrist Antti Pakaslahti, who interprets possession at Mehndipur as an indigenous form of family therapy. Exorcism, in which the family aims to get the spirit to voice why it has possessed the victim, provides a setting for the alienated possessed individual to reintegrate with relatives, much as a Western family therapist might accomplish. The possession appears to frequently arise in young women shortly before or after marriage, when they must depart from their natal homes to live with their husband's family. Sometimes young men facing marriage and adult responsibilities show a similar response. Inasmuch as Western-style psychiatry in developing nations remains in short supply, Pakaslahti sees exorcism as a useful low-cost way to facilitate mental health.<sup>302</sup> Pursuing the analogy between psychiatry and exorcism, Pakaslahti tells us that the objective is not so much to banish the offending spirit as to transform it into an ally, akin to the therapeutic objective of actualizing (or voicing) rather than dismissing the emotional needs of the fractured self. It is easy to equate the spirit's demands to be properly respected by the family as a call to acknowledge the needs of the afflicted family member.

Pakaslahti has admirably broken down the process of exorcism into discrete stages. However, his study itself has a narrow scope. Mehndipur is treated in isolation, perhaps understandably, given that Pakaslahti sees it as being "unique among pilgrimage centers of Northern India" in its spiritual services for mental illness.<sup>303</sup> Although Mehndipur is nowadays still the largest exorcism shrine in this region, it is hardly the only one, as I visited many such sites, which have

proliferated in the years since Pakaslahti's research. In restricting himself to the psychiatry-like family dynamics of exorcism, Pakaslahti bypasses systemic questions, such as why this especially happens in Mehndipur. Nor does he address the possibility that the authority of faith healers, and even the authenticity of the event that they oversee, is locally contested, and not simply a cultural norm passed through generations. Just as I had investigated the significance of Balaji in caste narratives in Salasar, so too, I would hope to consider where social dynamics enters into the discourse of devotion in Mehndipur.

### *Cultural and Literary Approaches to Interpreting Balaji*

Conducting research in the early 1990s (like Pakaslahti), anthropologist Graham Dwyer shifts attention from psychiatry to cultural patterns as a basis for possession and its treatment. In other words, he argues for a phenomenological (i.e. the cultural insider's experience of possession) more than a social structural mode of analysis.<sup>304</sup> Accordingly, Dwyer's main point is that those who become afflicted by troubling spirits are not simply reacting to domestic oppression. Rather, they become possessed because they and those around them are culturally scripted to be vulnerable to this condition.<sup>305</sup> This strikes me as a kind of scapegoat model; somebody has to be possessed to embody disharmony in the family or community, and so certain classes of individuals (mostly young adults, and particularly women) play that role. Beyond this, Dwyer's understanding of the mechanics of exorcism maintains what the psychiatrists had put forward.

Dwyer does us a service in situating Mehndipur in the context of rising pilgrimage, as he conducted a large survey on the background of visitors to the shrine. He found that they by and large come not from the immediate region but from slightly more distant areas in Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Delhi, and elsewhere. My own study confirms this finding. On a more general note, I have observed that locals seldom have much regard for a miracle shrine—anywhere—unless

they see a personal benefit to themselves in it. More often than not, a presiding guru depends on clients from afar looking for miracles, rather than locals. However, in presenting the experience of possession as a cultural norm, Dwyer renders it somewhat ahistorical. And, like Pakaslahti he does not really question the purported normativity of faith healers, at least a few of whom he had interviewed, although he notes that some devotees reject their role in exorcism. My own experience in Mehndipur revealed a surprising degree of ambivalence towards faith healers that the established literature on this site would not have led me to imagine. Of course, for those who are followers of a particular guru, he is indeed a morally upright and sincere individual—it is only other faith healers who are suspect. An adjunct point left unresolved is whether the traffic of faith healers has remained constant, and if not then why they would be increasingly coming here in recent years. To address these lacunae, I argue that Mehndipur is not simply a representation of a native practice, but rather that it demonstrates a historical process.

The most recent scholars, Frederick Smith and Philip Lutgendorf, both take a textual approach in their brief discussions of Mehndipur Balaji. The former does so through Sanskrit literature to support his thesis that, contrary to the orientalist who would relegate possession to non-Brahmin village culture, this practice has a long, rich history in Brahminical scriptural culture. Mehndipur is thus a modern iteration of that deep cultural tradition. As mentioned earlier, Lutgendorf primarily looks at tantric Hindi texts available in Mehndipur, to which he ties a long tradition of devotional literature relevant to Hanuman. In placing Mehndipur within these larger religious contexts, Smith and Lutgendorf advance the discussion in the direction I would like to go—supplementing the mechanics of possession and exorcism with an expanded picture of devotion. Inasmuch as Smith and Lutgendorf work within textual methodologies (although Lutgendorf also notably focused on performance in his earlier scholarship), the social context of

devotion at Mehndipur still needs attention. Having introduced Salasar in the first three chapters, I will thus place it side-by-side with Mehndipur. This would produce two parallel case studies testifying to the recent rise of miracle shrines, each within distinctive local conditions but responding to broader social change. Since scholarship on these sites is already heavily skewed towards Mehndipur, I will not explore the practical ritual details of this site to the same degree as at Salasar, but will instead highlight those aspects that support my thesis about a historical sequence of change at these shrines.

### 5.3 Historicizing a God Alleged to Have No History

#### *Mehndipur in the Early Days*

An overriding aim of this chapter is to establish commensurability between the two Balajis so as to allow for a discussion that brings them together into a historical narrative. However, to some of my respondents, talking about the two Balajis in historical terms is problematic. My Brahmin respondents in Salasar, being proud of the fact that Balaji had endorsed them as his permanent mediators more than two centuries ago, were quick to contrast their site as having a history [*aitihāsik bāt*], while Mehndipur had only “imaginary” origins [*kalpanā kī bāt*]. In other words, what we know about Mehndipur is supposed to be largely mythological.<sup>306</sup> Whereas the Salasar temple keeps artifacts (such as the one or more carts used to bring Balaji to the site) on display to remind visitors of the authenticity of its founding story, Mehndipur—the temple founded in a jungle—has not maintained any such evidence of its origins. Some say that Mehndipur existed for thousands of years, but it only became known in the mid twentieth century, when Ganeshpuri started to perform miraculous healings.<sup>307</sup>

A critical point about Balaji in Mehndipur is that, like Salasar Balaji, his image emerged fully formed [*svarūp*, as my respondents would say] from the ground, a sign that it had great inherent

powers.<sup>308</sup> Some locals in Mehndipur elaborate that around 200 years ago villagers suspected the presence of a divine power when a cow spontaneously gave milk (a sign of divinity, given cows' inherent sanctity) on the spot where Balaji's image would soon be discovered by the first *mahant*. This *mahant* had a dream in which Balaji told him of his presence, and so he excavated the image, which appeared as a roughly hewn relief of a monkey on a slab of stone. When the *mahant* started to worship this image it emitted holy curative water, which is still supplied to pilgrims, although supposedly only a few drops now appear each day, which must be mixed with ordinary water to make a quantity sufficient for so many visitors. Although the image is now covered in gold paint, it has not been physically reconfigured by its custodians in the way that Salasar Balaji famously was (described in Chapter 3). In a sense, the fact that Salasar Balaji was changed after his discovery might be another aspect of his "historical" nature—he was formally remade when the *sant* Mohan Das repainted his face differently. As Mehndipur Balaji has remained in a comparatively raw state, he is arguably unmarked by history. Mehndipur's other two major deities, Bhairu and Pretraj, are enshrined in other parts of Balaji's temple, and are understood to also be *svarūp*, having likewise stayed true to their original, rather aniconic forms.

Although information about Mehndipur Balaji's history might seem hazy, everyone is in accord that an ancestor of the current *mahant* discovered his image.<sup>309</sup> From that point on, as at Salasar, the deity's history is essentially a story of miracles. For instance, one Mehndipur *pujārī* stated that at some unspecified time in the past a businessman from "Bombay" [Mumbai] who had become a devotee tried to have the image moved by "machines" to a more convenient location, but the deity stopped the machines because it preferred its original spot, underscoring in everyone's mind that it had great powers. Another story tells us that a robber once stole valuable



accouterments from Balaji's shrine, but as a result he went blind. So, he returned them, which caused his sight to be restored, and he became a devotee.<sup>310</sup>

It is not necessarily the case, as Salasar's Brahmins would claim, that Salasar has a history while Mehndipur does not. Rather, the Salasar Brahmins' viewpoint evinces different social imperatives, which brings us back to the theoretical perspective that socioeconomic imperatives are foundational to the production of divine nature. Much of Salasar's history amounts to supplying dates and names to substantiate the claim that Balaji provides miracles for his hereditary patrons, and has endorsed one branch of the Dadhich clan as his representatives. Writers of devotional handbooks about Salasar, which are sold in the market there, substantiate the present system of worship in Salasar as being historically and divinely justified. Those who put together such handbooks for Mehndipur can make no such historical claims except that the *mahants* have all along been close to the deity.

Without the backdrop of a hereditary line of followers, what historical claim would be most critical to the system of authority in Mehndipur? Judging from the prose sections (as opposed to *bhajans*) in these booklets, they focus on the deity's ability to remove ghosts and demons from the afflicted. If we are going to locate an appeal to patronage, then, we will find it in healing (and gratitude), rather than ancestral piety. In sum, we could say that "history" is not a natural substance, but is continually produced and adjusted in relation to current social relations. History does not carry the same ideological meaning to religious mediators in Mehndipur, where the pivotal starting point was Ganeshpuri's miracles of healing perhaps 50 years ago, that it would in Salasar, where the equivalent moment would be the endorsement of the *pujāris* as his caretakers 250 years ago.

Dwyer and Pakaslahti agree that the shrine of Mehndipur is less than a century old, and that it only gained a popular following under *mahant* Ganeshpuri Gosainji (1899-1979).<sup>311</sup> Having performed years of *tapasya* [physical austerities to acquire spiritual power], this holy man gained *śakti* from Hanuman, from which he attained the ability to cure any affliction presented to him within three days. Before that time the deity had a local reputation for helping to maintain the wellbeing of cows and water buffalos, and granting the birth of sons, not unlike Salasar Balaji.<sup>312</sup> But, Ganeshpuri extended the god's healing to the masses that clamored for his *darśan*. We could say that this holy man was the prototype for the hundreds, if not thousands, of faith healers who nowadays commute to Mehndipur whenever they need a boost of extra power from this site for their work. Once Balaji and his divine assistants (Bhairu and Pretraj) have subdued and punished offending ghosts, they will keep those spirits in Mehndipur under their watchful eye. In many cases, these spirits may become helpful messengers to be summoned at will from Mehndipur to assist in other exorcisms far away, after which they return to be with Balaji.

As a member of the Gosain caste—traditionally ascetics who revered cows—Ganeshpuri was not a Brahmin *pujārī* in the standard mold of householder Brahmins who master Sanskrit scriptures. As a non-normative *pujārī*, the *mahant* served Balaji in a way that bypassed the primacy of scriptures, instead curing by charismatic ability. His spiritual self-control was so great that he consciously chose his own moment of leaving the world, like Salasar's founding *sant*, Mohan Das. As a result of his extraordinary life and passing, he has in effect become the fourth deity of Mehndipur, after Balaji, Bhairu and Pretraj, and is regularly depicted in religious imagery as a shaven-headed man in the orange robes of an ascetic. His *samādhi* [memorial place], constructed a few years ago in a field where he may have once treated devotees, is now a favored site for group *bhajans* and exorcisms. Based on the chronology of Ganeshpuri's life,

Mehndipur seems to have achieved some fame years earlier than Salasar (Figure 5-2). But, the two shrines ultimately followed the same timeline in the sense that it was only in the 1990s—years after Ganeshpuri’s passing—that Mehndipur’s infrastructure of pilgrimage was substantially developed, and faith healers and devotees started visiting from afar in truly large



Figure 5-2. Ganeshpuri’s *samādhī* and the ritual fire site in Mehndipur.

numbers. Locals agree that the number of visitors has escalated within the last fifteen years, and many believe that in the last decade or more the quality of devotion here has changed, perhaps for the worse due to the rapacious pursuit of profit, as I will elaborate later. I would equate this

with neoliberal-era public dismay about social change, which we encountered in Salasar as grumblings about wealth and privilege.

### 1980s Mehndipur

At this point, I will discuss the conditions that prevailed in the 1980s, immediately before the pan-Indian rise of Hanuman and neoliberalism made an impact on Mehndipur, as a starting point for analyzing what has subsequently changed at this site. It would not be true to say that everything suddenly changed around 1991 with neoliberal reforms, but only that this is a convenient landmark to separate different historical segments within a longer evolution. In interviewing locals about life from twenty years ago or more, I heard two not perfectly aligned narratives of Mehndipur's ascent. On the one hand, present-day devotees, idealizing Ganeshpuri as a virtual deity, said that large crowds came here for his miracles. On the other hand, locals would recollect that there was relatively little activity here until around fifteen years ago. In a study on religious practices and pilgrimage in Rajasthan, Ann Grodzins Gold mentions in passing that she joined a group on a religious bus tour in 1980, and they briefly stopped in Mehndipur. Noting at that time that the site has "gained great fame," she mentions that it attracted locals and those from afar "by the hundreds."<sup>313</sup> Did she mean in one day or in a longer period of time? Still, compared to today's numbers—probably upwards of a million in a year—I would suspect that much has changed, not least of all because locals speak of a dramatic rise in the last decade.

To gain some insight into the situation from the 1980s, I would note a 1981 study of Mehndipur—the earliest of all—by a group of psychiatrists from Jaipur, D. C. Satija and others. Satija cites an earlier (1973) article by psychiatrist Jaswant S. Neki on faith healing elsewhere that stated, "80 percent of [India's] rural population consults faith healers."<sup>314</sup> And yet, Satija

found that 82 percent of visitors to Mehndipur came from urban areas, and 80 percent had at least a high-school education, from which he concluded that we must revise the then-common impression that faith healing is a rural phenomenon. In my own study, urban devotees are indeed the most vigorous proponents of Balaji and similar new deities of miracles. Although the protocol for visiting Mehndipur Balaji's shrine is only very summarily indicated in Satija's study, it nonetheless corresponds to the later studies and to my own observations. All three of the main deities (Balaji, Bhairu, and Pretraj) were already in place at that time. Satija mentions that the *mahant* routinely sat in a building adjacent to the main temple to oversee *darśan* and offer mediation to those who needed personal treatment. For such personal attention to be feasible, the number of visitors must have been much smaller than now. Nowadays, visitors may line up for a kilometer during auspicious times. I was told that the temple currently holds a lottery on some days to select 20 devotees already in line to be granted special audience with the current *mahant*. As mentioned, locals say that he is more often not around.

Much of what Satija discovered will seem familiar to later scholars. He notes that the majority of those seeking divine treatment were "young students and housewives." Further, the largest proportion of visitors was from upper castes (60 percent), especially Vaishyas or merchants (38 percent). As for "motivational factors" for coming to Balaji, 80 percent of visitors seeking treatment cited the prior failure of allopathic medical treatment for the same condition, and 60 percent the influence of family and friends. The large majority came from Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, and Madhya Pradesh, with relatively few (14 percent) from Rajasthan. The authors conclude that 92 percent of visitors needing treatment came because of psychiatric ailments, and only 8 percent for physical problems. Around half of the devotees needing treatment went into what Satija calls a "trance" (possession) state, and half of those in turn saw some improvement in

their symptoms. It is fair to say that this early study set the pattern for later research, but there is one aspect of the later studies that is quite absent in Satija's findings: faith healers.

Satija mentions only "patients and their relatives" coming to Mehndipur for treatment, whereas in my own observation the exorcism that is seen around Mehndipur often takes place under the guidance of a faith healer. Pakaslahti and Dwyer, who both observed Mehndipur's possession in the early to mid 1990s, certainly see faith healers as important players, while also acknowledging that groups might also treat exorcism without them (as now). But, interestingly, Kakar, who did his research in the 1980s, says nothing about faith healers in Mehndipur; in his study, the afflicted are brought and treated by their families. He only mentions in passing that some devotees had unsuccessfully sought remedies for their ailments from local faith healers before going to Mehndipur, apparently without those healers, as a last resort. Further, there is no actual evidence to suggest that faith healers had been a significant presence in Mehndipur in the (1970s) days of Ganeshpuri.

It would not have made sense for large numbers of faith healers to arrive in Ganeshpuri's day, since locals testify that the *mahant* was successfully treating all devotees in need at that time. Thus, I would conclude that faith healers became more visible, active participants in the treatment of spirit-induced problems in Mehndipur from around the early 1990s on. I see a historical parallel, then, between the advent of high-profile Marwari merchant patronage and miracles in Salasar from the early 1990s on, and the hypothesized rise of faith healers who bring their predominantly urban-merchant followers to Mehndipur from the same period. I am suggesting a systemic change that equally affected both shrines, but was manifested in different forms because of their respective local systems of ritual authority (Brahmin family versus faith-

healing Gosain *mahant*). With rising numbers of visitors in Mehndipur, faith healers found a niche in the increasing demand for ritual services that the *mahant* could no longer logistically fill.

## 5.4 Recent Devotional Change in Mehndipur

### *Building Centers of Devotional Culture*

In this section, I will shift the focus from the 1980s to the 1990s and beyond. My aim will be to examine the major factors in Mehndipur's development as a major pilgrimage shrine, which I argue matches the trajectory that we have seen in Salasar. This will help to establish that they are both components of a broader system of belief in the efficacy of shrines in Rajasthan that has expanded far beyond this state within the last twenty years. In the chapters on Salasar, I alluded to the rise of the middle class, particularly urban mercantile castes, in a time of public desire to rapidly attain prosperity and wellbeing. Since the late 1980s, the nation had been enthused with the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* television serials, which raised Hanuman's profile.<sup>315</sup> I also noted the trend towards public demonstrations of faith as a means to attain miracles. The same era also witnessed a broad turn towards restoring Hinduism to a more dominant place in civic life, evident in the rise of Hindu-centric political movements, the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya and the movement to build a Rama temple there, and the popularization of Hanuman as a symbol of Hindu vigor. All of these factors contributed to the longer-term rise of public interest in shrines promising rapidly transformational miracles that were perceived to be based in time-honored Indian religious tradition. In tracking the local ramifications of such change in Salasar, I started with a look at infrastructural modifications, and I propose to do the same in Mehndipur.

However, the material record takes a different form in Mehndipur, compared to Salasar, because there is no ideology of a hereditary class of devotee patrons such as the Marwaris.

Hence, I could not find silver reliefs or plaques announcing donations from esteemed devotees inside Mehndipur's main temple. However, *dharmśālās* and some adjunct shrines and altars around town do provide dedicatory plaques stating that they were founded or upgraded through devotees' donations. Many of these donations seem to have been made in relation to the healing of some prior affliction, or in the memory of ancestors (including parents) whose spirits have been granted permanent rest in Mehndipur under Balaji's guardianship. Although mercantile castes are prominently represented, moneyed people from other caste backgrounds are also apparent, since divine healing in Mehndipur is not predicated on the preexisting hereditary association of this or any other caste group with this site.

I will first consider what *dharmśālās* can tell us about social change in Mehndipur. I was told that at the outset of the 1990s there were around five *dharmśālās*, whereas currently there must be scores, at least, in addition to a fair number of guesthouses and hotels (ostensibly more commercial in nature than *dharmśālās*).<sup>316</sup> Although I was not able to systematically note the names of all of Mehndipur's *dharmśālās*, it appeared that comparatively few follow the convention seen in Salasar of taking the names of devotees' home areas. Instead, they are given neutral religious names (Anjani Seva Sadan, Shri Rama Dharmshala, and so forth) while hotels appeal to the desire for luxury (Hotel Poonam Palace, Lord Hotel, etc.). The lessening of links to a specific region would seem to arise from the lack of an ideology of a hereditary or geographically-linked core community; instead, as mentioned, devotion is based on the personal experience or knowledge of Balaji's healing efficacy. The knowledge that Mehndipur is a place for the removal of unruly spirits, and consequently a repository for them so that they will no longer disturb devotees' homes, may also discourage identifying accommodations with devotees' home areas. Hence, also unlike Salasar (and Khatu Shyam), there is as yet no move to build



condominiums in Mehndipur for moneyed devotees who want to stay close to the god. Nobody wants to have ghosts for neighbors.

*Dharmśālās*, along with certain shrines in the vicinity of Mehndipur, have become readily available centers for *bhajans* and exorcism. The main temple of Mehndipur is now too congested, with long lines, for healers or family groups to comfortably carry out devotional activities, although the upstairs area of the temple, which is dedicated to Pretraj, remains a popular (and exceedingly noisy) gathering place for prayer. However, although serving an important religious function, *dharmśālās* are also viewed locally as outsider investments. As a local shopkeeper confided, “The owners of *dharmśālās* start them for money—‘business’—just like a hotel ... If they make a profit [in any other business], they’ll get stuck with income tax, so they open a *dharmśālā*—there’s no tax on *dharmśālās*!”<sup>317</sup> This is the same observation that locals in Salasar had reported to me; therefore, as previously discussed, I would see heightened incentives to build in the neoliberal era, when tax shelters became more attractive than ever. Indeed, seeing profits to be made, some ambitious locals in Mehndipur have started converting their homes into rest houses—“all within the last ten years,” according to a temple trustee.<sup>318</sup>

Notwithstanding the economic dimensions of constructing *dharmśālās*, these establishments have substantially contributed to the expansion of a culture of devotion. *Dharmśālās* serve both as lodging and as informal treatment centers and convalescent homes, where many guests stay for long periods to get better before returning home. As I personally observed, and as other scholars have noted, guests share observations and advice about their respective troubles and treatment regimens. Faith healers in Mehndipur told me that they regularly bring their followers to one or another favored *dharmśālā*, where they are assured that they will be able to carry out their spiritual work. Followers in need of spiritual treatment can even show up separately in

Mehndipur and proceed to a specified *dharmśālā* where a healer periodically resides, perhaps each month. In fact, some healers stated that they permanently rent the same rooms for themselves in this way.

The trend to upgrade the infrastructure of pilgrimage centers in anticipation of more visitors is of course normal anywhere. But, my point is to consider that the multiplication of *dharmśālās* since twenty years ago has been a vehicle for the development of devotion in Mehndipur. It would be interesting to track the actual dates of construction and learn more about their favored clientele. For comparison, I would preliminarily note Carla Bellamy's (2011) study of a Sufi *dargah* [mausoleum] in Madhya Pradesh, in which she states that many of the lodges built to house pilgrims were added between 1990 and 2002, which matches the timeline that I have been discussing.<sup>319</sup> As at other wish-granting *dargahs*, many visitors are in fact Hindu. However, Bellamy does not theorize systemic causes behind this rise of construction. Instead, she attributes this change to lodge owners' individual motives, which come down to making money from pilgrims.

In Bellamy's study, the 1990s were not the only time of notable growth, as she mentions earlier spikes in construction going back fifty years. However, she tells us, the locals also "overwhelmingly" affirmed that the various shops of that center mostly went up in the last decade (1990s). Is this indicative of the systemic rise in construction for pilgrimage that I have discussed? If so, as I suspect to be the case, I would suggest that this growth is not just about Hinduism, as such, but ultimately coeval with the popular desire for miracles, and having the economic means to pursue them through pilgrimage, which involves Sufi *dargahs* too. And of course, those living in the vicinity of such shrines are seeking to profit from the increasing number of visitors. As I have theorized, then, while a culture of miracles had in some form

existed for a very long time, it became much more visible in popular culture after the upgrading of infrastructure and the concomitant rise in the number of visitors to shrines such as Mehndipur, which accelerated in the 1990s.

### *A Shrine as Workspace*

Many *dharmśālās* have small shrines built within them, but I want to highlight an example of a private temple known as Mukti Dham that was built in Mehndipur in 2000 as a site for a wealthy guru to treat followers. This will illustrate how faith healers have materially transformed the landscape of Mehndipur into a domain for their own work, which at the same time expands the physical space in which public devotion to Balaji takes place. Although not formally set up as a *dharmśālā*, this elevated temple accommodates the guru's own followers in a ground-level hall beneath it. This establishment was named after the guru's home temple of the same name in Ludhiana, Punjab, exemplifying how Mehndipur's infrastructure frequently serves as an extension of gurus' personal practice. This founding guru, already a prosperous businessman, assumed the guise of a holy man in his later years, and now runs charitable trusts from donations in his home city. By coincidence, next door to this temple is the rather grand *dharmśālā* of another well-to-do guru from Ludhiana, the owner of a factory producing cloth dye, who also regularly comes here to treat clients.

Mukti Dham—the name suggesting that it is a place of spiritual liberation [*mukti*]<sup>1</sup>—is dedicated to Anjani Mata, the mother of Hanuman. This connection to a female deity is not a coincidence; the wife of the present guru died tragically in 2000 at the time the temple-*dharmśālā* was near completion, and her *pitṛ* now serves the guru and his son (also a guru) as a divine messenger to and from Balaji in devotional healings (Figure 5-3). Thus, the female gender of the *pitṛ* has prompted the sponsoring guru to dedicate the temple to the closest female

relative (mother) of Hanuman, who is already popularly acclaimed as the guardian of spirits. Given this orientation towards *pitrs* as participants in the removal of unwanted spirits, it is not surprising that the guru has also set up an outdoor enclosure for statues of his deceased parents, suggesting an additional line of divine power. An enclosed shrine near the entrance to the

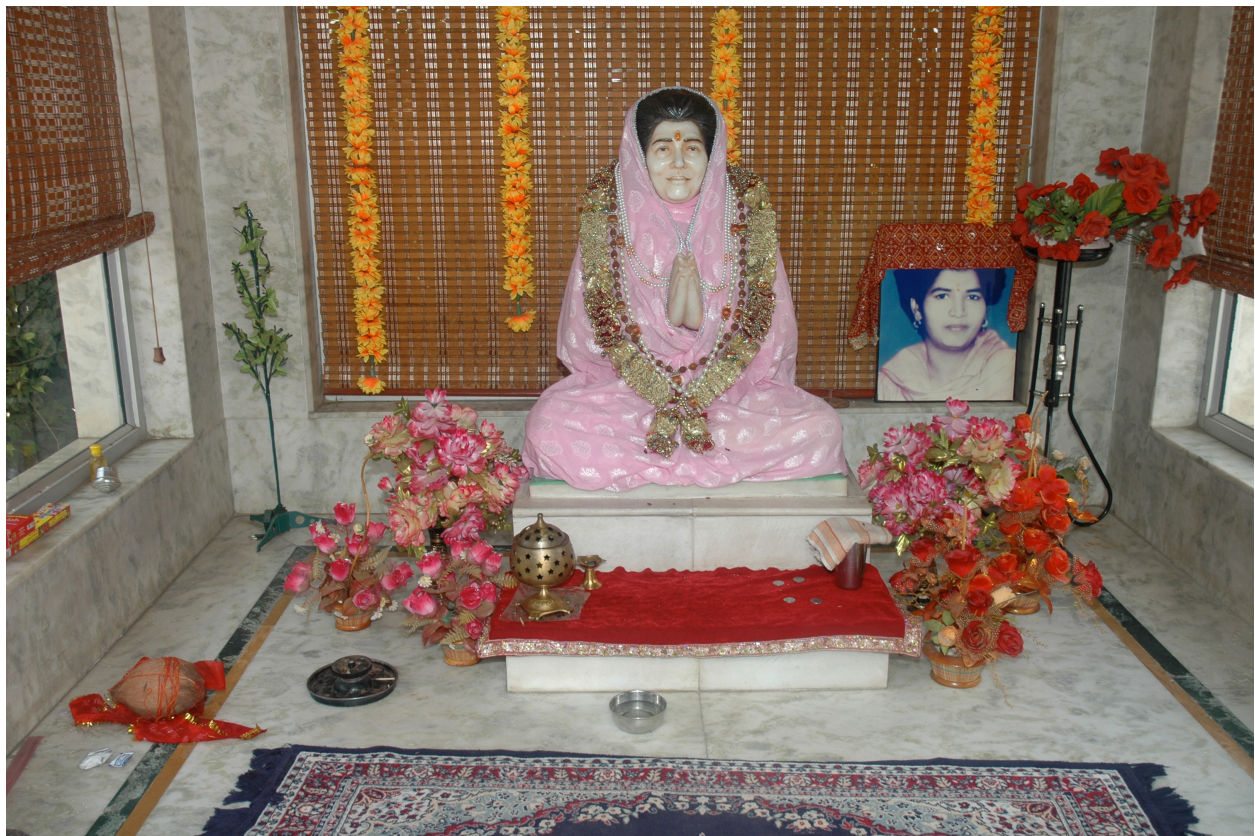


Figure 5-3. An image of the deceased wife of the guru of Mukti Dham in Mehndipur.

temple compound houses a statue of the deceased wife, to whom offerings are regularly made.

Adding a gaudy touch, on the other side of the compound is a huge three-dimensional cement tableau of Shiva and his divine family in a heavenly cave, and nearby a colossal statue of Hanuman. This has become an attraction for casual visitors off the street, who pay a fee to go

through. This attraction may even bring in the occasional new follower. The caretaker of this shrine informed me that someone seeking the services of the guru is expected to become a member of his devotional circle for “50 to 60,000 rupees,” after which any wish is guaranteed to come true [“navve ‘percent’ kā ‘demand’ pūrī hotī”].<sup>320</sup> Among the benefits that a visitor gains from membership is access to sacred soil dug up from the back yard of the temple, which rapidly brings miracles if rubbed on the stomach while invoking Anjani Mata (through the intercession of the deceased wife’s *pitr*). Inside Anjani Mata’s temple, the walkway [*parikramā*] around the goddess’s niche is festooned with thousands of pieces of red string, along with coconuts, hair ribbons, and bracelets, that devotees have tied to a lattice wall there in order to make their wishes known to the goddess. I have seen this sort of assemblage at a number of wish-granting shrines, but at this site I took particular notice of the many business cards attached to the strings, which advertised beauty shops, mobile phone dealers, bathroom fixture suppliers, and so on, from numerous cities (not just Ludhiana). It seemed as if these devotees were wishing for prosperity in their businesses. The Ludhiana guru’s shrine is simultaneously a private domain of work and an additional place for casual passersby to make a prayer. This exemplifies the relative freedom that faith healers have had to alter the environment of Mehndipur to suit their aims. In Salasar this would be impossible.<sup>321</sup>

An additional kind of spectacle is aural and transient, but has nonetheless significantly enhanced devotion in Mehndipur. That is, many visiting gurus and their followers sponsor *kīrtans* [group songs to invoke the divine] or *jāgrans* [large public religious song performances] in the vicinity of *dharmśālās*, especially around the time of holidays (not unlike at Salasar), which amply showcases the culture of faith healers for all to see. A very important point for understanding how devotion to Balaji has spread is to look at the physical dynamics of such a



*jāgraṇ* when the faith healer is present. At one, for instance, he sat at a distance from the band's stage like an honored guest. His followers, other guests at the *dharmśālā*, and anyone else who came in see the event, were made to sit on mats or stand in the back on the opposite side from the guru. It was not by accident, though, that as the singer, who had been hired for the event,



Figure 5-4. Possessed women during a *jāgraṇ* in Mehndipur.

vigorously sang, several female devotees who had been sitting near the front would get up and move about wildly to demonstrate their possession. But, notably, they were really facing the healer who was behind the stage. When he waved a hand for them to sit down, they would gradually do so (Figure 5-4).

This *jāgraṇ* in a *dharmśālā* exemplifies that much of the growth of devotion to Mehndipur Balaji is driven by the personal practices of these faith healing gurus. What we now see in Mehndipur has arguably more to do with what goes on in these healers' personal *dhāms* [religious sanctuaries] far from Mehndipur than it does with the ritual regimen of Mehndipur itself, since this site is an adjunct for their home practice. Of course, numerous visitors to Mehndipur come without a healing guru. But their impression of Mehndipur as a place of healing is conditioned by the spectacle that gurus promote as their livelihood. The involvement of outside devotees or investors in local development is a theme that applies equally to Salasar. Whereas the growth of Salasar in the 1990s and onwards strongly correlated with religious practices in Marwari urban life far from the site, the growth of Mehndipur in this period points to the geographically widespread, multitudinous private shrines and devotional circles that faith healing gurus were establishing. Like Marwari devotional communities in distant cities, these faith healer-operated sites became nodes for the spread of devotion to Balaji.

### *Negotiating Devotional Respectability*

As Mehndipur Balaji's fame has spread, he has been identified more closely with pan-Indian scriptural Hanuman. I had described a parallel process at work in Salasar, with the rise of pan-Indian Marwari patronage. In Mehndipur, twenty years ago there might have already been a small Rama temple directly facing Balaji's temple, but according to my respondents if there had been such a temple it was rebuilt ten to fifteen years ago in its current, grander form. There is nothing much tantric in this temple, which is Vaishnava in nature. Inside this Rama temple, an office is available for devotees to commission *savāmani* [a religious feast] in gratitude for wishes fulfilled, as is done in Salasar; this is standard Hindu practice.<sup>322</sup> Down the road, a very colossal Hanuman statue (several times larger than the one at the Ludhiana guru's temple) has been under

construction for some years, following the recent precedent of gargantuan Hanuman statues across northern India. In short, Mehndipur is keeping up with the pan-Indian trend to exalt Hanuman in grand terms.

In other respects, too, Mehndipur has moved in the direction of normative Hindu identity. Adjacent to the *samādhi* that had been constructed for Ganeshpuri, a large *havan* [Vedic fire] hall was built in 2000; Brahmins from nearby villages were hired to serve as *pujārīs* here.<sup>323</sup> Building this *havan* hall affirms that the much sought after, enduring *śakti* of Ganeshpuri, who is functionally equivalent to a *pitr* (that is, a helpful spiritual power) operates within the larger sweep of Hindu scripture. Each day, a half dozen or so of the *pujārīs* perform the *havan* ceremony, for which they recite Sanskrit scriptures. The stated purpose of the *havan* is to ritually convey devotees' wishes for benefits or relief from troubles to the *mahant*, and onwards to Balaji as a fast track to results. In this sense, Ganeshpuri, the faith healing ascetic, has nonetheless been confirmed as upholding a tradition of Sanskritic Brahmin practice.

The existence of contrasting interpretations of Ganeshpuri reminds me of the posthumous contestation over the religious identity of the famous nineteenth-century ascetic Sai Baba, who was supposedly born a Muslim and often lived in a mosque, not unlike a Sufi ascetic, but equally embraced Hindu spirituality. He has been depicted as ecumenically promoting “national integration” (in a book by Satya Pal Ruhela), but also remains enigmatic because of his multiple religious affiliations, leaving him open to reinterpretation in line with present-day political agendas (that is, shifting in identity between a Hindu holy man and a Sufi faqir).<sup>324</sup> Likewise, without further research, there is no telling how closely Ganeshpuri really resembled the many occult faith healers who would now claim to be conducting the same kind of work, or whether he was actually closer to the *pujārīs* who perform brahminical rituals.



At Ganeshpuri's *samādhi* each evening the *pujārīs* perform a rousing *ārtī*. During this *ārtī*, as in the one at Balaji's main temple, perhaps a dozen or so of the spiritually afflicted [*saṅkaṭvāle*] within the large crowd will spontaneously become agitated and wildly shake, perform summersaults, hit their heads against the ground or the hall's railing, and perhaps mutter angry words of defiance against no one in particular in reaction to the purifying effects of the *ārtī*. Impressively, as soon as the music stops, those who are possessed immediately revert to a placid demeanor and may start to chat with relatives and friends, as if nothing traumatic had just occurred. The Sanskritic *havan* and *ārtī* thus coexists with the culture of occult exorcism that has earned Mehndipur its fame. In the street in front of Balaji's main temple a similar scene unfolds each morning and evening when pilgrims crowd around to witness *ārtī*. Prayers for Hanuman and Rama are preceded by a mass recitation of the Gayatri Mantra, the famous Vedic incantation now widely promoted by Hindu reformists as a pan-Hindu all-purpose prayer. The effect, again, is spontaneous agitation among the afflicted, which was already common twenty years ago. Recalling Smith's thesis, we might argue from these scenes of possession during standard Hindu *ārtī* that such acts have all along been embedded in brahminical practice.<sup>325</sup>

A subtle tension between Mehndipur's identification with both occult and canonical devotional culture reached its apex around a decade ago (approximately 2004), when a chief magistrate from Jaipur visited the site and saw the harsh way the afflicted were being treated. The magistrate was so shocked that he commanded the temple to outlaw such practices. As the scholars who have written on Mehndipur have noted, and locals testified, the relatives of those believed to be possessed would commonly subject them to various tortures while they were here for treatment. Their intention was that in physically restraining the afflicted, they would keep the rebellious spirits from forcing them to cause harm to themselves or run away, while making

it intolerable for the spirit to inhabit the host. The possessed were sometimes chained to the floor, or forced to lie under piles of boulders. Starting from the magistrate's visit, more socially acceptable ways to ensure divine efficacy have been promoted. It was felt that as a growing pilgrimage center, Mehndipur needed to be more family-friendly. I was informed that the daily *havans* (and public *bhajans*) are meant to supersede these objectionable acts in appealing for divine intercession from Ganeshpuri and Balaji on behalf of any afflicted visitors.<sup>326</sup> Even so, some discomfiting practices continue, although perhaps on a lesser level. Near Ganeshpuri's *samādhi*, groups often drive the possessed into a pond full of filth to torture them into submission. In the space of a few minutes, I witnessed three women pushed into this pond. They rolled and splashed frantically in the mud while imploring an all-male crowd standing by to let them go.

Recent efforts in Mehndipur to build a more respectable public image seem not to have been subject to scholarly discussion, since everyone but Smith and Lutgendorf had already published the results of their research at that point (and these latter two writers were looking more at the scriptural tradition). But, we can find a contemporaneous parallel in Grodzins Gold's article about the recent conversion (or, as she calls it, "Vaishnavization") of meat-accepting Rajasthani goddess shrines into vegetarian Hanuman shrines, thereby instituting a more normative pan-Indian version of Hinduism.<sup>327</sup> As it so happens, Hanuman's assistant Bhairu in Mehndipur was already a vegetarian, so he was not affected by this trend, but another Bhairu, who had served the bloodthirsty Kailadevi shrine, was henceforth denied sacrifice. A useful cross-cultural comparison for this project of producing religious respectability would be Paul Johnson's work on Candomble or Brazilian possession cults. Johnson tracks the history of a voodoo-like popular religion mostly practiced among the lower classes of African descent, which subsequently

underwent a process of cultural “whitening” (as Johnson calls it) when the Brazilian government promoted a policy of valorizing this tradition as a national heritage.<sup>328</sup> In a sense, we could argue that, whatever his ongoing occult associations would be, Mehndipur Balaji has similarly been upgraded as an authentically rustic deity of miracles and exorcism who nonetheless upholds normative Hindu virtues.

### Imposing Ritual Order

At some point since the passing of Ganeshpuri and the rise in pilgrimage to Mehndipur, the administration of Balaji’s temple formalized the complex process of beseeching God for treatment of personal troubles. This represents the orderly dimension of worship, as opposed to the countervailing pragmatic, individual approach that faith healers take. Instructions for obtaining treatment from Balaji for spiritual ailments are posted on signs next to the temple, and repeated in every handbook sold in the market.<sup>329</sup> As in Salasar, where the system of *darśan* is fairly straightforward, those who do not require special treatment may simply pass through Mehndipur Balaji’s temple without formalities. But, for those needing to be rid of some affliction, the process can be much more involving, which should not be surprising, given that one is appealing to multiple deities (Balaji and two assistants) to get rid of spirits that are usually unwilling to leave. Indeed, the need for guidance to get through this process of removing unwanted spirits is the reason many devotees cite for coming with a faith healer, who serves as an expert on the rules.

To ask for relief from an affliction, a visitor should initially submit *darkhast* [a petition to undergo healing], along with *arzī* [a further application for healing], to the *pujārīs* inside the temple. *Darkhast* entails offering a bit of rice and coconut wrapped in red cloth (since that is Balaji’s favored color) in the temple; opinions differ, but people have also said one should

include a few rupees (variously, 1.25 or 5 rupees). The magnitude of treatment requested and the presumption that Balaji might more readily notice something more impressive affects the pilgrim's choice of what to offer. A fairly generous *arzī* would be to submit 181 rupees to the temple along with 1.25 kilograms of *laḍḍū* [sweets] (for Balaji), 1.25 kilograms of dry *uraḍ* [a kind of lentil] (for Bhairu), and 1.25 kilograms of rice (for Pretraj). In any visit to the temple, the devotee is given two *laḍḍūs* as *prasād*—the same two *laddūs* that I had been warned in Salasar not to eat for fear of spontaneous possession. In Salasar, visitors similarly make offerings with a wish in mind, but without the formal *darkhast* and *arzī*, which are perceived to be associated with Mehndipur and the treatment of spirit possession. Casual visitors leave Mehndipur within a day, but those needing spiritual treatment might need to stay up to 41 days (an auspicious number of days to practice austerities), although some in treatment stay indefinitely. During this time one should live an ascetic lifestyle and recite scriptures each day, such as *Hanumān cālīsā*, *Sundarkāṇḍ*, *Bajraṅg bān* (which is said to be good for getting rid of ghosts, as mentioned in Chapter 3), and so forth.<sup>330</sup> When one is ready to depart, one should submit an additional *darkhast* to gain permission from Balaji to leave.

Pakaslahti has noted that formally seeking Balaji's assistance at his main temple entails submitting to a kind of divine bureaucracy, as in a court of law.<sup>331</sup> Such steps as *arzī* and *darkhāst* are understood as petitions to the divine to hear the devotee's case, and then to make a decision about how to resolve the problem. But, I would take this a step further. This procedure is ideal because it does not involve bribery or favors that could be expected in mundane life, although involves making an offering here. This brings us back to my earlier discussion of Salasar Balaji's realm as a place where one can get tasks—miracles—accomplished fast, in contrast to cumbersome everyday bureaucratic procedures. But, it seems that when it comes to

seeking assistance from Mehndipur Balaji, the officiousness of Indian bureaucratic life has not been entirely abandoned. In the current public outcry about systemic corruption, should we expect Balaji to be even more popular? Insofar as Hanuman is a devotee of Rama, it would be easy to see him as a supporter of the movement to institute *Rāma rājya*, an idealized state governed by the Hindu morality of ancient days. The following quote from a devotee summarizes this view of Balaji as the leader of a moral bureaucracy, where corruption would not be tolerated, and every just action is rewarded:

[The deities] each have their own jobs. Now, Balaji's like the Indian president. Just as the president gives his "signature" without "fail" in India, in the same way Balaji's government [*sarkār*] provides its signature ... Whatever command [*ādeś*] Balaji gives, Pretraj then executes it as the prime minister that runs the nation ... And then, Bhairu is [Balaji's] interior minister [*grah mantrī*]. And, there is the chief of police [*kotvāl sarkār*] ... and various chief ministers [*mukhya mantrī*] of the states ... and then, lastly, there's the office of the secretary of state [*dīvān sarkār*]. All operate by the grace of Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana; they have produced what would be the Constitution ... Whoever does good or bad, according to his karma—that's what he'll get.<sup>332</sup>

On the other hand, the fact that a devotee coming to see Balaji typically states that his wish has been granted when his "number" has come up [*'number' āyā*] brings to mind that *darśan* with Balaji is not unlike the procedure for visiting an Indian doctor, where one might be given a number and told to wait until the number is called. The comparison is apt, as many visitors have substantial prior experience seeking relief through conventional doctors before they come to Balaji; indeed, Balaji is often likened to a doctor. I met a man with his family from Patna, Bihar, who reported that they had initially known nothing about Balaji, but only Hanuman. The man's son, a student in his final year in college in Jaipur, became depressed and dropped out of his studies. A doctor's prescription accomplished nothing. The parents then tried going to four different *tāntriks* in turn, fruitlessly spending 700,000 rupees. This turn of events is very

common in pilgrims' stories; they use up their money on useless specialists and then finally discover Balaji. As it so happened, the brother of the man's wife had been living in Delhi—hence, in Balaji's area of renown—and told them about the deity's shrine. In anticipation of success, the father exclaimed, "Balaji himself is the greatest doctor and greatest *tāntrik* [*Bālājī khud hī mahān 'doctor' aur mahān tāntrik*]!"<sup>333</sup>

In conclusion, then, Mehndipur's history over the last twenty years parallels what happened at Salasar, in the sense that in the early 1990s patronage from outside produced a basic infrastructure, which supported the expansion of pilgrimage. But, interestingly, given this diffuse authority, the administrators of Mehndipur did not enforce this development in such a narrow way, as was the case in Salasar, where all ritual activity centered on Balaji's main temple. Mehndipur's decentralized system allowed for the effective transformation of *dharmśālās* and some new shrines into alternative spaces of healing, which were under the dominion of faith healers. These spaces equally served family groups that might have no links to any faith healer.

As the 1990s progressed, the nationwide capitalist transformations had local parallels in the seemingly unchecked growth of schemes to profit from the burgeoning pilgrimage of moneyed urbanites seeking relief from their troubles. Anxieties relating to everyday modern life found a resolution in the efficient divine structure of Mehndipur, as in Salasar. In fact, two parallel but sometimes intersecting streams of devotion were evolving in Mehndipur: on the one hand, the temple enforced detailed bureaucratic rules for seeking divine treatment; on the other hand, faith healers worked as free agents, producing their own individualized protocols from the cultural storehouse of Indian tradition. The basis for faith healers' innovativeness is that they need to demonstrate magical qualities to substantiate their claim to be offering effective

treatment to a client. Devotional market economics in Mehndipur thus has a somewhat more entrepreneurial quality than in Salasar, with its top-down approach.

## 5.5 Local Culture and the Pilgrimage Industry

### *Shrines on the Hill: New Frontiers of Devotion*

I mentioned earlier that locals were starting to go into the *dharmśālā* business themselves, after observing how well outside investors had done. In a similar trend, locals sometimes started new shrines under outside sponsorship or perhaps improvised their own new shrines on a scrubby hill adjacent to Mehndipur. This hill now lures pilgrims on a detour through twenty or thirty small shrines and altars manned by would-be *pujārīs* who persistently pursue donations. These establishments support a peripheral economy dependent on the overflow of pilgrim traffic from the increasingly congested town below. However, in the way of the *dharmśālās* described earlier, they have also opened up new spaces where devotional practices take place.

Twenty years ago or more, there were only two shrines on this hill. Both housed aniconic *svarūp* deities presumed to be very ancient, much like Balaji. One was known as Sheshnag (half way up the hill) and the other Panchmukhi Balaji (at the top of the hill). These two shrines set the template for a spate of smaller cell-like structures housing deities directed towards exorcism and occult practices, such as Hanuman, his mother Anjani Mata, Kali, Bhairu, Shani (the god Saturn, thought to control fortune, and especially misfortune), and Shiva. The two *svarūp* deities' promise of magical efficacy remains the chief draw to pilgrims, who pass by the many later shrines on the hill in order to get to them (Figure 5-5). These various shrines have provided jobs for locals, but those who do not work there are often dismissive about these new shrines as a crass grab for pilgrims' money. As a longtime shopkeeper in town sardonically said, these hill

shrines are “a money-making vehicle ... nothing more! [*kamāī kā sādhan ... aur kuch nahīn*].”<sup>334</sup>

Therefore, locals deny ever praying in these shrines.

But, local judgments aside, I think the more interesting point here is that the construction of these shrines and small altars on this hill, largely sponsored by devotees from out of town,



Figure 5-5. Interior of an adjunct shrine on the hill near Mehndipur.

corresponds to the chronology of rising public interest in magical shrines in Rajasthan from the early 1990s onward. I would theorize these hill shrines and altars as a “second generation” development; in other words they are contingent on a sufficient mass of pilgrimage in the town of Mehndipur itself to support this new frontier of devotion on the hill. Seen from a broad vantage point, these second-generation shrines are conceptually equivalent to the rise of Jat foot



pilgrimage to Salasar. Jat foot pilgrimage only became a large-scale phenomenon in the mid-to-late 1990s, after the Marwaris had acclaimed Salasar as a site of miracles and had started investing in *dharmśālās* and other infrastructure. Alongside the rush of pilgrimage to Salasar, by the turn of the millennium we start to see numerous new shrines or upgrades of old shrines along the roads leading there, and new devotional organizations started by devotees in distant cities.

The most immediate economic beneficiaries of these new shrines on the hill are local members of the Jogi caste. They may have worked as professional mendicants in the past, which they have now translated into work as *pujārīs* in these new shrines. Apparently, the entire hill has all along been the property of the Ministry of Environment and Forests, but, as sometimes happens, this office has not been enforcing government ownership. As I was told, a well-placed fee [*riśvat*]<sup>335</sup>—“one or two thousand rupees”—to a local *pañcāyat* [town committee] official allows the *pujārīs* to carry on with their business. As one *pujārī* told me, “You give money to the official ... then he’ll think about it ... if it’s okay, then you’ll have the structure built ... in this way there are no rules here!”<sup>335</sup> The setting of the hill shrines likewise allows for ritual freedom that healers favor in pursuing their improvisational approach to treatment.

The Jogis and possibly others have effectively taken advantage of this freedom to occupy the land as squatters, setting up shrines of their own or securing sponsorship from pious patrons. Once ensconced as *pujārīs* in these shrines, the Jogis run them as caretakers for the absentee patrons, possibly faith healers themselves, who provided the initial investment. Some supplement this work by offering photography services in front of the shrines. For a fee, pilgrims from the big city can get a Polaroid photo of themselves dressed up in a colorful Rajasthani turban. As for the basic work, the Jogi *pujārīs* typically offer to brush a visitor with a sacred peacock feather in return for a donation. Occasionally, a devotional group will stop in at

a shrine of the healer's liking, make a donation, performing prayers, and then boisterously singing *bhajans*. In most cases, the repetitive, mesmerizing singing and clapping will induce one or more of the devotees to enter into a possession state. After perhaps half an hour or longer they will move on. In this way, the shrines on the hill, like the *dharmśālās*, are central to the production of Mehndipur's culture of exorcism. And at the same time, these shrines, like *dharmśālās*, guesthouses, and hotels, are economic ventures. Consider these comments by a young man from the area who had previously worked in a guesthouse, which fairly well sums up how the pilgrimage economy looks to many locals:

The land on the adjacent hill belongs to the government, but it doesn't stop people from building stone shrines on its land without permission. Those small shrines collect money ... one hundred, two hundred rupees, which pilgrims give out of piety. People come from Mumbai, etc., because of ghost [*bhūt-pret*] problems ... If pilgrims give just two or three or more rupees each, in a group of fifty, that's 250 rupees! ... *Bhagats* heal in the name of Balaji. They bring people here, charging thousands of rupees a day, saying, 'Come on, let's go to Balaji Maharaj!' It's all about money: they book a ride by Sumo [van], truck, bus, or whatever. They come here and become devotees [under the influence of a *bhagat*] and give offerings for Balaji—someone might give 10,000 rupees, or 5,000, or just 500; in this way [faith healers] make money. It's all deception [*jhūthī bāt*], I can tell you, because I worked in a guesthouse here for seven months. There was a 'lady' from Haryana who booked our whole guesthouse and asked for a 3,000 rupees discount—she said, 'Take 3,000—2,000 for the guest house and 1,000 for me' [in commission] ... those people who shake [in possession] during *bhajans*—that's wrong behavior [*galat bāt*] ... Whoever comes to Balaji ... gives five rupees—so, that'll be two or three lakhs [one lakh = 100,000] [rupees] per day. On the day the government takes over [this temple], this is going to be put to an end!<sup>336</sup>

As I have noted, it is often locals that feel left out of the socioeconomic benefits of a religious shrine who are most critical of it. The above speaker is no longer an employee, and so feels he has less to lose in this strongly worded critique. Certainly, for those who come to Mehndipur with faith healers, it would be absurd to think that the healers are not working fully on their

behalf. However, in also considering Mehndipur from the perspective of local inhabitants, I hope to increase our understanding of the multiple dimensions in which a pilgrimage shrine such as this operates. For this reason, I give attention to competing discourses, which reveal local contestations. The local perspective on Mehndipur was not really part of the picture in previous studies, as they stay within the boundaries of religious authorities and pilgrims. This contestation, although specific to Mehndipur, brings to mind the commentary among locals in Salasar about the alleged financial schemes of sponsors of *dharmśālās*, and more broadly of merchant patrons seeking privileges at the temple. In this sense, we may be seeing parallel discourses at the two Balaji shrines that locally reflect a broader public critique of official corruption.

### *Ancestor Spirit Altars and Anxieties of Modern Life*

Embedded in the walls of some of the hill shrines, plaques testify to donations made when the unquiet spirits of devotees' ancestors have been set free—a kind of “assisted living” for *pitrs* under Balaji's supervision (Figure 5-6). Far more numerous are small tile-covered cement enclosures with similar accompanying plaques that have been set up along the path that goes past the shrines. The plaques typically state that they have been set up in memory of one or more named individuals as *pitrs*, with the names of donors and their relationship to the *pitrs* indicated, along with a home address, and usually a date of establishment. The home locales specified on altar plaques are generally cities, not villages, in the Delhi-Uttar Pradesh area, which is Mehndipur Balaji's devotional heartland. I saw a wide variety of surnames, but the largest number was of merchant castes. These small altars and plaques may have spread in tandem with the construction of shrines on the hill, inasmuch as the attendants of these shrines have the duty of taking care of them.

Dwyer mentions such altars as mostly having been set up since the late 1960s, but does not discuss them in historical terms.<sup>337</sup> Many altars are not dated, which may mean that they are older ones, since those I noticed with dates were from around the mid 1990s onwards. If this is truly the case, then I would surmise that the practice of dating these altars (or at least dating them



Figure 5-6. A *pitr* altar on the hill near Mehndipur.

more often than before) would seem to chronologically match the inauguration of dated Marwari donation plaques in Salasar's temple. As I described in Chapter 2, the donations to Salasar were sometimes also made in the name of ancestors; in Mehndipur we have found a cognate practice that likewise indicates a newly public concern with the welfare of deceased parents. In the

case of Mehndipur, though, these altars indicate that an ancestor has been released from bondage to the family home, and will henceforth reside here close to Balaji.

From this arrangement, one could of course conclude that devotees had acquired the means to set up such altars at this time. However, the conditions of urban life may indeed be inducing anxiety about neglecting ancestral obligations. For instance, a one-time faith healer whom I met in Mehndipur and later visited at his home in Rewari (southern Haryana) described how a deceased uncle became angered when his family built an outdoor latrine in proximity to his shrine in their home. This precipitated a series of mishaps, including the sudden deaths of the healer's father and brother, all of which became revealed through a possessed family member. In such an instance, the crowding of space actually impinges on the spirit world. Likewise, long working hours in urban work situations potentially remove one from overseeing the domestic worship of spirits. Such neglect is implicit in the fact that the large majority of ancestral possessions happen in female members of the household, who are more likely to tend ancestral shrines and therefore voice ancestral critiques of neglect.

The therapeutic aim of exorcism is to discern the unmet needs of a possessing spirit so that it will stop troubling its host. Often, the spirit may initially resist cooperating, but ultimately, through question-and-answer dialogue with family members, perhaps under the guidance of a healer, the spirit will admit what it seeks. This may entail setting up a shrine for the spirit in the family's home with the expectation that it will be given offerings. A lasting solution would be for the family to conduct a memorial ritual for the deceased on the banks of the Ganga, resulting in the liberation of the spirit. In some cases, the spirit may voice a desire to be personally cared for by Balaji, resulting in an altar on the hill. The action prescribed is not certain beforehand, since the solution depends on what the spirit states that it requires to depart from its host.

Although there are many altars and dedicatory plaques on the hill, they represent only a minute fraction of possessions treated in Mehndipur. I noticed, however, that ghosts malevolently sent by a *tāntrik* are never honored here. Families are only interested in honoring their own ghosts—*pitṛs*—because these are expected to serve the family, if properly revered.

For payment, the Jogi *pujārīs* look after the *pitṛs*.<sup>338</sup> To keep these spirits happy in perpetuity, the *pujārīs* make occasional offerings, such as milk and *khīr* [sweet rice porridge], and they recite scriptures such as the *Bhagavad Gītā*, *Rāmcaritmānas*, and particularly the chapter contained in it known as *Sundarkāṇḍ*. The living relatives will pay their ancestor a visit here once or twice a year, which insures that there will be no further trouble back at home. As a shrine assistant explained:

[The *pitṛ*] has found peace, so it wants to stay here. By giving it a place here, the household members won't be bothered by it anymore ... This is Baba's [Balaji's] court [*darbār*]! [The *pitṛ*] stays near to [Balaji] now. It won't bother its relatives, so they'll have peace at home, and the *pitṛ* will be taken care of.<sup>339</sup>

Once the altar has been set up, it is not entirely clear whether the *pujārīs* do much further; when I was surveying these altars, many looked very grown over with weeds, although that was admittedly during the rainy season. The *pujārīs* themselves see the whole business in frankly economic terms:

We [*pujārīs*] cause a *pitṛ* to be made [through rituals and exorcism] ... we make two ... five ... sometimes 20,000 rupees to set up a memorial platform [*cabūtarā*]. By the grace of Baba, we get everything [economic profit] here—pilgrims come, they get rid of their troubles. When the *pitṛ* settles down here, then [the pilgrims] give donations [to us]! Then they come here and make wishes to the *pitṛs*.<sup>340</sup>

When we look at faith healing sessions in this and the following chapters, the theme of neglect is palpable. If one has had a business setback, it would not be unreasonable to suspect

that an ancestor is calling attention to having been unduly ignored. From another standpoint, though, families may be projecting their own frustrations or anxieties with unfulfilled aspirations in competitive urban life by nostalgically recalling ghosts representing a family past, perhaps linked to an idealized village. Framing anxiety in terms of urban life, Leela Fernandes (2006) observes a continuing restlessness about acquisition and social position among the neoliberal-era Indian middle class. Contrary to the more common depiction of the middle-class as a social category with singular desires and concerns, she finds considerable social differentiation. This is conducive to disappointment, as some families may not be getting ahead as fast others. Hence, Fernandes investigates “the differences between lived realities of the middle class ... and the idealized representations of the new middle class.”<sup>341</sup> In other words, middle-class urban life does not always prove to be as happy as it should. This, then, would be the flip side of the narrative of blessings propelling upward mobility that one can see at Salasar.

Similarly noting the increasing diversification of the middle class, Geert de Neve (2011) finds in this population “the feeling that kin structures are becoming more difficult to maintain in the context of busy working lives.”<sup>342</sup> Recalling Kakar’s psychiatric viewpoint, I would suspect that problems with ancestor spirits, empirically seen to be most often located in young adults, could relate not only to deteriorating relations with the afterlife but also perturbed family relations among the living in a time of ambition and competition. In the traditional extended family [*samyukt parivār*], brothers live in close proximity, perhaps sharing a common ancestral family home or adjacent homes, along with their respective families. In an urbanized environment, this may entail sharing congested living spaces. Individual advancement and unequal socioeconomic advancement brings stress that can cause rifts within such families. In fact, conflict over such

shared resources or competition within the family is exactly the theme that frequently comes up in possession, as I will document later in this chapter.

### *Devotion and Local Social Change*

In this subsection, I will elaborate what I mean in saying that the local population of Mehndipur does not revere Balaji as its primary deity. This is a crucial point, since it underlies the whole argument of difference between Mehndipur and Salasar, with its in-built hereditary merchant patronage. I mentioned that the population of the Mehndipur area is predominantly Meena, a tribal caste that is nowadays a beneficiary of the Indian reservations system (that is, affirmative action for disadvantaged groups). There are some Gurjars (another tribal group), Rajputs, and Brahmins in the area, too, among others, but hardly anyone from the merchant castes who so reliably support Salasar.

What sort of relationship do these locals have to Balaji? Mehndipur is virtually autonomous from its environs. Locals of the two large towns in the area, Toda Bhim and Sikrai, go about their lives with very little to do with Mehndipur except for those who have found work in the pilgrimage service industry. Interestingly, although the Meenas working here are no doubt grateful to Balaji for their jobs, in modern times they have established a caste narrative that enshrines a different deity especially identified with them. In conjunction with their rising social fortunes in recent years (due to government assistance) they have asserted their own caste god, known as Meen Bhagwan (“Meen God”). Inasmuch as Meen Bhagwan was none other than Vishnu’s first avatar, when he took the form of a fish [*mīn* in Sanskrit] to save the world, the word “Meen” is understood to index Meena identity. However, this relation may be a retroactive mythology to support the modern-day social uplift of the Meena caste.



We might recall that during the last twenty years the Jats similarly embraced Hanuman as a kind of caste hero, along with an ideology that the Jats were pivotal in ancient Aryan history. Similarly, Marwari donations to the shrine of Balaji, whom they claimed was their *kuldev*, or lineage deity, supported a nascent narrative of heroism to counteract their reputation for miserliness. So, there is a precedent for thinking that Meen Bhagwan might be a relatively new development. Nandini Kapur addresses this in an intriguing exploration of how Indian tribes have revised their identities in line with aspirations for social emancipation in modern times. As she tells us, not only the Meenas, but also various other tribes have composed ethnic mythologies that assign to themselves long Sanskritic pedigrees.<sup>343</sup>

In 1967 a Meena scholar named Muni Magan Sagar composed *Mīnā Purāṇa Bhūmikā*, in which he borrowed from folk stories and Sanskrit scripture to assemble a Meena caste history. This included etymologies purporting to link the Meena name with ancient Sanskrit literature, specifically to the *Matsya* [“fish”] *purāṇa*, which describes Vishnu’s first *avatār*.<sup>344</sup> In all likelihood, they also revered Hanuman, but as locals say, it was only when Ganeshpuri started attracting attention from outside that Balaji’s shrine became a place of miracles.<sup>345</sup> This reinforces my conclusion that the cult of Mehndipur Balaji is truly the product of the enthusiasm of outsiders not originally linked to this site, although the shrine may have quietly existed for many years. For this reason, Balaji, not unlike Meen Bhagwan, arguably does not represent a continuous tradition that goes back thousands of years but rather a reconstructed or transplanted tradition that conforms to contemporary socioeconomic conditions.

There is an interesting twist to this story of Meena uplift that shows the god’s independence from Balaji. Around two kilometers from Balaji’s temple on the short road leading to the Agra-Jaipur highway, a Meen Bhagwan temple was built, reportedly in 1987.<sup>346</sup> It is a pleasant,

expansive temple that makes Balaji's temple down the road seem shabby by comparison. Inside is a life-sized man-made (not *svarūp*) image of Meen Bhagwan, represented as Vishnu with a fish's tail (Figure 5-7). On the street side of the temple, a large signboard lists all the donations from local Meenas; the amounts, in thousands of rupees, shows that the Meenas were building a

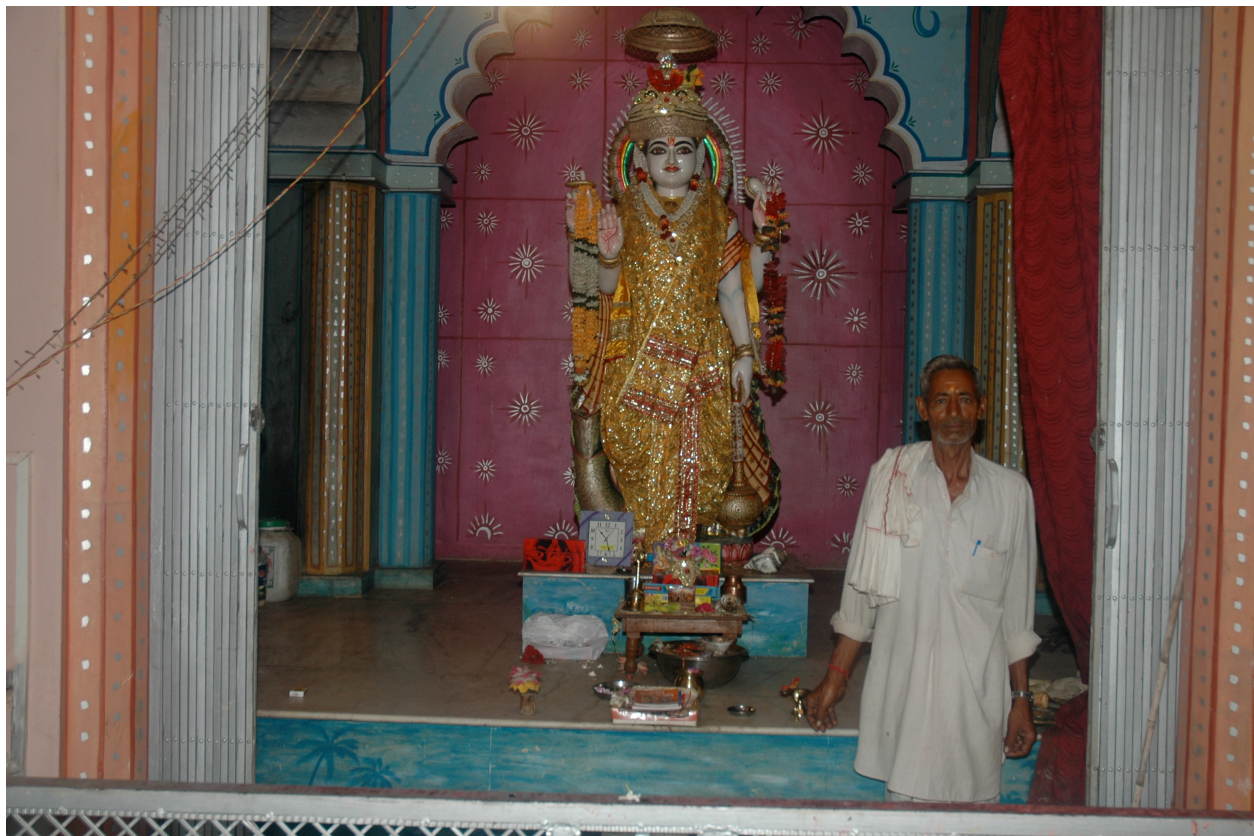


Figure 5-7. Meen Bhagwan in his temple near Mehndipur.

shrine that would be commensurate with their rising prosperity. The fact that it was built so close to Mehndipur might mark a subtle assertion of new local Meena power on par with those who control Balaji's shrine. It was not clear to me whether the current temple had truly been completed in 1987; I was told by others that this temple had been built 15 to 20 years ago, which

would be more in line with my chronology of the rise of miracle shrines. Furthermore, a man who lives nearby and often comes to the temple said that Meen Bhagwan was only popularized in this community within the last five to fifteen years.

No exorcism is performed at the Meen Bhagwan temple, although it is claimed that those who are possessed can find immediate peace here (similar to what Salasar Balaji offers). As mentioned, locals look with disfavor at the ostentatious performances of possession in Mehndipur, and see it as something foreign. However, I was told that there had formerly been a very small Meen Bhagwan temple on this spot where the *pitr*s of several deceased devotees answered wishes, but some locals seem to dispute whether such a shrine ever existed. If there was such a shrine, perhaps it could have resembled what Balaji might have once been like—a place for contacting local ancestor spirits, a protocol that still exists in at least some Meena and Gurjar villages in the area. Extrapolating from such small shrines, then, Balaji could be emblematic of an appropriation, or gentrification, of an ordinary lower-caste (tribal?) deity. This has been going on all over India, where upwardly mobile urbanites embrace what is bucolic as magic and authentic. For instance, J. J. Pallath has written a provocative article documenting the high-caste takeover of a previously low-caste goddess shrine in Kerala, which has resulted in various ritual and customary changes in her worship (such as eliminating bawdy singing and other impure acts) to bring her in line with modern urban sensibilities.<sup>347</sup>

In the large subdistrict town of Sikrai, I visited a Meena *pitr* shrine in which Hanuman is also enshrined—not surprisingly, given his usual role as overseer of ancestor spirits. Perhaps this shrine could give a sense of the arrangement at Balaji’s temple before pilgrimage transformed it. A sadhu residing at this shrine administers to the spiritual needs of a mostly Meena local clientele. Although primarily worshiping Devi, he keeps a prominent Hanuman image in front of

his small abode, and next to it several rough stones representing a collection of *pitrs* of various social backgrounds originating in the area—one a king, one a merchant, another a farmer, and so forth. Given their social diversity, under the mediation of this sadhu, the *pitrs* are able to treat visitors from a wide range of backgrounds (following the idea that *pitrs* can best assist those who are of the same social group as themselves). With the support of the *pitrs*, and empowered by Hanuman, this sadhu treats locals for problems of possession, but without what he dismissively refers to as public “drama” [*nāṭak*] or delusion, as seen in Mehndipur. It is not the case, then, that this sadhu is copying the ways of Mehndipur. Indeed, surprisingly, he has never been to Mehndipur, even though it is less than an hour’s drive from here. It is striking, then, how insulated Mehndipur Balaji is from the surrounding area. Those from Delhi and other relatively distant areas are overwhelmingly the ones who patronize Balaji.

### *The Last Twenty Years, From a Local Perspective*

In this investigation of local religious practices, my intention has been to present narratives of devotion from the area surrounding Mehndipur that provide local perspectives about what the worship of Balaji means here. This expands the discussion beyond the accounts of faith healers, *pujārīs*, and devotees who are already enmeshed in the culture of pilgrimage. As a final note on the local perspective of devotion in Mehndipur, then, I will discuss how social and religious change in Mehndipur over the last twenty years looks from the standpoint of those who have been here for much of that time. Although many locals have economically benefited from the influx of pilgrims, they (at least older people) may see recent developments in pilgrimage to Mehndipur as symptoms of decline linked to the bad effects of the Kali Yuga. But, those symptoms are ironically some of the actions most commonly associated with devotion to Mehndipur Balaji! In particular, most people in the region criticize public possession here as a

misguided attempt to attract attention because of some psychological disturbance or for personal profit.

The old days, when Ganeshpuri performed miracles, are seen as a time when divine power was truly present, and people trusted each other. Nowadays, with the influx of pilgrims from diverse places, and those seeking to profit from them, Mehndipur has allegedly deteriorated into a place of greed and deception. As the proprietor of a shop near Ganeshpuri's *samādhi* told me:

Previously there was much more feeling of devotion here ... nowadays there isn't any to be found. Before, a man would prepare food and say: 'Feed these twenty men!' [as *savāmani*]; today nobody asks [because they're selfish]. A lot has changed; before people had faith in God, but nowadays they just come [to Mehndipur] for an outing [*cakkar*], without genuine belief. Previously a lot of troubled people [*sankaṭvāle*] used to come, and in that time it took a month at most to get rid of their trouble ... they'd recite [a *mantra*] 108 times from a rosary [*mālā*]; they'd recite *Hanumān cālīsā*. Devotion came first!<sup>348</sup>

According to this interviewee, pilgrimage has become cheapened; instead of being an act of faith, it is now a tourist jaunt. The fact that people publicly perform possession does not necessarily counteract that perception because many locals regard that practice as a contrivance. This narrative of decline was similar to what a *pujārī* from the city of Sardarshahar in Shekhawati had told me regarding the popularization of foot pilgrimage among predominantly Jat youth groups, as reported in Chapter 4. There, too, authentic faith had been adulterated in an age of just looking for spectacles. In other words, this may be a systemic complaint—at least as far as major pilgrimage sites go. The kind of material development seen in Mehndipur is merely a snapshot of what anyone would see in even bigger places like Vaishno Devi or Hardwar, where pilgrimage is big business.

As the quality of faith in Mehndipur has supposedly deteriorated, the shrine itself has organically responded in kind. Reportedly, the holy water that formerly emanated in larger

quantities from Balaji's image has now been reduced to a few drops a day. Adding to this sense that authenticity has been lost, I was reminded that Ganeshpuri could cure anyone in just three days, but nowadays faith healers and *pujārīs* allegedly keep devotees under their treatment over multiple visits for months and years in the pursuit of a resolution, perhaps deriving some financial benefit from this. Even the loss of more severe (hence, authentic) methods of treatment, such as chaining people for days to the side of the temple may be a sign of decline. Nowadays, locals and even some visitors told me, only half of possession cases may be authentic (or even much less, depending on who is talking), as women allegedly perform it out of delusion or perhaps even to draw clients to a complicit healer. As I was also told, some visitors even feign possession to be allowed to pass to the front of the line for entry into Balaji's temple. Some locals think that the presentation of real troubles is giving way to simple wish making (already the norm at Salasar), suggesting an adulteration of the original healing mission in this place. As a *dharmśālā* proprietor observed, "Nowadays people coming to make wishes are on the increase, and those with troubles are declining."<sup>349</sup> Such a change might seem like a good thing, if it meant that fewer people were troubled, but it seemed that the speaker meant that people are approaching Balaji without a proper appreciation for what the god can do.

## 5.6 Case Studies of Faith Healers

### *Faith Healers in Contestation*

In this section, I will shift the discussion to faith healers as agents in the development of devotion to Balaji and the propagation of his cult. They are important for this story because devotional groups typically coalesce and organize activities around the spiritual charisma of a guru. Examining the way devotional groups form highlights one of the most fundamental distinctions between the two Balajis. As we will also see in the urban context in Chapter 6,

whereas Salasar Balaji's devotional groups organize on the basis of shared regional ancestry, Mehndipur Balaji's groups always seem to need a healer at the center; otherwise, the group may lack cohesion. As I will be introducing additional healers (and devotees) in the following two chapters, their appearance in this chapter is only the beginning of a longer discussion. Among the issues relating to healers to be considered here will be how they became religious guides working with the power of Hanuman-Balaji, and also how they represent Balaji to the devotional public. Theoretically, my aim is to shift the focus from exorcism as the main event of devotion to recognizing that it is one among several possible expressions of devotion. A discussion of faith healers will serve this purpose by illustrating the diverse range of services that they offer, which includes but is not limited to exorcism.

One point I would like to amend at the start is the notion that faith healers are stable subjects following a singular tradition. My own approach throughout this study has been to highlight the contestations and improvisations in relationships among religious specialists, pilgrims, local economic authorities, and so forth. One way in which I would offer a new perspective through contestations is in a reexamination of the relations between faith healers and *pujārīs* in Mehndipur. Dwyer has suggested that they have a complementary rather than competitive relationship. In my view, this is true only up to a point. Antagonism might not be expressed outright, but it stands to reason that when local authority and possibly economic livelihood are at stake, there may be some competition. Consider, then, the following statement from a *pujārī* in one of the shrines on the hill in regard to faith healers:

[This claim of faith healers to embody Balaji's *śakti*] is only a 'business'! This is our birthplace—we [*pujārīs*] know more about this. Those faith healers just come here for 'business' for a month each year ... and they don't study the religious rules; they just make the world a wretched place [*duniyā ko chutiya banāte hoṅge*]! They don't [directly] take money, but they get it indirectly. They'll say: 'I'm going to have a

temple built—it'll take 50,000 rupees ... so give a donation.' Therefore, [my advice is to] go directly to Baba [in the shrine, therefore not by way of faith healers]! Contact the *pujārīs*! ... Everyone [faith healers and *pujārīs*] here understands this is a 'business.' Our 'aim' in sitting here [in the shrines] is to make a living, so we need donations!<sup>350</sup>

This rather tough talk, which resembles what Salasar's *pujārīs* had said about faith healers (in Chapter 3), suggests some rivalry between these different classes of religious guides. The *pujārī* speaking above, although not a Brahmin himself, and therefore not a high-caste religious specialist, nonetheless disparages faith healers as only being in this line of work for money, but then acknowledges that the *pujārīs* on the hill have similar aims—hence, they are competing. Since none of the faith healers of Mehndipur live there, insofar as they all have practices elsewhere, the speaker claims that they are less authentic than the local *pujārīs*. The local *pujārīs* do offer treatment to pilgrims, although more as a generalized blessing than a dramatic exorcism. But, since the shrines on the hill also benefit from the clientele that the healers bring for exorcism sessions, the *pujārīs* and faith healers are co-dependent.

### *A Faith Healer as Exorcist*

In this and the following two subsections I will provide three case studies of faith healers in Mehndipur, each of which will illustrate a particular characteristic of their work pertinent to this study. The first case study will illustrate that these healers typically manage ancestor spirits or other *ātmās* (such as those sent by *tāntriks*). This story will document, in part, how it is done. In this sense, they model themselves after Hanuman, the ultimate master of such spirits. This kind of work does not necessarily involve confrontational exorcism. The healer might just recite scriptures or advise the client to undergo a regimen of austerities to make the bad influence quietly go. Sometimes a healer may find that a problem has not been instigated by a spirit but is simply the result of bad karma, in which case he will prescribe a procedure for purification. In



this first story, then, I will give an account of exorcism in its classic form in Mehndipur. This vignette will show the centrality of *ātmās* and *pitṛs* in such treatment. As explained in Chapter 3, an *ātmā* is the soul of the deceased, but a *pitṛ* is an *ātmā* that has become a family's helpful protector. Usually the discovery of a *pitṛ* is a good thing, because, it may assist one in keeping away bad ghosts and provide other assistance.

In this case, a healer, around 60, had arrived from Gurgaon District (Haryana), near Delhi, with a family group that included a woman in her 40s who had been barely able to walk for some years. This healer had sponsored the construction of a cement room on the path going up the hill as a personal spiritual treatment center. It housed a shrine for a *pitṛ* and images of Hanuman and Bhairu, both ready to fight any bad spirits. The group believed that a malevolent spirit had caused the woman's problem; so, they would treat her and stay for the night. The healer felt that with the proper frame of mind they would be successful because, as he said, "faith can accomplish all miracles!"<sup>351</sup> In his youth, this man had known little about Hanuman, but then he came to Mehndipur with a friend at age 18 for some mental [*mānasik*] ailment and was healed after three years of treatment. He thereby gained the power to help clients, whom he brings here possibly several times a month. The ancestor spirit that had formerly troubled him now serves as his principle messenger [*dūt*] to the gods, facilitating healing for others. For this session, the healer built a *havan* [sacred fire] in the shrine to summon the power of his divine helpers.<sup>352</sup> Joining this group, I followed after them in reciting a series of Sanskrit mantras, each time taking up a handful of sacred dried leaves (*tulsī* leaves and other ingredients) from a pile before us to feed the fire.

After several minutes of *mantras*, the disabled woman started to breath heavily. An older woman, her mother-in-law, anticipating a spiritual confrontation, asked, "Who is it?" The faith

healer shouted threateningly in the direction of the afflicted woman and harshly threw his fire tongs to the floor, as if to scare the spirit into submission. The woman's husband and a neighbor echoed the demand: "Who is it? Say your name! Speak up fast!" The healer then adopted a more welcoming stance to get the spirit to open up to them: "Talk! ... Here's a peaceful fire ... Have something to eat! ... We'll prepare your bed ... Be at ease in speaking! Who are you?" A second man in our group more aggressively insisted: "Say your name ... [or else] Baba's [Balaji's] going to beat you!" After several minutes of negotiations, the woman blurted out a name: "Urmila!" This invited more questions: "Urmila who? ... Leave her! ... Are there more of you in her?" The woman muttered, "Four." She was carrying four ghosts at one time. "So, what are your names, the four or five of you?" After much back-and-forth, the spirit in the woman revealed a problem at the root of this possession: "I wasn't given a *laḍḍū*!" Because Urmila and her cohort had not been offered sweets in reverence, they retaliated by causing this woman physical disability with the intention of bringing attention to this wrong. The healer assured the spirit: "So, have a *laḍḍū*! ... I'll feed you! But what are the names of the rest of you?!" Again, he violently threw his fire tongs to the floor, invoking the purifying power of the sacred fire.

From these alternating demands, threats, and offers of liberation to the ghosts, their names and identities gradually became revealed. After a lengthy exchange, the healer made first Urmila and then the other ghosts repeat after him: "I [so-and-so] promise that I will never possess [her] again, Baba!" In further questioning, it turned out that Urmila was the aunt [*cācī*] of the disabled woman. This was not a bad thing, because such a *pitṛ* could become a valuable ally if treated properly. There were so many spirits in this woman to be treated that the healer finally asked in exasperation: "Is there any other *pitṛ* in there [*Aur pitṛ hai koī*]?" Finally, when it appeared that

the spirits had all agreed to stop troubling the woman, the healer commanded her: “Stand! Come here [*Khade ā! Cal ke idhar ā jāo!*]” The woman haltingly stood and walked a few steps before collapsing. Her mother-in-law chuckled, apparently pleased to see some progress, and then shouted out: “Say it, ‘Hail to chaste Baba’ [*Bol brahmacārī bābā kī jai!*]” Whenever someone in a group makes such an exhortation, it is clear that the session has come to a close. The entire session had lasted around 90 minutes.

With this case study in mind, I would like to momentarily reconsider the writings on Mehndipur (Satija, Kakar, Pakaslahti), in which mental problems were seen to be at the root of possession, as I think the mind-body split that prevails in Western thought needs to be addressed here. Many Indians themselves nowadays agree with a Western psychiatric interpretation of possession, although they may also profess faith in a god, so it would not be fair to suggest that Indian thought is inimically opposed to it. But, I would also note an article on theories of possession in which Frederick Smith reminds us of the need to avoid imposing a mind-body duality when analyzing possession. Traditional South Asian possession, he says, is informed by somatic and mental unity. He prefers to see possession through the lens of performance theory—possession as a physical act of therapy that has meaning to the practitioner.<sup>353</sup> This is what Dwyer was getting at with his call for a phenomenological approach, in which the experience of the cultural insider is the primary focus. So, in considering this case study of exorcism, I avoid the presumption that the healer is deceiving his charges—at least, I saw no evidence of that—and instead focus on the way he performed to make the process work.

As mentioned earlier, an important aspect of the healer’s work in this session was not only uncovering *pitṛs* but also possibly turning them into helpers. There was a certain ambiguity in the interactions with the *pitṛ*—sometimes inviting and sometimes threatening. The treatment

itself may not be definitively over, if the woman relapses, but if that should happen the healer would subject her to further treatment to uncover lingering spiritual causes. Much of this treatment is therefore improvisational. Clearly, the family group was satisfied with the work completed that day, but most devotees in Mehndipur describe such work as a long-term effort, sometimes taking years. After this particular session, the group relaxed together in the shrine space and prepared dinner, as if all had gone according to plan. Although I did not meet these individuals again, my point of inquiry here is less the biography of the afflicted than the methods of the specialist, since these specialists are the nodes around which circles of devotees form into groups, which solidifies the worship of Balaji in diverse locales. This is a very different model of devotional spread than what takes place in the worship of Salasar Balaji, where shared caste and ancestry among members is important, with regard to charismatic leaders.

### *The Faith Healer as a “Jet-Set” Advisor*

In this second case study, I will highlight that faith healers tend to be savvy about the business of attracting clients from a wide geographical range. Word about a particular guru may spread by word of mouth, and may additionally involve social networks of which the guru is a member; one example that I observed is of urban business networks. These healers take an interest in all aspects of their clients’ lives, so as to better serve them, and may organize group devotional activities and preside over annual or periodic *jāgrans* that bring together established donors and new followers. I have noted the accusation that faith healers seek ways to entrap the unwary into giving money. Most faith healers seem to agree that this is a common problem. However, at least some healers have already attained wealth through business before taking on a religious identity, which becomes important in their personal narrative. The advantage of this is that they

can refuse money for their services (so they say) and point to their own business success as evidence that they have effective spiritual helpers, which could presumably benefit others.

One day, I met such a healer in Mehndipur: a potbellied bearded man of around 60, standing in the street in front of the souvenir shops opposite the main temple. Curiously, he was holding a large stack of Indian rupee bills of varying denominations and was handing them out willy-nilly in wads to passersby. Some individuals seemed perplexed to receive this unexpected gift; various beggars would continually pester him, getting some money but then being shooed away. The shopkeepers nearby told me that he was a faith healer and that I should talk with him. Once I had approached him, he immediately started divining my past and future, telling me that I had been in India for three years. No, I insisted, it had only been six months at that point (although I had stayed in India for long periods in earlier years). This is a typical introduction; other faith healers have started off by telling me that my father has two wives and that I have spent time in jail. As in reading a horoscope, if objective facts did not seem to align with the forecast, I would try to find agreement on some existential level: perhaps many of us are living in some kind of mental “jail,” I reasoned. This is one way that faith healers immediately signal to potential clients that they have clairvoyant powers, and can therefore help them attain their wishes.

The healer brought me to the *dharmśālā* where he occupied the same suite of rooms each weekend, when he would fly in from Mumbai to Jaipur. We settled on a veranda—he on a raised table like a god on an altar, with a plate of fruit as an offering set before him. When I refused his offer of fruit, he seemed inspired to make further readings of my soul: he told me that I did not drink nor smoke, and that I would be successful in my work. I learned that he had grown up in the district of Pali, in western Rajasthan, and became interested in Balaji when he went to a Hanuman temple in Jaipur around 18 years ago. The healer now passes out bills in gratitude for

Balaji's blessings—a promising sign to those seeking abundance. When I asked him what he thought about rumors of corruption among gurus, he coyly reflected that there are “all types” while extending the five different-length fingers of one hand to make his point. In fact, he noted, he does not need the money, as his son is a well-to-do real estate developer in Mumbai. Thanks to Balaji, he retired from the family business some years back when he found he had the power to heal others.

Several urban followers had gathered around the healer to seek answers for their troubles. Turning to a man from Ahmedabad (Gujarat), the healer asked him about his business and then forecast that it would start to improve after six months. A woman, also originally from Ahmedabad but now living in Delhi, said that her son had broken his leg in an accident and needed an operation. The healer told her that it would go well if she prayed to Balaji, assuring her that he had once attended a dying man in a hospital and after his prayerful intervention the man recovered completely by the next morning. As if that was not enough, he reflected that through his intervention in the name of Balaji he had successfully “delivered” (through divine intercession) over 500 sons. Judging from his clientele—apparently Marwaris living in Gujarat—it seemed likely to me that their relationship was built on mutual business contacts. The healer himself fit the pattern of the typical Marwari who leaves Rajasthan in youth and goes to a city like Mumbai to make a fortune.

We might wonder why this man did not become a devotee of Salasar Balaji. As it happens, Pali, his homeland, is too far from Shekhawati for him to consider Salasar Balaji as his ancestral deity. But, he had some lively views about that shrine. He averred that there is an invisible boundary around three kilometers from Mehndipur beyond which the inhabitants seem to only revere Salasar, not Mehndipur. Earlier in this study I described the geographical range of Salasar

Balaji's core clientele—the Shekhawati-Bagri Jat region and certain cities where Marwaris and others from this region now reside. But, Mehndipur Balaji, lacking a hereditary community from his home region, receives devotees from a much less obvious domain. His following in the Haryana-Delhi-Uttar Pradesh area has spread outwards along mercantile networks in cities along the Grand Trunk Road, from around Kanpur in the east to Amritsar in the west.

Answering an unspoken question, the healer asserted that Salasar is a shrine for *krod̄patis* [multi-millionaires]; by comparison, Mehndipur is for common people [*ām log*]*—*a bit ironic in light of his own business and social connections, but consistent with the egalitarian ethic that I saw there. The healer added that whereas the temple at Mehndipur has an annual budget of merely 15 million rupees, Salasar's is 60 million rupees, signifying much bigger donors.<sup>354</sup> This was consistent with my observation that Mehndipur has not shared in the condominium building agenda seen in Marwari-favored shrines. In sum, then, this man is typical of a fair number of faith healers who dismiss the accusations about their money ambitions with the claim that they do not need any more wealth. Although it might be that he conducts exorcisms on occasions, his usual role is simply to give divinely inspired advice. This, in fact, is the most typical activity of faith healers. Although Mehndipur deserves its reputation for exorcism, the scholarly preoccupation with this one procedure obscures this less dramatic type of work.

### *The Faith Healer as a Magical Figure*

A third aspect of healers, which I will highlight a third case study, is that they typically demonstrate supernatural powers to justify their claim of magical efficacy in treating clients. Of course, the challenge of finding a suitable healer has been part of Indian religious discourse all along. For instance, in the concluding chapter of June McDaniel's book on ecstatic gurus of Bengal, she discusses the traditional importance of verifying that a guru is authentic.<sup>355</sup> In

Mehndipur's market I obtained a manual by M. Ramsukhdas giving advice on how to find a good guru, showing the continuing relevance of the concerns McDaniel describes.<sup>356</sup> Basing its discussion on excerpts from Sanskrit texts with Hindi explanations for the average pilgrim, the manual makes clear that nowadays, as in ancient times, a guru is needed to guide one to final spiritual liberation. In a place like Mehndipur, which is loaded with gurus offering services, advice on selecting a guru is clearly needed.

The cultivation of magical personal qualities is a crucial aspect of faith healing that characterizes most of the healers introduced in this study. But, although some of their abilities, such as being able to see a client's inner thoughts and future actions, may be common to many such healers, most also have individual quirks. One evening during Hanuman Jayanti (in April), in the street near Mehndipur Balaji's temple, I encountered a healer who exemplified particularly unconventional abilities. The healer and a group of perhaps 50 followers had just arrived by foot after a 10-day journey from Delhi (although some of them might have met the healer on the road near Mehndipur) and were boisterously banging on drums and dancing as they made their way to the *dharmśālā* where they would stay. It was their eleventh annual foot journey here.

As noted, pilgrimage to Mehndipur on foot is unusual, unlike at Salasar. In Shekhawati, Hanuman Jayanti would be one of two each year when hundreds or thousands of volunteers set up roadside services to help foot pilgrims reach Salasar. By contrast, the group coming to Mehndipur told me that they had fended for themselves, dodging trucks on the highway and sleeping and eating in villages. This was a test of their fortitude as a group. As one *yātrī* [pilgrim] said, citing the famous *Sundarkāṇḍ* scripture, "Without a devotional community, there is nothing [*Bin hari kṛpā satsaṅg nahīn ātā*]." The high level of faith within the group compensated for the lack of community support along the journey. They had especially high



regard for the magical power of their faith healing guru, which helped them to avert misfortunes. The opportunity for personal guidance under a charismatic healer is one of the major attractions of Mehndipur-oriented worship, which Salasar does not offer except to certain privileged donors.

Once the group had settled for the night into a large room in their *dharmśālā*, it was time for *darśan* with the healer. They had set up a Ram Darbar shrine (statues of Rama, Sita, Lakshmana, and of course Hanuman serving them) in one corner, bracketed by pictures of Shiva and Hanuman. To the left were framed pictures of Balaji, Bhairu, Pretraj and the Samadhi Baba. Fruit was placed before the healer as an offering. As usual, men and women sat in two gender-separate sections. The red devotional flag that the group had carried from Delhi rested upon the shrine as an offering. To the right of the shrine a young woman sat reading from a large edition of *Rāmcāritmānas*, with a supporting chorus of women frequently joining in. This recitation would please Balaji, and thereby bring his *śakti* into the room. To the left, the healer was seated on a large cushion with a low table set in front of him. Most of the time, he would be writing with an elegant peacock feather (a sacred implement) in an impressively large book. He periodically emitted strange wheezing sounds from deep in his throat as if he was having trouble breathing; however, each time he would first utter “om.”

An old woman approached the healer and told him softly of some personal problem. The healer winced and wheezed, then noticeably gulped, apparently to indicate that he was receiving some divine message. He asked the woman about her intentions for the future, reminding her that whatever she does she must above all adhere to Balaji’s rules [*pālan*]. The old woman started to violently shake, but rather than take this as a prompt for exorcism the healer dismissed her with a curt “*Rām rām!*” Although the healer was speaking as one possessed with the *śakti* of God, this evening’s event followed the common pattern of advice giving, not exorcism. Next, a

couple spoke of a family conflict. The healer lectured them about the proper role of the husband in the family. The man started to cry while several times mentioning that he was having a difficult time with money. After this, another woman approached the healer, but he sensed some dishonesty within her and shouted, “[There is a] mistake [*galtī*] [here]!” Eventually, an assistant shouted out that everyone making a wish should now bring forth 5 rupees for it to come true; small pieces of red cloth were passed out in which to wrap the coins, which people placed on the altar next to the healer. Others came forward one by one, each bowing low to their healer.

When I later spoke with this healer I learned some details about him that made clear that he was a God-infused individual. While running a handicraft factory in Delhi, he has also served as a spiritual advisor for more than 20 years. He had had a guru of his own who never married, did not speak for 16 years, and ate but one *roṭī* [flatbread] each day. The older guru’s mother had been ill, and she told him that as long as he retained his life breath [*prāṇ*], and therefore would not speak, she would stay alive; thereafter, he remained silent. When the old guru was ready to die, he announced that his time had come; even a news reporter came to observe the event. Although the younger healer-guru is married with children, he has nonetheless followed the precedent of his own guru by periodically practicing austerities, such as not eating for 41 days or continuously reciting *jāps* [strings of mantras]. He said that he needs only one or two hours of sleep each night.

After so many years of ascetic practices, this healer observed that God now continually talks to him and gives him divine power. For instance, recently the son of a devotee of his had gotten in a motorcycle accident, was taken to the hospital, and was near death. The mother of the young man called the healer in tears about what had happened; he told her to wait for three hours and then call again. She called again after three hours and reported that her son was now

completely fine, to the amazement of the doctors. Reflecting on this experience, the healer told me that it might not be enough for a devotee to pray on his own. He needs the extra *śakti* of the healer to overcome the negative karma of the situation. Because he sees the future, he can warn his clients to change their behavior in order to alter their karma before it is too late. He accepts no money for these services, although he acknowledged that too many faith healers nowadays are pursuing wealth from their spiritual work. Ultimately, he reminded me, without faith [*viśvās*], nothing can be accomplished; therefore, the outcome of prayer rests equally on the sincerity of the devotee.

I still wondered about the healer's strange behavior in the *dharmśālā*. It turned out that this had indeed been a manifestation of magical power. I learned that, as the healer received his devotees, he was writing about them—what they were saying, and his request to Balaji to resolve their problems quickly. In other words, as he put it, the act of writing in his large book was “a kind of prayer” [*ek prakār kī prārthanā*]. Moreover, due to his God-endowed charisma, he said that he did not write in the normal left-to-right, top-to-down fashion. Rather, he wrote from right to left and bottom to top—in other words, completely opposite to our normal way of writing. This oppositeness could indicate occult powers. The healer stated that his book would never get filled up, even though he used it on every such occasion. Stranger still, a devotee added that if we look at the healer's writing in this book, it would appear as nothing but “*Oṃ rām*” repeated endlessly. Only the healer could read what he had actually written in prayer for his followers. Here, then, is a remarkable incidence of how a faith healer constructs himself as a magical figure, which substantiates his followers' faith in him to produce a resolution to every predicament.

## 5.7 The Discourse of Devotion

### *Do-It-Yourself Devotion*

In this section, I will mention some possible connections that we can draw between devotees' experiences of possession and neoliberal socioeconomic change. As in other sections of this chapter, I want to also draw a connective line to what we have seen at Salasar, where I have suggested that the socioeconomic conditions of recent years have indeed shaped the contours of devotion. At both shrines, most pilgrims arrive in family groups, although I have mentioned that young men nowadays often come in their own groups. Although I have highlighted the role of faith healers in Mehndipur, many devotees eschew such mediation, whether because they suspect such specialists are dishonest and feel competent to conduct the process of winning the god's assistance on their own, or their reasons for visiting are simply for *darśan*. When focusing on the many individuals who come to Mehndipur of their own accord we have more of a basis for comparing this worship with the protocol at Salasar, where faith healers play no role. In do-it-yourself worship at both sites, then, the mindset of neoliberal reform or narratives of personal advancement are equally likely to pervade the devotional life of everyday pilgrims.

I will initially mention what constitutes do-it-yourself worship without a faith healer. Such individuals typically follow the advice of friends or ritual manuals available in the market. As with faith healers, such work takes individualized forms. For instance, when visiting a *dharmśālā* one day, I witnessed a woman of around 30 providing spiritual treatment for her husband, a policeman suffering from *ātmā*-induced depression, by holding up a cell phone to his ear to play a recording of Sundarkāṇḍ, the sacred story of Hanuman's exploits. She did this for several hours each day. On this occasion, after a few minutes of phone therapy, he began to slowly nod, as if the spirit troubling him was being roused by the sacred recitation. Soon, the

man's mother, who was sitting near the couple, started sympathetically slipping into her own possession state, leaving her daughter-in-law to administer to both of them.

Visiting family groups in Mehndipur frequently sing devotional hymns together until anyone possessed might start to speak, at which point they will halt the singing and attempt to have a dialogue with the spirit. Often, when someone manifests signs of possession during such performances, the whole group will devolve into repeatedly chanting "Hail Baba [*Jai bābā kī!*]"<sup>357</sup> This raises the intensity to a crescendo. As I had mentioned in Chapter 4, devotional groups in Salasar use the very same chant to encourage those who perform ritual prostrations on the ground while progressing towards Balaji's temple. In both cases, the chant seemingly invokes the presence of the divine; despite their many differences, Mehndipur and Salasar share this basic approach to devotion. Clearly, music (drums and other percussion), or perhaps more vitally, vocal accompaniment, is critical to inducing possession.

I seldom saw anyone go into possession without a sonic context, but once the possession state has come into the open, the afflicted individual may go on talking and behaving wildly long after the music and singing has stopped. On the other hand, some possessed people will suddenly snap out of this state the moment the sound stops. Needless to say, much research has been carried out on possession as a response to music performance. Notably, Gilbert Rouget provides a comprehensive survey of music as a force that "impregnates" the atmosphere, thereby preparing the setting for possession to occur, although he contends that music itself does not directly cause it.<sup>358</sup> In terms of this study, performances of music and song for exorcism might be on the increase in tandem with the public turn toward making devotion more visible, as seen in the rise of foot pilgrimage, *daṇḍavat*, and exorcism.

The fact that the possessed are usually young women elicits many native explanations. I was variously told this was because women are subjected to more stress in the home (a psychological reason in line with Kakar's analysis), but also that it is because they wear perfume, which attracts wandering spirits. Other reasons given were that they are "weaker," or more easily controlled than men, or that their bodies are less pure (due to menstruation), which makes them vulnerable.<sup>359</sup> Beyond these mundane theories of possession, however, I discovered a very interesting local theory that puts a theological spin on an otherwise sociological analysis. That is, devotees of Mehndipur Balaji commonly agree that he is a *bāl rūp* or deity in child form; his name is supposedly derived from *bālak* or child.<sup>360</sup> For this reason, he has a less tamed, more rambunctious (child-like) nature. By contrast, devotees would explain that Salasar Balaji is *javān rūp*, or a young male form of the god; that is why he has a beard. This knowledge informs possession and worship at the two shrines. Since Mehndipur Balaji is a prepubescent child, he is culturally well suited to treat women. On the other hand, since Salasar Balaji is a young man, he should not interact too closely with women (since he is equivalent to a chaste sadhu); therefore, other reasons aside, one would not expect to see women needing intimate treatment for possession in Salasar, unlike in Mehndipur.

### *Possession and Devotion in a Time of Neoliberal Reform*

Most scholars of Mehndipur that I cited earlier in this chapter (Kakar, Dwyer, and Pakasklahti in particular) have focused on the experience of afflicted devotees as the basis for their analysis of possession and its treatment. By contrast, in foregrounding the socioeconomic dimensions of devotion I have broadened the narrative to give greater weight to contextualization, such as caste narratives, economic motives, and local systems of authority. Although I, too, heard numerous stories of possession and its treatment, I will only mention a small number of cases here that

highlight possible intersections with neoliberal change. A key social change that affects the development of Mehndipur over the last two decades is that although Balaji remains famous for exorcism, he has increasingly attracted casual devotees with no specific problem to resolve but who are convinced of the god's ability to grant wishes. For instance, a man from Uttar Pradesh enthused that if one comes here owning one soap factory and makes a sincere wish for improvement, "he will leave with ten!" Another devotee concurred that people regularly come from afar to pray to the deity for jobs, for the resolution of pending court cases, and for other practical concerns.<sup>361</sup> These concerns are hardly different than what pilgrims bring to Salasar Balaji, which thereby provides a basis for theorizing systemic social change affecting both shrines.

Along with economic benefits and appeasing neglected ancestor spirits, another primary concern is ghosts sent by others as a form of attack. On the one hand, this is an age-old predicament.<sup>362</sup> At the same time, I suspect that this problem may have acquired a new significance in the setting of nationwide capitalist narratives of material development. The problem typically arises when a jealous relative or neighbor (often the same thing) hires a *tāntrik* [sorcerer] to send a ghost to attack the victim. As noted, given the tradition of brothers living in adjacent spaces (while women of the house move to their husbands' homes), conflicts may arise regarding inheritance or shared habitation of ancestral property. I would like to suggest that this problem has been exacerbated because of rising social expectations of personal advancement. Rohit, a young man from the city of Panipat in Haryana who had been working in Mehndipur while treating himself, described a typical experience:

A year ago my auntie and uncle wanted to destroy everyone in my family, so they engaged a *tāntrik* ... He used mantras to secretly send something to our home. At that time we didn't realize anything had happened. But then, our car broke down, and

conflicts arose in our household. Mom and Dad were fighting, and my family fell into a very bad condition. Dad left his job, and became angry all the time. He didn't have the desire to do anything; he'd just go out drinking to feel better ... I had been a good student; I had talent, but then my "angel" came to an end, and I left my studies to get a job, but my heart wasn't into it ... I fought with everyone. Then I met a *sant* [ascetic] in Panipat; he told me that my problem was because of my auntie and uncle. At first I didn't believe him, but he said to recite some mantras and *japs* [sacred words] and this problem would get better. Well, then Balaji came to me in a dream ... I'd heard about him. In his presence, I prayed that he would get rid of these ghosts [*bhūt-pret*] ... Hanuman made me better ... so then I came [to Mehndipur] and found a job [maintaining a telecom tower on the hill of shrines]. But then my uncle and auntie caused us to be attacked a second time—I could feel it. I relapsed into bad behavior again ... So I made offerings here and thought things could get better once more ... [but] nowadays the bad situation is still going on; I'm fighting with people again ... the *tāntrik* sent someone's soul into me ... I saw it in a dream ... [my uncle's] 'main issue' [reason] was 'jealousy'; he was wondering how we could be so well off, how we became upper 'status,' and had more money than him ... [the uncle] wanted to kill us, so our things—our land—would be his.<sup>363</sup>

At first glance, this story might seem virtually universal. It tells of a downward spiral in a young man's life, involving family conflict and personal anxiety over career and relationships. Towards the end, the speaker reveals that jealousy about unequal wealth and status within the family was the underlying motive for the spirit attack. Could the jealous relative have felt disappointment about not being able to get ahead fast enough in the new economy—not keeping up with the proverbial Joneses? If the problem was simply of finding a job, and the speaker had lived in the Shekhawati-Bagri Jat region, he might have undertaken a long foot journey to Salasar to wish for improvement in his situation. But, instead he perceived the problem as requiring the removal of a malevolent external force, which prompted a visit to Mehndipur. Panipat is on the Grand Trunk Road, and close to Delhi, therefore it is within Mehndipur's devotional zone, so a visit to Balaji would be the logical choice. Now I want to highlight a very similar story from a second young man named Rajkumar from Gurgaon (south of Delhi). The



same basic players appear as in the first story—a jealous uncle and aunt. But, here the problem of economic inequality is more clearly delineated:

My uncle [here *cācā*, or father’s brother] arranged it ... with a *tāntrik*, to bother me. Auntie was the one who went to the *tāntrik*. She didn’t like that we were getting ahead [*upar cale gae*], and had more money [than them], while they hadn’t been advancing [*ab nīce reh gae*] ... so she accomplished this work with the *tāntrik*, and fed me something [cursed] ... our home went into bad times. I was going to get a job in Gurgaon but it didn’t work out. After coming here [to Mehndipur] and making an application [*arzi*], the spirit [*sankaṭ*] started talking from my mouth ... it said, ‘I came inside you because someone sent me.’ I couldn’t control it—it just said what it wanted, and I had to do whatever it willed. [It said], “Do like this, do like that ...” But the *bhagat* with us managed to gain control over it ... the *tāntrik* got that *ātmā* on his own from a cremation ground. The person it came from had died at a young age—around 24. God has given us each 80 years. If we just make it to 40 years, then we have 40 years left over [as a ghost].<sup>364</sup>

In this story, the speaker describes the same sorts of anxieties—career and relationships. However, career has a new significance nowadays, when neoliberal public policy is valorizing the public desire to attain a more affluent life. As I noted, this seems to be an important factor in the development of a culture of pilgrimage in Salasar, as young men by the thousands seek divine intercession, all the more so for jobs that might otherwise require special connections or bribes to obtain. It would make sense that the same sensibility has entered into devotion in Mehndipur, in tandem with the traditional imperative of preserving family harmony. As I have documented in this study, both Salasar and Mehndipur shared in a broad culture of pilgrimage involving donations from those with sufficient money to build *dharmśālās*, new shrines, and other infrastructural improvements in gratitude for the god’s assistance. In such a setting, the perception of economic inequality within families may become a point of contention, and prompt requests for Balaji’s assistance.

In sum, then, alongside the infrastructural changes documented in this chapter, recent socioeconomic change may be reflected in the perception of affliction and methods for treating it. Whether or not one engages the services of a faith healer, demonstrating faith in the god remains the key to success. While I do not suggest that faith is new to the landscape of devotion, I think that we may be witnessing a heightened emphasis on faith as the way to achieve ends, which in a time of rapid social change is attractive. This is no different than what I have argued is taking place in Salasar. At this level of analysis, the two shrines transcend their purported opposition, based on the contrast of Salasar's blessings versus Mehndipur's exorcism. In other words, they share a common culture of faith-for-miracles. The following statement from a devotional manual written by a female guru explains the instrumental importance of faith in Mehndipur:

Here, Baba's [Balaji's] special miracles are truly [evidence of] his divine power [*śakti*]. And, three things are necessary for each person here: (1) faith [*śraddhā*], (2) devotion [*bhakti*], and (3) belief [*viśvās*]. If one has these three qualities, all his aims will be accomplished. The *mahant* made this point very clear to pilgrims: whether one worships Balaji for ten years, or ten days, all [faithful devotees] are equal before him. In his audience [*darbār*, or court], Baba notices the faith and belief within his devotees; this is why devotees make the pilgrimage here. All are equal; none are different. The biggest impression this place leaves in people's hearts is thus devotion [*bhakti*]. It's not just that Balaji gets rid of ghosts and demons [*bhūt-pret*]. If we have faith in our heart, Baba will get rid of all kinds of diseases, as he listens to each person's cries for help. All afflictions are extinguished, such as spirit-caused obstacles, insanity, epilepsy, paralysis (from stroke) [*lakwā*], T.B., cancer, domestic discord, or inability to produce a child—if a bag is empty, Baba will quickly fill it!<sup>365</sup>

As the guru tells us, Mehndipur Balaji is not just adept at getting rid of ghosts and demons. That performance is important evidence of the god's power, but it is not an end in itself. The critical factor is for the devotee to demonstrate faith—this point is equally central to the rhetoric of Salasar. The emphasis on faith introduces an egalitarian mindset into the reality of money politics in pilgrimage, as through faith all devotees are equal before Balaji. This is why wealthy

and poor devotees alike strive to demonstrate their faith, albeit in ways suited to their particular stations in life (such as walking to a shrine, undergoing austerities, making large donations, and so forth). From a theoretical standpoint, then, I take this common culture of faith as a prompt to reintegrate the mechanics of possession and exorcism—the spectacle of it—back into the larger narrative of public devotion, which has been on the rise in shrines throughout India since at least the 1990s. Looking for such points of commonality between the two Balajis allows us to locate a common devotional culture.

In this chapter, I have argued for situating Mehndipur and Salasar within a single historical chronology, and for recognizing a discourse of devotion, as opposed to the particularism of exorcism. A discourse of difference of course remains important to understanding how these shrines have developed in their particular ways. Brahmins stake a certain claim to authenticity in telling others that Mehndipur is spiritually dangerous due to the prevalence of exorcism there, and that faith healers cannot be trusted. In Mehndipur itself, faith healers and their followers are likely to point out that Salasar is associated with wealthy elites, who receive privileges denied to common people, unlike at Mehndipur. An analysis of the differing systems of authority at these two shrines helps us to understand how they have moved in these contrastive directions.

Based on individual testimony and material evidence (such as donations for shrines and the establishment of *dharmśālās*), it appears that both Salasar and Mehndipur dramatically increased in popularity in the 1990s within a broader societal turn to such sites for miracles. My analysis of devotional culture at these sites has emphasized the pivotal importance of urban devotees in this development. In both Mehndipur and Salasar, a more general devotional population followed some years after earlier visitors acclaimed the power of each Balaji to bestow miracles. With this shared trajectory in mind, in the following chapter I will follow devotees back to their

home areas. In this way, I will shift the narrative to the cities to discuss how numerous groups dedicated to these gods arose, how they produced a culture of devotion, and how they expanded the worship of Balaji far beyond the local confines of his shrines in Rajasthan. As I have argued in this chapter, devotion to Balaji did not simply arise at the shrines, but was co-created in the conditions of urban life.

## Chapter 5 Notes

<sup>280</sup> Interview 2-26-2011.

<sup>281</sup> “*Bhīm rūp dhari asur sañhāre / rāmcandra jī ke kāj sañvāre //*.” I have used an edition of *Hanumān cālīsā* commonly sold in Mehndipur; see Tulsidas, p. 16.

<sup>282</sup> “*Bhūt piśāc nikaṭ nahīn āvai / mahāvīr jab nām sunāvai //*.” See *Hanumān cālīsā* (as mentioned in the preceding note), p. 30.

<sup>283</sup> *Bālājī cālīsā saṅgrah*. This collection contains *cālīsās* for the other deities mentioned as well. All these *cālīsās* refer to the god’s ability to destroy ghosts and demons—more than in *Hanumān cālīsā* itself. This shows that the author has deliberately tailored these *cālīsās* to Mehndipur’s current ritual protocol.

<sup>284</sup> Confirmation that Mehndipur Balaji is different from a *kuldev* (or *kuldevatā*) can be gleaned from a book by a guru named Anamika Bhardwaj. In the inside cover of this book, she makes a point of first honoring “Mohan Ram Baba, Kholiwale” (the name of a site in southeastern Haryana-Alwar region, not far from Faridabad), not Balaji, as her “*kuldevatā*.” In providing guidelines for preparing to visit Balaji, she gives the would-be pilgrim the following advice, with the assumption that someone coming to Balaji will already have a *kuldevatā*: “I appeal to all devotees to apply my words after carefully reading and reflecting on them. That is, *before* worshiping Balaji, honor your own parents, in-laws, and ancestral deity [*kuldevatā*], because those that brought you into this world are the most venerated [*pūjanīya*] of all. They are to receive the greatest reverence. Only when we give our superiors [*baḍoñ se*, i.e. parents, ancestral lineage] the highest respect will Balaji Maharaj accept our worship.” [“*Main sabhī bhaktoñ se anurodh kartī hūñ kṛpayā merī is bāt par amal karen tathā dhyān se paḍhe aur samjheñ. Ki bālā jī kī pūjā se pehle āp apne mātāpitā apne sās-sasur aur kuldevatā kā man-sammān karen. Kyonki sabse pūjanīya to voh hote hai jiske kārañ sam is sañsār meñ āeñ hai. Kyonki sabse baḍī pūjā unhīn kī hotī hai. Hamēñ apne se baḍoñ kī izzat karnī cāhie tabhī bālā jī mahārāj hamārī pūjā svīkar karenge.*”]. Bhardwaj, p. 15. This passage makes clear that we are indissolubly connected to our parents, in-laws, and *kuldev* (or *kuldevī*), hence we are obligated to worship them, even before we voluntarily enter into a devotional relationship with Mehndipur Balaji. It would be inconceivable to repudiate these familial figures that are so fundamental to our existence. On the face of it, devotees already revering Salasar Balaji who come to Mehndipur effectively become dual Balaji devotees, but when it comes to observing necessary life ceremonies [*sañskār*] such as a wedding or the birth of a child, the shrine of Salasar Balaji, the *kuldevatā*, will remain the primary site.

<sup>285</sup> Interview 8-19-2011.

<sup>286</sup> Interview 3-21-2011.

<sup>287</sup> See McGregor, p. 756, for definitions of “*bhagat*.”

<sup>288</sup> “*Bhagat*” is a Hindi dialect equivalent of “*bhakt*” or devotee. In the Uttar Pradesh-Delhi-Rajasthan-Haryana-Punjab area, people apparently use a voiced glottal “g” for at least some words that would be spoken with an unvoiced “k” in formal Hindi. Whenever I would ask my respondents in this region about the habits of devotees—“*bhakt*s,” I would say—they would typically respond by speaking of “*bhagat*s” even though they were talking about ordinary devotees and not religious specialists. Conversely, when I referred to “*bhagat*s” to specify faith

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healers, devotees would often respond as if I had asked about everyday “*bhakts*” rather than these faith healers only. On one occasion, in another part of Rajasthan, I observed a large poster installed in a new temple that included a portrait of the presiding guru; under his face was written “*bhakt*” in Hindi. And yet, the locals spoke of him and his followers alike as *bhagats*. Therefore, I will use “faith healer” descriptively, to clarify that I am referring to those who perform such work rather than to all devotees. From a broader theoretical standpoint, I would also like to disestablish the notion that those faith healers who come to Mehndipur are simply exorcists, as one might suspect from much of the established literature on this site. Like any guru, they provide a wide range of spiritual services, not limited to exorcism.

<sup>289</sup> Harlan, p. 139.

<sup>290</sup> Harlan, p. 140.

<sup>291</sup> Various small books sold in Kailadevi describe the two devīs, who share the same name and are described as sisters. Some exorcism-related devotion goes on in at least one adjunct shrine that I visited during the goddesses’ annual festival in April. For a concise history of the site, along with miracles, see Jadaun.

<sup>292</sup> Like Balaji, Kali and Bhairu commonly appear in religious literature sold in Mehndipur (but in the case of Pretraj, less so). One example would be *siddhi* [practical occult wisdom] handbooks—*Kali siddhi* and *Bhairav siddhi*. Each book provides instructions for controlling one’s daily circumstances by invoking the deity concerned. The use of incantations, diagrams, and other occult practices marks these as tantric literature.

<sup>293</sup> Of the numerous examples of such literature, I would point to *Hanumān tantra-mantra sādhan*, which I obtained in Mehndipur. As the title implies, it gives detailed instructions for incantations to get rid of or control unwanted spirits. It also tells how to ritually ensure success through *yantras* [religious diagrams] in making wishes to the deity.

<sup>294</sup> Lutgendorf (2007), p. 105.

<sup>295</sup> Interview 4-18-2011.

<sup>296</sup> See, for example, *Ekmukhi Pañcmukhi Hanumān kavac*, a collection of incantations and *mantras* that is sold in Mehndipur for warding off bad spirits.

<sup>297</sup> Foulston, pp. 175-177.

<sup>298</sup> Foulston, p. 187.

<sup>299</sup> Kakar, p. 81.

<sup>300</sup> Kakar, p. 75.

<sup>301</sup> See the chapter on possession and psychiatry in Lewis, pp. 160-184.

<sup>302</sup> Pakaslahti, p. 129.

<sup>303</sup> Pakaslahti, p. 130.

<sup>304</sup> Dwyer, p. 41.

<sup>305</sup> Dwyer, p. 3.

<sup>306</sup> Interview 9-4-2011.

<sup>307</sup> Jha, *Balaji upāsana*, pp. 13-14; Dwyer, p. 15, repeats the same story.

<sup>308</sup> We might reasonably consider such an image as “*svayambhū*.” However, my respondents, both in Mehndipur and Salasar, and farther afield, never used this term. They always referred to self-formed images (not made by human hands) as *svarūp*. As for the individual nature of self-formed Mehndipur Balaji, while pan-Indian Hanuman is commonly acknowledged to be the

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*avatār* [earthly manifestation] of the god Shiva, this local Balaji is in turn described as the *avatār* of Hanuman [“*Śrī hanumān jī ‘bhagvān bālājī’ ke rūp meṅ avatārit hue hai*”]. Reminiscent of Salasar Balaji, he is said to have appeared in Mehndipur to remedy the suffering of the Kali Yug. See Jha, *Balaji upāsanā*, p. 11.

<sup>309</sup> Kakar, p. 59, cites a somewhat different story, which has possible parallels with Salasar. Millions of years ago, Balaji’s mother Anjana raised him at the site that is now Mehndipur. Much later, a prince was murdered at the spot where Balaji’s temple is now located and became a ghost. As the ghost cried out to be saved, Balaji came to his rescue, releasing him from his ghostly existence. We may surmise that this story prefigures Balaji’s current role in taming and liberating possessing spirits. As I discussed in Chapter 3, an unfortunate death resulting in a spirit started off Salasar Balaji’s story as well, at least as far as the printed texts there would indicate. Using the story that Kakar cites, one can say that in both cases a *pitṛ* [ancestor spirit] is involved. As we will see in the final chapter, a resident *pitṛ* typically serves as a messenger conveying messages between the healer and Hanuman.

<sup>310</sup> Interview 3-20-2011.

<sup>311</sup> Dwyer, pp. 14-15; Pakaslahti, p. 131.

<sup>312</sup> Interview 3-20-2011.

<sup>313</sup> Grodzins Gold, p. 278.

<sup>314</sup> Satija et al, p. 247. The statistics on rural faith healing that Satija uses were taken from Neki (1973); I have separately listed that article as well.

<sup>315</sup> See Lutgendorf (1990).

<sup>316</sup> Interview 2-26-2011.

<sup>317</sup> Interview 6-15-2011.

<sup>318</sup> Interview 2-27-2011.

<sup>319</sup> Bellamy, p. 35.

<sup>320</sup> Interview 8-21-2011.

<sup>321</sup> In connection with shrines, as with *dharmśālās*, locals in Mehndipur have started to join in the enthusiasm for setting up new places of worship. Down the street from Balaji’s main temple, a longtime resident has established another Balaji shrine since some years back, which he has named “Purana (ancient) Balaji Temple.” Calling it an ancient place seems to be a way of making this Balaji an ancestor of the main one. The man dresses like a sadhu and sits everyday in this open-air shrine, but claims that he does not do it for money. Other sites on the outskirts of town have added to the number of devotional spectacles available to visitors.

<sup>322</sup> Interview 8-20-2011. Consistent with Mehndipur’s reputation as a place for common people, compared to Salasar’s image as a site for the very wealthy, the recipients of *savāmani* feasts may differ. In Mehndipur, these feasts are commonly offered to any fellow devotees, while in Salasar the Brahmins insisted that these should be primarily offered to them, as Balaji’s mediators.

<sup>323</sup> Interview 3-22-2011.

<sup>324</sup> Ruhela provides a good example of Sai Baba as ecumenical integrationist. Note the comment in the forward by politician Aziz Qureishi, which mentions national integration; see p. v. For a more thorough discussion of Sai Baba’s multidirectional religious affiliations, with particular attention to Hindu ascetic associations, see Rigopoulos. For a more Sufi-centered perspective, see Warren.

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<sup>325</sup> Consider, for instance, Smith’s discussion of possession in the Vedas and Upanishads in Chapter 5 of his book, pp. 175-244, where he argues that possession was present in what understood to be some of the foundational texts of classical Hinduism.

<sup>326</sup> Interview 4-13d-2011.

<sup>327</sup> See Gold’s *Deep beauty: Rajasthani goddess shrines above and below the surface*.

<sup>328</sup> Johnson, pp. 84, 91.

<sup>329</sup> *Balaji upāsana saṅgrah*, a collection of information for devotees and *bhajans* to be sung while undergoing spiritual treatment, lists 38 rules; the slimmer *Mehndipur ke Balaji* handbook reduces this to 15 rules.

<sup>330</sup> For a brief discussion of the *Bajrang bān* text, see Lutgendorf (2007), pp. 101-102.

<sup>331</sup> Pakaslahti, pp. 141-142.

<sup>332</sup> “*Un kā alag-alag kām haiñ. Bālājī jo hai, voh ek prakār se ‘indian’ raṣṭrapati—‘president’ samjho—aisā kuch ... jis prakār se kā rāṣṭrapati ‘signature’ kar detā indiyā meñ ... Bālājī sarkār ke ‘signature’ ho jāte haiñ—to us kām ko koī ‘fail’ nahīñ saktā. Us kām ko bālājī ne jo ādeś kar diyā to pretrāj sarkār to hai voh pradhān mantrī kā kām karte. Ek tarikā se jab ‘indiyān’ pradhān mantrī deś calātā hai ... us hī prakār se pretrāj un ke pradhān mantrī ... jo bhairu hai, voh un ke grahmantrī—is tarikā se ... aur jo ek kotvāl sarkār ... yeh alag-alag ‘state’ hote, ek prakār se mukhya mantrī ... phir, us ke bād meñ ... ‘lāst ke lāst’ meñ, divān sarkār. Voh un ke alag-alag ‘state’ hote haiñ ... aur sab kī kārya kāraṅ kī mukhya kāryakṛpā bhagvān, śrīrām, lakṣmaṅ, sītā hai ... jab tīnoñ se pādat ho jātā hai. Saṃvidhān jis prakār samārā banā huā indiyā kā ... un ke hāth meñ, jo acchī burāī karte ... jo jaisā karm karegā, us ko niścīt se milegā.*” Interview 4-13-2011.

<sup>333</sup> Interview 4-12-2011.

<sup>334</sup> Interview 6-15-2011.

<sup>335</sup> “*Sarkār ko jo karmacārī hai ... unko paisa denā ... voh dekhte .. thīk hai to banvāeṅge ... aisā koī niyam nahīñ hai!*” Interview 8-23-2011.

<sup>336</sup> “*Pahād hī pe jo zamīn ... ‘government’ kī zamīn hai ... ham log pattar ke koī mandir banvā diyā—hamāre sakār koī rok nahīñ lagā—koī ijāzat kī zarūrat nahīñ—pareśān nahīñ karegī ... vahāñ ke choṭe mandir ‘money’ prāpt kar sakte ... ek sau, do sau kā ... śraddh se log dete haiñ ... kisī ko koī pareśān āyī—bhūt-pret hai, na—jaise log mumbāī se ... ek mandir pacās yātri log ā gae—ek kā pāñc rupaye lagāyā, pacās to kitnā ... do sau pacās hogā ... bhagat vahāñ ke log vahāñ se lete ... hazār hazār rupaye lete, ek ‘per day,’ calo bālājī mahārāj cal ke āte ghūm jāte ...paise kā māmlā hai, na! ... To voh ā ke kisī jātā sūmo bas ‘truck’ vagairah ‘book’ kartā hai. Us ke bād us meñ baiṭhā un logoñ ko le ke āte. Yāhāñ pe ā ke phir voh kisī se bhagat bantā hai to bālājī bharte koī carā bhī dete logoñ kī. Kisī ne das hazār de diyā, kisī ne pāñc hazār de diyā ... pāñc sau ... is tarikā kamāī hogī ... yeh jhūṭhī bāt, bilkul ... main bhī ‘guest house’ kā ‘manager’ thā, sāt mahine ... us samai ek ‘lady’ āyī haryānā se, to voh pūrī ‘guest house’ ‘book’ kar letī thī—voh mujhse ‘discount’ māṅgtī thī—usko tīn hazār lene ... ‘do hazār guest house ko, aur mujhko [bhagat] ek hazār’ ... us ke bād ... jo log bhajan karte samai kāmpte haiñ ... yeh galat bāt hai ... jo bhī bālājī ke pās āte haiñ ... ek log jāegā to pāñc rupaye degā ... to do tīn lākh rupaye hoṅge ‘per day’ ... jis din meñ ‘government’ ho jāegā, us din sab pā kar band ho jāeṅge!*” Interview 3-21-2011.

<sup>337</sup> Dwyer, p. 14.



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<sup>338</sup> Even if a family cannot bring the possessed person to Mehndipur, a *pitṛ* can be ritually transferred there from an unknown place in the world by a magical process known as *Bāharī Bādā*.

<sup>339</sup> “*Voh [pitṛ] śānt ho gayā, to voh yahān baiṭhnā cāhte. Yahān biṭhāeṅge se kyā, voh pitṛ ghārvāloṅ ko pareśānī nahīn ātī ... yahān bābā kā darbār hai ... [pitṛ] in ke caranoṅ par baiṭhe. Voh gharvāloṅ ko pareśānī nahīn karte, un ke ghar meṅ sukhśāntī rehtī hai, aur pitroṅ ko bhog lagte rehte.*” Interview 8-19-2011.

<sup>340</sup> “*Pitṛ banvāeṅge—do hazār bhī bante, pānc hazār bhī bante ... bīs hazār kabhī bante ... pitroṅ ke lie cabutārā banāyā ... ab hī bābā, is kī kṛpā se, jo sab kuch ātā hai, yātrī āte, un ke saṅkaṭ kāṭe haiṅ. Jab pitṛ baiṭheṅge, to dān deṅge! ... Phir voh ātā hai, voh māṅgte pitroṅ ko ...*” Interview 8-19-2011.

<sup>341</sup> Fernandes, p. xix (Introduction).

<sup>342</sup> De Neve, p. 95.

<sup>343</sup> When I visited Mahavirji, the major Jain temple in this part of Rajasthan, I found that local Gurjar artisans were working hard to complete a new temple to their god, Devnarayan. It seems that the project of tribal emancipation is broadly based.

<sup>344</sup> Kapur, pp. 94-105.

<sup>345</sup> Interestingly, in a survey of castes and tribes of Rajasthan, Sukhvir S. Gahlot states that Bhairu, Hanuman, Krishna, along with their own ancestors, are the main deities that the Meenas worship. However, he has little to add beyond that; see p. 235.

<sup>346</sup> Interview 8-21-2011.

<sup>347</sup> Pallath, pp. 32-39.

<sup>348</sup> “*Pehle bhakti bhāv, prem bhāv zyādā thā—ājkal sabhī jagah nahīn hai. Pehle ek ādmī khānā banā letā to bīs ādmiyoṅ ko kahā bhojan karo. Ājkal koī kisī ko nahīn pūchtā ... bahut badlāv ho gayā. Pehle bhagvān kī āstā thī ... ājkal keval ghūmne kī cakkār—voh bhakti-bhāv nahīn hai. Pehle bhī saṅkaṭvāle āte the, parantu us ‘time’ pe zyādā-zyādā ek mahīne meṅ saṅkaṭ kar jātā thā ... bhāv the bālājī kī priti—ek sau āṭh mālā karnā—hanumān cālīsā kā pāṭh karnā—bhakti-bhāv sab se pehla!*” Interview 8-20-2011.

<sup>349</sup> “*... To ab manokāmanāvāle zyādā hote haiṅ, aur saṅkaṭvāle kam haiṅ.*” Interview 3-23a-2011.

<sup>350</sup> “*... To yeh keval ek ‘business’! ... Yeh hamārī janmbhūmi—ham is ke bāre meṅ zyādā jānte haiṅ. Jo bhagat haiṅ, voh keval ‘business’ ke taur pe āte ... sāl se ek mahīne yahīn haiṅ, aur unhoṅneṅ kī pāṭh-pūjā, niyam vagairah, inko sīkh ke nahīn, aur duniyā ko cutiyā banāte hoṅge ... [bhagat] paise nahīn lete, par un kā ... ‘indirect’ lenā hotā hai. Unko kārya kar lete, ki ‘maiṅ mandir banvānā ... bābā ke karm banā de, bhagat—pacās hazār lageṅge’ ... ‘direct’ bābā se sampark karo! Pujāriyoṅ ko sampark karo! ... Paise kamāne kā kām, to aisā hī sab ek ‘business’ samajh rahe ho. Jis kārya ke lie udeśya ham baiṭhe, us hī ‘aim’ ham kar khāne ke lie, dānā cāhiye.*” Interview 8-23-2011.

<sup>351</sup> Interview 8-20-2011.

<sup>352</sup> Manuals on how to prepare a *havan* are available in Mehndipur’s market. The manual that I obtained contained numerous Sanskrit scriptural references to *havan*, with updates on how to reproduce the procedure. See Bahal.

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<sup>353</sup> Smith (2011), p. 12. For a fuller discussion of performance theory, and its application, see Kapferer's work on devil dancing in Sri Lanka. For a discussion of performance theory itself, see Schechner, pp. 1-34.

<sup>354</sup> Unrecorded interview 4-18-2011.

<sup>355</sup> McDaniel, p. 243.

<sup>356</sup> Ramsukhdas, p. 4.

<sup>357</sup> A fuller version of this chant exists in which one person makes an exhortation to the group, and the others respond with "Hail, Lord!" I heard the following exchange in Mehndipur: *Hey, come up front!*—Hail Baba [Jai Bābā kī! *Know about this!*—Hail Baba! *Say your name!*—Hail Baba! *Beat it, Baba!*—Hail Baba! *Destroy it, Baba!*—Hail Baba! *Throw it out, Baba!*—Hail Baba! *Say a mantra!*—Hail Baba! *Why are you crying now?*—Hail Baba! *These are female ghosts [cudel!]*—Hail Baba! *Hey, have darśan!*—Hail Baba! *Approach the throne [of Balaji!]*—Hail Baba! *Make an application [to have the trouble banished!]*—Hail Baba! *Make a petition!*—Hail Baba! *Pay attention!*—Hail Baba! *Say 'wellbeing'!*—Hail Baba! *Everyone say it!*—Hail Baba! *In Mehndipur!*—Hail Baba! *In Salasar!*—Hail Baba! *Bring darkhāst [offering to the deity!]*—Hail Baba! *Baba has come!*—Hail Baba! *He really made her cry!*—Hail Baba! *He's really tormented it!*—Hail Baba! *Samadhi saint!*—Hail Baba! *Say cremation place!*—Hail Baba! *Meet [God] and say it!*—Hail Baba! *I can't hear you!*—Hail Baba! In Hindi: "O sāmne ā jā—jai bābā kī! Patā lagāo—jai bābā kī! Terā nām batā jā—jai bābā kī! Māro bābā—jai bābā kī! Toḍo bābā—jai bābā kī! Choro bābā—jai bābā kī! Mantra bolo—jai bābā kī! Ab rotā kyon?—jai bābā kī! Cuḍel haiñ ye—jai bābā kī! Khulā darśan—jai bābā kī! Khulā sinhāsan—jai bābā kī! Ārjī lagāo—jai bābā kī! Ārdās lagāo—jai bābā kī! Dhyān lagāo—jai bābā kī! Maṅgal bolo—jai bābā kī! Sāre bole—jai bābā kī! Mehndipur meñ--jai bābā kī! Sālāsar meñ--jai bābā kī! Darkhāst lagāo—jai bābā kī! Bābā ā gaye—jai bābā kī! Bahut rulāyā—jai bābā kī! Bahut satāyā—jai bābā kī! Samādhivāle—jai bābā kī! Marghaṭ bole—jai bābā kī! Mil ke bole—jai bābā kī! Āvāz nahīñ āyī—jai bābā kī!" Recording 3-22c-2011. In this chant, the man's references to a *mantra*, wellbeing, *darśan*, female ghosts, and cremation grounds, among other things, all directly index the magical work to be accomplished, and some of the occult forces in play—that is, *tāntriks* tend to capture their ghosts in cremation grounds. Having *darśan* and reciting suitable *mantras* are the way to restore wellbeing from such an attack. The references to violent acts—beating, destruction, crying, and tormenting—encapsulate the entire process of exorcism in Mehndipur. Lastly, the caller invokes the samādhī bābā, Ganeshpuri, who started the tradition of healing here; for good measure he also mentions both Mehndipur and Salasar, the two major shrines of Balaji. The content of this chant in Mehndipur specifies the concerns of exorcism, and Balaji's efficacy in removing troubling spirits. Thus describing the process of seeking treatment from Balaji, the man in this scene exhorts the crowd to approach an enthroned Balaji, and to bring an "application" [*arṣī*] of sweets (such as *laḍḍūs*) that those suffering afflictions are expected to present to the deity for his consideration of their individual cases. In addition the man refers to *darkhāst*, a donation of five rupees that all devotees deposit in the temple when they come for *darśan*, regardless of whether they have any particular personal troubles to treat. In this sense, the chant cues the audience in about what they will need to do in Mehndipur.

<sup>358</sup> Rouget, p. 65.

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<sup>359</sup> Applying Bourdieu's famous concept of *habitus*, or socially learned physical habits, I noticed that there is a definite gendering in acting out possession. Women sit on their haunches on the ground and whip their long hair around, and twist their torsos around in this position. Men, on the other hand, are more likely to jump up and down like a jackhammer and perhaps also hit their head against a wall.

<sup>360</sup> As supporting evidence for the claim that Balaji is an all-powerful child, Brahmins and pilgrims in Mehndipur fondly cite the famous scriptural anecdote of Hanuman's childhood when, being naturally curious and voracious, he tried to swallow the sun, thinking the yellow orb was a laḍḍū. As explained to me, it is therefore no coincidence that laḍḍūs are nowadays the most basic *prasād* that pilgrims receive from Mehndipur Balaji. At Salasar, too, laḍḍūs may be offered, but there the mindset of Rajasthani or Shekhawati cultural identity predominates. Hence, the stereotypical offering that Salasar Balaji most loves is *cūrmā*, the wheat-based sweet associated with that region.

<sup>361</sup> Interview 4-13-2011.

<sup>362</sup> One glimpse of the traditional practice of faith healing in the Delhi region, where Mehndipur Balaji is now popular, could be Ruth and Stanley Freed's compendium on ghost possession in a predominantly Jat village, based on their fieldwork from the late 1950s through the early 1970s. They document more or less the same kinds of possession seen in Mehndipur, although they never mention that site itself, but faith healers are only very low-key in their work. They seemingly work only within the locale of the village, with no indication of the urban fascination for magical remedies now very publicly on display in Mehndipur.

<sup>363</sup> “*Ek sāl pehle, ‘my auntie and my uncle—my family’ ke barbād honā cahiye. Unhoñneñ sārā liyā tāntrik ... unhoñneñ hamāre ghar pe kuch aisā kiyā ... usne kuch na kuch mantron ko, asī cīz hamre ghar bhej dī ... Hamēñ kuch mālūm nahīñ thā. To kyā huā, hamāre ‘kār’ vahāñ band ho gayā, aur ghar meñ laḍḍī jag rahā thā, hone śurū ho gayā. Mamī pāpā—‘they are fighting’—to ‘my family became very bad condition.’ Kām pāpā ne chor diyā, bahut gussā āyā thā ... kām karne meñ man nahīñ kartā—to ghar meñ jo bhī āte pīte bāhar jāēnge, khuś raheṅge ... Maiñ acchā paḍhtā thā—merekō baḍiyā ‘knowledge’ thā ... lekin us hāl ke bād mere ‘angel’ meñ yeh band ho gayā. Maiñne paḍhāī chor diyā—us ke bād mere ‘job’ thī—voh vahāñ mere man nahīñ lagtā us cīz meñ, har kisī ko laḍnā, mārñā, jhor bolñā. Phir maiñne kisī ādmī se milā—ek sant—us ne mujhe yeh batāyā, pānipat meñ, unhoñneñ batāyā ki tumhāre koī aise ‘problem’ ‘uncle’ ne, ‘auntie’ ne aise tumhāre karvāyā. Mujhe viśvās nahīñ huā, phir usne to batāyā ki tum aise karnā—koī mantra-vantra diyā, aur jap yād karnā. To us ke bād maiñne soc kiyā—mujhe ek cīz dhīre-dhīre kam hotī hai. To mere sapne meñ bālājī āyā ... to phir maiñne unse prārthanā kī bhūt-pret ho ... hanumān jī merā kām cal gayā ... to yahāñ pe maiñ āyā—to āne ke bād maiñne kehī pe ‘job’ kar liyā ... Uske bād dobārā vahīñ kārya karvāī ... mere ‘uncle’ aur ‘auntie’ ... maiñ mehsus se jāñ gayā. Phir se laḍāī, jagrāī, būrī cīz ... to phir ... maiñne bālājī ko ...yahāñ par āte, kuch caḍāte, prasād—voh maiñne caḍāyā. Uske bād phir maiñne mehsus kiyā ki śāyad dobārā phir acchā hogā. To yahāñ se phir jo tanāv yahāñ se merā lag jagdā ho gayā—ās pās ke ‘area’ meñ ... tāntrik ne mujhe kisī aur kī ātmā mere pās bhejī ... mujhe sapne meñ voh ātmā dikhā dī ... un kī ‘main issue’ is tāntrik ke lie ‘jealousy’—ki ‘uskā yeh acchā kyon hai—is kī ‘status’ upar kyon, is ke pās hamse zyādā paisā kyon’ ... jo hamārā jo zamīn hotā hai ... voh cāhte ki agar yeh mar jāegā, to is kī cīz hamārī ho jāegī.” Interview 4-12-2011.*

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<sup>364</sup> “Mere ‘uncle’ ne karvāyā. Us ne tāntrik ke dvārā mere upar kuch karvā diyā ... Tāntrik ke pās ‘auntie’—pāpā ke bhāī kī gharvālī—to usko kuch acchā nahīn lagā ho rahā hai—hamēn kuch pragati kar gayā ... ham upar cale gae, zyādā paisā hogā ... ab nice reh gae—us ne tāntrik ke pās kuch karvāyā. Usko mereko kuch khilā diyā ... to kyā ho gayā, ghar kharāb karne kā rāstā hogā. Maiñ guḍgāñv dhañdhā karen, nahīn karnā, bhāī ... Yahān āne ke bād, arzī lagāī, mere mukh se bolne lagā, sañkaṭ! Voh khud bolegā—ki ‘maiñ andar āyā, kisne mereko bhejā—yeh aisā karvāo, aisā karvāo—hamārā man ‘control’ nahīn lagtā—us kī marzī se bola, voh karvāegā ... lekin voh bhagat, voh apne āp ‘control’ kar letā ... yeh ātmā tāntrik samsā ghāt se le ke gayā ... to kam umr usko—takriban teīs-chaubīs sāl tak ... Bhagvān ne asī sāl de diyā. Agar apan calīs sāl ho gae haiñ, us ‘time’ voh ho gayā, calīs sāl bākī haiñ.” Interview 4-13-2011.

<sup>365</sup> “Yahān par to insān ke andar tīn cīzeñ honī zarūrī hai: (1) śraddhā, (2) bhakti aur (3) viśvās. Agar jis ke dil meñ tīnoñ cīzeñ haiñ, unke sāre kām pūre ho jāte haiñ. Svayam śrī mahantjī mahārāj kī is viṣay meñ itne hī spaṣṭ haiñ ki jitne yātrīyāñ, bālā jī meñ jo das sāl se pūjā kar raheñ hai, śrī mahant jī aur jo das din se bābā kī pūjā kar rahe hai bālā jī meñ sab samān hai. Bābā ke darbār meñ bābā apne bhakt ke andar śraddhā aur viśvās dekhte hai, is lie bhakt yātrī jāte haiñ. Sab ek samān haiñ; koī antar nahīn hai. Yahān par sabse baḍā asar to logoñ ke man meñ bhakti kā hotā hai. Bālājī meñ yahīñ nahīñ hai ki bhūt pret hī kāṭte haiñ. Yahān par to bābā sab tarah ke rog kāṭte haiñ agar hamāre man meñ viśvās haiñ to bābā sabkī phariyād sunte hai. Sab bīmārī kāṭte haiñ, jaise bhūt-pret kī bādhā, pāgalpan, mṛgī, lakvā, ṭī. bī., kaiñsar, ghar kleś, kisī kā karā huā, jiske baccā nā ho, khālī jholī to bābā bahut jaldī bharte hai.” Bhardwaj, Śrī Balaji ki Mahima ka Anmol Khajana, p. 31.

## CHAPTER 6: THE GROWTH OF URBAN DEVOTION

### 6.1 Balaji as an Urban Deity

#### Patterns of Devotional Spread

Up to this point, this study has primarily focused on devotion at the shrines of Salasar and Mehndipur, and in some cases (in regard to Jat and Meena society) in the surrounding countryside. However, in this chapter I argue that the rise of urban devotional groups dedicated to either one of the two Balajis has been vital to the development and expansion of their worship. A large proportion of devotees coming to Balaji's shrines in Rajasthan, and virtually all of those who have made the major donations that support these shrines, live in cities. The earliest historical evidence of Balaji in the urban setting is the existence of *mandals* or devotional groups from the early 1990s onwards. In Mumbai, for instance, members of groups dedicated to Salasar Balaji concur that the oldest such group there came into existence around 1990. Not by coincidence, the earliest substantial evidence of patronage at Salasar and Mehndipur dates from the same time. Through patronage, affluent urban devotees obtained ritual privileges from religious specialists (*pujārīs* in Salasar and visiting faith healers or local *pujārīs* in Mehndipur) who served them at the shrines. Balaji as a famous god of miracles is a product of this relationship, and this chapter will document the urban dimension of that trajectory.

Of course, we know that both shrines already received visitors before the 1990s, especially in the case of Mehndipur. But, without exception, respondents at both shrines who addressed the issue of rising pilgrimage affirmed that the number of visitors was relatively small until the

early-to-mid 1990s. Many urbanites, particularly in the Delhi-Haryana region, have visited both shrines, but they typically privilege one or the other Balaji as the primary recipient of their devotion and donations. When devotees for either of the Balajis return from Salasar or Mehndipur to their home cities, their participation in devotional *mandals* extends the magic and sense of belonging that they had experienced at the shrines, as witnessed in public religious events that I will discuss in this chapter. In these urban venues, they also reproduce the doctrines in effect at the two shrines of Balaji—Salasar is more often connected with blessings, while Mehndipur is famously oriented towards extracting unwanted afflictions. *Mandals* are therefore always oriented to just one Balaji, with one exception to be discussed (where the two gods are combined), just as the religious specialists at the shrines that they patronize typically identify with just one or the other Balaji.

Since at least the 1990s Marwaris have overtly embraced their ancestry in Shekhawati, the region of Salasar, as witnessed in the rise of Balaji's urban *mandals* and social programs oriented to the Marwari community. The increasing popularity of Salasar Balaji himself should be understood within this narrative of caste identity formation. Just as the urban Marwari community has mobilized around the worship of Balaji, so too, this population has embraced certain other deities of the Shekhawati region, notably Khatu Shyam and Rani Sati. Although the Marwari homeland corresponds to Shekhawati, I seldom heard this geographical term used as a referent for Marwari ancestry. More often, urban descendants from that region would simply speak of Rajasthan. Since Rajasthan as a state is much larger than the area encompassed by Shekhawati, the geographical scope of Marwari identity is therefore elastic. Thus, migrants to distant cities from other parts of Rajasthan might not have any formal connection to Salasar or Shekhawati, but they broadly identify as Rajasthani and therefore show up at some Marwari

public events from an assumed sense of commonality. This expansion and reification of Rajasthani identity sometimes even includes Mehndipur Balaji, even though that shrine is not part of Shekhawati, and no Marwaris trace their ancestry to the Mehndipur region.

Although both Balajis thus broadly signify Rajasthani piety in the minds of urbanites originating in that part of India, the correlation between Marwari-Shekhawati identity and devotion to Salasar Balaji and the other Marwari deities from the region as lineage deities remains quite clear. Despite this narrow Marwari caste-ethnic affiliation to only certain lineage gods, they always insist that more and more people are becoming devotees of Salasar Balaji all the time because of the god's miracles, not simply because they identify with his geographical location. This is a remarkable paradox in the worship of Salasar Balaji; he is formally a god for the whole world, and yet in actual practice his following is limited to certain groups. On the other hand, devotion to Mehndipur Balaji is an elective embrace, ostensibly without regard to one's personal background. Members of *maṇḍals* dedicated to Mehndipur Balaji typically refer to his role in alleviating some personal affliction as the critical event that prompted them to worship him as a primary deity. Given the relative newness (a few decades) of Mehndipur Balaji's cult of devotion, it remains to be seen whether children from Mehndipur-oriented households will ultimately affirm him as a hereditary deity or revert to a more generalized reverence to pan-Indian scriptural Hanuman without special reference to Mehndipur.

Whether one has joined a Salasar or Mehndipur-oriented Balaji *maṇḍal*, urban conditions similarly affect the way devotion is publicly expressed in both cases. *Jāgrans*, or large religious singing events where faith in a deity is roused (for a length of time lasting anywhere from a few hours to a whole night) tend to look much the same for both Salasar Balaji and Mehndipur Balaji, although at events for the latter an honored faith healing guru is usually present, whereas this is

not the case for the former.<sup>366</sup> In devotion to either god, preexisting social and economic networks in urban communities influence the decision to join a *maṇḍal*. In some cases, then, business relations may translate into spiritual relationships.<sup>367</sup> For instance, a wealthy factory owner in Ludhiana, to whom we will return later in this chapter, owns a miraculous Balaji image that he escorts to devotional events organized by *maṇḍals* of allied merchant devotees in nearby cities, not to mention in Ludhiana itself. This industrialist also serves as the presiding guru at these events, accompanying the image in processions through the market areas of these cities. In another instance, a middle-aged faith healer in Amritsar counts an elderly guru in Delhi as his spiritual guide. As it turns out, the elderly guru had formerly run a grain company that had done business with the younger guru-to-be for some years before they formally became holy men in a guru-*śiṣya* relationship. I also met a few Muslims who described their affection for a particular *avatār* [earthly manifestation] of Hanuman known as Babosa (to be described in the following chapter). In interviewing them, it became apparent that they were lower-level employees of Jains who were already staunch devotees of that deity, and so they became knowledgeable about miracles that the god offered.

Some groups sponsoring *jāgrans* in honor of Balaji may start the event with a *śobhā yātrā* or costume procession that winds its way through the market district so as to draw a crowd. Members of the organizing *maṇḍal* are often enterprising merchants from the same neighborhood. Their sponsorship of these events, which normally include free meals for the public, raises their stature in the community. These groups also provide charitable financial services, such as emergency loans for members in need, or help with wedding arrangements for less prosperous neighbors. So, affiliating with a *maṇḍal* consisting of a few dozen likeminded devotees, or at least being socially connected to them, brings both spiritual and economic



benefits. A glance at the promotional brochures for *jāgrans* sponsored by *maṇḍals*, listing members, guests of honor, and so forth, reveals the dominance of merchant castes in organizing devotion to either of the two Balajis. From this perspective, devotional groups for Salasar Balaji and Mehndipur Balaji have certain commonalities.

### *Theorizing the Formation of Urban Devotion to Balaji*

In considering the spread of devotion to Balaji in urban centers I would first recall Milton Singer's 1950s research on changes in public religiosity in Chennai, summarized in *When a Great Tradition Modernizes* (although I am looking at a population linked to northwestern rather than southern India). Considering urbanization within a structuralist paradigm, in which the Sanskrit ("Great") tradition is seen as distinct from the Little (village or folk) tradition, Singer observed the staging of public recitations of the scriptures as a way to counteract the perception of lost traditions.<sup>368</sup> He regarded such performance as an example of cultural "selection," in which people adopt elements from traditional practices of the two traditions to improvise new religiosities.<sup>369</sup> In my own study, the move from the rural to urban context is less pronounced, since many of Balaji's patrons have been living in the city for decades, but my respondents maintain a distinction between an ancestral homeland, which therefore represents the religion of their forefathers, and their present-day urban locales. Like Singer's respondents, many Marwaris nowadays favor group recitations of certain scriptures, especially *Sundarkāṇḍ*. Indeed, many Salasar Balaji *maṇḍal* members cite these gatherings as the origin of their groups and the events they sponsor, such as *jāgrans*. At urban *jāgrans*, an image of Balaji is installed on a stage to be worshiped along with a surrounding array of images representing the pantheon of pan-Indian deities—Rama, Shiva, Durga, Krishna, and others. In this sense, borrowing Singer's theme of

urban religious innovation, we could say that Balaji as the local deity of one shrine has been doctrinally reconfigured in the translocal terms of nationwide Hinduism.

Singer also theorized that urbanization engenders a shift from the primacy of *ritual*, rooted in traditional social relationships, to devotion, in which the loss of those moorings is replaced by the imperative to demonstrate faith to affirm a relationship with the divine.<sup>370</sup> Of course, *bhakti* [devotion] has a long history in Hinduism, but Singer suggests that its recent elevation in urbanized life signals a new usefulness that is specific to that social context. In my own study, the rhetoric of faith [*viśvās*] in religion is pervasive, whereas ritual is perhaps less obvious. My respondents repeatedly emphasized that not only is anything possible through the performance of sincere faith to God, but also that this is the *only* element in religious life that truly matters. The utility of faith is proven in the production of the God-granted miracle; if one approaches the divine with insufficient sincerity, no good result will follow. Whereas we have seen significant doctrinal and ritual differences between the two Balajis, when it comes to the need to demonstrate faith there is not so much difference, as both Balajis' share this value. Both systems of devotion equally depend on performing faith to produce prosperity and wellbeing. In the urban setting to be discussed here, the main way in which faith is publicly practiced is in events like *jāgrans*, where devotees sing religious songs and testify to their belief in God.

At the same time, however, in noting what might seem to be the unrivalled importance of faith in these urban practices, I would not go so far as to suggest that rituals are obsolete, but only that they are being revised in line with changing devotional needs. For instance, faith healers in Mehndipur may prescribe various ritualized acts for clients to get rid of troubling spirits. These acts might include fasting, building family shrines, or reciting certain *mantras* or scriptures, such as *Hanumān cālīsā*, not to mention using procedures to directly attack the

offending spirit (making a *havan* and employing various rituals involving sacred string or grain to imprison the spirit). Faith healers at urban shrines likewise prescribe such ritual performances, although they may feel that Mehndipur's various shrines makes it a more spiritually potenti site for carrying out such work. In essence, this reifies Mehndipur as a repository of rustic tradition lacking in the city.

Considering Singer's point, one could extrapolate that busy urbanites feel anxiety over the loss of some ritual traditions in the setting of rapid social change. One symptom of this would be the proliferation of *pitr* [ancestor spirit] problems that urban residents experience, which they have come to Mehndipur to treat in recent decades. Devotees say that nowadays these *pitrs* are generally causing more trouble.<sup>371</sup> After all, *pitr doś* [affront to one's ancestor spirits] is generally diagnosed as the neglect of rituals for the upkeep of these spirits. The standard solution is to perform rituals at the Ganga River in Hardwar or Gaya, but nowadays this may be supplemented with setting up a home shrine for them and ritually giving them offerings.<sup>372</sup> One can also hire *pujārīs* in Mehndipur to make regular offerings at a designated altar there. Thus, in a broad sense, ancestors demand ritual, while God asks for faith. In treating spirit-related problems, faith healers as ritual specialists mystify the process in suggesting that their clients alone may not have the proper bodily purity or preparation to offer faith without their ritual guidance. At Salasar, too, some of the Brahmins may offer clients complex rituals, for a fee.

### Updating a Structuralist Model of Urban Religious Change

Bringing Singer's model of urban religiosity in the 1950s up to the twenty-first century entails some changes. In citing a study conducted by John Harriss on the devotional practices of "big businessmen" of Chennai in 2000, Christopher Fuller observes that nowadays charismatic gurus and miracles have assumed a dominant place in popular religion, whereas Singer had not

mentioned them.<sup>373</sup> As an example of guru-facilitated miraculous services, Fuller mentions pregnancy facilitated by handing a wish coconut to a guru for magical intercession. This is exactly the kind of scenario that I have documented as a basic service that healers oversee under the authority of Mehndipur Balaji. My respondents repeatedly emphasized that as the Kali Yuga degrades the moral quality of life, more people seek expedients to affirm their faith to counteract this trend. Gurus promising miracles meet that need, since they guide us in purifying ourselves so as to cultivate faith. Even the *pūjārīs* of Salasar inadvertently acknowledge the ubiquity of charismatic gurus when they disparage faith healing.

It would seem that one major factor favoring the elective embrace of gurus offering magical services is the rise of a middle class that feels empowered to choose its own destiny in keeping with its upward mobility. Fuller cites Maya Warrior's discussion on the affection that the middle class (and an international audience) feels for the guru Mata Amritanandamayi as an example of freely chosen faith superseding inherited affiliations in importance.<sup>374</sup> There is similar fluidity among Mehndipur-oriented gurus, who acquire followers through facilitating miracles (or at least give the impression that they can do so). Even without a formal system of faith healing, devotion to Salasar Balaji centers on miracles too.<sup>375</sup> However, Fuller is not simply interested in the middle class, but gives particular attention to the role of businessmen who are keen to find what works best, in religion as in business. In this chapter, I develop the theme that Indian urban businessmen have been particularly important in spreading devotion to Balaji in the upwardly mobile social milieu. These businessmen are the devotees who most often join the *maṇḍals*, and donate to Balaji's temples. In the case of worshipping Mehndipur Balaji, businessmen may even become the gurus themselves, guiding other businessmen in worshipping Balaji. Throughout this

chapter, then, I will be giving attention to these intersections of devotional and mercantile interests.

Although Singer and Fuller inform my discussion on devotional *maṇḍals* of the city, this study presents a rather different kind of analysis. I document not one city, as those scholars did, but multiple cities where *maṇḍals* of the two Balajis have arisen. I examine how social and economic networks facilitate the spread of devotional culture between cities. Taken as a whole, this study theorizes a multidirectional system of devotional relationships that encompasses Balaji's main temples, rural devotees, mercantile devotees in cities across India, and new shrines of miracles in the countryside of Rajasthan that relate to Balaji. I am interested in how a system of faith expands between such agents—shrine to city, city to shrine, group to group, businessman to businessman, and so forth—in the era of neoliberal economic reform. To make such an analysis, this chapter will consist of a series of case studies of urban *maṇḍals*—sometimes including faith healing gurus—and the events that they sponsor. This chapter will initially focus on *maṇḍals* that revere Salasar Balaji, and therefore involve no presiding guru, and then shift to *maṇḍals* oriented towards Mehndipur Balaji, each of which is centered on a charismatic guru. The position of mercantile communities in devotion will be a common theme throughout this chapter.

## 6.2 The *Jāgraṇ* as a Site for Devotion

### *An Evening Performance of Faith*

In this and the following section, I will provide four case studies that document the spread of devotion to Salasar Balaji in urban Marwari communities. This will include *jāgraṇs*, which bring together several thousand devotees at one time, and illustrate that the worship of Salasar Balaji is firmly rooted in Marwari and Rajasthani identity. Within the rubric of worshipping

Balaji, devotional *maṇḍals* also provide social and economic services to the surrounding community. It is remarkable that only those who identify with the Marwari community attend these public devotional events for Salasar Balaji, even though they are formally open to all. Non-Marwaris in the city are unaware of Salasar Balaji; if anything, they know only that he is a Marwari god. This is indicative of the insularity of Marwari society within the host culture.

At 7 p.m., the guests started arriving for the second annual *jāgrāṇ* of Bangalore's recently established Balaji *maṇḍal*. The event was to take place under a large tent in a park in the middle of the city, with an adjacent large tent to provide free meals. Marwari families dressed nicely for the occasion entered into a line that would lead them past the performance stage before taking a seat on mats spread out for the event, men on one side and women on the other, in keeping with Hindu gender segregation at religious events. On the stage, a large framed poster of bearded Salasar Balaji had been set up, with sumptuous offerings of fruit and sweets arranged before it (Figure 6-1). A hereditary Dadhich *pujārī* from Salasar, dressed in a white outfit, had been flown in to tend the *havan* [ritual fire] in front of Balaji's stage display (Figure 6-2). As the guests passed the stage in single file, the *pujārī* gave each a handful of dried coconut and a ladle full of ghee to put in the fire, after which he dispensed some *prasād* [a small piece of sanctified food], as is normal when worshiping deities. Around fifteen members of the organizing *maṇḍal* putting on the event, all men of around 30 dressed in conspicuous orange kurtās (orange being the sacred color of Hanuman and his most ardent devotees) assumed positions around the tented enclosure to manage the incoming crowd. Wanting to show that their *maṇḍal* had attracted international attention, my hosts put the novelty of a foreign devotee to advantage in having me stand at the entrance to disarmingly greet each guest with a “*namaste*.”

By around 7:30, the professional singer hired for the occasion took the stage with the aim of enthusing the crowd with a program of *bhajans* [devotional songs] in praise of Balaji and other deities. As the evening progressed, he interspersed these *bhajans* with interludes in which he exhorted the crowd to affirm faith in Balaji. As is common in such events, he often urged his



Figure 6-1. An image of Balaji at a *jāgrāṇ* in Bangalore.

audience to raise their hands as a demonstration of devotion: “Say it, hail to Balaji! ... One, two, three, four, hail Salasar Balaji!”<sup>376</sup> At other times, the singer encouraged the crowd to clap during the songs, and of course to sing along as well. Frequent repetitions of the lines in each *bhajan* made this relatively easy to do. As in any *jāgrāṇ*, the excitement of the event rose to



periodic crescendos as the beat of the music quickened, punctuated by sudden pauses when the singer would speak for a while before slowly launching into the emotional arc of the next song.

During one break between songs, the singer recounted the miraculous birth of a son to a devotee after praying to Balaji.<sup>377</sup> He reminded the crowd: no matter what our life situation may



Figure 6-2. Ladling ghee onto the sacred fire in front of Balaji's image, Bangalore.

be, Balaji will answer our prayers. After all, he reflected, Hanuman proved in the *Rāmāyana* that one can accomplish anything through the power of faith. But, the singer observed darkly, nowadays so many people have forgotten their faith [*bhakti bhūl gaen*]. So, he reasoned, we must all heed Balaji's message of the power of faith to overcome immorality in the world.



Faith, he added, has social ramifications too: we need to renew our reverence to our parents, just as we would to God in a temple. Nowadays people have lost touch with these old-time values, but Hanuman will restore them. As the singer arrived at his final point, one of the musicians sitting quietly nearby presciently fingered a few notes on the harmonium as if to accent the



Figure 6-3. Inside the *jāgrān* enclosure in Bangalore.

singer’s words and hint at what was to come. The singer then shifted into the verse of a *bhajan*, as the music started up.

Although a professional singer hired for a *jāgrān* could be described as an entertainer (or “artist” in popular terminology), the above sections show that he or she also has the important job of creating devotional feeling in the crowd. The desirable aesthetic here is of overwhelming

sound to convey rapture with the god (Figure 6-3). In a chapter on Indian wedding processions, Gregory Booth makes the point that loud sound may often create sacred or ritual space.<sup>378</sup> The form of these *jāgrans* exemplifies that aim, which is equally apparent in devotional events for Mehndipur Balaji. For the singer, managing such an event requires constant alertness. As the singer at the Bangalore *jāgrāṇ* later explained to me, he must stay aware of the mood of the crowd, and make spontaneous decisions about what song should come next, so as to maintain the proper devotional sentiment. This also requires the musicians, primarily playing harmonium, drums, and various rattles, to closely follow the singer for cues about what melody to strike up next. In return for this service of devotional management, a good singer and band will be paid well. At the Bangalore *jāgrāṇ*, I was told that the singer and troupe would receive 100,000 rupees, but he was new at the job, and bigger stars could demand much more.

As the Bangalore *jāgrāṇ* had almost reached the 12-midnight finale, the level of devotional excitement rose. The orange-cloaked *maṇḍal* members gathered on stage and riotously danced as the musicians picked up the pace ever more rapidly. At one point they took turns waving a lamp in prayer before the image. Overcome by this devotional peak, one man of around 60 stood up to dance in the audience, fell to the floor, and then crawled onto the stage, lying prostrate before the framed picture of the god. Skillfully responding to this moment of surrender, the singer reminded the audience in song of the ultimate power of Hanuman to accomplish all deeds: “Victory dear Hanuman, victory dear Hanuman, victory dear Hanuman [*Kījai hanumān lalā kī*] ...” The band then came to a halt, and the audience, estimated by my hosts to number 3,000, slowly got up and headed home.<sup>379</sup> As silence returned, several migrant workers from Rajasthan started to dismantle the stage and roll up the mats. Marwari merchants prefer to recruit from Rajasthan, because they come from the homeland and are therefore more dependable. In sum,

then, this is the essential setting in which a culture of devotion to Balaji is affirmed far from the god's main temple in Salasar.

### Words of Devotion

Outside of *jāgrans*, *bhajans* are already ubiquitous in Indian public life, both in live performance and in recordings, and are important for producing a devotional atmosphere. In this subsection, then, I would like to emphasize the continuity between *bhajans* heard at Salasar and what we find in urban *jāgrans*. In essence, these songs support a culture of devotion. CDs and DVDs of songs for Balaji are widely sold in markets adjoining the shrines in Rajasthan. Pilgrims taking home such recordings can retain the mood of faith at home throughout the year, and many listen to these recordings in the morning and evening as part of regular prayer. Marwari *maṇḍal* members may have some recordings too, and are likely to recognize many of the songs at *jāgrans*. At least some *bhajans* at Salasar-oriented *jāgrans* will directly focus on Salasar Balaji, but just as often on pan-Indian Hanuman. In the *jāgran*, the singer may also allude to Salasar itself, thereby hailing the audience as pilgrims and descendants from that land. The following excerpt from a *bhajan* in the Bangalore *jāgran* shows a typical invocation of personal faith in Balaji that also references his shrine:

Everything I have is by [Balaji's] grace ... he keeps delivering it [all] to us: sometimes wealth, sometimes water ... We will continuously bow low, on the day that Balaji comes to our home ... we are ecstatic upon his birthday ... We will sing such sweet *bhajans* at every moment, on the day that my Balaji comes to our home! ... Every corner of our home will be festooned with flowers ... O, my Balaji, on the day that I build my home, I will have your name written on every single brick! ... In that little home, one room will be yours! Day and night, the sacred flame [*jot*] will be lit [for Balaji], and I will sing *bhajans*! Even when nobody will come [to my home], Balaji will be there! On days when I would suffer, [his presence] will make me better! My Lord, Lord, Lord [*bābā*]! This was my fate from a previous life. When Balaji puts his hand upon one's head, what does one say in gratitude? [I will say:] I shall go to Salasar,

I shall go to Salasar, I shall go to Salasar! ... I will lower my head at your [*terā*] feet,  
Lord! I shall come to Salasar!<sup>380</sup>

The dominant theme here is of humble devotion, and inviting the divine to come into one's own home. The narrator even tells of making a family shrine for the deity. The comment about putting Balaji's name on every brick in one's house emphasizes the absolute surrender of the self to the will of the god of Salasar. The reference to wealth and water apparently points to the uncertainty of fate, even when we maintain faith in the god; we can never fully guess his divine whim [*līlā*]. The narrator's final resounding statement that he will go to Salasar in gratitude is rhetorically equivalent to the various miracle stories that one hears from devotees in Salasar itself. In those stories, one experiences a miracle in a time of need and then goes to Salasar in gratitude. Hence, although faith to Balaji has been cultivated in far-flung cities such as Bangalore, the rhetoric of devotion frequently brings one's thoughts back to Salasar. And, while Balaji is hailed as the god of Salasar and therefore esteemed among the Marwaris, he is also glorified as the savior of the world. Thus, there is always a potential tension between Balaji as the inherited Marwari god versus Hanuman the god of miracles that all should embrace. The following excerpt frames Balaji in that grander scriptural dimension:

O Balaji, O Balaji, O Balaji ... the world would not turn without Rama, Rama could not act without Hanuman, the world would not turn without Rama, Rama could not act without Hanuman ... Saving Lakshmana [Rama's wounded brother] was difficult ... Who was it that was tasked with bringing the healing herb [*jadī-buṭī*] for Lakshmana? ... When I read the *Rāmāyaṇa*, here's what I understood: without Rama, Ravana [the demon king] would not be dead, without Hanuman, Lanka [Ravana's abode] would not have been burned down ... the world would not turn without Rama, Rama could not act without Hanuman ... Hail Rama, Consort of Sita! Hail Lord Hanuman! Hail Salasar Balaji!<sup>381</sup>

It would be useful to consider for a moment how this kind of presentation relates to the longstanding tradition of scriptural recitation. Philip Lutgendorf provides a thorough examination of such a tradition in his work on the performances of *Rāmcaritmānas* in Banaras. A major aim in his study is to investigate the strategies that storytellers use to “frame” the story for the audience to understand.<sup>382</sup> In the public recitations that Lutgendorf describes, the formal textual and social structure of the recitation would seem to be more complex than in a *jāgran*, insofar as it involves the narration of an entire epic. Thus, intricate verbal artistry and stylistics would be important to the practitioners. On the other hand, the delivery of *bhajans* in Balaji *jāgrans* is necessarily a much less complex effort. The emphasis is on repeating simple phrases of praise for the god, often many, many times in one single song, to build devotional fervor. The presentation aims for the kind of ecstasy that makes one want to immediately surrender to the god, than engage in pious introspection.

### *Balaji and Pan-Indian Marwari Culture*

In this subsection, I will discuss how Marwaris socially relate to their diasporic setting, as a way of identifying how Rajasthani identity is sustained. This is critical to understanding how faith in Salasar Balaji has expanded in this pan-Indian community, since he is so closely associated with Rajasthani cultural revivalism. During the Bangalore *jāgran*, as at others as well, I milled about in the rear of the audience where the sound might not be quite as loud, which would allow for conversation. I found that with hardly an exception every guest had been born in Rajasthan or was descended from ancestors in that region. That night and in the following days, I learned that my Marwari respondents routinely speak Hindi—or even Marwari, their term for the Rajasthani dialect of the Salasar region—in their day-to-day work. Most have little if any understanding of Kannada, the official language of Karnataka, in which Bangalore is located.

Although guests reported a variety of professions linked to manufacturing or business, many of the members of the *maṇḍal* itself were involved in the cloth business. Mercantilism is at the root of the Marwari experience of diaspora. As I was told at the *jāgrāṇ*, “All of [the audience] are from Rajasthan; they migrated here for business purposes.”<sup>383</sup> And so, I argue, this mercantile orientation, which is so central to Marwari life, also facilitates the development of a devotional culture centered on Balaji in this population.

When I later visited one of the *maṇḍal* members at his cloth shop in the crowded cloth district, I could hear Hindi being spoken all around me; it was apparent that most cloth merchants, including *maṇḍal* members, pursue their livelihood within a Marwari social milieu. While in Bangalore, I slept in the warehouse of another *maṇḍal* member, whose business involved delivering undergarments to Marwari shopkeepers. The employees who shuttled about all day with stacks of underwear in the back of an autorickshaw were likewise all Hindi speakers from Rajasthan, and generally very recent arrivals who knew no Kannada. In this setting, local Hindi media announce upcoming events to the community. *Maṇḍals* also have access to lists of Marwari community members. For the *jāgrāṇ*, they sent out 3,500 invitation cards using the address directories of several Marwari social organizations, including “Jain society [*samāj*], Agrawal society, Maheswari society (another Marwari caste group), Brahmin society,” and others.<sup>384</sup> No low castes were ever mentioned, nor even Jats. The social configuration of the invitees confirmed the common perception in Salasar and elsewhere in Rajasthan that Marwari *baniyās* are Balaji’s stereotypical clientele.<sup>385</sup> Since the Marwaris have no temple for Balaji in Bangalore, *jāgrāṇs* and similar social events are their only venue to come together in worship.

The devotees at the Bangalore *jāgrāṇ* were quite conscious of their shared Rajasthani heritage, and readily talked about it. One man started to say that “99 percent” of guests at the event were

Rajasthani—then he corrected himself, “... No, that’s 101 percent!”<sup>386</sup> Social identification with Rajasthan at the Bangalore *jāgrān* could actually be narrowed; guests were mostly from the Churu-Bikaner-Sikar-Jhunjhunu area, which comprises the larger Shekhawati region (and Salasar). An unresolved question, then, would be what proportion of all merchants, as a social category, may be considered as Marwaris. There are *baniyā* communities in the northwest of India, such as Punjab, who may have Marwari-type surnames such as Agrawal but do not necessarily speak of themselves by that term. It appears that only those merchants who live in cities outside the northwest identify by the term Marwari in the caste sense. Inasmuch as this transplanted Marwari community will likely never again live in Rajasthan, the activities of *maṇḍals* reproduce an otherwise distant homeland. At the Bengaluru *jāgrān*, one woman, originally from Uttar Pradesh but married to a Marwari, said she had never been to Salasar due to limitations from diabetes. To her, these *jāgrāns* were a “godsend” because they allowed her to partake of Balaji’s blessings without leaving her urban home area. So, on the whole, members are quite conscious of being apart from a distant homeland, and appreciate Marwari social events as a way to ameliorate that situation.

The theme of recreating lost homelands, even in ways that might imaginatively transform the reality of the land left behind, has of course been explored in scholarship. Such case studies theorize the production of new “traditions,” ostensibly reproducing what was lost, but in fact also responding to the conditions of the new locale. Among possible comparative examples of reconstructed homelands, I would consider Thomas Tweed’s study of Cuban exiles in Florida, which he uses as a pivot for defining a theory of religion in terms of a total lifeway—in the case of the exiles, a reconstruction of their previous life—more than just religious practice in the restricted sense. Tweed uses the condition of Cuban exile to reflect on their belief as a means of

crossing to another place—an instrument of “itinerancy,” as he calls it—which unites the experience of diaspora with the aspiration to attain salvation.<sup>387</sup> Looking at the Marwari diaspora, the doctrine of Balaji as a *kuldev* has its own parallel in the Marwari experience of social difference in a distant land, and their retention of an identity that explains and even valorizes their distant origins in morally uplifting terms—Balaji is both their god and the savior of the world.

In studying Black Caribs in New York City, Paul Johnson describes the awareness of being in “diaspora” as “a discursive marker of a person’s conscious extension towards a given place or its imaginal representation.”<sup>388</sup> The last part of that statement is key here: in *jāgrans* and other devotional events, Salasar Balaji is in essence imagined as a god of Marwari heritage; whether he was actually worshiped by Marwaris in ancient days, he is imagined so. I have suggested that the formation of Balaji’s identity has as much to do with urban Marwari life as it does with the doctrines of Salasar itself. It is not simply that devotion to Balaji has spread to faraway cities, but that these distant residents have made Balaji their own in their distant cities, and in so doing have established a vigorous new culture of devotion. In patronizing Balaji’s temple in Salasar, these Marwari devotees have also configured Balaji in line with their own experience of diasporic pan-Indian religiosity (as seen in the emphasis on the *Rāmāyaṇa* epic, praising the god as humanity’s savior in the Kali Yug, the importance of faith, etc.), even as they claim that he is their particular deity. Balaji has become what he is in the context of modern Marwari urban experience.

Following from Tweed’s theory of religion as a relational practice (humans to gods, humans to humans, and so forth), I would emphasize that Balaji in the urban setting is not simply a religious undertaking but more broadly a cultural response to the shared experience of being



different from the surrounding population.<sup>389</sup> As my cloth salesman host in Bangalore said regarding the *jāgrāṇ*, “This is our cultural function . . . it’s a ‘bonding attachment’!”<sup>390</sup> The members of the *maṇḍal*, who generally live in middle-class flats in the residential areas of the city, were already part of the same social circle before they became a devotional group. They had gotten the idea to start a *maṇḍal* after attending a *jāgrāṇ* for Vaishno Devi, the premier goddess of northwestern India, among fellow Hindi-speakers in Bangalore.<sup>391</sup> These *maṇḍal* members had also participated in periodic group readings of *Sundarkāṇḍ* since childhood, so the *jāgrāṇ* seemed like a logical progression from those devotional gatherings.

As I also found out, all but one of the 21 members of the Balaji *maṇḍal* of Bangalore are Jains. The Jain merchant in whose warehouse I stayed kept photographs of famous Jain gurus from the Salasar region, along with images of Hindu gods. Babb, the only scholar that has given attention to Salasar Balaji, has explored the Jain-Marwari-Rajasthan nexus of identity, but has not extended this to discuss their pan-Indian diaspora.<sup>392</sup> And how, then, did these Jain *maṇḍal* members explain their interest in Balaji? I was surprised to hear one of the members say, “We don’t have any faith in [Jain] temples—we don’t go!”<sup>393</sup> However, they do worship the Jain *tirthāṅkars* [divine incarnations], and maintain relationships with certain Jain gurus. It seems that Jain temple life is a bit stale for them—a sentiment that I would hear again in other settings, and to which I will return in Chapter 7. I would surmise that Balaji provides a greater level of devotional intensity—and perhaps most importantly better access to *miracles*—than they would find in Jain temple practices. Thus, Jains, too, join in the Marwari narrative of the Rajasthani homeland, and thereby become the same as Marwaris.

### 6.3 Remembering Rajasthan From Afar

#### “Balaji is a Kuldev for All of Us!”

In this section, I will document a *jāgrāṇ* in Surat to illustrate how the deployment of multiple images of gods on the performance stage can be a strategy for producing a more inclusive diasporic Rajasthani community. I will also examine the rhetoric that Balaji is a *kuldev* [lineage deity] of these diasporic Marwari communities. Several deities from the Shekhawati area—most often Balaji, Khatu Shyam, and Rani Sati, and sometimes some others—are often worshiped together as a kind of Marwari pantheon. For example, although someone might consider Khatu Shyam to be his primary deity, he would not only attend *jāgrāṇs* for that god but sometimes also Balaji events in the area because these are, after all, also Rajasthani social events. It is at the devotional margins of this pantheon, where someone might identify as Marwari but not yet actively worship any of these allied deities, that there is the most potential for the production of a new devotee of Balaji, as that person becomes drawn into activities within the community and perhaps has a personal revelation of the god’s miracles. These are the personal narratives of discovering the god that I heard in Salasar itself. But, the growth of devotion to Balaji in Marwari communities may be less a matter of that god alone so much as a systemic rise of Marwari public religiosity. This has resulted in an increase in collective interest in all the deities that signify “Rajasthan” as a cultural commodity.

I was told that Surat has witnessed the founding of 800 Balaji devotional organizations in less than twenty years. Even if this number seems exaggerated, it is indicative of the large Marwari-Rajasthani population in this city, which is famous for its cloth industry. Indeed, over the entrance to one part of Surat’s extensive cloth district, cloth merchants have put up a grand archway broadcasting a bold message in Hindi script to let every visitor know of the god to

whom they owe their livelihood and wellbeing; “Shri Salasar Hanuman Gate.”<sup>394</sup> At the *jāgrān* that I attended in Surat, which was located in a Marwari residential area, it was immediately clear that this devotional *mandal* had won a large following in the merchant community. A large banner emblazoned with an image of Salasar Balaji listed 263 patrons, specifying numerous



Figure 6-4. A banner listing donors at a *jāgrān* in Surat.

textile, cloth dyeing, sari, silk mill, and fashion businesses, along with a fair number of tax accountants and stock brokers, not to mention individual sponsors (many with *baniyā* surnames, and others with ambiguous caste affiliations) (Figure 6-4). Smaller promotional banners around the pavilion announced several upcoming *jāgrāns* sponsored by other Marwari organizations for Balaji, Khatu Shyam, and even Babosa.

This was the *maṇḍal*'s seventeenth annual *jāgrāṇ*, which made it one of the oldest such events in Surat. It appears that sponsoring a *jāgrāṇ* is the most essential kind of public act that any *maṇḍal* must facilitate to be acknowledged in the community as a viable organization. Every *jāgrāṇ* involves the temporary installation of images of Balaji and other deities for the public to worship. When devotees worship a reproduction of Balaji on a stage set up for one day, this may be sufficient to realize their wishes, if done with sincerity. Equally so, devotees may take the opportunity of the *jāgrāṇ* to thank the deity for wishes already fulfilled. And so, the successful execution of the *jāgrāṇ*, and its size, are described as measures of divine efficacy. One man in the Surat *jāgrāṇ*'s audience commented that this event had been getting bigger each year, as more and more people experienced Balaji's miracles—expansion proves that the god is helping his worshipers. Even though no Marwari Balaji temple exists in Surat, in the course of a year Marwaris find multiple opportunities to stay in touch with their gods, as numerous religious events in their community take place throughout the city.

While virtually all guests at Balaji *jāgrāṇs* are of Marwari-Rajasthani background, I noticed that some sub-regions are better represented, depending on diasporic settlement patterns. More guests at the Surat *jāgrāṇ* described a background in Nagaur District (to the west of Salasar), whereas in Bangalore more were from Churu (to the north). The desirability of bringing together gods representing certain sub-regions or caste groups may also correlate with the social composition of the *maṇḍal* itself. Such inclusivity also conveniently obscures caste-specific religiosity, which is taboo in public discourse, due to the egalitarian principles of Indian public life. Hence, the Surat *jāgrāṇ* was an event of Rajasthanis, not Marwaris, Jains, or other particular groups. Devotional inclusivity may also enhance the pooling of economic resources. *Maṇḍal* members in Surat, as in many other places, donate money into a community fund each



month, and when anyone has a significant need for extra funds he can make a withdrawal and pay it back later. Defining the group as Rajasthani avoids the Marwari moniker, since Marwaris are notorious as miserly financiers. Donation to Balaji’s shrine at Salasar conceptually models such a structure of savings and loans on the spiritual plane. As I commonly heard, donating



Figure 6-5. “Five Hanumans” on stage at a *jāgrāṇ* in Surat.

wealth to the god results in even greater benefits (hence, including interest) in the long run, as Balaji repays the devotional deposit.

Recognizing Rajasthan as an inclusive cultural category, the *jāgrāṇ* in Surat was set up as a “five Hanuman” event (Figure 6-5). On the stage, an elaborate sculpted scene of caves presided

over by a large image of Shiva (one of whose *avatārs* is Hanuman) contained images of five Hanumans representing particular shrines in Rajasthan (left to right): Salasar Balaji, Punrasar Balaji, Khedapati Balaji, Balaji Babosa (his full name), and even Mehndipur Balaji. Earlier in this study, I mentioned Punrasar Balaji, in the Bikaner area, as a favorite wish-granting deity of Jains. Babosa has likewise gained a following among urban Jains in particular. In all likelihood, at least some of this Surat *maṇḍal*'s members were Jains too. Khedapati Balaji was not a deity I had encountered before. His primary shrine, in the direction of Khatu Shyam, and therefore near to Nagaur District, was presumably the homeland deity of one or more of the organizers, given the high profile of Nagaur descendants at this event. The presence of Mehndipur Balaji at a *jāgrān* for Shekhawati deities is uncommon, due to his renown for occult rituals and the fact that Mehndipur actually lies outside Shekhawati. Apparently, his inclusion in this event marks an effort to bring together all the most famous Hanumans, thereby reconceiving Shekhawati as a more expansive Rajasthan—the state as a sacred homeland. Thus, the iconographic arrangement collectively carves out “Rajasthan” as a social and spiritual entity in the diaspora.

In imagining these Balajis—each a visual reproduction of the local image back in Rajasthan—as a kind of Rajasthani pantheon, the scope of the *kuldev* as a family's lineage deity has likewise been expanded from just one locale to all of Rajasthan, and—as Hanuman—even of the nation as a whole. As one young man at the event told me:

Balaji is the *kuldevatā* [or *kuldev*] for all of us [Rajasthanis] [*hamāre sab ke kuldevatā hai bālājī*]. A family has one god. If there's any trouble, he'll come right away [to help]. The whole family worships him. In Hindu culture, one should first think of one's family. At the same time, one should remember one's *kuldevatā*, and worship him. There's only one *kuldev* per family! ... [and] Hanuman is the *kuldev* of all Hindustanis!<sup>395</sup>

This respondent juggled three levels of divine guardianship. At the most intimate level, he noted, Balaji is a Marwari deity who comes before all other deities in that role. But, this young man also expanded Balaji's scope to encompass all of Rajasthan, which in this particular *jāgrān* would correspond to the five Balajis represented on stage. But then he drew the connection out further in telling me that Hanuman is the *kuldev* of all of Hindu India! Significantly, when he made this last claim he switched from saying "Balaji" to "Hanuman" because he intuitively knew that Balaji is really a referent for Rajasthan, whereas Hanuman, although doctrinally the same entity, refers to the pan-Indian scriptural deity who is revered by Hindus everywhere. And where, then, do we see the "Hanuman" that is a referent of the Hindu nation encompassing the five Balajis? He is here, too, as in other Balaji *jāgrāns*. On the stage, to the left of the five-image set is a life-size *Rām darbār* [court] scene—the familiar tableau of God as Rama enthroned with his consort Sita, his faithful brother Lakshman, and of course Hanuman in his generic monkey form (rather than resembling a specific local shrine image) bowing before them. Thus, in this *jāgrān* (and others) we can see a refashioning of devotional publics by selectively expanding or contracting the scope of Balaji-Hanuman worship to match the scale of the community in question: family-region-nation.

### *Remembering a Homeland*

Clearly, devotion to Balaji in these *maṇḍals*, and the religious events they sponsor, means more than just revering a deity who provides miracles, even though that is the reason most often given for his popularity. Balaji is a cultural symbol too. These Marwaris, and their compatriots from the broader Rajasthan-Haryana area, find social and economic benefit in remembering a homeland that most of them have permanently left except as visitors. While no scholarship has examined Balaji in this pan-Indian context, Anne Hardgrove has provided the parallel example

of Rani Sati in her study of the Marwaris of Kolkata. As it happened, on the day I visited the *jāgrān* in Surat, a stroll down the road brought me to a group of women engaged in a monthly Rani Sati ceremony; this was another dimension of worship within the same Marwari neighborhood. Likewise, in Banaras, I visited a lavish Balaji temple constructed by well-to-do Marwaris in which the three main niches enshrine (from left to right) Rani Sati, Salasar Balaji, and Khatu Shyam. So, Hardgrove's work on this *kuldevī* overlaps with my investigation of the social construction of Balaji as a Marwari *kuldev*.

Based on fieldwork in the late 1990s, Hardgrove tells us that over the last century urban Marwaris' diligent mercantilism has set them apart from the surrounding Bengali population.<sup>396</sup> The Marwaris' distinct economic identity, which fueled the formation of a bounded sense of culture, aligns with my own thesis that the culture of devotion to Salasar Balaji has likewise been propelled by neoliberal economic change over the last twenty years. The Marwari worship of Balaji as a *kuldev* constitutes the reconstructed social memory of their shared heritage. Hence, we could almost think Hardgrove is referring to Balaji when she states that Rani Sati is “a symbol of community identity for the Marwaris,”<sup>397</sup>

However, Hardgrove voices ambivalence about the historical depth of the relationship between the Marwaris and their goddess, referring to their “imagined homeland of Marwar, in Rajasthan” as a modern construction more than an ancient heritage.<sup>398</sup> She notes that when the big-city Marwaris converged on Jhunjhunu to celebrate the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Rani Sati's death, locals were hardly involved at all, and indeed did not feel any commonality with the Marwaris.<sup>399</sup> I have similarly argued that the Marwaris rediscovered Balaji in recent times but, unlike Hardgrove, I observed a more substantial personal connection between Marwaris and their ancestral land. Most Marwaris of Mumbai, Bangalore, Surat, and other cities stated to me that



they had been born in Shekhawati, and many of them now often return to family homes in that area. Only a fraction of Marwaris described a life removed from Rajasthan by a span of several generations, as Hardgrove has in mind in her century-long historical study. Thus, although Balaji as a lineage deity seems to be relatively new in Marwari spiritual and social life, the Marwari connection to the region of Salasar itself has greater depth. A more precise way of describing local Rajasthani ambivalence towards Marwaris, as I discussed earlier in this study, would be to note Jat pilgrims' critique of the Marwaris as privileged outsiders.

*Maṅḍal*-sponsored activities for Balaji thus not only constitute present-day Marwari identity within the diasporic community, but also draw a relational link to a distant homeland of cultural antiquity and miracles. A fair number of theorists have described the process of making such a collective memory through public acts. Paul Connerton describes the importance of rituals in such wide-ranging instances as Nazi Germany and Islamic pilgrimage as ways of instituting public consciousness of a shared historical identity.<sup>400</sup> We could say that Salasar, publicly invoked as a holy site at events such as *jāgrans*, is at least as vital and real to Balaji's devotees for what it signifies as a memory (reconstituting an ancestral culture) as the physical place itself. We can also see the potentially greater vibrancy of memory over the historically real site in Maurice Halbwachs's discussion of the early Christian apostles leaving the Holy Land to go out into the world, "As to group members who leave these places without seeing them again ... they soon create a symbolic representation of these places ... But symbolic reflection detaches these places from their physical environment and connects them with the beliefs of the group."<sup>401</sup> In terms of Marwari memory, this indicates that as a symbol, the lost land acquires new dimensions of meaning in relation to the current-day social realities of living in a big city. The actual day-to-day context of Marwari life involves some insularity from the surrounding population, as we

have seen. But, in signifying a rural, religious homeland, Balaji and other Marwari deities provide a sense of belonging that is meaningful within the diasporic context of otherness. In this sense, I argue that devotion to Salasar Balaji is as much an outgrowth of Marwari urban life as it is of the shrine in Rajasthan.

## 6.4 Marwari Socioeconomic Diversity

### *The Life of a VIP Devotee*

From the beginning of this study I have loosely conglomerated “Marwari” and “VIP” as a social category. From the standpoint of my respondents in Salasar, most VIPs are Marwaris, although some higher-ups in the political world are likely to be from other backgrounds. What does the life of a VIP Marwari patron of Salasar look like? In fact, many Marwaris in cities around India are simply getting by in a middle-class way; they live in small apartments and scrimp to make ends meet. In this section, then, I will present two case studies that bracket the diversity of Marwari diasporic experience. They also represent two social pathways in which devotion to Salasar Balaji has grown. That is, I discovered that some *maṇḍals* for Balaji have a reputation for attracting VIPs in the truest sense—those who are wealthy and influential—while other *maṇḍals* coalesce within middle-class communities.

As an illustration of a VIP Marwari member of a *maṇḍal*, I will mention a man named Prakash who belongs to a *maṇḍal* based in Bhayandar, a city that is part of the Mumbai metropolitan area. Established in 1990, this Balaji mandal is said to be the oldest one in the Mumbai area. I met Prakash while sitting in audience before a *sant* [holy man] that was visiting Salasar during the annual festival of Mohan Das, the founder of Balaji’s temple. Prakash had come to visit an ancestral town near Salasar. Now in his early 40s, he is a stockbroker and lives in a posh penthouse in Mumbai. Like many Marwari businessmen, he is a very busy man, but I

kept up the hope that I might interview him when I came to Mumbai to meet other devotees and attend *jāgrans*. By coincidence, on the day after New Year's Day, I met him again amidst a crowd of thousands of devotees at the Sai Baba shrine in Shirdi, Maharashtra. Not unlike Balaji, saintly Sai Baba, who died in 1918, has become known as a granter of miracles for Mumbai's business elite.<sup>402</sup> Marwaris like Prakash particularly seek Sai Baba's *darśan* at the beginning of the year because it is thought that this will bring prosperity for the whole year.

I had been told in Salasar that Prakash was a VIP, and so I wondered if this status would have any meaning away from Balaji's temple. Right away, when I ran into him in Shirdi with several of his business associates—pudgy fellows who described themselves as property dealers—I found that he has made himself a VIP at Shirdi, too, through generous donations. He beckoned me to come with them into the inner shrine through a special VIP shortcut that would get us there, he said offhandedly, “within three minutes.” I explained that since I was wearing shoes at the moment, I would need to first deposit them in a locker elsewhere. And I had my camera with me, which is another no-no for entry. No matter, he responded, in his company I could go inside wearing my shoes and entrust them to a guard! And, he promised that no one would trouble me about my camera. Still unable to believe this expediency, I cautiously said that I would contact them later when they had exited the shrine. On the previous day (January 1), I had already patiently waited in line for around five hours to see the inner shrine of Sai Baba which Prakash was now inviting me to see a second time within three minutes. Police rigorously require pilgrims to deposit their shoes, not to mention cameras and other forbidden objects in special lockers before entering into line. But, at the moment I met Prakash, a VIP patron, none of this was of great concern.

Meeting up with these acquaintances again, I was able to get a lift with them by car to Mumbai. Minutes after we had embarked, one of the property dealers in the back seat confided to me that land prices had lately gone up fifty-fold in Shirdi, due to investors. As if to prove the point, on the way out of town, my hosts stopped to make a deal with a local farmer in a rice field next to his shack. A few yards away a new concrete apartment block loomed over us. Prakash's position as an influential VIP extended beyond the domain of business. He was also a member of a government "anti-corruption" task force that was cracking down on influential figures who unduly sought special privileges. This affiliation brought certain perks. On the road to Mumbai, when we passed through a tollbooth, Prakash flashed his "anti-corruption" card, which entitled us to free passage. When an unknowing attendant initially denied the validity of the card, a quick phone call to a higher office soon put him in his place. Once in Mumbai, Prakash gave me a tour of several shrines that he patronized near his home. In each case, the presiding priests seemed to know him well, greeting us with the sort of eager warmth that one would expect of a shopkeeper receiving a favorite customer. While we were inside one temple, the priest secretly directed an assistant to decorate Prakash's parked car with flowers, and he made sure to also place a splendid garland of flowers around Prakash's neck before we left.

That night, I stayed in Prakash's penthouse apartment. His family shrine room contained impressive molded wall reliefs of Balaji, Khatu Shyam, and Sai Baba. Sitting at the dining table as a servant brought our meal, Prakash said that his father had died when he was a child, and he grew up poor in Kolkata. But, he later came to Mumbai, and through hard work and Balaji's protection was moving up in the world. Then, disaster struck. In 1993, the Mumbai stock market crashed; he lost everything. As a remedy, a business associate advised him to start going to Shirdi, which he did; soon prosperity returned. Like the Marwari from Nanded that I had

interviewed in Salasar, whose factory had burned down (in Chapter 2), for Prakash the stock market loss did not represent a failure of Balaji. Rather, it was a test of faith. Furthermore, Balaji was his lineage deity. It is not possible to repudiate one's *kuldev* any more than one's own parents or caste. Not once during my year of research did any devotee express the view that



Figure 6-6. A family shrine in a “VIP” Marwari home

Balaji could cause harm to, or disappoint, a lifelong devotee. What, then, is one to do when Balaji is not enough? One should worship Balaji even more intensively, and if need be add additional deities until auspiciousness has been restored. This is exactly what Prakash did in becoming a devotee of Shirdi Sai Baba (Figure 6-6). And, he has not forgotten Balaji: he

maintains condominiums in both Salasar and Shirdi, and travels once a month to the former and twice a month to the latter to stay on good terms with both deities.

### Attending a VIP Jāgran

The day after my visit to Prakash, his maṇḍal was hosting its major annual *jāgran*. Prakash sent me with his family in their chauffeured car to the *jāgran* in Bhayandar; he would follow later after taking care of some business. The event resembled what I had become accustomed to seeing, but on a more affluent level, as befitted the status of its organizers. I was told that like so many *maṇḍals*, it had grown out of weekly meetings for singing bhajans. As the members became more prosperous and gained a broader social network, their *jāgrans* became more ambitious in scope. Most recently, the maṇḍal organizers sent out 13,000 invitations, and would be paying the performers between 500,000 and 1 million rupees! These were much higher numbers than what I had heard from the new *maṇḍal* that had sponsored the *jāgran* in Bangalore. The rise in the magnitude of this *maṇḍal's jāgrans* over two decades is in itself an indication that Balaji has been rewarding these devotees for their faith in him with miracles of prosperity.

The *jāgran* is also a chance for the businessmen who are the maṇḍal's members to impress upon their peers that they are able to mobilize sufficient resources to sponsor a large public event, including both free entertainment and full meals. We could consider the *jāgran* as a display of affluence or an offering to impress both God and peers, theoretically akin to the feasts that Marcel Mauss famously documented in *The Gift*. As Mauss recounted, tribal chieftains would host impressive events as ways of raising their social status, which would compel their peers to put on even grander displays.<sup>403</sup> The *jāgran* of course makes the god happy, which induces him to give good fortune in return. Fellow Marwaris will also be impressed, which might increase opportunities for business networking. During the Bhayandar *jāgran's* song breaks, I got a sense

of the mutual honoring and community solidarity in this event when *maṇḍal* representatives handed out awards to members of the Marwari community who had contributed to charity or to the improvement of the business climate (such as the anti-corruption campaign); Prakash was thus honored.

Given the starting year for this *maṇḍal*—1990—its origin slightly preceded the national inauguration of neoliberal reforms. Whereas I have suggested that donations to Salasar’s temple escalated in the early 1990s due to rising Marwari piety for ancestral gods, increased revenue, and possibly incentives for tax avoidance, it would seem that neoliberal tax reforms were not the original impetus for the *maṇḍal*, although all these factors likely existed on some lesser level before the 1990s. I think we should primarily situate the origin of the *maṇḍal* in the pan-Indian turn towards the worship of Hanuman and Rama at that time, as famously evinced in the movement to build a Rama temple in Ayodhya in 1991, as well as with the nascent Marwari movement to affirm its ancestral connections to Rajasthan (as Hardgrove has discussed). But, the *maṇḍal* members did not mention any of this; instead, they typically framed the founding and growth of the *maṇḍal* within the narrative of Balaji’s blessings. It was divine will that their *maṇḍal* should grow, and their increasing prosperity, which has made this possible, is a kind of miracle in itself.

Based on the chronologically parallel (early 1990s) nascence and growth of the Marwari sponsorship of shrines such as Salasar and Marwari-centric urban devotional groups for Balaji, it appears that these are two manifestations of the same phenomenon. It makes sense, then, to say that Marwari money moved in two directions—to Salasar, and to religious organizations on the urban home turf. But, was there some precedent of establishing *maṇḍals* before Balaji came onto the scene? Looking back in history, Thomas Timberg tells us that the Marwaris were

already profiting as middlemen in the import-export industries, such as cloth, under British rule.<sup>404</sup> He characterizes Marwari firms as family enterprises, but notes that as trade across the Shekhawati region declined during the early nineteenth century, and Marwaris moved to cities, they established caste associations, community banks and other organizations to facilitate their economic advancement.<sup>405</sup> The takeaway from this is that community-based social services expanded in line with their new prosperity in the city. If we bring this model of Marwari association up to the 1990s, then, when the Indian public was seemingly giving a religious slant to many aspects of everyday life (e.g. the rise of public devotion such as pilgrimage, colossal Hanuman statues, ritual revival, etc.), it seems hardly surprising that a tradition of socioeconomic solidarity would now be colored with the rhetoric and practice of devotion to a Marwari lineage deity.

Taking up the question of “indigenous capitalisms” with some attention to donations for religious causes, Ritu Birla likewise locates the formation of Marwari economic dominance in their role as colonial middlemen. She notes the development of Marwari charitable organizations by the end of the nineteenth century that donated to religious establishments such as various temples, *dharmśālās* [rest houses], and *gośālās* [cow sanctuaries].<sup>406</sup> If, as I did with Timberg, I extend Birla’s historical narrative to the present, this situation also very well describes the state of affairs in the Marwari diaspora and in Salasar. But, although Birla notes that Marwari merchants might go so far as to decorate their homes with murals from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, “like local rajas,” she says little about the Marwaris’ religious practices. So, it is hard to say whether there is a precedent for large Marwari community events such as *jāgrans*. But, one can say from the testimony of *maṇḍal* members themselves that these groups often started out as informal get-togethers each week to sing such classics as *Sundarkāṇḍ*; many



*maṇḍals* still do this. Such gatherings are routine in villages throughout northwestern India, if not elsewhere. As an urban practice, it could also be related to the turn to public religiosity more than a longstanding tradition specific the Marwaris. As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, Singer had connected urban public recitations with urbanization itself.



Figure 6-7. The stage at the Bhayandar *jāgrāṇ*.

And so, a finding of this subsection on a VIP *maṇḍal* is that, as in Salasar, so too in urban *maṇḍals* and their *jāgrāṇs* in honor of Balaji, money and faith synergistically support the growth of devotional culture and social solidarity among the Marwari or greater Rajasthani community (Figure 6-7). As an illustration of these two overlapping dimensions, I offer the following two

observations of the Bhayandar jagran. First, a young Marwari financier I met at Bhayandar remarked about the financial dimension:

The chief guests [at the *jāgrāṇ*] are the ones who give [very much] money; they're 99 percent Marwari people! They are the very richest businessmen ... [a certain overseas Indian] is a world-famous businessman in London ... he's from our caste ... He's donated a lot ... He gives money, but nobody tells – you know, it's a 'secret donation' [*gupt dān*] ... The ones who come here [to the *jāgrāṇ*] give 5,000 ... 10,000 ... even 100,000 rupees, but nobody tells about it ...<sup>407</sup>

The above comment is reminiscent of what I had heard in Salasar, but in this case it is the *maṇḍal* rather than the temple that is the recipient. The alleged secrecy surrounding donations likely refers to the practice, which I had discussed in regard to Salasar, of giving donations as a means of tax avoidance. During the Bhayandar performance, the wealth of the sponsors was certainly on full view, as the better-off *maṇḍal* members approached the singer as he sung, and pulled out wads of 500 and 1,000-rupee notes to showily bestow upon him in gratitude. It is common at public events to show gratitude in this way, but I noted that only very large notes were the norm here.

Despite the semblance of affluence, the public rhetoric of the event was quite different, with of course no hint of underground money. Rather, the singer in this *jāgrāṇ* dwelled on the need to increase devotion, as at other *jāgrāṇs*, but also particularly the need to retain the memory of Rajasthan as a place of piety. This, then, is the second, cultural-devotional dimension of describing the event. As so often happens at such *jāgrāṇs*, the singer hailed his audience as Rajasthanis, even addressing them at one point with the stereotypically rustic Rajasthani greeting, “*Rām rām sā!*” Later, in another interlude, the singer told the audience that he wished to express respectful greetings to Rajasthan itself [*Main rājāsthān ke praṇām kartā hūṅ*]. He then reminded them that he would be singing Rajasthani songs that day, before reflecting, “There's one *kuldev*

... that's Balaji, and ... our 'guru' [Balaji] watches over his temple [in Salasar] ...<sup>408</sup> Hence, I would emphasize that piety and financial considerations are equally intertwined in the worship of Balaji in Salasar and in devotion in the Marwari diaspora.

### *Building a Middle-Class Devotional Community*

I will now describe a less affluent Marwari *maṇḍal*. I would emphasize that even though "Marwari" is reified as moneyed merchant castes of the city, in fact people from a range of income levels may self-identify under this term. While still in the US, I had contacted Pramod, a man in his late 50s who is the leader of a Balaji *maṇḍal* in Dombivli, a satellite city of Mumbai. Although born in Jhunjhunu District (Shekhawati region) he has lived in Dombivli for several decades. He occupies a small apartment with a young daughter, as he lost his wife some years earlier and his son has moved elsewhere. Pramod is the most active member of the *maṇḍal*, and the caretaker of its large framed picture of Salasar Balaji, which the *maṇḍal* uses in public events. Having propped the picture against a wall in his modest living room, Pramod performs daily prayers and makes a food offering to it before taking anything for himself (Figure 6-8).

Among the usual array of pictures of Hindu deities on Pramod's wall is one of Agrasen, the legendary king of Agroha, which is said to be the ancestral land of the Agrawals and more generally the Marwaris (described in Chapter 2) (Figure 6-9). Having left behind relatives who still live in a picturesque *haveli* [mansion] in a Shekhawati town near there, Pramod identifies as a Marwari, and regularly visits his hometown, along with a stop in Salasar. On one occasion when he had gone to his ancestral home, I visited him there and attended a special *jāgrān* in a nearby town to honor him and other native sons who had made contributions to the advancement of the area. These were not necessarily the Marwaris of Hardgrove's narrative, who had imaginatively claimed kinship with the land and its gods while distancing themselves from the



locals. Clearly, Pramod has remained close to the home community, although his *maṇḍal* in Dombivli dates only from 1992, similar to the one in Bhayandar.

A semi-retired pharmaceutical representative, Pramod has found a new calling dispensing information about Balaji over the Internet. He frequently fields questions, sometimes from



Figure 6-8. A devotee's living quarters with Balaji image in Dombivli.

overseas, about the history of the site, how to worship Balaji, how to get to Salasar, and where to stay. Thus, Pramod can justifiably be considered to be at the forefront of the growth of devotion to Balaji. But, he says the *maṇḍal* has no plan to build a temple for their god. According to Pramod, one should never make a duplicate statue of this god, apparently because Balaji had





Figure 6-9. A depiction of King Agrasen.

emerged fully formed from the earth and therefore cannot be replicated with human hands. Anyone who disobeys this rule will quickly die, or his business will fail.<sup>409</sup> But, this does not stop devotees from worshiping two-dimensional pictures of Balaji as standalone images or in conjunction with generic Hanuman statues. Apparently this form of image does not count as a reproduction of the original statue, so it is allowed. However, within the last decade, some wealthy Marwaris, in other cities, eager to promote the worship of Balaji, have broken the taboo by installing the god's images in new temples, although this is still rare.

Pramod's *maṇḍal* had started out as a weekly get-together among Marwari descendants in his neighborhood to recite *Sundarkāṇḍ*. Around 1990, they met for these recitals after-hours in a nearby factory, but when the factory owner sold the place they switched to alternating each week between members' flats. After a year, they decided to start putting on large devotional events but realized that they did not have sufficient funding. They went to their Marwari compatriots in the Bhayandar *maṇḍal* for advice about how to develop their group, whereupon they undertook a project to contact all the Marwari people in their area, as they had not previously organized as a community. By the time they had contacted 200 Marwari families, they had established a sponsoring community. In 1992 this nascent *maṇḍal* sponsored its first *jāgrāṇ*—a small affair that has gradually grown in the years since. From this brief history, we can see that the impetus to publicly honor Balaji went hand in hand with bringing together the Marwaris of Dombivli as a tighter social unit. But, unlike the Bhayandar group, to whom Pramod refers as “the rich people” [*paisevāle log*], the Dombivli *maṇḍal* has remained a decidedly middle-class devotional group.<sup>410</sup>

Pramod seems to only socialize with others of Rajasthani descent in the area, and likes to go to a local Rama temple run by a *pujārī* who had inherited the job from his Rajasthani father two

decades earlier. As the prime mover of Balaji's devotional community, Pramod put together a commemorative Hindi-medium book for their annual *jāgrān*.<sup>411</sup> Following from the *maṇḍal*'s intention to bring together the community, the book provides a directory of more than 400 heads of Marwari households in the area, along with details about their businesses. Some of the surnames indicate non-*baniyā* origins, such as Soni (goldsmiths) and Sharma (Brahmins), but all are linked to Rajasthan. As the book informs us, the core *maṇḍal* consists of 10 men, with adjunct committees of both men and women. Despite the diversity of surnames, the list of members does not include lower castes.

As an official endorsement of the *maṇḍal*'s work, the opening pages of the commemorative book feature full-page statements from the federal minister of "Heavy Industries and Public Enterprises" and from Rajasthan's Chief Minister, lauding this *maṇḍal* for its promotion of Rajasthani spiritual and cultural traditions and entrepreneurship [*vyāvasāyik kauśal*]. No mention is made of the Mumbai or Maharashtra administrations, but a separate page also offers a letter of endorsement from a representative of the Delhi branch of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, a movement dedicated to raising the profile of Hinduism in public life, in which he congratulates the *maṇḍal* for helping to awaken Hindu faith [*kāryoṅ se samāj meṅ jāgrt āegī*]. Inside this commemorative book, articles provide advice for self-improvement through the practice of timeless Hindu principles, such as "Lord Rama's Prescription for Spiritual Liberation [*Bhagvān rām dvārā mokṣ kī dawāī*]," and such down-to-earth matters as controlling diabetes. Interspersed with these articles are numerous advertisements for commercial enterprises, particularly related to textiles, along with a large map of Rajasthan.

Despite VHP endorsement, and the *maṇḍal*'s promotion of devotion to Balaji, who as Hanuman is a standard-bearer for nationwide Hindu resurgence, Pramod did not seem especially

enthused about political Hinduism. The *maṇḍal*'s website states that only Hindus may become members, but this hardly seems like a necessary rule, inasmuch as Marwaris would generally identify as Hindu. I would emphasize that there is no restriction in simply attending a *jāgrāṇ* for Balaji; it is only for membership in the *maṇḍal* that religious background might matter. When I visited Pramod's home in the Shekhawati area, however, his nephew gave me a booklet put out by a group advocating the building of a Rama temple on the spot of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya.<sup>412</sup> The title page of the booklet reads: "It is our belief that awakening the power of Hanuman will be the most expedient way to build the temple on *rāmjanmbhūmi* [that is, Rama's birthplace]."<sup>413</sup> This by no means indicates any deep involvement on the part of the Dombivli *maṇḍal* in that project, but suggests that there is some common ground in the conviction that Hanuman is a central figure in Hindu revival, just as Balaji is critical to Marwari revival.<sup>414</sup>

On the whole, then, as a condensation of the *maṇḍal*'s objectives, the annual commemorative book suggests a commitment to producing religious, socially involved Marwari Indian citizens. That is to say, like *jāgrāṇs* and other events (reciting *Sundarkāṇḍ*), religious costume processions, community loans), this book supports the construction of a community. At the same time, the *jāgrāṇs* and other cultural programs of the urban *maṇḍals* offer messages of inclusion in an economically and culturally ascendant Hindu nation, in which Rajasthan is a vital resource of authentic spirituality. Similarly, Geert de Neve (2006) analyzes how upwardly mobile city people of Tamil Nadu "mobilize space" to create a new identity.<sup>415</sup> One element in De Neve's study is that in the setting of neoliberalism, a community may reimagine itself on a higher social or moral plane to be commensurate with its material aspirations.<sup>416</sup> When this happens, the community may also define a morally uplifted physical space as its own. When the procession of Pramod's *maṇḍal*'s *jāgrāṇ* winds through the neighborhood, the possibility of a



certain moral space—referencing Balaji and Marwari community—is plausibly demarcated. But, beyond this, the most important moral space invoked is Rajasthan itself, a morally pure land held at a distance from the degrading affects of Mumbai city life, just as Balaji remains pure within the Kali Yug. Hence, Rajasthan as a discursive ideal owes its viability to the experience of city life.

## 6.5 Gurus of Mehndipur Balaji in the Urban Setting

### Mehndipur Balaji and Ritual Innovation

In the remainder of this chapter, I will examine urban devotional groups and religious events devoted to Mehndipur Balaji. Unlike groups dedicated to Salasar Balaji, those dedicated to Mehndipur Balaji typically center their devotional attention on a faith healing guru who channels the *śakti* of the god for the benefit of members. I would argue that gurus performing under the power of Mehndipur Balaji, are at the forefront of a wave of urban religiosity that borrows elements of generally known village traditions (possession by ancestors and ghosts, and treatment involving bodily purifications, prayer, and occult materials) but which is firmly oriented towards the needs of urban life. As a model of what I am describing, I would cite Eva Ambos's study on the recent rise of what she calls "ecstatic priests" in Sri Lanka.<sup>417</sup> She describes a rise in "free-lance exorcists ... [who] receive their knowledge through inspiration and engage in transforming tradition through ritual innovations," such as fire walking and so forth (which we can read as *havans* in the Indian context).<sup>418</sup> Further, she notes that these cults claim "a higher rate of success [than allopathic medicine] in solving modern problems ... [which satisfies] the needs of urban Sinhalese Buddhists ... facing new socioeconomic tensions resulting from capitalism ..."<sup>419</sup> The situation that Ambos describes strikes me as being very similar to urban cults of Balaji in which exorcism of spirits is frequently practiced. As my respondents

repeatedly emphasized, the whole enterprise of this therapy is grounded in devotion as the key to success, as Ambos observed in Sri Lanka. But, the faith healer is needed to guide the client's process in a skillful way, so as to gain maximum therapeutic benefit. As the Delhi guru demonstrates, what counts is the ability to improvisationally interact with the client to arrive at a solution; in other words, this is healing as drama.

I am particularly intrigued by the idea that faith healing as now known in the urban setting could be a fundamentally urban innovation that draws elements from village tradition. Or rather, new urban traditionalism is not simply a transfer of village religion into the city, but it references such a tradition. For some, everyday devotion may not be enough; they need more elaborate rituals, such as making certain offerings to Balaji and his divine assistants, to ensure that the gods will perceive the intensity and sincerity of their prayers. This is where innovation comes in, in the urban milieu of worshipping Balaji. I am not suggesting that this development is unique to South Asia; it seems to be happening wherever rapid social change (and perhaps disposable income) in the urban setting provides an opening for revivals of folk therapies as culturally authentic solutions for contemporary challenges. For instance, Kirsten Endres writes about the rise of spirit mediums in contemporary urban Vietnam in conjunction with market reform. As Endres tells us, capitalism is giving rise to new forms of religiosity as traditional aspects of religion (medium work) become commoditized and repackaged for upwardly mobile lifestyles.<sup>420</sup> In other words, the Vietnamese mediums Endres describes borrow from traditional practices of faith healing, but they are responding to the conditions of modern urban life.

Returning to my own study, then, the fact that locals in the Mehndipur area often speak dismissively about urbanites coming to Balaji's temple to be rid of possession-related problems empirically demonstrates that what passes for tradition in the city is not necessarily recognized as

something traditional in its supposed place of origin. As I noted, people from that region regard the whole dramatic complex of rituals and exorcism as a big-city religion that has descended on their community. Many, of course, see this is as a windfall and open rest houses and shops. But, to track the culture of devotion to Mehndipur Balaji, we need to follow the gurus back to the city. This situation begs us to consider what counts as “authentic,” when there is such openness to innovation. One guru might prescribe sacred ash, but another will give sacred water; one gives one mantra to recite, but another may prefer a different one. In this sense, although certain idioms of faith healing are widely shared, specific solutions for problems may vary. This openness to innovation due to the mediation of gurus means that devotion to Mehndipur Balaji is more diverse in practice than the worship of Salasar Balaji, which relies more on scriptural authority (as promoted by Salasar’s Brahmins) in combination with faith to obtain miracles.

#### *Innovations Combining Mehndipur Balaji and Salasar Balaji*

In shifting attention to Mehndipur Balaji in the city, I want to first acknowledge that although the gods preside over rather different protocols of worship, some urbanites—particularly those in the Delhi-Haryana region where the two gods’ devotional territories overlap—are likely to embrace both gods according to individual need. Here is one example. Subhash, a Jain man of around 60, grew up in a village in Hisar District, Haryana, and not surprisingly (given his locale of origin) has been a longtime devotee of Salasar Balaji. However, after having moved to Delhi some decades ago, in middle age he became a severe alcoholic.<sup>421</sup> He had never heard of Mehndipur, but an acquaintance suggested that he go there to devotionally treat his alcoholism, so he did. There, he discovered his personal guru, named Mohanpuri, who is officially the *mahant* of Pretraj (not the same as the *mahant* of Balaji) and lives near Mehndipur. Subhash followed the *mahant*’s prescription for healing, such as making ritual offerings, prayers, and

recitations of holy readings, drinking holy water, etc., and he got better. The *mahant* saw into his soul, and knew how to cure his alcoholism. Nowadays Subhash keeps a picture of the *mahant* on the wall in his bakery in Delhi to help him stay on the right path.

Subhash said that Jainism has no system for treating possession, which he learned from the *mahant* was the cause of his alcoholism (a common explanation). Therefore, he no longer participates in Jain worship and ceased going to Jain temples. He does, however, organize bus journeys for pilgrims to go to Salasar twice a year, since he still feels some connection to Salasar Balaji (as a god of miracles). But, he now gives Mehndipur Balaji the highest place as his *iṣṭadev*, and goes to Mehndipur each month. Subhash follows the devotional regimen of regularly praying to Balaji, as set by his guru, and has thereby reconfigured his Jain-Salasar Balaji-Shekhawati religious identity in the direction of the god who has been most efficacious for him. Expanding from this story, I would argue that in the setting of the nationwide growth of interest in folk remedies and public religiosity, Mehndipur Balaji's gurus are well situated to improvise compelling magical services, as they combine essential bhakti with the sensational powerful occult rituals of Balaji's temple to devise personalized therapeutic techniques.

On the other hand, there is one instance of a god, Triveni Balaji (his name meaning "the three-in-one Balaji"), who truly fused the other two Balajis, as well as Balaji of Tirupati in southern India into a new deity whose power is said to equal all three of them combined (Figure 10). Hence, his ability to miraculously fulfill wishes was ostensibly greater than any of the other Balajis, which is what draws devotees to him. Unfortunately, this god's cult of devotion face an uncertain future, as half way through my research period the presiding guru was arrested for improprieties with the daughter of two of his followers, and he was jailed, as widely reported in the news at the time.<sup>422</sup> Nonetheless, the story of this god is very instructive for my investigation



Figure 6-10. Triveni Balaji. Photograph of a souvenir image obtained from the shrine in Delhi.

of guru-mediated devotion and innovation in the urban setting. Although this urban god combines features of multiple Balajis, the fact that a faith healing guru mediates him without any obvious reference to Marwari identity makes it absolutely clear that he is typologically equivalent to Mehndipur Balaji rather than Salasar Balaji. Indeed, as is typical in the worship of Mehndipur Balaji, devotees describe coming to this guru and god based on personal crises or other needs for which bad spiritual influences need to be extracted, rather than because of preexisting social commonality.

A decade ago, a faith healing guru of Delhi had a dream in which the three Balajis came to him in the form of Triveni Balaji to say that he should worship them in this form, as they could collectively provide a greater service to humanity in this age of troubles. The healer, who worked as a court clerk, commissioned some statues of the three-headed deity to assemble a shrine in the cement-paved back yard of the modest apartment building where he lived. On Tuesdays and Saturdays, devotees came to worship the god and sing *bhajans* in his honor. Notwithstanding the claim of Triveni Balaji's superlative powers, his ontology is problematic. The third Balaji is not Hanuman at all but rather a manifestation of Vishnu. However, from the standpoint of promoting Triveni Balaji as a new god, there could hardly be a better combination to make a new super-god. Since the 1990s, the two Balajis of Rajasthan have been the two most popular manifestations of Hanuman in northwestern India. At the same time, Balaji of Tirupati, although completely unrelated to the other two, has all along received more pilgrims than any other god in India. Therefore, one could argue, Triveni Balaji has been designed with an awareness of gods that are currently in demand (and have the same name).

I would suggest that in combining the powers of several Balajis, Triveni Balaji indicates a desire to maximize the odds of obtaining miracles. This, I think, particularly relates to the



zeitgeist of getting ahead that became more prevalent in India during the neoliberal era. The rush to pray to whichever shrine deity acquires the best reputation for miracles is part of this trend. So too, I think, the convergence of multiple deities into one Triveni Balaji may point to this more-is-better approach. On a national level, anthropologist Peter Jackson's study of religious convergence in the setting of "prosperity religion" in Thailand of the 1990s similarly suggests the mindset of combining efficacious sources of magic into a new super-cult. In that instance, the state and media are involved, but the public response—bringing together popular objects of worship, such as ancestors, earlier kings, Buddhist monks, and gods of the land, not to mention Buddhist deities into a single pantheon in one home shrine—suggests a willingness to employ all possible sources of magic.<sup>423</sup> Again returning to Singer's thesis, then, we may be looking at the city as a center of new religious systems, accelerated in the context of neoliberal reform and the desire for prosperity, which has made a receptive environment for Triveni Balaji.<sup>424</sup>

### *Gurus and Jāgrans*

Inasmuch as groups devoted to Mehndipur Balaji live in very similar circumstances to those that worship Salasar Balaji—often in the same cities—there is a certain structural sameness in the *jāgrans* that they stage. And yet, some differences exist that distinguish the dynamic of Mehndipur-related groups from those connected to Salasar. As mentioned, the most fundamental difference is that Mehndipur-oriented *maṇḍals* generally revere a particular faith healing guru, to whom they look for intercession for Balaji's miracles. In this and the following sections, I will show that faith healing gurus are significant agents in the propagation of devotion to Mehndipur Balaji. While the guru's appeal is basically due to his expertise in spiritual practice (exorcism, for instance), in some cases, when the guru is a recognized businessman, mercantile prowess

may play a part. When a devotee joins a Mehndipur Balaji *maṇḍal*, he may also be formalizing preexisting social and economic links with the other members. However, he will usually explain his accession as an act of gratitude for some prior miracle through the guru's intercession. As with Salasar Balaji *maṇḍals*, multiple levels of reasoning (religious, social, economic) go into the decision to join a *maṇḍal*.

Gurus will usually attend the *maṇḍal's jāgrans*, and smaller-scale events such as *kīrtans* [group invocations of the divine]. At *jāgrans* for Mehndipur Balaji, organizers set up an array of images on the performance stage, as in events for Salasar Balaji. But, on some occasions, such as *kīrtans*, the guru himself rather than an image of the god appears to be the primary object of veneration. Because of the guru's role in summoning spirit helpers under the authority of Balaji to resolve devotees' problems, events sponsored by Mehndipur Balaji groups always have the potential to induce possession states in some audience members. However, this rarely happens at the large *jāgrans* that attract the general public, which guests call *pārivārik* or family events. These large events are celebrations of faith in the god, but not occasions for therapy. The crowd in attendance is not explicitly a Rajasthani community, although very often there is a Marwari presence. Rather, these events are based on a common bond of having being healed by Balaji or in at least being convinced that Balaji can heal, and that he is the most powerful deity of miracles.

At events where there is a high concentration of the guru's personal followers, as opposed to casual onlookers, and the guru himself is prominently in view, a few devotees may spontaneously enter into possession. Thus, I saw women in possession states at *jāgrans* taking place in *dharmśālās* in Mehndipur itself, where the guru was highly visible, but never in equivalent large events in major cities. At major urban events, although the guru is likely to be present, he will seem inconspicuous amidst the overall spectacle of the event. Beyond the usual



presence of the guru, I would note some other differences that sometimes set apart Mehndipur-oriented urban *jāgrans*. From what I have seen, they have more visually extravagant *śobhā yātrās* in the run-up to the *jāgrāṇ*, with more elaborate costumes. And, in the *jāgrāṇ* itself they may include compelling dance dramas involving the impersonation of deities such as Kali, a fierce goddess who can oversee exorcism and is not typically seen in a Salasar Balaji event. Such spectacles may be due to recognition of the charismatic efficacy of the guru and Balaji. By contrast, at Salasar Balaji *jāgrāṇs* and processions there is more emphasis on social solidarity within the Marwari community, such as having children dress up in Rajasthani costumes, and passing out school supplies.

### *When the Guru is the One Worshiped*

As an example of an event where the guru is the dominant presence and is actively worshiped, I will present the case of a daytime *kīrtan* I witnessed in a large tent in the Malad area of Mumbai. I had come across an announcement for the event in a Hindi newspaper among a dozen or more notices for various other devotional events.<sup>425</sup> The announcement stated that this *kīrtan*, the sixth annual event, would start with a 9 a.m. reading of *Sundarkāṇḍ*, a *havan* from 12 noon, *bhajans* and *kīrtans* from 1 p.m., and *ārtī* and *prasād* at 5 p.m.. On the face of it, these are normal elements of popular devotion, but as it turned out, the presence of a much revered faith healing guru, who had come all the way from distant Kanpur (in Uttar Pradesh), multiplied the level of excitement. The guru's arrival was greeted with a shower of flowers, and he and his wife were seated directly facing the audience. Not more than two hundred people were in attendance, at least half women. Around 15 women, being close followers of the guru, were dressed in red saris as a mark of their special dedication to Balaji. Unlike at a major *jāgrāṇ*, there was no formal display of deities on stage here, but instead only a photograph of Balaji on

the wall behind the guru (Figure 6-11). It was obvious that the magical presence of the guru would be the focus of attention. As one attendee said to me, “Maharaj [the guru] is my *iṣṭadev*. He has the power of God, and will give *darśan* today.”<sup>426</sup> In this case, the guru was not just a facilitator of the god; he was performing as the god himself. And since the god embodied in the



Figure 6-11. A faith healing guru with an image of Balaji behind him, Malad.

guru would be physically present on this day, there was a high likelihood that there would be performances of possession.

In one corner of the tent, nine Brahmins solemnly and repeatedly threw sacred dried leaves as fuel into a large *havan*, each time intoning “*Svāhā!*” Behind the *havan*, another framed picture

of Mehndipur Balaji had been propped against the wall and given offerings of fruit. Flanking Balaji by the *havan* were pictures of Ram Darbar, Shiva and Parvati, Ganesh, Kali, Krishna and Radha, Bhairav, and the guru himself. Not only the presence of Mehndipur Balaji but also Bhairav and Kali on each side, not to mention the guru, signaled that this *havan* was serving occult purposes, such as exorcism. Like the costumed processions and divine impersonations mentioned earlier, the performance of such a grand *havan* seems to only come up in Mehndipur Balaji-related events, again, because of the imperative to summon maximum divine efficacy in conveying devotees' wishes to the god to be rid of afflictions.<sup>427</sup>

At the *kīrtan* in Malad, on the guru's other side, a singer alternated between leading the audience in *bhajans* and exhorting them to praise Balaji. Along with standard Hanuman-themed content, the songs on several occasions devolved into the pattern of exclamation-and-response that devotees use to invoke God during possession at Mehndipur, and also during *daṇḍavat* [ritual prostrations], the most dramatic act of devotion to summon the divine in Salasar. Here is a small excerpt:

[1] Be careful of this ghost [*saṅkaṭ*]! ... [2] Hail, Lord [*Jai bābā kī*]! ... [1] Say it loud! ... [2] Hail, Lord! ... [1] I can't hear you! ... [2] Hail, Lord! ... [1] Hail, Samadhi Lord [the former *mahant* of Mehndipur]! ... Say it with love! ... [2] Hail, Lord! ... [1] Hail, Chote Maharaj [the guru attending the *kīrtan*]! ... He gives me alms [*Jholī bharte*]! ... Please grant me victory, Beloved Lord ... O Mehndipur Lord! ... [2] Hail, Lord! ... [1] O Salasar Lord! ... [2] Hail, Lord! Hail, Lord! Hail, Lord! Hail, Lord! ... [1] Come up front! ... [2] Take my possession [*Peśī de de*]! ...<sup>428</sup>

In leading the chant, the singer adeptly drove the crowd to chant faster and faster until it had reached a state of frenzy. On the floor between the audience and the singer, several women writhed and shook with possession, and reached out pleadingly to the impassive guru, as if the ghosts trapped within were begging for liberation. Other devotees stood close by to urge them

on. In short, the sequence closely matched what happens at Mehndipur, and even more grippingly so, given the full band accompaniment and larger space here. This scene of possession in Malad / Mumbai brings us back to the point I had made that much of the activity of devotion, such as possession and exorcism, actually takes place away from Mehndipur. Therefore, as with Salasar Balaji, I would argue that the formation of a culture of devotion to Balaji is rooted in cities as much as in Mehndipur itself.

To limit a discussion of devotion to Balaji only to Mehndipur undervalues the fact that every faith healing guru who comes to Mehndipur actually resides somewhere else and treats clients in his home area as well. In looking at the spread of devotion to Balaji, this study attempts to rectify this lacuna by showing devotional practices not only at the major shrines in Rajasthan but at multiple sites, and moving across geographical space rather than being anchored at one temple or another. It is also important to keep in mind that locals from the Mehndipur area regard the pilgrimage and particularly the possession that takes place there to be a grafting of urban religiosity rather than an outgrowth of local practice. The local critique thus undermines the proposition that devotion to either of the Balajis is strictly about the temples (with their gods) in Rajasthan. To test the validity of that critique, in this chapter I shift the focus to urban events such as the one in Malad, which will allow us to see how this devotional culture is produced.

Although explicit symbols of Rajasthani identity were not apparent at the Malad event, many if not most of the members of the *maṇḍal* are Marwari merchants originating in northern Rajasthan, in other words little different than members of Salasar *maṇḍals*. But, they showed no particular enthusiasm for discussing their background—a markedly different disposition than at any of the Salasar Balaji events. The origin of the guru and Mehndipur Balaji, neither of which is linked to Shekhawati, would subdue any reference to Marwari ancestry. A few members

spoke of ancestry in pre-Partition Sind and also Uttar Pradesh, however. This suggests to me that being culturally uprooted in the big city could predispose one to more easily embrace new gurus and systems of devotion from elsewhere (unlike a native Marathi raised in the regional culture), just as Marwari devotees of Salasar Balaji look to faraway Rajasthan.

A significant social dimension of this *kīrtan*, likewise evident when visiting Mehndipur, is that women are much more prominent in the devotional event than would be the case at a gathering for Salasar Balaji. Possession puts those afflicted at the center of attention, and since those who are possessed are mostly urban women, their personal experiences therefore become a central point of attention in the whole group's performance of devotion. Inasmuch as the possessed are the ones manifesting the effect of Mehndipur Balaji's *śakti*, along with the guru's magical power, they carry the magical burden of demonstrating the realness of these forces. At the Malad *kīrtan*, women sat in the front of the audience (no doubt due to the anticipation of possession during the performance), and it was they who triumphantly marched around the room in a line while carrying red flags at one point as a token of their devotional fervor. Men were largely onlookers in this event, although the guru, the singer, and the Brahmins attending to the *havan* were the authority figures. By comparison, in Salasar-oriented *jāgrans*, for the most part only men talk to the audience and get up to dance before the god. Even allowing female devotees to ladle ghee onto the sacrificial fire at a Salasar Balaji event is sufficiently controversial to warrant debates about ritual protocol within the male-dominant Salasar *maṇḍals*.

### *A Female Guru and the Mediation of Personal Experience*

Given the relative visibility of women in Mehndipur's devotional culture, it should be no surprise that a fair number of women also serve as faith healing gurus. When it comes to treating the afflicted and gaining a following, I saw that female gurus have an advantage in being able to

offer a more congenial setting for women to address their day-to-day concerns. Indeed, Karen Pechilis argues that female gurus “fundamentally changed” the way a guru was traditionally imagined; the key factor is that they more often put emphasis on the personal experience of the client, as opposed to male gurus’ focus on lineage and initiation.<sup>429</sup> As Pechilis notes, women were traditionally excluded from Sanskritic authority, so she documents a number of women who came to prominence outside of established protocols of guru-ship. But Pechilis is thinking more in terms of alternatives to the normative brahmanical tradition, whereas we are looking at faith healing, a system of worship in which both men and women already work at the margins of normative scriptural Hinduism.

Nonetheless, if we were to take Pechilis’s theory about the female guru’s disposition to recognize the devotee’s personal experience and apply it to the faith healing setting, we might ask whether male healers could adequately perform within this female-gendered model. Faith healers characteristically probe into the personal lives of their clients, and induce ecstatic experience with a minimal use of scriptures. As I had described in Chapter 3, this is the Brahmin *pujārīs*’ critique of faith healers: they have forsaken Hinduism’s venerable scriptural tradition for emotion-grabbing shortcuts. So, this style of guru-work may not be so gender-specific if in fact male faith healers typically also perform according to this “female” mode. As Julia Leslie notes in her comprehensive study of Hindu women’s rituals, the (less or non Sanskritic) tantric tradition has all along offered some intrepid women an avenue to become gurus. She tells us that this role is particularly individualistic, orally transmitted, and not much systematized, which I think fairly well describes the current methods of Mehndipur’s faith healing gurus, both male and female.<sup>430</sup> Still, it is fair to say that most of the case studies in this chapter highlight male gurus whose personal history connects them to male-dominant social networks, such as business

communities. And yet, in seeking treatment from Mehndipur Balaji's gurus, women seem to come to male gurus at least as much as men, if not much more so. They also far more often present problems (such as possession) that systemically affect the whole family. But, I would argue, the nature of faith healing itself, more than the gender of the guru, makes it a profession that is well suited for women as clients.

In the following case study, I will describe the work of a female guru, but not because she necessarily differs from a male guru in her technique. In terms of our larger theme on the spread of devotion, I offer this vignette as an instance of what the routine work of treating clients looks like at the ground level, since this is the point of entry for new devotees. People in distress hear about the guru from someone who has gone before, they like what they find, and keep coming back. This particular guru, a woman of around 40, lives with her family in a townhouse in a densely populated market district of Delhi. In addition to hosting a major annual *jāgrān*, along with other periodic events, she provides weekly counseling sessions on Saturdays and leads *kīrtans* on Tuesdays in the shrine that she has set up on the first floor of her home. Her faith healing service has produced a community of urbanite followers from what seems to be a wide range of backgrounds (including some Sikhs, for instance)—not simply Marwaris. Her broad appeal stems from dependable availability each week, and from her attentive, personalized approach to healing, a style of therapy common to most faith healers.

Some months after watching the guru's annual *jāgrān*, I came to her home to learn about her work. Although the guru herself is originally from Bulandshahar, Uttar Pradesh—near Delhi, and therefore within Mehndipur's core domain of worship—her husband is from Hanumangarh, which is Salasar Balaji's territory. He had been going to Salasar since childhood, but only became acquainted with Mehndipur after he had married his wife. Although the husband has a

separate business, he serves as a kind of office manager for her. On Saturdays, he gives numbers to clients in order of their arrival, as may happen when patients come to see an Indian doctor. The clients are called forth with any family companions, one group at a time, for twenty minutes of consultation with the guru. She sits next to a glass case containing statues of the standard pan-Indian deities, along with large pictures higher up on the wall of Mehndipur Balaji and his assistants, Bhairu and Pretraj. Since all the client-devotees (perhaps twenty or thirty of them) sit closely packed in the same small room with the guru during her individual consultations, every consultation potentially attracts the attention of the other clients. However, the guru occasionally draws closed a red curtain to leave her and those she is advising alone with the images of the gods.

Around twenty years ago, when she was newly married, the guru-to-be became ill and was advised to go to Mehndipur, where she was cured, which brought to light her ability to channel the divine. This is a very common becoming-guru narrative. She had all along regarded Hanuman as her *iṣṭadev* [primary deity], as her brother, a wrestler, had set an example of worshipping him. But, after the healing, she affirmed Mehndipur Balaji himself as her *iṣṭadev*, with the understanding (based on her personal experience) that he is Hanuman's most powerful manifestation on earth in this era of troubles [*kali yug*]. This transformation, I would argue, is how many individuals become devotees of Mehndipur Balaji; a generic cultural reverence for Hanuman is localized in Mehndipur Balaji. This narrowing of primary devotion becomes evident when the devotee starts to follow a regimen of offerings and prayers with faith Balaji's particular powers.

Now and then, devotees of Mehndipur Balaji personally testified to me that they had experienced such a process of devotional narrowing from Hanuman to Balaji. For instance, a



married man in Panipat who was born a Sikh but had assumed the role of a professional Hanuman dancer (painting himself with *sindūr* and dancing in the guise of the monkey god) at Dashehra events initially knew nothing about Mehndipur Balaji. He kept Hanuman masks and various visual representations of the monkey god at home. His earliest substantial experience of pilgrimage was bringing sacred water back from Hardwar, the ritualized act known as *kānvar yātrā* (as described in Chapter 4), which he did in Hanuman costume. Eventually, he heard about Mehndipur Balaji, went to his temple, and was highly impressed by the evidence of devotion and miracles there. He subsequently draped a red banner over his main poster of Hanuman, which read “*Jai śrī bālājī* [Hail, Balaji].” Henceforth, Mehndipur Balaji became his main god. As a result, he now makes pilgrimages on foot to Mehndipur each year dressed as Hanuman, and is revered as the god by pilgrims encountered in the street there. For novice devotees, then, the sensorial spectacle of possession and exorcism, and other devotional acts visible in Mehndipur or in the home city, may be so emotionally compelling as to prompt a narrowing from identification with pan-Indian Hanuman to Balaji. The female faith healing guru’s story of illness and recovery is thus one of several paths by which Hanuman becomes reconfigured as Balaji.

### “X-Ray Vision” in Faith Healing

Although the female faith healing guru of Delhi was not inherently different from her male counterparts, when it came to explaining her relation to Balaji a particular question came up. I wondered how a female guru might explain the presence of Hanuman’s (or Balaji’s) *śakti* in her, given that he is famously chaste and therefore (in scripture, at least) keeps a distance from female company. As the guru explained, Hanuman’s *śakti* but not the god himself can enter her, as the *śakti* is greater than the individual god. Considering that *śakti* is considered a feminine

power in classical Hinduism, this seemed like a plausible response. As I will describe in the final chapter, I have seen a male guru channel Kali, which involves overt gender switching. However, when it comes to possession by *pitṛs* [deceased relatives], at least in the countryside, it is empirically clear that the *pitṛ* more often prefers a living host of the same gender.

The outcome of being infused with Hanuman's *śakti* 24 hours a day is that the guru has, as she says, "x-ray vision." With motherly practicality, she mentioned that this meant she never has to ask her teenage children where they have been—this comment elicited a weary nod from her daughter sitting nearby. Like all magical gurus, however, she needs to demonstrate her clairvoyance to convince the client of her efficacy. At our first meeting, the guru informed me that I lived in a wooden house (true, up to the time before I entered my PhD program), that two years ago my home's carpet had been ruined by water (partly true, insofar as there had been a flood in the basement some years before), and that my mother was "thin and beautiful" but had some personal troubles [*pareśān*] (subjectively true, I supposed). The guru employs the same technique of clairvoyance when meeting her clients for the first time, although many of them have been coming for years, so their relationship is well established (Figure 6-12).

Sitting next to the guru during her work, I could see that although she often arrived at a diagnosis of neglected *pitṛs* or ghosts [*bhūt*] as the root of her clients' problems, the brunt of her work consisted of dispensing no-nonsense "tough love" for people's everyday problems. Often, the problems could be very convoluted, and the client would practically whisper. The guru habitually speaks at a rapid pace, and often clicks her tongue in her mouth to admonish her clients for not seeing the solution to their troubles. The problems she treats generally involve some form of anxiety (such as not sleeping well), domestic disputes, business deals gone wrong,

unemployment, family members in the hospital, and so forth. Although the guru sometimes seemed impatient, she would ultimately reassure clients that things would turn out all right—  
“Nothing’s going to happen! Don’t worry [*Kuch nahīn āyegā! ‘Tension’ mat karo!*]”

Compared to the accusatory conversations between gurus and possessing ghosts that are so well



Figure 6-12. An urban shrine for Mehndipur Balaji.

known in Mehndipur, the Delhi guru’s Saturday session therapeutic method has more to do with directly reassuring the client than negotiating with any ghost.

Certain rules apply in treatment. The guru does not handle problems in which she cannot discern a spiritual component. When a woman sought her advice about where a lost checkbook

might be, the guru observed, “This is a loss ... [but] how is it that are you asking me about this? ... Here we just handle possession troubles [*sañkaṭ*].”<sup>431</sup> There seems to be a general disinclination among faith healers to lead clients to lost or stolen items, since concretely revealing an object’s location is obviously challenging, as it allows for less interpretive leeway. In the same vein, I once saw a posting in the workspace of a faith healer in the city of Panipat stating a policy of refusal to find lost objects. Spirit possession is generally reserved for *kīrtans* on Tuesdays, when singing brings forth the spirits. However, one woman did go into a spontaneous possession state at the very end of the Saturday advice session, prompting the guru to roughly command the spirit out while threateningly thrashing a stick on the floor. It turned out that the woman worked at the shrine as a volunteer, sweeping the floor after each session. Once her dramatic performance of screaming and rolling about was over, the woman calmly got up, picked up her duster, and went to work, telling me with chatty normality that she had been coming here for ten years (since the shrine’s inception).

Bringing back Pechilis’s idea that facilitating personal experience is a traditional hallmark of the female guru, I think we could say that the Delhi guru with x-ray vision does indeed exemplify an approach that encourages clients to reveal personal experience. But, even without any gender dimension, I would like to suggest that this kind of work is particularly well suited for the spiritual problems of urban life. The Delhi guru’s personal touch seems to be a central part of her appeal, like that of a good doctor. Comparison between faith healers and allopathic doctors is pervasive among devotees. Those who come with gurus to Mehndipur commonly say that they used up their money on fruitless efforts under the guidance of doctors, and may even suggest that doctors are untrustworthy (because of charging too much money), if not ineffective. The solution, they discover, is that the affliction was caused by a spiritual problem; therefore the

affliction can only be resolved through spiritual therapy. The fact that the Delhi guru commonly looks for a spiritual dimension to any problem and does not want to simply tell someone where a lost object is suggests the therapeutic aim of always looking for a spiritual cause.

The opportunity for deeply felt personal revelation, along with the interpretive ambiguities that seem to be inherent in attempting to define a problem in spiritual terms, makes the process more deeply involving than physical healing. My sense of this style of therapy is that it suits a northwestern Indian cultural practice of talking through all sides of a matter as a prelude to resolving them. For many people, getting a quick diagnosis and a prescription from a doctor might be quite acceptable, but for others the chance to first emote about the problem may be more satisfying. On that note, from interviewing the clients who came to see the Delhi guru, I found that at least some have been coming for many years without a definitive resolution. I think this indicates the appeal of the process itself more than the endpoint. Devotion to Mehndipur Balaji, with its many gurus, opens up the possibility of this discursive space in a way that Salasar Balaji, whose miracles derive from individual prayer to the god, does not.

## 6.6 Businessmen and Faith Healing

### *“Balaji is the Owner of this Factory”*

In this chapter I have investigated the role of Marwari businessmen in establishing devotional *mandals* for Salasar Balaji, but now I will shift the focus to business-oriented devotees who revere Mehndipur Balaji. In fact, extending the theme of the previous section, this section will document guru-based devotional innovation within mercantile culture. But, what sort of religious ideology for businessmen might we expect in connection with Mehndipur Balaji when they do not trace ancestry to that region? How would businessmen regard Mehndipur Balaji as a personal deity? The story of one particular guru provides a way of answering these questions. In

visiting events for several devotional *maṅḍals* in cities of the Grand Trunk Road corridor, particularly within Punjab, I repeatedly heard of a guru who is renowned both as a spiritual leader and as a model businessman. Sant Raj, 65, is a *baniyā* of Ludhiana whose ancestors came from Rajasthan. He owns a dye factory for wool products. While this guru will be our starting point, the broader narrative of this section will tell of the growth of several urban *maṅḍals* in Punjab that collectively look to him as their spiritual leader. This section thus explores the model of devotional expansion predominantly based on business networks.

I have mentioned that faith healers typically cultivate magical characteristics to convince potential followers of their efficacy in channeling the god's power for their benefit. Sant Raj is no different, but in this case it is not strictly his own qualities but that of his personal statue of Balaji that makes him remarkable to his followers. This statue has become the locally preferred stand-in for Mehndipur Balaji in devotional events sponsored by *maṅḍals* in a number of cities of Punjab. Building on business relationships, the devotional relationship forged in bringing this magic image of Balaji to public events in the region has been a prime vector for spreading devotion to Balaji in this part of northwestern India. I use the term "Balaji" more often than "Mehndipur Balaji" at this point because although Sant Raj's Balaji is modeled after Mehndipur Balaji, the guru's vigorous promotion of this statue's powers has meant that this Balaji has effectively replaced Mehndipur Balaji as the primary Balaji of the area. In the process, this has produced a regional Punjabi devotional culture operating as a subset of the larger domain of devotion to Mehndipur Balaji.

I had attended devotional events for Mehndipur Balaji in Phagwara and Jalandhar and both times noticed Sant Raj as a guest of honor. Later, when I came to Ludhiana to see a *kīrtan* that he leads every two weeks in a Krishna temple, I got my first chance to learn more about the guru

and his god. In this *kīrtan*, unlike the one I described in Mumbai, an image of Balaji was the center of worship. Although its posture and physique were similar to Mehndipur Balaji, it was different enough to be recognizable as a separate entity. Flanking the image on one side was a small gold statue of Laddu Krishna, the boy on a swing who is said to grant wishes to have children, and on the other side a smaller copy of the main image. Around 10 *maṅḍal* members dressed in elegant white *kurtās* hurried about in preparation for the event. I tried to arrange an interview with one of them, but he curtly explained that they were all “businessmen” and therefore “too busy.” From their clothes and well-fed appearance, the crowd sitting on cushions, around two thirds of them women, looked prosperous.

Throughout the ensuing *kīrtan*, there was no sign of possession. It was a generic devotional event, and the songs contained standard praises of Hanuman. But towards the end I started to see signs of the guru’s special role. Dressed in the orange robe of a confirmed devotee of Hanuman, he performed *ārtī* for the images, and then sprayed holy water on the crowd. I was later told that he brings the water from Mehndipur, where he stays each month at the *dharmśālā* that he owns there. When the *kīrtan* had come to an end, many from the crowd clamored around the guru, who was now sitting in a chair. They thrust photographs of relatives at him, pleading for his intercession on their behalf, or asking for blessings. The guru seemed to already know details of their lives, and often gave impromptu advice for the problems they blurted out. Standing nearby, I caught his attention too; he turned to me, and sagely told me to honor my parents and my children.

Having been frustrated in my attempts to arrange an interview, I showed up unannounced the next morning at his townhouse in a quiet neighborhood. Fortunately he was there, and after enquiring to make sure I was a vegetarian he admitted me into the family shrine where the image

is kept. As I learned, around 35 years ago his mother had been ill, and he was advised to take her to Mehndipur. There he obtained personal treatment from the saintly *mahant* Ganeshpuri (died 1979), who not only cured his mother but also gave Sant Raj divine powers of his own and told him to go forth and heal others. This meeting with the late *mahant*, now worshiped at his *samādhi* in Mehndipur as virtually a god in his own right, endows Sant Raj with a special connection to Mehndipur Balaji that makes him stand out among faith healers.

Despite this investiture of divine power from Mehndipur's most revered religious leader, Sant Raj claims that he does not perform exorcisms, but instead prays to his private Balaji on behalf of followers. However, some devotees stated that he does indeed facilitate the banishing of *saṅkaṭ* (often understood to mean spirit possession) in his *dharmśālā* in Mehndipur. Although going by the title of *sant*—a holy man—Sant Raj said proudly that he is foremost a businessman. Later in the conversation, when I asked him about this statement, he opined that he was first of all a family man. Indeed, the main message on his posters, matching what he had advised me, is to honor one's parents. As with the Triveni Balaji guru, reinstating morality in this degraded era is a kind of social cause. Still, he acknowledged, he continues to be involved fulltime with his family factory (unlike many gurus, who retire from business to assume a religious identity). Reflecting on his integration of business and religion, he noted, “Balaji is the owner [*mālik*] of this factory, and I am only his employee [*sevak*]!”<sup>432</sup> Because he is already prosperous he does not need to ask for money from his followers. He receives over a thousand emails each day asking for help, but responds to just one of his choosing. Sant Raj has been in demand among overseas Indians too. A non-resident Indian living in London urgently sought his help for a “420” (a legal code number for fraud) court case. Sant Raj told him to sponsor a *savāmani* [ritual feast] in Mehndipur by proxy, which he did, after which the court case was suspended.



As the guru's image of Balaji is critical to his claim to efficacy, I will mention some details about its miraculous nature. Commissioned from Jaipur, Sant Raj's Balaji supposedly eats real *laddūs* and *pān* [betel nut], and its face is said to change mood or expression several times a day. Sant Raj keeps a large supply of posters for giving away that photographically depict a dozen or more such metamorphoses (Figure 6-13). For the most part, the pictures achieve their point



Figure 6-13. A section of a Ludhiana Balaji poster showing the god's changing visage.

through suggestive haziness in combination with bold-letter explanations of what mood is being expressed. As the posters indicate, the Ludhiana Balaji is not only happy and angry, and in other moods, at different moments of the day, but has even been known to take the form of Salasar

Balaji, and Rama at times. Perhaps most remarkably, he has also become Santa Claus (!), a visage that was fittingly photographed on Christmas Day. As Santa Claus, the god had acquired the semblance of a white beard. Apparently this Balaji subsumes other popular (wish-granting?) deities of the world. The posters also contain printed instructions for making a wish: enclose 50 paises in a red cloth along with your name, surname, lineage, father's name, and home city, on a piece of paper, and take it to Mehndipur or just bring it to the guru. Bolstering the idea that this is indeed a god of miracles, Sant Raj has named it Icchapuran [Wish-fulfilling] Balaji (a different Balaji than another of the same name in Rajasthan, to be discussed in Chapter 4). The critical outcome of this narrative, then, is that Balaji has been innovatively reconfigured as a much-promoted commodity over which Sant Raj alone has control as the charismatic mediator.

### *Towards a Regional Culture of Devotion to Balaji*

The essential biography of Sant Raj himself is only half the story; in this subsection I will explain how he and his Balaji became the nucleus of a regional devotional cult. As business peers in surrounding cities heard about Sant Raj's miraculous Balaji, they came to his twice-monthly *kīrtans* to seek his intercession. This led to the establishment of a number of *maṇḍals* with predominantly merchant membership owing allegiance to Sant Raj and the Ludhiana Balaji. I personally saw Sant Raj and his Balaji at a *jāgrāṇ* in Jalandhar and Phagwara (west of Jalandhar), and it was reported to me that *maṇḍals* in several other cities of Punjab have similarly become associated with this guru. It was not clear to me exactly how many years the guru has been serving in this capacity, but I found out that his own *maṇḍal* was staging its sixth annual *jāgrāṇ* at the time of my arrival, and an adjunct one in Jalandhar put on its fifth *jāgrāṇ* at that time.

While in Mehndipur, I had noticed that the numerous ancestor altar plaques on the hill adjacent to the town, dating from the early-to mid 1990s, predominantly specified origins in the Delhi-Uttar Pradesh region (Ghaziabad, Bulandshahar, Rewari, etc.), but seemingly not Punjab. When I had come to Jalandhar, a middle-aged *maṇḍal* member there confirmed that until 1995 very few people went from this city to Mehndipur, but in the last ten years pilgrimage has significantly picked up. Hence, we may be witnessing a gradual devotional expansion along urban market centers of the Grand Trunk Road in Punjab, starting from the time when devotion to Balaji had achieved a level of demographic density in cities of the Delhi region (mid to late 1990s). Those who worship Mehndipur Balaji regard him as the most powerful manifestation of Hanuman in the world; in other words, he is Hanuman in his truest form. Sant Raj has capitalized on this conviction in making the Ludhiana Balaji the chief representation of that Balaji in Punjab.

The *jāgrans* of Punjabi cities help to constitute a regional culture of devotion to Balaji. At processions for *jāgrans* that I witnessed in such cities as Jalandhar and Phagwara, Sant Raj rides at the head in a special chariot along with his Balaji. The processions, largely consisting of youths dressed up in diverse kinds of Hanuman costumes, typically wind through the market area, similar to what we saw in other cities. This practice has the effect of bringing in a lot of onlookers for the *jāgrans* who otherwise have little personal experience of Mehndipur Balaji. A newcomer's impression of the *jāgrāṇ* will be that Ludhiana Balaji is the main deity and Sant Raj is his chief representative. Of course, *maṇḍal* members are more likely to have been to Mehndipur, and therefore to connect the *jāgrāṇ* to both Ludhiana and Mehndipur Balaji. Those who are socially connected to *maṇḍal* members receive invitation cards labeled "VIP" that allow them to sit in a designated area in the front. Hence, the notion of the VIP devotee that is

sometimes controversial at Balaji's shrines in Rajasthan is reproduced as a privileged category of devotee at *jāgrans* in Punjab.

At the Phagwara *jāgrān*, Mehndipur Balaji and Salasar Balaji were equally represented on stage in relief, on each side of Ludhiana Balaji, and beyond them Ram Darbar and pan-Indian Hindu deities. It is interesting to see that Mehndipur Balaji and Salasar Balaji have thereby been rendered as equal attendants of Ludhiana Balaji—the only deity here that actually grants *darśan* to the guests. Some locals do not fully realize the distinction between these gods, since it is sufficient to know that they are all Hanuman. But, based on what devotees told me, when it comes to seeking help for personal troubles, a first step could be to go to Sant Raj's biweekly *kīrtans* in Ludhiana, and then possibly all the way to Mehndipur. On some occasions, as at the Phagwara *jāgrān*, posters of Sant Raj's miraculous Balaji were also put on sale, for 20 rupees each. Other counters manned by *maṅḍal* volunteers provided easy ways to make wishes to Mehndipur Balaji by proxy (as mentioned on the poster described earlier), involving a small donation and writing one's name and other information on a slip of paper to be submitted to the *jāgrān* organizers. In short, the *jāgrān* depicts Mehndipur Balaji not so much as a superlative deity but as a somewhat distant authorizing agent for the imminently powerful Ludhiana Balaji. Similarly, Balaji in Mehndipur in turn relies on the reputation of scriptural Hanuman to undergird his own narrative of efficacy. Thus, we have a three-step ontological narrowing that ultimately reconfigures pan-Indian Hanuman as the god of this particular locale (Punjabi cities of the Grand Trunk Road region), with Sant Raj as the only guru qualified to represent him.

The members of the *maṅḍals* in cities near Ludhiana are thoroughly involved in market culture, so they esteem Sant Raj as the model of a successful and pious businessman. The morning after the *jāgrān* in Phagwara, I interviewed several of the *maṅḍal* members in a

hectically busy bathroom fixtures shop in the old market district, as workmen carrying boxes continually passed by and phones frequently rang. I was told that Sant Raj is now acknowledged as the leader of “all Balaji *maṇḍals* in Punjab.”<sup>433</sup> A group of merchants in Phagwara who were already friends decided to start this city’s *maṇḍal* five years ago. They already knew about Sant Raj and his miraculous Balaji, while none of them had ever been to Mehndipur, so, they sought Sant Raj’s advice for starting their group.<sup>434</sup> Subsequently, some of the 31 members of the *maṇḍal* started to regularly go to Mehndipur. Thus, having Sant Raj and the Ludhiana Balaji so near seems to encourage them to seek his intercession before going to Mehndipur Balaji.

What might someone gain from joining such a *maṇḍal*? One member, an accountant, told me that when he joined the Phagwara *maṇḍal* five years ago he knew a bit about Hanuman, but nothing about Mehndipur Balaji. Not surprisingly, after joining, he first made a wish to the Ludhiana Balaji, asking, “God, please just give me a little house!”<sup>435</sup> Within one year, his wish was fulfilled, even though he had little money at the time. Now he prays to Balaji morning and evening and recites scriptures such as *Hanumān cālīsā* and *Sundarkāṇḍ*. He meets with the other members every two months and regularly gives money for projects such as the *jāgrāṇ*. The *maṇḍal* also operates savings and loans for members. Balaji *maṇḍals* in nearby cities similarly offer members a pathway to enhance financial and personal wellbeing through a system of worship endorsed by Sant Raj.

Like the Phagwara merchants, fifteen men from Jalandhar approached Sant Raj for advice about how to put on their own *jāgrāṇ*, which led them to form a *maṇḍal* too. Once this had happened, they had an inside track to Sant Raj. For instance, when the brother-in-law of a member had become an alcoholic, this member took a photograph of the alcoholic relative to Sant Raj, exactly as I had seen take place at the *kīrtan*. Sant Raj told this man that the alcoholic

relative had been given cursed *bhabhūti*—sacred ash—by a *tāntrik* who had been hired by an uncle with whom he had been in a property dispute. The solution was for the family to take the alcoholic relative to Mehndipur, and there purify him through a regimen of no alcohol or meat, along with daily prayer to Balaji. Meanwhile, this member had had financial troubles, and so he went to Mehndipur around 20 times in his own right until his situation improved and he was able to buy a motorcycle. In the supportive network of his *maṅḍal*, and with Sant Raj in nearby Ludhiana, he feels more optimistic about his future. Other urbanites from the region are similarly embracing the benefits of divine grace backed up by social and economic solidarity.

In sum, I would argue that the benefits of joining a *maṅḍal*, or at least of seeking divine benefits, dovetails with personal agendas of moving up in society. Personal improvement—getting rid of alcoholism or domestic discord, and acquiring a nice home and a motorcycle, are all potentially attendant to engineering the self as a modern, middle-class citizen. We need not just imagine the proliferation of magical gurus as a resurgence of something traditional, but rather as the selective application of available spiritual technology for contemporary needs. Balaji’s miracles work harmoniously within the culture of neoliberal desire (for choice in consumer products, acquiring symbols of a comfortable life, and so forth) in conjunction with spiritual attainment. In his own way, Sant Raj is admired for his success as an industrialist, which serves as a resume for his work as a charismatic healer and caretaker of a miraculous Balaji.

### *The Ever-Upward Trajectory of Neoliberal Devotion*

In closing this chapter, I want to mention an additional guru who is an exemplary businessman, but who works independently of Sant Raj. In this particular case, by producing an ever-bigger *laḍḍū* as *prasād* [consecrated food] for his *jāgrans* each year, this guru demonstrates

his spiritual power in a novel way that I had not seen elsewhere. Ashok, the guru-businessman I will discuss, lives in the heart of the old market area of Amritsar, and reportedly owns three factories. Like so many gurus offering magical services, he has a compelling personal narrative to explain his abilities. When Ashok was 13 his father died, but starting the following year, every night for around 30 years he would go to a cremation ground, read scriptures for Hanuman, Shiv, and Vaishno Devi, and then at 12 midnight ascend to heaven, where he would receive blessings [*āśirvād*] from the gods before returning to earth around 4 hours later. He married and had children, but nobody ever became aware of his nightly journeys because only his *ātmā* would go, leaving his body behind. On Ashok's last night of visiting heaven, by which time he was 45, Hanuman himself took him on a journey over many mountains, and then the gods offered him dog urine to drink. Repulsed by this, he refused; then they placed cat dung on a rock in his hand. Finally, he realized it was a test [*parīkṣā*] of faith in the divine; he accepted the offerings and they instantly turned into *khīr* [sweet rice porridge] and *alū kī sabzī* [potato curry]. At that point, his divine training was over. The fact that these adventures started in a cremation ground each night suggests a tantric or occult dimension, which would also explain his subsequent magical powers of healing.

During Ashok's years of divine training, he had also found his personal guru, a much older man in Delhi who had been supplying flour for a business he owned. The old guru eventually transmitted some of his own *śakti* to Ashok. With this power, and that of the gods, Ashok started to magically, indeed effortlessly, cure people of afflictions in the streets of Amritsar. Eventually, he started a regular practice of healing, which he now performs in his business office on Tuesdays and Saturdays (Hanuman's favored days). As a sufficiently affluent businessman, he (like Sant Raj) says he does not need to request money for his services. However, he receives

donations for his *jāgrans*—700,000 rupees for the most recent one—which take place in the market center near his home. He now has plans to build what he says will be the largest Hanuman temple in the world near the city, which will consist of “Italian marble only . . . no Indian marble!” Apparently, moving up in spiritual grandeur is reflected in the presumably higher-quality foreign marble. The fact that one of Ashok’s sons owns a marble company in Delhi may explain his particular interest in the quality of this material.

These big plans bring us back to the growing *laḍḍū*, which is offered as evidence of the guru’s potency as a healer. It was reported to me that at the *jāgrān* eight years ago, the *laḍḍū* was 1,000 kilograms. The size of the *laḍḍū* reflected the magnitude of satisfied devotees, as a donation for making the *laḍḍū* is the preferred way of demonstrating gratitude for the guru’s intercession with Mehndipur Balaji. By five years ago, the *laḍḍū* had increased to 5,500 kilograms. In the year I observed the *jāgrān*, it was at 15,000 kilograms (Figure 6-14). This *laḍḍū* resembled a huge boulder wrapped in silver foil. Throughout the *jāgrān*, *sevaks* gradually chipped away at this *laḍḍū* to give in small portions to the guests, who would also be given a free meal. In a voice of awe, a devotee told me that this titanic *laḍḍū* had cost seven million rupees to make, entirely from the donations of devotees whose wishes had been granted. This seemed a bit extravagant to me, even for such a huge *laḍḍū*, but there is no telling whether all the money was used for the *laḍḍū* only. Other costs might have been included in that sum; for instance, the *jāgrān* offered some exquisite entertainment involving impersonations of Hanuman, Shiva, and Kali, and a *havan* attended by 51 *pujārīs*, who recited *Sundarkāṇḍ* to ensure that guests’ wishes would be answered.

We can see, then, that the upward trajectory of growth of this *laḍḍū* is critical to the guru’s personal narrative as a superlative healer, and perhaps even as a successful business leader who



can mobilize resources for the welfare of his followers. But, can this *laḍḍū* keep growing indefinitely? According to capitalist theory, ascendant in this era of neoliberalism, a perpetual ramping up of production requires the generation of increased demand. In the market culture of India's cities, the narrative of the growing *laḍḍū* is predicated on increased client satisfaction. But, in a sense we could also say that in producing an increasingly large *laḍḍū* the guru is also promoting more interest and therefore demand. Analyzed in stock market terms, we would call this a "forward looking statement." For instance, a pharmaceutical company would leverage good reviews on products in the making to raise expectations of market dominance in the coming years, thereby increasing interest among potential investors. The growing *laḍḍū* likewise generates an expectation of a better future for those who are willing to invest in the guru's devotional projects. Who would not want to join a devotional group where members all claimed that their wishes were answered each year, as proven by the ever-larger *laḍḍū* given in gratitude?

One might argue that Balaji's faith healing gurus are simply working within a long tradition of providing spiritual benefits. But, as it now stands, benefits through faith are enmeshed in the neoliberal project of personal advancement, and global prosperity, which is not limited to the Indian tradition but is also found in other emerging economies. Consider, for instance, Katharine Wiegale's study of the Philippine Pentecostal movement known as El Shaddai. As in other Catholic settings, the potential for a miracle is fundamental to popular faith. But, El Shaddai wraps miracles within the personal desire for economic advancement and living a better life in general. In Wiegale's account, devotees eagerly recount their personal stories, in which miracles of prosperity and wellbeing arise from their prayers through the intercession of the El Shaddai cult.<sup>436</sup> Tellingly, Wiegale finds in these narratives "a transformation of the individual and not society."<sup>437</sup> El Shaddai devotees complain of insufficient opportunities for personal

transformation in conventional Catholicism, and so they seek a more direct, emotionally supportive prayer-to-miracle route through this organization. As Wiegele sees it, this system of personal advancement exemplifies “prosperity theology”—a wealth-creating local response to global capitalism.<sup>438</sup>



Figure 6-14. A fire ceremony at a *jāgrāṇ* in Amritsar. The partly eaten giant *laḍḍū* is in the background.

In India itself, affiliation to marketing organizations such as Amway offers alternatives to the old spiritual path of securing divine benefits, not unlike some of the benefits one would hope to get from belonging to a *maṇḍal* or at least enlisting Balaji’s assistance towards a better life. That is, globalized marketing networks offer the promise of moving up into a privileged international

community that supports the progress of the ambitious individual. In India, I met local members of these corporations who were expecting to be brought to the US soon as a result of their salesmanship. Although *maṇḍals* do not send their members abroad, they open new possibilities through participation in a community of the miracle-blessed. Recalling Wiegele's point about individual versus societal transformation, at first glance a crucial element in these various paths of advancement, spiritual or less so, would seem to be the focus on the attainment of individual advancement. Studies of popular religion in developing nations have noted the increasing draw of worship that caters to the individual's interest in self-betterment. For instance, Robert Weller has studied a newly popular "amoral" miracle shrine in Taiwan where devotees wish for their own material advancement foremost, rather than for their families, as would traditionally have been expected in a culture of filial piety.<sup>439</sup>

However, rather than wholeheartedly adopt a narrative of neoliberal individualism, I would return to the persistence of values of family and group identity in Indian society. The Indian gurus discussed here declare reverence to parents as a fundamental principle. In the case of *maṇḍals* for Salasar Balaji and Mehndipur Balaji, belonging to a likeminded cultural (Marwari-Rajasthani) or magical (guru-based) group has real advantages over individual worship. Devotees following gurus typically say that they need these spiritual guides to "show the way" [*rāstā dikhāte haiṅ*]. Scholars such as Antti Pakaslahti (discussing exorcism in Mehndipur, as cited in Chapter 5) emphasize that exorcism is fundamentally a family undertaking to restore harmony in the home; I similarly observed that devotees typically approached the female Delhi guru in the company of relatives. At the same time, Indian spirituality has all along allowed for inspired individuals to embark on journeys of gaining spiritual powers or *siddhis*. So, I would adopt a dual model for theorizing the growth of Balaji's *maṇḍals* in our era. The *maṇḍals* do

indeed offer solutions for the individual, as well as the family, but most importantly those solutions are embedded in a supportive community of fellow devotees. Business networks in India's new economy offer a template for such devotional communities, just as they potentially did in the old days of colonial mercantilism. Nowadays more than ever, urbanites can choose their own spiritual affiliations based on the promise of efficacy—in other words, miracles.

And so, I return to the theme of the city as a site for the development of new religiosities. In this chapter, I have argued that it is not simply that these urban devotional communities are outposts of devotional culture centered on Salasar and Mehndipur, but that the shrines are equally outposts of urban devotional culture, inasmuch as urban patrons and other devotees have had a significant role in their development. Further, I have linked the development of major doctrinal differences between the two Balajis—blessings at Salasar versus exorcism at Mehndipur—to the evolving socioeconomic relationship between patrons or other devotees and the religious specialists who represent the gods. Here too, then, urban conditions come into play. I have discussed the urban Marwari imperative to consolidate their community, which centers on Balaji as their common lineage deity. On the other hand, urban faith healers promote their own powers in mediating Mehndipur Balaji, often building on preexisting market relations, which solidifies a particular public impression of the supernatural benefits that Mehndipur Balaji offers.

But the expansion of this devotional culture also moves on other paths besides those connecting the cities and Balaji's main temples in Salasar and Mehndipur. As these temples, and the other major Marwari-sponsored temples such as Khatu Shyam, have received more and more visitors, enterprising faith healers in villages and towns of Rajasthan have been establishing their own *dhāms* [shrines], where they offer magical services for the public. In Chapter 4, I mentioned the Marwari sponsorship of lavish new temples along the roads to Salasar as a second

generation of pilgrimage sites based on the preexisting popularity of Balaji. So too, the proliferation of these faith healing shrines in the last fifteen years, since pilgrimage to Salasar and Mehndipur had solidified, constitutes a second generation of sites offering faith healing services for visitors. Collectively, these religious sites—the main temples, the roadside temples, and the faith healing shrines—constitute northeastern Rajasthan as a region of miracles, as I will discuss in the following chapter.

## Chapter 6 Notes

- <sup>366</sup> For an introductory discussion of the performance of *jāgrans*, see Erndl, pp. 84-93.
- <sup>367</sup> On the other hand, devotional diffusion in the countryside, which I will discuss in the final chapter, follows a somewhat different pattern. There, resident gurus or priests of shrines cultivate a clientele of urbanites from afar.
- <sup>368</sup> Singer, p. 58. Also, see Redfield and Singer, pp. 53-73, for a theorization of cultural change in cities.
- <sup>369</sup> Singer, p. 59.
- <sup>370</sup> Singer, p. 149.
- <sup>371</sup> Interview 1-8-2011.
- <sup>372</sup> O'Malley provides a description of such rites in Gaya as found in Sanskrit texts.
- <sup>373</sup> Fuller, p. 217. Harriss, p. 328, succinctly sums up Singer's contribution in theorizing urban religious change in India.
- <sup>374</sup> Fuller, p. 218; also see Warriar, pp. 31-36.
- <sup>375</sup> A bit like Salasar's *pujārīs*, the guru that Fuller discusses, known as Swami Dayananda (a different individual than the famous founder of the Arya Samaj movement), advocates classical Hindu principles as an antidote for modern troubles. For instance, Dayananda lectures on the applicability of the Bhagavad Gita for business success. See Fuller, p. 219.
- <sup>376</sup> "Bole, jai śrī bālājī! ... Ek do tīn cār, bālājī kī jaikārā!" Heard at *jāgraṇ* 10-24-2010.
- <sup>377</sup> Observed at *jāgraṇ*, 10-24-2010.
- <sup>378</sup> Booth, p. 71.
- <sup>379</sup> Although a *jāgraṇ* in its fullest form would last a whole night, in actual practice they may end early, as in this case. This depends on official restrictions on much time allotted for the usage of a particular space, and at times may also relate to the amount of funding available for the event. On one occasion when I had gone to a *jāgraṇ* in Delhi, I recall that the police arrived at around 1 am to enforce the end of the event because the organizers only had permission to use the space up to that time.
- <sup>380</sup> "Hamāre pās jo kuch hai unhī kī hai meherbānī ... hameñ yeh bhejte haiñ: kabhī dānā kabhī pānī. Pal ke hī pal ke ham bichāeñge jis din mere bālājī ghar āeñge ki ham to hai bālājī kī janmo se divāne ki ... mīthe mīthe bhajan sunāeñge jis din mere bālājī ghar āeñge! ... Ghar kā konā konā phūloñ se sajāyā ... Jis din o mere bālājī main apnā ghar banvāūngā, ghar kī har ek īth īth par nām terā likhvāūngā! ... us choṭe se ghar meñ ek karm terā hogā! Jis din jyotī jalegī, aur main bhajan sunāūngā! Jab koī nahīn ātā bālājī āte haiñ! ... Mere dukh ke dinon meñ yeh baḍe kām ātā hai! ... Mere bābā bābā bābā! Pichle janm kā yeh merā nātā, bābā mere bābā ... jis ke śarīr par bālājī kā hath hai ... dhanya huā, voh usko kyā bāt hai, usko kyā bāt hai? Main sālāsar jāūngā, sālāsar jāūngā! ... tere caraṇon meñ bābā śir ko jhukāūngā! Main sālāsar āūngā!" From *jāgraṇ* in Bangalore, 10-24-2010.
- <sup>381</sup> "O bālājī, o bālājī, o bālājī ... duniyā cale nā śrī rām ke binā, rām jī cale nā hanumān ke binā, duniyā cale nā śrī rām ke binā, rām jī cale nā hanumān ke binā ... lakṣmaṇ kā bacnā muškil thā ... Kaun jaḍī-buḍī lāne ko thā? ... Jab se rāmāyaṇ paḍh lī hai, main ne ek bāt samajh lī hai: rāvan mare nā śrī rām ke binā ... aur lañkā jale nā hanumān ke binā ... duniyā cale nā śrī

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*rām ke binā, rām jī cale nā hanumān ke binā ... Bol sītā pati rām candra bhagvān kī jai!  
Hanumān jī maharāj kī jai! Sālāsar mahārāj kī jai!*” From *jāgraṇ* in Bangalore, 10-24-2010.

<sup>382</sup> Lutgendorf (1991), p. 18

<sup>383</sup> “*Yahān pe sabhī rājāsthān ke haiṅ; ye ‘business purpose’ ke lie āye haiṅ.*” Interview 10-24-2010.

<sup>384</sup> Interview 10-26-2010.

<sup>385</sup> Wondering if the Karnatakan worship of Hanuman would significantly differ from the cult of Balaji, I visited some shrines in Bangalore where Hanuman—known in this part of India as Maruti—is worshiped. I found these local shrines to be exclusively attended by Kannada-speaking locals—never Marwaris—and the images worshiped were of course of an identifiably Karnatakan style, under the guidance of Brahmins in white *luṅṅīs* [sarongs] no different than in many southern temples. The rituals were somewhat different than at Salasar; the offering of particularly large quantities of *tulsī* [basil] and flowers, although akin to northern styles Indian worship, suggested the local abundance of these materials beyond what one would find in the northwest.

<sup>386</sup> Interview 10-24-2010.

<sup>387</sup> Tweed, pp. 123-163.

<sup>388</sup> Johnson, p. 9.

<sup>389</sup> Tweed, p. 6.

<sup>390</sup> I was told that the ancestors of at least some of these members had lived in Bhiwani District, Haryana, which is at the margin of Balaji’s core devotional area.

<sup>391</sup> Erndl, pp. 38-44, discusses the cult of Vaishno Devi.

<sup>392</sup> See Babb’s *Absent Lord* (1996), especially his introduction pp. 1-21, for a discussion of Jains within Rajasthani culture. I will return to Jainism in further depth in Chapter 7, when I discuss the new god known as Babosa, who has become popular among urban Jains.

<sup>393</sup> “*Ham [jain] mandir nahīn mānte—ham nahīn jāte.*” Interview 10-26-2010.

<sup>394</sup> “*Śrī sālāsar hanumān dvār*” Sign observed 1-17-2011.

<sup>395</sup> “*Hamāre sab ke kuldevatā hai, bālājī. ‘Family’ kā ek bhagvān ... koī bhī kaṣṭ, to voh turant hī āeṅ ... pūrā parivār us kī pūjā arādhikā hotī hai ... hindū saṅskriti hai, us ke andar kyā, pehle parivār mān se dekh kar jāeṅ; us hī prakār kuldev ko yād rakhnā paḍtā hai ... kuldev ek hī, parivār ke viśeṣ! ... Hanumān jī ‘total’ hindustānī ke kuldev hai!*” Interview 1-16-2011.

<sup>396</sup> Hardgrove, p.xi.

<sup>397</sup> Hardgrove, p. 250. With these relations among deities in mind, I suspect that Hardgrove’s omission of Balaji in her study may be due to her own research imperatives, rather than his true absence. In her treatment of Rani Sati, Hardgrove prioritizes the goddess as a model of conservative female mores in the Marwari construction of female identity.

<sup>398</sup> Hardgrove, p. xii.

<sup>399</sup> Hardgrove, pp. 250-253.

<sup>400</sup> Connerton, pp. 41-48.

<sup>401</sup> Halbwachs, p. 205.

<sup>402</sup> Several handbooks sold near Sai Baba’s shrine provide glowing reports of the miracles ascribed to his worship. Among them, see those authored by Jani and Chand. Also see *Sai*

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*cālīsā*, which is also available, in which the *sant* Sai Baba of Shirdi is effectively Sanskritized; he is depicted as one of a cohort of Marathi Hindu ascetics, and as a source of miracles.

<sup>403</sup> Mauss, p. 1, sets forth the basic thesis of the ritualized gift as something that compels some recompense from the recipient.

<sup>404</sup> Timberg, p. 175.

<sup>405</sup> Timberg, p. 6.

<sup>406</sup> Birla, p. 74.

<sup>407</sup> “‘Chief guest’ jo paise dete—‘ninety-nine percent’ *mārvādī log!* ‘They are very richest; they are businessmen!’ ... *voh duniyā meñ bahut maśūr* ‘businessman ... *hamārī jāti ke haiñ ... usne bahut dān diyā ... voh dān detā kisko boltā nahīn--āpko mālūm hogā, ‘gupt dān’ ... Abhī yahāñ par jo āye, koī 5,000 ... 10,000 ... lākh degā, kisīko nahīn batāegā.*” Interview 1-2-2011.

<sup>408</sup> “*Ek satya kuldev ... voh bālājī ... aur gurūjī dhām dekhhāl ...*” Performance observed 1-2-2011.

<sup>409</sup> Interview 1-3-2011.

<sup>410</sup> Soon after this group organized, dissensions arose that threatened its unity. A member became “too proud” [*ghamañḍ*] and sought to set up his own *mañḍal* by drawing away members from the same community. But, according to Pramod he did not succeed because he was too autocratic and thereby did not have sufficient “grassroots” support. Community organization is thus crucial to the success of a *mañḍal*. Interview 1-4-2011.

<sup>411</sup> See *Bābā kā āśirvād*.

<sup>412</sup> See *Śrīrām janmbhūmi mandir nirmān hetu śrī hanumat śakti jāgrañ anuṣṭhān*.

<sup>413</sup> “*Hamārā viśvās hai ki hanumat śakti jāgrañ se hī śrī rām janmbhūmi par bhavya mandir nirmāñ kā mārg praśāst hogā.*” Taken from a pamphlet titled *Śrī rām janmbhūmi nirmān hetu śrī hanumat śakti jāgrañ anuṣṭhān*.

<sup>414</sup> However, connections between such *mañḍals* and religious revival political movements may be more substantial in other settings. When I later visited a Mehndipur Balaji *mañḍal* in Punjab, a *mañḍal* member asserted that all of the members were firm supporters of the Rama temple movement.

<sup>415</sup> De Neve, pp. 21-22.

<sup>416</sup> De Neve, p. 23.

<sup>417</sup> Ambos, p. 203.

<sup>418</sup> Ambos, p. 204.

<sup>419</sup> Ambos, p. 204.

<sup>420</sup> Endres, p. 79. A useful analogy for theorizing Mehndipur Balaji as a commodity for urbanites in cities across India could also be studies of the international Indian diaspora. Vineeta Sinha tracks the circulation of what she calls “puja things” as commodities among diasporic Hindus in places like Singapore and Malaysia. She cites these as a modern commodification of enchantment. See Sinha, p. 189

<sup>421</sup> Interview 7-7-2011.

<sup>422</sup> Narayan, Shalini. “On pretext of curing her, priest drugs, rapes DU student; arrested.” Indian Express.com. May 17, 2011.

<sup>423</sup> Jackson, pp. 305-309.



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<sup>424</sup> On my first day of research in India, by chance I came across a poster for Triveni Balaji Dham on the overhead crossing of New Delhi Railway Station. Within a few days the poster was gone, but it presaged many more that I would find. In both Salasar and Mehndipur, devotees of Triveni Balaji had undertaken a project of putting up posters, stickers, and cardboard pictures in innumerable shops and on walls, apparently without complaint from the proprietors because the god was explained as a new manifestation of Balaji. They even installed a large statue of the god in one of the hill shrines of Mehndipur. A devotee later told me that the god commanded them to do this as a service to the world; in effect, they were proselytizing. The directive to spread the word was not simply an agenda for enlisting new followers but also a technique for reinforcing the faith of the guru's current followers. Despite these devotees' efforts, locals and pilgrims in both Salasar and Mehndipur seemed to have no idea of what Triveni Balaji actually was, or why he had three heads. Few were able to identify which head represented which Balaji, and some made completely wrong guesses, even though these heads have recognizable similarities to the three Balajis. To the devotees themselves, what counted was the new god in his entirety, since it was in that form that they worshiped him, although at least some also regularly visited the Rajasthani Balaji shrines. As the guru was effectively the guardian of the powers of this god for the sake of his followers, he was indispensable to this cult.

<sup>425</sup> The announcement appeared in *Sunday Navabharat Times*, Mumbai, "Desh / Videsh" section, p. 10: January 2, 2011.

<sup>426</sup> "*Mahārāj hamārā iṣṭadev hai. Unko bhagvān kī śakti ... aur darśan bhī deṅge.*" Interview 1-8-2011.

<sup>427</sup> The equivalent way of maximizing ritual efficacy at a Salasar-oriented event would be to bring a Brahmin from Salasar to attend to the fire, which is small, in front of the image of Balaji. In Mehndipur Balaji *jāgrans* any elaborate *havan* must be set up in a separate space, since there would be no way to accommodate it on stage.

<sup>428</sup> "[1] *Yeh saṅkaṭ haṭke!* ... [2] *Jai bābā kī!* ... [1] *Jor se bolo!* ... [2] *Jai bābā kī!* ... [1] *Āvāz nahīn sunī!* ... [2] *Jai bābā kī!* ... [1] *Jai samādhi vāle!* ... *Prem se bolo!* ... [2] *Jai bābā kī!* ... [1] *Are kānpūr vāle!* ... *Yeh jholī bharte!* ... *O, jaikārā!* ... *Are mehndipūre!* ... [2] *Jai bābā kī!* ... [1] *Are sālāsar vāle!* ... [2] *Jai bābā kī!* *Jai bābā kī!* *Jai bābā kī!* *Jai bābā kī!* ... [1] *O sāmne āeñ!* ... [2] *Tū peśī de de!* ... Heard at *kīrtan* 1-8-2011.

<sup>429</sup> Pechilis, p. 114.

<sup>430</sup> Leslie, p. 225.

<sup>431</sup> "*Yeh hāni ... kaisā pūch rahā thā? ... Yahān saṅkaṭvāle kām sirf.*" Session observed 7-9-2011.

<sup>432</sup> "*Bālājī hī is udyog kā mālik hai, aur main sirf un kā sevak hūn!*" Interview 8-3-2011.

<sup>433</sup> "*Voh pañjāb meṅ sab samiti kā adyaṅśā haiñ.*" Interview 11-28-2010.

<sup>434</sup> Interview 11-29-2010.

<sup>435</sup> "*Prabhu, mujhe ek chotā sā makān de do!*" Interview 11-29-2010.

<sup>436</sup> Wiegele, p. 97.

<sup>437</sup> Wiegele, p. 96.

<sup>438</sup> Wiegele, pp. 91-93. Jackson, p. 247, and elsewhere in the same text, refers to "prosperity religion" to describe the same kind of phenomenon during Thailand's "Asian Tiger" economic boom of the 1990s.

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<sup>439</sup> Weller, pp. 141-142.

## CHAPTER 7: IN THE LAND OF MIRACLE SHRINES

### 7.1 Journey to a Spiritual Reservoir

#### *Rajasthan as a Sacred Land*

By the mid-to-late 1990s, as pilgrimage to Salasar and Mehndipur was becoming substantial, faith healers started to establish shrines offering miracles across northeastern Rajasthan. Most of these new shrines were oriented towards the worship of either of the two Balajis, and in some cases certain other local deities. In this chapter, I examine a number of these new miracle shrines, and advance several theories to explain why they came to be. First, the two Balajis had become important pilgrimage deities by this time, so those who presided over new shrines in the region needed to posit some kind of ritual or magical relationship between their shrines and one or the other of the two Balajis' temples (Salasar and Mehndipur). Second, these new shrines were predominantly concentrated in the region of northeastern Rajasthan that pilgrims traversed in coming to Salasar, but not in the corresponding area around Mehndipur. This difference, I suggest, had to do with patronage and socioeconomic differences between the two regions. Third, these new shrines all offered occult services, similar to Mehndipur, but unlike Salasar and the other Marwari temples, which I attribute to faith healers' desire to attract visitors already making the journey to Salasar and similar sites, and also to provide supplementary magical remedies not available in Salasar. These new shrines, in combination with the two main Balaji temples and the Marwari-sponsored roadside shrines (described in Chapter 4), have collectively solidified a public perception of Rajasthan as a reservoir of magical remedies.

Many of those tracing descent from the Shekhawati area but living in cities across India, and equally so those who live in adjacent areas to the north (Punjab, Haryana, Delhi, and Uttar Pradesh) seem to feel that Rajasthan has retained magical qualities that were largely lost elsewhere. As a pilgrim once said to me, “Rajasthan is the land of the gods—it is a holy place [*pavitrsthān*], and pure ... the environment is very good!”<sup>440</sup> The rustic lifestyle and wilderness, which seemingly hinders the land’s economic potential, actually increases its spiritual purity, just as a *sant*’s asceticism accumulates inner *śakti*. As the home of many *avatārs* or popular gods, such as Balaji, Rajasthan holds the antidote to the decline of morality due to the Kali Yuga, our present era of troubles. Hence, as neoliberal reform and the drive for material advancement have become integral to public life, the old-time Rajasthani culture of kings and holy men has been reified as a commodity signifying both cultural and spiritual authenticity.<sup>441</sup> Although every shrine in this region has its own ritual protocol, they all receive visitors informed by a similar notion that this land has special spiritual potency. Consider the following statement from a native of the city of Barwala, in Hisar District, southern Haryana, which alludes to this sentiment:

There are a lot of personal troubles [*sañkaṭ*] everywhere in India, but little of that in Rajasthan. The land there is sacred [*pavitr*]. There are shrines for every god and goddess; it’s a religious [*dhārmik*] land. There are so many shrines in Rajasthan ... big temples ... Indians all go there. They go to Salasar, Mehndipur, Khatu Shyam, Gogaji, Mirabai, [and] Narhaḍ [a place of exorcism and healing in Jhunjhunu District] ...<sup>442</sup>

By virtue of the shrines listed, the speaker delineates a broader “Shekhawati” region and adjacent areas of northeastern Rajasthan as a representation of the state in its entirety. In the previous chapter, I examined how urban Marwari reverence for Shekhawati as an ancestral homeland became translated into a more inclusive “Rajasthan” in public religious discourse,

even though this “Rajasthan” in fact centered on the shrines of Shekhawati and nowhere else. The northeastern Rajasthan region, which we could extend a bit further to include Mehndipur to the east and Mirabai’s shrine slightly to the west, is of course the most proximal part of Rajasthan for the population of Haryana and nearby states. It would be interesting to know whether people in Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh, or those who emigrated from those areas and are now living in distant cities, have similarly constructed a viewpoint of their adjacent areas of Rajasthan as a spiritually powerful place. We may be dealing with a rendition of the famous Saul Steinberg New Yorker cover illustration of how the world looks from Manhattan, but the fact remains that merchants in cities across India who speak of a homeland in northwestern India look to Shekhawati and no other region.

Since these Marwaris comprise many of India’s economic heavyweights, their conviction that the shrines of Shekhawati have special significance has raised the public profile of this region. Most of the sites mentioned in the above statement were obscure village shrines or only locally famous, until Marwaris and other urbanites (in the case of Mehndipur) started to affirm their faith in them in the early 1990s. Inasmuch as these shrines only recently became well known, the above speaker’s notion that they are primary examples of Rajasthani spirituality suggests to me that this conception of Rajasthan is likewise a recent construct, or at least has been substantially revised in recognition of the rise of these new shrines. In other words, the discourse of “Rajasthan” as a signifier for sanctity entails a retroactive projection of the contemporary landscape of Shekhawati shrine culture, in the aftermath of twenty years of rising pilgrimage. In these days of the competitive new economy, a perception of Rajasthani sanctity as a throwback to an earlier, morally upright time also colors the way the inhabitants of that region are seen. As one man from a village in Sirsa District, southwestern Haryana said:

In Rajasthan they know much [of spiritual matters] ... in Haryana, we have no such wisdom ... not in Punjab either ... Only in Rajasthan do people have this [spiritual knowledge]: they have more faith in God. Here, in Haryana and Punjab, we have more money, [but] because of all that money, look what's happened—people don't feel devotion [*bhakti*]!<sup>443</sup>

In popular religious literature, the image of Rajasthanis as staunch devotees of Hanuman is likewise pervasive. The twenty-fourth edition of Gita Press's *Śrī hanumān aṅgk* (2010), a compendium of classical texts and observations on current practice relating to the monkey god, tells us, "Rajasthan is both a spiritual [*dharmprāṇ*] and staunchly worshipful [*vīrpūjak*] state. This being the case, the people here maintain a heartfelt reverence for Hanuman..."<sup>444</sup> Whether or not such statements were part of the first edition in 1975, they would surely have more resonance nowadays, in the years since Balaji's shrines in Rajasthan have become famous.<sup>445</sup> It appears from these writings that Rajasthanis possess deeper spiritual insight, although they live in a land stereotypically associated with feudal society and uneducated farmers.

This sense of Rajasthan as a site of spirituality helps us theorize the Marwari embrace of this land—specifically Shekhawati—as their homeland. It gives urban descendants access to deep piety and even moral nobility commensurate with their rising economic status. Acquiring a link to such untrammelled dignity counteracts the perception that Marwaris are miserly and therefore lacking in virtue. Further, in their rush towards affluence, middle-class or working-class people of Haryana and nearby states, too, have embraced this perception of the spiritual qualities of Rajasthan. After all, miracles have as much appeal to those who are at the lower end of the socioeconomic scale but have hopes of future advancement, as glimpsed in the prosperity of Marwari devotees.<sup>446</sup>

### Where the Gods Are

Since Mehndipur is generally understood to lie outside Shekhawati, how would it figure in a Shekhawati-centric discourse of miracle shrines? No Marwaris or other communities revering Balaji trace their ancestry to the Mehndipur region. Therefore, without this sense of belonging, there is no compelling imperative to support new shrines in that broader area. Moreover, within communities devoted to Salasar Balaji, Mehndipur has a somewhat uneasy status. I mentioned in Chapter 3 that Salasar's *pujārīs* warned me that from a cultural standpoint Mehndipur represents not Rajasthan but Uttar Pradesh, with its alleged social troubles. So, Mehndipur's inclusion in cultural Rajasthan, to say nothing of Shekhawati, is unstable. Likewise, foot pilgrimage to Mehndipur has not gained popularity (although I noted one group of walking pilgrims in Chapter 5), as visitors mostly come there by vehicle. Concomitantly, there is no local custom of helping pilgrims on the way to Mehndipur, as is the case in going to Salasar, where *bhaṇḍārās* and volunteer organizations offer free services to aid weary travelers. The upshot of this difference is that as of now there are no shrines affiliated to Mehndipur Balaji in the region of that shrine itself. In Chapter 5, I discussed the proliferation of shrines on the hill adjacent to Mehndipur as an outgrowth of pilgrimage to the main temple, but this is really an expansion of the original site itself.

Despite the relative lack of new shrines oriented to Mehndipur in that region, shrines owing allegiance to Mehndipur Balaji nonetheless do exist, but, surprisingly, they are all in the part of Rajasthan where foot pilgrimage to Salasar and other Marwari shrines has become popular. I would surmise that this is due to big-city Marwari patronage in that region, and the increasingly substantial traffic of pilgrims coming into Shekhawati along multiple paths from the surrounding area and distant cities. This general increase in visitor traffic has distributed a culture of

pilgrimage along pathways leading to Salasar, which has made a fertile ground for new shrines. By contrast, Mehndipur, lacking an appreciable amount of foot pilgrimage, is only approached from one main road, which goes through a largely tribal area not conducive to stopovers. The counterintuitive phenomenon of Mehndipur-oriented shrines existing only in the region of Salasar suggests that pilgrimage in this region is economically feeding the growth of new shrines regardless of whether or not they owe divine allegiance to Salasar. All the new shrines in this area of northeastern Rajasthan offer services for the relief of spirit possession, similar to Mehndipur, even though this practice is banned in Salasar itself. Therefore, these new shrines do not directly compete with Salasar but offer supplementary magical services that would not be available at Balaji's main shrine there.

Whether a faith healer attributes his power to pan-Indian Hanuman, Salasar Balaji, Mehndipur Balaji, or another deity, he is still performing essentially the same kind of service. Establishing a link to one deity or another is therefore largely an outcome of the healer's personal history. In this chapter, I will be putting emphasis on such personal accounts as a way of showing how charismatic healers personally innovate a protocol of public worship. Faith healers initially work in their own homes, modified as *dhāms* until they have funding to build a freestanding building. Even though healers more often live in what would seem to be obscure villages, the overall "branding" of northeastern Rajasthan as a place of miracle shrines draws enough visitors looking for spiritual services in the region for them to get a steady supply of clients. Salasar and Khatu Shyam (less so Mehndipur, due to its distance) are anchors that bring in visitors, who may in turn seek out additional shrines reputed to have a record of magical efficacy.



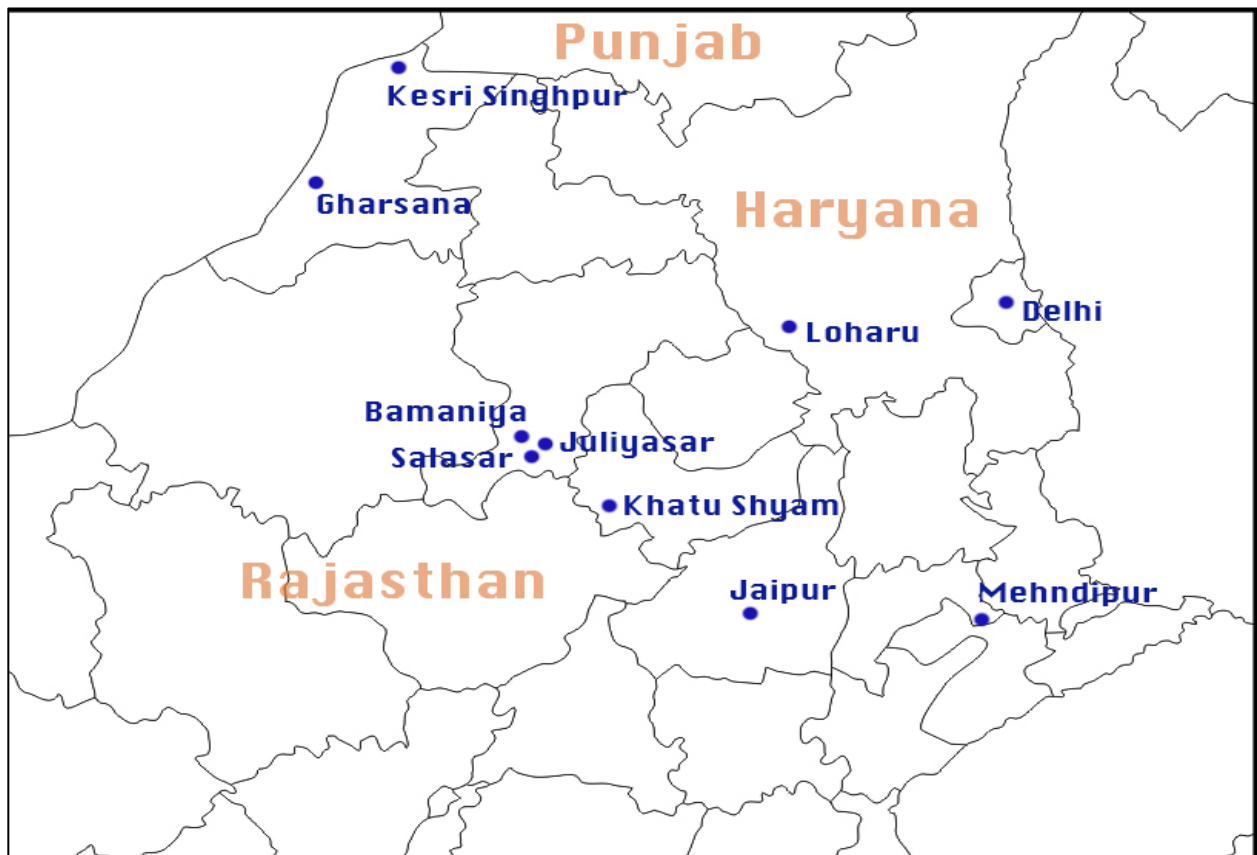
The faith healers of these new shrines do not ignore Salasar, but integrate it, and possibly the other major Marwari-sponsored temples of the region (Khatu Shyam, for instance) into their spiritual services. For example, as we will see, a healer may send a client to Salasar for ritual purification before undertaking to remove an offending spirit, or send the client afterwards for a follow-up blessing. However, although faith healers of northeastern Rajasthan generally assert some kind of formal allegiance to either Salasar or Mehndipur, they typically avoid installing statues of the Balajis enshrined at those sites. Instead, they opt for a generic image of pan-Indian Hanuman while discursively hailing the specific Balajis of the Rajasthani shrines during faith healing sessions. I speculate that this is largely to avoid being seen as appropriating authority from those who ritually represent the deities at these gods' major temples, a mindset that may likewise inform Marwaris in distant cities who also eschew making copies of Balaji.

Given the diversity of the new *dhāms* across northeastern Rajasthan, I will structure this chapter as sections that typologically organize them in thematic terms: (1) *dhāms* very close to Salasar, (2) *dhāms* that are more distant but still within the larger region in which devotion to Salasar Balaji is the norm, and (3) *dhāms* owing allegiance to Mehndipur Balaji, within this region (Map 4). This will not be a discussion of all healing shrines that I visited in my research, but merely a sampling of those that illustrate the integration of shrines into a regional pilgrimage culture, with particular attention to how they relate to the Balajis of Salasar and Mehndipur.

An additional category of shrines occupying the same region as the faith healing shrines of this chapter are those directly built under Marwari sponsorship along the main roads to Salasar, or those that have become associated with Marwari worship in recent years. I discussed those shrines in Chapter 4 for their contribution to the development of pilgrimage culture. The Marwari road shrines are not generally final destinations but simply stops on the way to Salasar.

And, although they offer miracles, they are operated by salaried *pujārīs* carrying out routine ritual duties. By contrast, the faith healers of this chapter run their own spiritual and economic enterprises. Therefore, they need to develop magical abilities to attract patrons.

At the end of this chapter, my discussion of the miracle shrines of Rajasthan will lead into an



Map 4. Locations of shrines mentioned in Chapter 7.

investigation of the faith healing cult of Babosa, a god whose *śakti* and personal characteristics are directly taken from Balaji. The *maṇḍal* that represents Babosa builds on the public perception of Rajasthan as a holy land to propagate the god among Marwaris, and more particularly Jains, who live in the pan-Indian urban diaspora but long to reconnect with that state

as their ancestral homeland. This final case additionally brings to mind an unresolved problem in the worship of Salasar Balaji. That is, as we saw in Chapter 3, the worship of Balaji in Salasar itself offers no avenue for the mediated treatment of afflictions. Some moneyed Marwaris do hire Brahmins in Salasar to carry out elaborate scripture-based rituals to ensure desired outcomes in business or home life, but this does not generally provide the sort of personal attention that a faith healer offers. As it happens, a Jain-Marwari woman of Rajasthani ancestry channels Babosa and personally attends to her Marwari devotees' problems during frequent travels to events in their communities in cities around India. Worshipping Babosa thus offers a compelling alternative or supplement to Salasar Balaji.

In promoting Babosa as a new, upgraded version of Balaji, the Babosa *maṇḍal* has filled a gap in Marwari-centric spiritual mediation. This is not to say that Babosa is the same as occult-leaning Mehndipur Balaji. Whereas Mehndipur Balaji attracts a broad population, including but not limited to Marwaris, Babosa is very much centered in the milieu of Jain-Marwari urban communities—the sort of devotees usually associated with Salasar Balaji. Thus, Babosa offers whatever one can get from Salasar Balaji, but additionally has the qualities that would typically impel one to come to Mehndipur—relief from troubles owing to spirit attack. The enthusiasm that devotees show for Babosa as a consequence of his limitless miracles highlights the centrality of faith in attaining such benefits. The need to demonstrate faith through pilgrimage and other strategies seems aligned with a larger recent societal trend towards making the practice of religion more public. In the era of neoliberal narratives of personal advancement, demonstrating faith to get benefits is critical as a practical approach to everyday life.

### Scholarship and the Mapping of Shrines

In this subsection, I want to consider some scholarship that may help us to theorize Rajasthan as a sacred space. I have found no scholarship that specifically focuses on the rise of miracle shrines in Shekhawati-Rajasthan, but Lawrence Babb and Anne Hardgrove discuss the role of merchants as patrons of shrines (as cited in previous chapters). I have argued that this patronage was pivotal to the evolution of the popular perception of Rajasthan as a place of miracle shrines. Babb focuses more on the Marwaris' role within Rajasthan, and Hardgrove on the pan-Indian diaspora (in Kolkata). Inasmuch as the faith healing shrines in northeastern Rajasthan that are to be discussed in this chapter were founded less than fifteen years ago, after pilgrimage to the main Balaji shrines had already gained momentum in the 1990s, this development falls outside the scope of these scholars. In fact, in contrast to the Marwari-sponsored major temples discussed in Chapter 2, the small new shrines that I discuss in this chapter get more of their visitors from the surrounding region than from distant cities. Depending on the specific shrine, visitors might comprise Jats, Sikhs, and Rajputs, and of course some Marwaris, who seek occult mediation not obtainable at Salasar. Marwari patronage to the major temples is still very relevant, however, because it subsidizes Salasar, which invigorates the mindset that the region offers miracles.

In investigating perceptions of Rajasthan as a holy land, I would first call attention to Rakesh Hooja's essay (2010) addressing the historical transformation of "Rajpootana into Rajasthan." He characterizes Rajasthan as having a relatively stable social structure on account of its princely tradition of personal administration, as opposed to the more layered bureaucratic nature of British colonialism.<sup>447</sup> Hence, traditional social rules persisted longer in Rajasthan than elsewhere; we could connect that with the statement I cited earlier that Rajasthan has held onto cultural values now lost in Haryana and elsewhere. As an example of regional difference, Hooja

cites the anecdote that women observing purdah in Rajasthan would feel free to remove their veils only when crossing into the British-administered provinces.<sup>448</sup> On this point of cultural conservatism, I would also return to Babb's work on merchants, which he offers as a corrective to a pervasive scholarly preoccupation with the Kshatriya-Brahmin (noblemen-priests) relationship.<sup>449</sup> Babb tells us that Vaishyas (merchants) played an important role as traders and administrative managers for the kings. From this standpoint, we could extrapolate that the modern-day Marwari patronage of major temples such as Salasar, now forced to get by without royal patronage, potentially puts Marwaris in the role of cultural conservators, which would align well with their narratives of rediscovering ancestral deities in Rajasthan. Certainly, various scholars have described the rise of Indian merchant patronage in the aftermath of the end of the old royal system in other parts of India. Vasudha Dalmia's work on the nineteenth-century merchant propagation of Vaishnava devotion, cited earlier in this study, comes to mind. So, a public preoccupation with Rajasthan as a holy land could have been enhanced by the Marwari embrace of ancestral deities in this region in the early 1990s.

Even if Shekhawati was "made" into a holy land in recent history, we have not yet explained how all these new shrines would relate to each other. Administratively, they are completely autonomous, but they ultimately share allegiance to the same deities—Hanuman, for instance—and they share many of the same visitors. A sacred land as a network of shrines is easily found in other contexts in India. From one standpoint, India itself is a sacred land that encompasses networks of pilgrimage centers. In a study of the modern evolution of the visual personification of India as the Mother Goddess, Sumathi Ramaswamy notes that nationalists and artists have in effect "enchanted" an ostensibly secular nation.<sup>450</sup> Are we perhaps also looking at a kind of enchantment in Rajasthan with the establishment of many shrines of miracles? This would be

consistent with Meera Nanda's analysis, in which self-conscious religious traditionalism has become more visible in public life. The conception of Rajasthan as a holy land could thus be seen within this narrative of making spaces of public religiosity. Indeed, pilgrimage to Salasar and Khatu Shyam very much puts "Rajasthan-as-holy land" on public display, when crowds of pilgrims cross the region and stop at roadside shrines in walking to these sites.

To address what shrines can do for mapping sanctity, I want to mention Surinder Bhardwaj's research in the late 1960s on patterns of shrine pilgrimage. Bhardwaj tracks citations of pilgrimage shrines in the *Purāṇas* and other Hindu scriptures, supplemented with his own observations of caste distribution among visitors at contemporary popular shrines. He finds that Brahmins and Vaishyas are more mobile and also more involved in the most sacred places of pilgrimage—as he notes, "the mercantile castes travel the longest distances."<sup>451</sup> So, certain elites are to be connected with higher-profile places of worship. Therefore, Bhardwaj concludes, these castes were pivotal to the ancient spread of trans-regional Sanskrit culture, which he characterizes as "the highest common [pan-Indian] beliefs of Hinduism."<sup>452</sup> Meanwhile, at the subregional level, he observes shrines operating as "a problem-solving social mechanism in which the sociological rather than the spiritual aspects dominate."<sup>453</sup> In other words, high-culture shrines like Hardwar and Varanasi are for pure spiritual endeavors, but shrines of more local interest (like Salasar?) would be for practical wish-making and social customs (such as paying a visit to a lineage deity).

Although Bhardwaj did his research at a time when Balaji was still obscure, his model resonates with some aspects of my study. Merchants (that is, Marwaris) do indeed appear to be the most mobile and involved in the shrines as honored patrons. But, Bhardwaj's model adopts a structuralist high-culture / village-culture distinction that I would problematize. The last twenty

years have witnessed the rise of shrines of miracles that bring visitors from far away, and elite merchants are among the most ardent supporters of these “problem-solving” centers; this phenomenon cuts across the distinction that Bhardwaj had theorized. Invoking Christopher Fuller, I note that we live in an era of faith healing gurus and miracles that serve economic elites, so the implication that magical problem solving is only for non-elites no longer holds up.<sup>454</sup> Far from being removed from the practicalities of life, VIPs are as faithful to miracle shrines and faith healers as anyone. This new economic regime renders moot the whole high / low dichotomy in theorizing religious practice. And, more than ever, faith—so much talked about in everyday religious discourse—is a leveling common currency that makes miracles happen without regard for the devotee’s social status. Therefore, revising Bhardwaj’s model of higher castes as agents of high culture, I would like to suggest urbanites or simply “the ambitious” (of whatever background) as the force behind shrine construction and devotional spread. It is a supply-and-demand situation; as more pilgrims come to Salasar and the other temples, more faith healers set up shrines and promote their supernatural skills in response (which in turn attracts more visitors).

### *Shrine Networks and Regional Consciousness*

Given the ongoing proliferation of new shrines in northeastern Rajasthan (if not elsewhere in the state), is it fair to speak of networks of shrines constituting regional consciousness? Insofar as many pilgrims visit multiple shrines on the same journey, we could theorize inter-shrine relationships. Addressing this from a comparative standpoint, I would point to the work of Anne Feldhaus, who provides a potential model for regional consciousness by way of networks of shrines in Maharashtra.<sup>455</sup> In that state, deities of different locations balance each other and mark spiritual relationships in the location of their shrines along certain rivers, mountains, or

intermediate zones between subregions. In traversing between these shrines and honoring their deities, locals perform a kind of boundary making that defines the region.

In noting such relationships, Feldhaus acknowledges the earlier work of David Sopher, who had studied pilgrimage as a circulation among multiple shrines in one region (such as Gujarat, or the Char Dham marking the four corners of India as a whole). As Sopher saw it, these relationships organize Hindu practice as a singular religious system, which, he contended, it otherwise was not.<sup>456</sup> Bringing the work of Feldhaus and Sopher to bear on Rajasthan, then, we could potentially establish a typology of shrines in terms of their divine relations and also through patterns of pilgrim circulation. For instance, we could distinguish Mehndipur-oriented shrines from Salasar-oriented shrines, and shrines visited on the way to Salasar. And the fact that many pilgrims to the region visit multiple shrines opens up the possibility of certain favored combinations. In Salasar, during the annual Dashehra festival many vehicles in fact carry signs outlining the visitors' intended itinerary to multiple shrines, thereby constituting a network.<sup>457</sup>

However, I would have to concede that the shrines of Shekhawati are not systematized in divine relationships in quite the same way as those in Maharashtra, and so it would be harder to identify the kinds of formal networks that Feldhaus finds. Some shrines in northeastern Rajasthan have given rise to others, as relatives or acolytes of gurus start their own *dhāms*. But, on the whole, the shrines to be mentioned in this chapter result from inspired individuals; the locations of the shrines are simply their homes, and have no significant natural features. Furthermore, from the standpoint of the pilgrims, there is no special reason to visit one shrine over another apart from the conviction that the presiding faith healers of certain shrines are more efficacious. Pilgrims thus pick and choose according to word-of-mouth or prior social acquaintance, especially in relation to caste, from a burgeoning array of sites. As a divine



commodity, Balaji can be invoked anywhere that a religious specialist happens to live, and is transported to distant cities. In this study, the location of divinity is thus more portable and adjustable than in the stable geographic models that Feldhaus and Sopher have theorized.

## 7.2 Close to the Heart of Salasar Balaji

### *Faith Healing in Context*

In looking at village faith healing, I will initially consider theoretical approaches that help us to discern a broader Shekhawati-Rajasthani spiritual culture. To that end, I want to open up the discussion of possession and its treatment beyond the limiting paradigm of cultural phenomenon versus psychotherapy (as discussed in Chapter 5) to a contextualization of possession that brings in social relations, which I take to be a broader picture. This would allow us to frame shrine practices within the setting of neoliberal reform, local systems of authority, Marwari patronage, and social patterns of pilgrimage. I will mention two examples of pertinent scholarship. First, Shail Mayaram (1999) has described a spirit medium in a village in Ajmer District (central Rajasthan) who regularly becomes possessed and gives advice to those in trouble, similar to what we are considering in this chapter.

Mayaram broadens the discussion of possession beyond the dichotomy described above (culture versus psychology / medicine), which in her view has been typical of most scholarship on possession. Instead, she advocates for attention to “the social context.”<sup>458</sup> In Mayaram’s study, this theoretical perspective means looking at how possession transcends boundaries of Hindu and Muslim identity, and self and other. While possessed, practitioners of ambiguous religious affiliation reorder social relationships in the home and elsewhere. In the case Mayaram presents, the self is not entirely effaced by possession but is guided towards making useful social critiques. For instance, an ancestor spirit commands a man to stop drinking alcohol for the sake

of his family. In this call to attend to the social context, I see the germ of my own approach of looking at some of the socioeconomic dimensions of mediumship and possession.

Putting further emphasis on the socioeconomic context of possession, Jeffrey Snodgrass (2002) writes of the capitalist “fetishization” of possession among lower-caste Bhat performers of Udaipur District in Rajasthan. In this instance, the binary to be transcended is not religious affiliation (as seen in Mayaram’s work) but traditional livelihood versus the modern money economy. As Snodgrass tells us, a man’s wife becomes possessed by his ancestors in reaction to his ambition to make a name for himself in putting on cultural performances for tourists in service of “new money relations.”<sup>459</sup> The man’s relatives accuse him of worshiping money as virtually a deity in its own right, to the detriment of his ancestral traditions. In this case study, alcoholism has been replaced by money as the point of contention. In my research, the exchange of money for faith healers’ services was often implicit, but my respondents generally responded coyly to queries about income. More often than not, devotees were expected to make a donation of any amount to the healer after the work had proved successful, similar to what I had noted in the system of the Brahmin ritualists of Salasar.

Applying these socioeconomic theories in the local context of the Salasar region, I would initially make two observations concerning *pitr* possession in recent years. First, *pitr*s are more and more behaving like public gods to serve the rising traffic of pilgrims looking for miracle shrines. Hanuman-Balaji has become all the more important in the process of their creation. I had mentioned in Chapter 3 that he traditionally plays a role in managing spirits. And so, with the advent of new Balaji shrines throughout northeastern Rajasthan, this god is likewise a presence at the rising number of *pitr* shrines, even when the *pitr* may ultimately be empowered by another god, such as Shiva or Krishna. A second point I would add is that whereas a

traditional *pitr* serving a family is caste-identified, a *pitr* behaving as a public god is theoretically open to all. Often, a subtle tension exists between these two poles—domestic and caste-centric versus public and efficacious for all. If the *pitr* is channeled through a faith healer, who is typically a close relative of the deceased, those who seek services from the *pitr*-god are likely to come from the same caste-based social network as the healer, despite the claim that the *pitr* can help all in need. This problem will become particularly apparent when I discuss the case of Babosa, a Jain *pitr*-like god, at the end of this chapter. Babosa's followers make grand claims about the god's powers to help all of humanity, and yet his devotional clientele nonetheless remains largely restricted to Jains.

### *A Faith Healer as Neighbor*

For the rest of this section, I will discuss two faith healing shrines that are near enough to Salasar that they share many of their clients with the main Balaji temple there. These investigations will frame devotion to Balaji within the socioeconomic setting of Salasar Balaji. Although these two *dhāms* get only a very small fraction of the visitors that Salasar Balaji receives, and are hardly more than household shrines, even a few groups arriving each day provides a semblance of business in these otherwise quiet villages. Both of these shrines feature a *pitr* working through a same-gendered living sibling, in the first case male and in the second female. Normally, whichever god one has primarily worshiped while alive will empower the deceased's spirit after death. In Shekhawati, that typically means that *pitrs* work through Hanuman-Balaji or certain other locally favored gods. Ganesh Dham, our first case study, is in the village of Juliyasar, scarcely two kilometers from Salasar, and around ten years old. Walking there from Salasar takes one past the signs announcing upcoming condominiums for devotees of Salasar Balaji that I had mentioned earlier in this study.

As I walked to this *dhām* one Sunday afternoon, a car full of men coming from the direction of Salasar passed me by. Later, I found them at the shrine. Coming from Hisar, Haryana, and having just been to Salasar for Balaji's blessings, they would now pay a call to the faith healer for good measure. They had already known this healer for some years, since the time he had worked as a driver in Hisar. Like most healers, he is most typically addressed as "Maharaj" ["Great King," but understood in a religious context as "Lord"]. It was reported to me that as a result of the healer-medium's earlier professional connections, politicians and other notables from Haryana and beyond now often come here. It so happened that one of the visitors from Hisar that day had been in a car accident two months earlier and had been thrown 35 feet from the vehicle, part of which landed on him. As he told me, he was taken to the hospital and was thought to be dead, and yet, because he had called on Balaji to save him at the time of the accident, he miraculously came back to life. Now he had come to Salasar to show his gratitude. And at the same time, it seems that he had already been in the habit of coming to this *dhām* because, he noted, "I get benefits ... in business, in work ... and peace at home."<sup>460</sup> For him, this *dhām* was an extension of the good fortune he got from Salasar, with the added attraction of a personal connection with the resident healer, something not available at Balaji's temple.

Although the *dhām* is really just one home compound surrounded by high walls, it is set up to attract visitors. Black snakes have been painted on the street side of the walls to signify that occult healing takes place here (Figure 7-1). This association borrows from folk knowledge that the ability to cure snakebites is the hallmark of many popular gods in the region (such as Ramdev, Gogaji, and others). A printed handout in Hindi, which includes a photograph of the resident *pitr* from the time he was a living young man, informs visitors of the services provided here:

By the boundless compassion of Shyam Baba [Khatu Shyam], The miracle of Shri Nareshji Pittar [*Pitr*] Dev has begun! Sacred fire every Sunday, 11:15 a.m. to 1:15 p.m. Every problem is guaranteed to be solved by the grace of Shyam. Immediate relief from ghosts, demonic obstacles, sorcery, lack of success in acquiring wealth, miscarriage, emotional problems, physical impairments, epilepsy, TB, cancer, paralysis, etc., will be obtained within 48 hours through devotion in the presence of Pittar Dev! Service to humanity is Pittar Dev's ultimate wish! ...<sup>461</sup>



Figure 7-1. Ganesh Dham in Juliyasar.

Inasmuch as this *dhām* promises to immediately cure ailments, it offers extra assurance of results that might be sought from Salasar Balaji, but with the added mystique of occult power. After all, no matter how sincerely one may pray to Balaji, whether one's "number has come" [*number* ' *āyā* ]—which is to say, the god has answered one's prayer—is a matter of divine

prerogative. However, as the above statement indicates, this *pitr* works not in the name of Balaji but rather Khatu Shyam, Balaji's ally and fellow recipient of Marwari donations and pilgrimage. This allegiance might seem counterintuitive, considering that Balaji is so close by, and also in light of the fact that (as I was told) the family of the *pitr* are Brahmins who regard Balaji as their lineage deity. But, I would theorize that performing occult healings under the name of Khatu Shyam is preferable from the standpoint of relations with Salasar. Being so close, faith healing under the name of Balaji could attract negative attention from the *pujārīs* down the road, who consider themselves to be Balaji's sole representatives, and who are dismissive of mediumship. Healing in the name of a closely allied god preserves the structure of authority but allows this healer a niche in which to do his work.

As I noted among the faith healing gurus in Mehndipur and in the cities (in the previous chapter), so too this healer's personal background provides a resume for charismatic work. Back in the days when the healer was still working as a driver in Haryana, his brother, although born into a Balaji-worshiping family, embraced Khatu Shyam but then fell over dead from a heart attack at age 25 while working in his chickpea field across the road from his home. After the young man's death, strange things started to happen that made the family realize that his *ātmā* was lingering among them. The *ātmā* of this young man came to his brother one night and said that the living brother should make a shrine [*tīrth*] for him. Then, during a wedding, the living brother started reciting *Gāyatrī mantra*, one of the most sacred incantations in Hinduism, in the voice of the dead brother. Finally, the family saw the dead brother standing on the roof of their home, after which he slowly descended through the air, saying: "I am neither a ghost, nor a god..." The implication was that he would be a protective ancestor spirit. "It was then that we

really realized [that he had become a *pitr*],” the man’s widow told me. So, they built a shrine for the deceased man, and the living brother became his channel (Figure 7-2).

The *pitr* only enters the body of the living brother when he sits facing their open-air shrine, which contains portraits of the dead brother, along with pan-Indian Hanuman, Salasar Balaji, and Khatu Shyam, among others. Although *pitr*s typically serve their living families rather than strangers, in the context of proliferating miracle shrines in the pilgrimage economy of Rajasthan, it does not seem surprising that *pitr*s would be called upon to serve the public at large. Thus, I propose that Ganesh Dham and similar shrines represent a modern-day reformulation of the traditional notion of an ancestor spirit. No longer just a household spirit, the *pitr* now performs more of the functions of a public divinity, as seen in granting miracles to those who present proper faith.

It is worth recalling that Jat devotees likewise stated that before twenty years ago they mostly just worshiped Hanuman in their homes. As I have documented, Hanuman, locally understood as Balaji, subsequently became externalized as a god of shrines and the object of pilgrimage—a very public act indeed. It also seems clear that *pitr*s are the most accessible class of divine beings from which to derive gods to populate the numerous new faith healing shrines of Rajasthan. As I noted in my research, these shrines are all fairly recent, and a deceased relative is obviously a resource for a spirit that requires little formality, outside of the conviction of the spirit’s presence through miraculous events. Thus, the rise of *pitr*s in public life may relate to local conditions specific to northeastern Rajasthan, where many new shrines were taking shape in the years after the Marwaris, and then the Jats, acclaimed Salasar Balaji as a god of miracles and increasingly arrived at local shrines looking for divine benefits.





Figure 7-2. *The pitr shrine in Ganesh Dham, Juliyasar.*



I have come across scholarship on the conventional categories of Hindu family spirits, but as yet nothing on the modern appropriation of such entities, as I argue here. For instance, David Knipe describes a *pitr* as the outcome of a year of ritual for the sake of the “*pret* or *jīva*” [in other words, the *ātmā*] that hovers in the world following cremation of the deceased.<sup>462</sup> He thus links the contemporary ritual feedings of such beings to rules concerning them in Sanskrit scripture. Hence, he does not consider the possibility of recent ontological change. As I suggested in the previous chapter, contemporary urban religious practices, and shrines in the countryside that receive urban patronage, are prone to innovation because the social context is in flux and faith healing intermediaries have much freedom to put together their own ritual protocols. So, in the *pitr* of Ganesh Dham we may be looking at one healer’s adaptation of domestic religiosity in line with the increased public desire to gain access to efficacious folk spirits during a time of increased pilgrimage to Rajasthan.

### Personalized Performances for Visitors

The medium of Ganesh Dham gives personal attention to his clients, and claims to see into their souls. He also puts on a convincing performance of possession and mastery of spirits to meet visitor expectations of a miracle shrine in the sacred land.<sup>463</sup> While demonstrating ritual efficacy, the healer also needs to maintain some element of mystery in his procedures, since he is representing invisible powers. Any healer is acting against a pervasive discourse (which I have extensively discussed at Salasar and Mehndipur) that would challenge his authenticity, so maintaining some element of mystery in the performance is one way of withholding powers from analytical observation. Although the healer of Ganesh Dham has set times for his performances, he will engage the spirits whenever a sufficient number of people have gathered. Receiving messages from the *pitr*, the healer may order visitors to stay for a certain amount of time—

possibly even a week—to complete the process of healing. To illustrate how he performs his work, I will describe two sessions witnessed at this *dhām* one Sunday, in which about a dozen people were in attendance.

As several family groups watched expectantly, the medium, facing away from them and towards the shrine, started to breathe very heavily and faster, indicating that the *śakti* of the *pitṛ* was entering him. Suddenly he blurted out “Say it, hail to the divine court!”<sup>464</sup> In response, the crowd immediately murmured: “Say it, hail to Pittar Lord!”<sup>465</sup> Then the medium said: “Say it, hail to the court of Salasar!”<sup>466</sup> Again, the crowd responded. The medium started calling forth different audience members, at times seemingly channeling not only the *pitṛ* of the shrine but also the deceased relatives of the visitors, who had messages for them. He frequently fell silent, and then loudly praised Balaji in conjunction with the *pitṛ*, thereby repeatedly reminding the audience that the deity of this shrine was a peer of Balaji. Keeping his back to the audience, the medium started addressing a woman who had remained silent: “Daughter, why don’t you remember me?”<sup>467</sup> The medium seemed to be virtually in tears as he channeled the woman’s late father. “You should support the development of shrines ... to save me [i.e. performing good acts for merit] ... you should place my picture [in a shrine] ... I am now in Sujangarh [a nearby market town].”<sup>468</sup> He alluded to a medical condition, which a doctor had been unable to cure. Finally the woman spoke up: “We’ll make it happen [revering the father in a shrine, as requested]!”<sup>469</sup> After further silence, the medium started repeating “Shyam! ... Shyam! ...” Each time, the woman repeated after him, seemingly in accord with his prescription for the resolution of her troubles.

In this instance, the problem at hand was that the *pitṛ* of a deceased relative had not been properly revered. In situations like this, the typical solution is for the family to build a shrine for

that spirit or dedicate a spot in a temple for him. In effect, this is what we saw happening on a mass scale with the numerous spirit altars set up in Mehndipur from at the least the 1990s. As briefly described in the chapter on Mehndipur, the other major kind of problem treated at faith healing shrines is spirit invasion instigated by an enemy, most often an uncle who is jealous of the prosperity of his brother's family, or who is in a dispute with them over property that they share. In such situations, the aggrieved relative may hire a *tāntrik* [sorcerer] to send an enslaved *ātmā* to harass the victimized family. On this particular day at Ganesh Dham, the healer likewise treated such a problem, this time speaking as the resident *pitṛ* to a family group:

What's your name, brother? ... Your test with Khatu Shyam is over ... but this is what you need to do, brother ... You haven't been coming to my idol lately ... Were you thinking I wouldn't save you? ... go out into the greenery [*hariyālī*] ... in that place, light a sacred flame ... do you follow me? ... Perform *pūjā* ... take your family with you ... make an offering ... [the spell] will go right to ... your enemy ... then place a coconut there ... make a shrine ... [and say] 'O God, from today on, deeper than the enmity of any enemy or the *tantra* of any *tāntrik*—protect the peace of my children, my family' ... you must do that ... [more heavy breathing] [at] 6 a.m. and 1 p.m. [recite] '*śri rām jai rām jai jai rām*' ... pray, brother ... honor me ... follow the path of devotion to Khatu Shyam ... you've been to my *pitṛ dhām*, so troubles and obstacles will be banished; everything will be fine ... I'm giving you a blessing, brother ... you honored me on *amāvasyā* [the day of revering *pitṛs*]... [You're making] good effort ... do one thing, brother—take some *bhabhūti* [sacred ash] ... you must obey these instructions ... brother, you need to feed this [deity] ... and performing service for the lord of the land—you must do good service for my *dhām*, brother ... it's sacred—this is God—feed him, treat him well, bring a coconut ... your work will come to fruition in eleven days ... the whole family must follow the rules ... and everything will be fine ... Say it, hail Shyam! [Audience: 'Hail Lord Pitṛ!'] [The medium becomes silent; everyone starts to get up].<sup>470</sup>

In the above passage, the medium speaks with the voice of the *pitṛ*, whereas in the earlier dialogue he seemed to be voicing the visitors' deceased father. Assistants at the shrine told me that the guru clairvoyantly knew the identity of the relative causing the harm, but would not reveal who it was so as not to exacerbate family discord, leaving the family to draw its own

conclusions. Besides, I was told, confronting an offending relative is pointless because once the spell has been cast, the originator is powerless to undo it, requiring the afflicted to come to a faith healing guru. This sort of intermediary service is quite unavailable in Salasar. In Chapter 3, I described the magical services that some Brahmins in Salasar provide for visitors who are willing to pay for extra ritual attention, but those services are centered on the recitation of *mantras* and scriptures and do not involve any direct dialogue with spirits. In this sense, Ganesh Dham participates in a peripheral spiritual economy that provides a service unavailable in Salasar. And the medium integrates Salasar into his work. He said that after treating clients, he sends them down the road to Salasar for a follow-up visit to Balaji, thus retaining that god as the ultimate authority over miracles.

#### *A Sister's Ghost Matches Mehndipur Balaji*

I will turn now to a second shrine, known as Agawani Dham, located around 25 kilometers from Salasar in the village of Bamaniya, to investigate how the female faith healer here integrates her work channeling the *pitr* of her deceased sister within the framework of devotion to Balaji. Focusing on integration with Balaji helps us to consider where any sort of ritual alignment or regional consciousness of Rajasthan as a collectivity of shrines comes into the picture. Inasmuch as Agawani Dham is more remote than Ganesh Dham, relative to Salasar, it receives fewer visitors. Structurally, the shrine is no more than a small room inside the healer's home. However, she states that she receives devotees from faraway cities—in other words, some of the same Marwaris who go to Salasar. The guru reasons that in modern Indian cities this kind of spiritual treatment is not available, which is what brings these visitors to her little *dhām*. This is indeed what I have argued: the Shekhawati countryside is a reservoir for magic seemingly

unobtainable in the modern city, and this popular perception has been promoted by the growth of such new shrines in tandem with the major Marwari temples like Salasar.

In this healer's shrine, I noticed that between two portraits of her deceased sister she had placed an event invitation from a devotional organization in Surat, a major industrial city with a large Marwari population, where Balaji is particularly favored. Like the Ganesh Dham healer, the Agawani Dham healer ritually incorporates Salasar, sometimes telling her clients to go there to receive blessings before she will treat them. Like many people in the region, she considers Salasar Balaji to be her *kuldev*, which means that despite the occult nature of her work, her primary allegiance is to Salasar Balaji, not Mehndipur Balaji. But, it is to Mehndipur's healers that she compares herself, since they are providing the same kind of services. As she says, since she already adequately treats *bhūt-pret* problems, she has no need to send people to Mehndipur. Therefore, she is effectively in competition with Mehndipur, but not with Salasar, which offers a different sort of service.

At the center of Agawani Dham's shrine room is a statue of Hanuman in his familiar monkey form (Figure 7-3). I did not notice a picture of Salasar Balaji, but the healer has multiple pictures of her sister, along with Lakshmi and a locally famous *sant*, Akaramji, who healed snakebites and was a contemporary of Mohan Das, the founder of Salasar. An inscription on the picture of the sister indicates that this family is of the Suntwal lineage of the Dadhich clan—the same as Salasar's *pujārīs*. According to the healer, it is Akaramji's *śakti* that operates through the deceased sister, who in turn works through the living sister. Hanuman is the ultimate power, but his chaste male divine power must not directly enter a female body (contrary to the explanation that the Delhi guru gave me in the previous chapter). Thus, the healer emphasized, it is actually Akaramji's power that enters her through her sister's *ātmā*.<sup>471</sup> Looking at this

analytically, I would say that, as at Ganesh Dham, here too, the path through which divine power is transmitted to the healer sidesteps potential conflicts with Salasar over doctrine (embodiment of Hanuman in a female body) and ritual authority (the *pujārīs*’ monopoly of Mohan Das and Salasar Balaji).



Figure 7-3. The shrine in Bamaniya.

The healer told me that when she sits at the shrine her departed sister takes over her. A visitor needing help is expected to bring a coconut, and the *pitr* working through the healer will then ask the visitor to wave it around his head seven times, after which the healer will examine it and correctly divine the problem. She will then give advice for the problem’s resolution and how many further visits and how much time might be required. The healer evidently sees herself as

working in tandem with Hanuman, as she limits her medium service for visitors to just Tuesdays and Saturdays, the special days for worship at any Hanuman-Balaji shrine. As she puts it, the deities whose images she keeps here all work together as a “parliament,” with Balaji as “prime minister.” This healer normally grants around 20 minutes per visitor; once the sister’s *pitr* has performed her work in the presence of the sacred flame [*jot*], she leaves the healer again.

As is so often the case, this healer has a magical narrative to explain how she came into her present work, which I will mention in shortened form. The older sister had always been a particularly devout follower of Balaji, and often read scriptures. This pious woman had forecast to her younger sister, the present faith healer, exactly when she would die, and then experienced a *jīvit samādhi* [self-appointed conscious death] on a full moon—Hanuman’s holiest day—around 30 years ago in the Hindu month of Asoj at 4 p.m., exactly as expected. The departed older sister had commanded the younger sister to marry her husband after she would be gone. Five years after her death, the older sister’s *ātmā* came to the living sister during the wedding of a cousin. The wedding guests had been singing all night when the younger sister started speaking in the voice of the deceased older sister.<sup>472</sup> In the same moment that the sister’s spirit spoke, the door to the room opened by itself; the guests tried to close it but the voice of the sister said to leave it open, and to perform *pūjā* to her in the morning. But the guests did not understand and locked it shut anyway. And yet, the door “automatically” opened again. The sister’s voice then said to bring ghee and other ritual materials. At this point, everyone realized that this was the spirit of the dead sister. Gradually, by the early 1990s, people started to come to this healer for supernatural services. As a Dadhich Brahmin, her local connections helped to spread word of her abilities through Salasar’s Marwari devotional network, as pilgrimage to that shrine rose throughout the 1990s.

As evidence that this healer's work is equal to what is obtained in Mehndipur, she mentioned that three days earlier a woman from Bikaner, who had been regularly coming to see her, had resolved a problem here for which she had unsuccessfully sought treatment in Mehndipur over a period of ten years. As at Ganesh Dham, this healer claims effectiveness and timeliness in her work, in addition to providing personal attention. As this healer described it, an *ātmā* that had possessed the woman would not leave. On the first day that this woman had arrived in Bamaniya with her relatives, she started violently pulling away as the bad spirit in her cried out, "Don't bring me here [*Mujhe yahān mat le calo!*]" But two male relatives grabbed her and forced her to the feet of the healer at the shrine, whereupon she immediately became quiet because of the shrine's healing effect. The healer then questioned the invading spirit before the sacred fire in her shrine, later telling the woman to apply holy water from the nearby memorial shrine of Akaramji to the gate in front of the *dhām* and to bring a wish coconut from Salasar. Nowadays, thanks to the Agawani faith healer, the woman has found peace. This story illustrates that, as with the Maharaj at the other *dhām*, the Agawani healer regards her work as a supplement to Salasar, not in competition with it. By aligning her *dhām* with Salasar Balaji, she provides devotees of Balaji a pathway to treat occult problems within the rubric of Shekhawati spiritual locality, thereby obviating the need for them to go to Mehndipur.

### 7.3 On the Periphery of Balaji's Realm

#### *Faith from Afar*

Having looked at devotion to Balaji near the heart of Salasar Balaji's territory, I will now shift the focus to the periphery. Again, my aim will be to discern to what extent a sense of sacred regional territory enters into the discourse. The two cases of devotion that I will present in this section are located at the western and eastern extremes of Salasar Balaji's region of devotion. As



I had delineated in Chapter 4, this area starts at the Pakistan border and runs east to Bhiwani District in Haryana, with a breadth of around 100 to 200 kilometers north and south of the Rajasthan border. The periphery of this region presents a devotional dynamic somewhat different from the center. These shrines at the edge do not share pilgrims with Salasar in the same way, since they are distant from it. That is, pilgrims from surrounding towns and cities come to these shrines, and also congregate here to embark on mass pilgrimages to Salasar under the guidance of the faith healing gurus of these shrines. In the two cases to be discussed here, the healers work directly under the power of Hanuman rather than through an intermediary *pitṛ*. This may be only coincidental, although I am tempted to think that this reflects the fact that at this greater distance from Salasar these healers are less concerned about conflicts over ritual authority (with Salasar's *pujārīs*) in representing the god.

A second point to be emphasized in this section is that these shrines have monthly *jāgrans* on the night before the full moon. These events celebrate not only the god but also the healer's magical power, not unlike what we saw in the Mumbai *kīrtan* of the previous chapter. However, unlike so many of the members of devotional *maṇḍals* in Mumbai and other cities, the healers of these sites in the countryside are not businessmen. Some have farms or smalltime occupations, but by and large they have retired from other work to become faith healers. Therefore, they do not have the resources to stage the kind of ostentatious public *jāgrans* that would bring together urban mercantile society. Instead, these *jāgrans* in the countryside are more intimate, local events, although attracting some devotees from towns and cities in a broad area more than villagers from the immediate vicinity. In essence, these monthly events are formal elaborations of the guru's weekly sessions of divination and healing. When there is a specific building project or related devotional agenda at hand, the healer may use the *jāgrāṇ* as an opportunity to

broadly appeal for funding. These events are also a time to mobilize devotees in anticipation of a pilgrimage to Salasar.

### Religious Mobilization at a Jāgran

Ektali Dham, in the large town of Gharsana, a few miles from the Pakistan border in northwestern Rajasthan, currently amounts to a basement and half a shell of a concrete building above that. The faith healing guru has been overseeing the temple's gradual construction since starting this *dhām* a decade ago. The unfinished ground level of this shrine has no statues yet, but has a few pictures of gods, along with the Sikh guru, Nanak Dev—hinting at the fact that much of the shrine's clientele comes from nearby Punjab. It seems likely that Sikhs have joined in the broader Hindu societal turn towards finding religious remedies for everyday life. So, they come to this shrine to handle occult problems that would not be admissible in mainstream Sikh practice due to the orthodox Sikh discouragement of faith healers. At the end of this chapter, when we arrive at Babosa, we will see a parallel movement among Jains against orthodox practice in favor of miracles and faith healer-mediated worship.

The healer of Ektali Dham said that when he formerly operated a tea stall on the spot of the present *dhām*, he was not making enough income to support his family. A pivotal moment came when his son was gravely ill and doctors told the man that nothing could be done. A bus driver he knew suggested that he pray to Hanuman, which he did, and the boy miraculously recovered. At that time, this healer-to-be discovered he had the power to summon the god for the sake of others, and so, following Hanuman's protocol, he began to treat clients for myriad troubles on Tuesdays and Saturdays. In his sparse temple basement he keeps a painted placard that depicts Hanuman shining a ray of *śakti* on the bus driver (whom this healer considers to be his guru), and then to his own parents, and finally to himself, simply labeled “*bhakt*” [devotee] at the

bottom of the poster. As is the case with most healers, his method of treatment does not involve much scriptural work. Clients come close to his ritual fire, set up in the shrine, and there he recites some *mantras* and gives them sacred ash to ingest each day. The healer often admonishes his clients for allegedly eating meat or drinking alcohol, which are sins, and are the main reason people become sick (due to their karmic effects), even though his clients may try to deny his accusations. Setting an example of the kind of purified living that would stave off illness, the healer said he consumes only milk and water each day.

The healer, who characteristically speaks very rapidly and animatedly, vigorously promotes his own magical abilities. On the first occasion that I arrived at the *dhām*, I observed him treat around a dozen clients. One man arrived with his head completely hidden in a cloth, as he was too ashamed to be seen in public. Lying before the fire, his face was uncovered, revealing that a portion of his skull next to his eye had been removed due to an operation for cancer, leaving a large hole. After some *mantras*, the guru stuffed sacred ash into the hole and gave the man some more to take home. Others approached with similarly dire physical problems. Noticing me in the back of the crowd, the guru passed me several printed testimonials in Hindi from former clients whom he had successfully treated. The testimonials told familiar stories of incapable doctors, which ended with the clients finding success with this healer. These stories spoke of acts of gratitude in response for the healer's work: one client wrote that he gave the shrine 250 bricks (for construction), 21 kilograms of *savāmani* food [in other words, a donation of money to host a ceremonial feast], and apparently an additional money donation of an unspecified amount.<sup>473</sup> Insofar as the healer said that he has no other livelihood, such donations are his main income, although he stated that any gifts go to building the shrine.

It was when I showed up a few weeks later to see the monthly *jāgrāṇ* that I got a chance to fully see the healer's methods of engaging devotees. For most of the event, a singer led the crowd of around 300 in songs of devotion that focused entirely on Salasar Balaji or Hanuman. Intermittent announcements made clear that Salasar Balaji was the local lord here. A man came to the stage and spoke of details of the annual walking *yātrā* that devotees would perform from here to Salasar. It would last five days and be organized through this shrine. The guru had earlier said to me that 2,000 people annually joined him for this walk. But, the voice of the man on the stage was temporarily obliterated by a possessed woman's screams from near the sacred fire, accompanied by repeated loud thwacks as someone hit her hard with a stick. A bad spirit was begging for mercy. Acknowledging the godly work at hand, the man on stage interjected, "Say it, hail Salasar Dham!" Before long, a possessed man, howling loudly, came running from outside through the seated audience up to the healer by the fire. Although exorcism would be out of place in Salasar, shrines such as this, which reference Salasar Balaji as a source of divine power, serve a supplementary role in providing such a service. Far from Salasar, the healer has more freedom to improvise his own spiritual regime with less concern for impinging on the authority of Salasar's *pujārīs*.

The *jāgrāṇ* soon took a turn that I had not witnessed before. Several devotees came up to the stage to personally testify of miracles through the intervention of the guru. A man said his child was cured of illness, and that he had known only prosperity since coming to Ektali Dham. Another man stated that he had walked here for this event in a group of 20 from 50 kilometers away in gratitude for the fulfillment of his wish to get an "IT" job. He noted that his companions had similarly realized their wishes arising from financial problems [*ārthik samasyā*], illness, and so on. Because of these miracles, he had been coming to Ektali Dham each month. Further, he

said with elation, this year he would walk to Salasar for the first time! The crowd roared with him, “Hail, Salasar Dham!” Later, between some *bhajans* set to Rajasthani melodies, the singer exhorted the crowd, “Have faith in Salasar Hanuman!” Hence, although the occult methods of this *dhām* are at odds with the ban on faith healing in Salasar, the god of Salasar is hailed as the ultimate power behind the healer’s work. Therefore, since healers of this holy land over which Salasar Balaji rules have considerable local freedom, “Rajasthan” as a marker for miracle shrines does not entail a single doctrine of practice (in the mode of Salasar) but encompasses considerable diversity.

Towards midnight, the guru himself spoke to the audience for almost an hour, referring to the need for husbands to stop drinking, so as to restore domestic life. He noted that a husband who gave up drinking but continued to smoke *bīḍīs* [local cigarettes] still brought spiritual suffering into his home. He then introduced stories of sick children healed through faith in this shrine, including one who was brought here after a hospital in Jaipur had asked for 500,000 rupees to operate. The guru then called forth all those who had walked to this event in gratitude for divine assistance in giving up alcohol. A *yātrī* approached the stage and handed the healer 100 rupees in gratitude, which he refused while commenting that someone had earlier offered 1,000 rupees.

It seems that treatment for alcoholism is an important dimension of the work here, as at so many faith healing shrines in Rajasthan. At this *jāgran*, the rhetoric of alcoholism as a religious project under the watch of Balaji, in which the client is encouraged to publicly acknowledge his problem, may strike us as similar to the classic model of Alcoholics Anonymous in the West, in which a higher being is understood to watch over the individual in recovery.<sup>474</sup> The current Western therapeutic perspective that alcoholism is an illness rather than a moral defect might find resonance in the Hindu theory that many afflictions are externally induced (like an illness)

through spirit attack. On the other hand, as devotees agree, immoral behavior weakens the *ātmā*, which makes one susceptible to spirit attack. I was told that the ghosts of alcoholics typically drive their living victims to behave similarly.

Throughout the *jāgrāṇ* at Ektali Dham, temple assistants announced that one person or another had now made a donation for a *savāmanī* (in gratitude for a wish fulfilled). These periodic updates seemed to be giving the audience the exciting impression that miracles were taking place right and left as the event unfolded. The emotional trajectory of the event—the songs for Balaji, possessed devotees screaming, stories of miraculous healings, the impending journey to Salasar—brings to mind the phenomenon of Christian Pentecostalism, which has been theorized as a way of making sense of life in a rapidly developing society, as seen in countries with emerging economies. Throughout this study, I have been suggesting socioeconomic approaches to understanding religious change, so the Pentecostalism-economic globalization dynamic has potential for comparison. Out of many possible examples of scholarship on Pentecostalism, I would note Girish Daswami's argument that Ghanaian international migration and the need to "seek one's fortune" in a global economy has spurred the rise in faith in Pentecostal prophets. These leaders offer guidance in negotiating Westernizing culture and can help to achieve one's personal aims through faith.<sup>475</sup> Within India itself, not only Marwaris but also innumerable working-class people have left their ancestral homes to find work in the city. Therefore, I would consider the likelihood that seeking charismatic healers in the countryside similarly endows one with the purified *śakti* necessary to return to compete in the urbanized pan-Indian market economy.<sup>476</sup>

### Multiple Gods for Greater Power

We will now shift to a *dhām* at the eastern end of Salasar Balaji's domain that is in many respects similar to Ektali Dham, but which exemplifies what can happen when a shrine is located at the intersection of geographical fields of devotion to multiple local deities. Our subject, Malawana Dham, is near the town of Loharu, in Bhiwani District, southern Haryana. From this point to the east, devotion to Salasar Balaji gives way to primary allegiance to Khatu Shyam. When I had gone to the main shrine of Khatu Shyam for Holi, its grandest festival, I saw that the largest proportion of pilgrims arriving on foot came from the region directly east of Loharu. Within the world of Hanuman-centric worship, as we move east from Loharu, allegiance to Mehndipur Balaji also becomes stronger. The healer presiding over Malawana Dham, a recently married young man, has assembled a convincing magical profile by combining all three of the major regional deities—the two Balajis and Khatu Shyam—in his work. Hence, as we have seen at other new shrines in Rajasthan, this healer provides faith healing services—frowned on in Salasar itself—even as he looks to Salasar Balaji is his *iṣṭadev* or most favored deity. He had attained his power through many austerities; at the time that I first met him, he was following a 21-day regimen of remaining standing daily from 12 noon to 2 a.m., to be followed at the end of the process by sitting on the hot embers of a fire as Brahmins recite *mantras*. It appears that this healer draws from every available avenue of spiritual power, as befits his location at the crossroads of divine territories.

Like Ektali Dham, Malawana Dham is around a decade old and remains in a rudimentary state of construction, with little more than a concrete floor. But, it is already endowed with a main niche foregrounding a statue of Hanuman in his standard monkey form, with small images of Ram Darbar and Durga, and below them Ganesh and Shirdi Sai Baba. A framed picture of

Salasar Balaji stands at one side, and a statue of Khatu Shyam covered with flowers rests on the floor. Outdoors and facing this shrine is a large relief panel of seven *sants* who have significance for this healer's eclectic practice (Figure 7-4). On the far left is a relief of bald Ganeshpuri or Samadhiwala Baba, the famous *mahant* of Mehndipur now revered as a god. Next, we come to



Figure 7-4. Seven gurus at Malawana Shrine in Loharu.

Mohan Das, the founder of Salasar Dham. Third is a locally known *sant* [known as *dādā guru ke gurujī*] from nearby Jhunjhunu District. Then we see Gorakhnath, the founder of the Nath ascetic movement, whose birthplace, to the north of Salasar, is a major pilgrimage shrine. Sixth is the granduncle [*pardādājī*] of the healer, who had become a *pitṛ*. Sixth, we come to a *sant* of



the healer's own village, who was known as a devotee of Khatu Shyam. And last, a *sant* whose name I could not catch but who was renowned for picking locks with a peacock feather. In short, the divine arrangement of this *dhām* correlates with its position at the center of multiple fields of divine power, and at the same time situates the present-day healer as someone able to draw from



Figure 7-5. Prayer at Malawana Shrine in Loharu.

these different sources (Figure 7-5).

Just as the healer tells his devotees to go to any of the big three gods according to their desire—Salasar Balaji, Mehndipur Balaji, and Khatu Shyam—so too, his style of treating devotees is eclectic. While receiving followers, he often holds a *kartāl*, a long rattle instrument

used to accompany *bhajans*. Since *bhajans* typically cause afflicting spirits to emerge from their victims (in other words, the performance of possession), the *kartāl* symbolizes the immanent power to remove such spirits, as in exorcism. When receiving clients, this *bhagat* gives clairvoyant advice but also prescribes standard scriptures as therapy. I observed him treat a girl who had a stomach problem. After some questioning, he told the parents that the illness had been caused by a granduncle's [*tāūjī's*] *ātmā*, which had not found peace because he had once killed someone. On account of the crime, the prescription was for this family to recite *Hanumān cālīsā* daily, something that would not be out of place in Salasar. This healer's multiple divine allegiances belie the either / or binary that Salasar's Brahmin *pujārīs* imagine between their doctrine and that of occult faith healers, especially when they talk about Mehndipur. Going against the Salasar-enforced binary, then, we could say that healers at many of the various new *dhāms* in the region do not strictly rely on exorcism for its own sake but adopt whatever methods will help them to claim special powers to attract clients.

As at Ektali Dham, the healer of Malawana Dham has acquired a following from the surrounding region, but not strictly from the town of Loharu. Earlier in this study I noted that locals often revile faith healers while urbanites from afar favor them for their magical abilities. Generally, local animosity has to do with suspicions that the faith healer privileges those from far away, who are likely to offer better donations, which locals allege the faith healer keeps from the villagers. However, the two healers discussed in this section seem to have made themselves indispensable to their respective regional clienteles not only through offering a compelling presentation of magic, but also in organizing periodic foot *yātrās* to shrines such as Salasar, and hosting *jāgrans* on the night before the full moon each month. A devotee met at Malawana Dham told me that the healer takes his followers to Salasar every three months. Each time, the

healer helped assemble two tractors of provisions for the journey. Locals whispered that the healer “has a lot of money” [*unke pās bahut paise*] from his healing work, but they acknowledge that devotees make donations only according to their own preference, after the miracle has been granted.

At Malawana Dham’s monthly *jāgrāṇ*, the central ground at the event was roped off like a boxing ring, and throughout the night as many as twenty devotees entered it to shake and writhe in possession. The overall tone of this event was very similar to Mehndipur-oriented *kīrtans*, such as the one I described in Mumbai. By interesting coincidence, though, a Marwari-sponsored *jāgrāṇ* in Loharu town unrelated to this *dhām* had taken place some days earlier, providing an excellent contrast between these two models of public religious events. The Loharu *jāgrāṇ*, dedicated to Khatu Shyam, had been put on as a homecoming event for some Marwaris from Mumbai who had made some donations to the home area.

The Marwari *jāgrāṇ* in Loharu initially resembled the big-city extravaganzas I described in the previous chapter, including speeches made to honor the visiting Marwari notables. But, a *pujārī* in attendance had also invited the Malawana healer to sit with the officiators on stage. Around 2 a.m., the *bhagat* began to sway and then dramatically turn somersaults on the stage—an indication that the power of Khatu Shyam had entered him. Locals in the audience needing treatment for ailments rushed to the stage to gain his blessings and advice. In upstaging the Marwari *jāgrāṇ*, this healer exposed the fundamental weakness in Marwari Rajasthan-based religiosity that I noted earlier in this study. That is, this system of worship enables diasporic Marwari social solidarity in the city but makes no formal provision for guru-mediated supernatural treatment. This is the problem to which we will return at the end of this chapter with the cult of Babosa, the guru-mediated Marwari deity.

Based on the case studies of *dhāms* seen so far, then, it can be asserted that faith healers employ a wide variety of techniques to serve the public, regardless of the doctrine in force in Salasar, and that they are quite open to innovation. Taking measure of this diversity, I would revisit Milton Singer's thesis that urbanization reconfigures rural religiosity. In making that assertion, he assumes a stable rural context that is an ongoing preserve of traditional life. On account of the rural devotional diversity and innovation documented in this chapter, I think that this city versus countryside binary no longer works so cleanly. The countryside, too, is now changing, although I have noted that many Indians themselves see Rajasthan as a backwater. In the model of religiosity in Rajasthan that I would suggest, country shrines like Salasar and Mehndipur are a staging ground for the development of new religiosities, in which urban visitors seeking magical services participate. Beneath the ideology of Rajasthan as a place of tradition, the major temples are fully engaged with the interests of their biggest patrons, who come from distant cities. Pilgrimage has primed the region for setting up many small new shrines that owe allegiance to the larger shrines but ultimately follow the individual paths of their presiding faith healers in serving visitors. Thus, I suggest, the city does not remain in the city, but continually interacts with the countryside, spurring new devotional forms.

#### 7.4 Shrines for Mehndipur Balaji

##### *Embodying Balaji*

Considering how distinct Mehndipur is from Salasar, it might seem surprising that shrines in the Rajasthani countryside that are oriented to Mehndipur Balaji are not very different from those dedicated to Salasar Balaji. In both cases, faith healing is the norm; the main difference is that shrines owing allegiance to Mehndipur make little formal reference to Salasar even though they are located within the same region. Although I visited several Mehndipur-oriented shrines, I will

discuss only one in this section. The case to be looked at here involves a healer who speaks with the voice of Balaji, not unlike what we saw at Ganesh Dham earlier in this chapter. The notion that one can fully embody Hanuman and speak with his voice is controversial among the Indian public. Many respondents flatly denied that this god could take abode in a human body, as his *śakti* is so great that it would cause any human vessel to “explode.” People seem to be uncomfortable with the idea that Hanuman, despite his accessibility, would be commensurate with a human. And, some may have differing ideas about what constitutes respectable possession.

There are countless examples of local deities speaking through mediums in village settings, which might be easily categorized as village beliefs, but when it comes to a deity with pan-Indian connections, such as Hanuman (or Balaji), then it is offensive to some to think that any one individual can speak for him. Exploring the idea of contesting divine identities in possession, William Sax, who has written extensively on Himalayan spirit mediums, mentions a case where Duryodhana, a villainous character from the *Mahābhārata*, the pan-Indian epic, is believed by the inhabitants of one mountain valley to live on as a local deity who speaks to them.<sup>477</sup> Sax reports that outsiders unfamiliar with this manifestation of a villain think it is absurd to think that he has been reconfigured in a local setting rather than only in terms of pan-Indian scripture. But, in the world of faith healing, where individual healers perform as autonomous agents and set the rules for the shrines they operate, embodying Hanuman or Mehndipur Balaji is simply one of a range of strategies for the healer to demonstrate his magical abilities. And, we may theorize, the choice of embodying Hanuman in this region of Rajasthan is a nod to the popularity of Balaji’s two main temples.

The shrine that I will discuss, Sinduri Balaji Dham, was founded in its present form in 2009 in the town of Kesri Singhpur, located almost at the Pakistan border, and very near to the state border with Punjab. Despite its allegiance to Mehndipur Balaji, it is far from Mehndipur. Hence, the shrine appeals as a local substitute for the long journey to Mehndipur, and therefore is a power source in its own right. Few if any people in Mehndipur have likely even heard of this small but pleasant shrine built within the home compound of its presiding faith healer. But, the significance of this shrine is that it exemplifies how devotion to Mehndipur Balaji is expanding within Salasar Balaji's geographical domain. To reiterate, we can define Salasar Balaji's regional territory as the adjoining area from which most visitors arrive in Salasar on foot and by vehicle. The geographical overlay of shrines oriented to Mehndipur Balaji thus produces multiple layers of spiritual power nodes, which adds to devotional diversity in the region.

The central idol of the main niche in the Kesri Singhpur shrine is Hanuman in his popular mountain-lifting pose. The niche is also populated with numerous lesser images, such as Radha-Krishna, Sita-Rama, Ramdev, the healer's own guru, and pictures of Hanuman. Numerous posters of deities (especially Ramdev) and sacred texts (such as *Hanumān cālīsā*) adorn the walls (Figure 7-6). A small shrine for the healer's original *sindūrī* Hanuman, dating from 16 years ago (and covered in *sindūr*), along with a generic picture of Bhairu and one of Mehndipur Balaji, and several small *pitr* statues, pieces of red cloth, wish coconuts, and other ritual implements round out the scene. I saw no images of Salasar Balaji, however. The presence of a small *sindūrī* Hanuman is found at virtually all the Hanuman-centric shrines mentioned in this study, and registers the earliest dedication of the site as a place of worship. Eventually, funds permitting, a full-fledged temple is built, but the little Hanuman remains an object for making wishes. As usual, Tuesdays and Saturdays are the time for organized evening *pūjā in the sindūrī Hanuman*



*shrine*. The main attraction is the healer's embodiment of Hanuman. Around sixty people had gathered on the day I attended the event. As at most devotional gatherings noted in this study, men and women tended to congregate on opposite sides of the room. By 8:30 p.m., a *sevak* had put on a recording of *bhajans* for Hanuman. At 9 p.m. the healer entered wearing an orange



Figure 7-6. Interior of the shrine in Kesri Singhpur.

outfit and an orange turban. Near the main image, he prepared a ritual fire. A *sevak* placed a *kartāl* instrument—so frequently seen at faith healing sessions in Rajasthan—next to the healer. As in Mehndipur itself, devotees had earlier brought forward coconuts for *arzī* or petitions for the god to rid them of their troubles. Speaking through the healer, Hanuman would be expected to know the nature of every visitor's problems solely from the coconuts, without prior discussion.

At 9:17, the healer sat facing the main image of Hanuman and away from the devotees. At 9:24, the *sevak* pulled closed a red curtain behind him, which was not opened again until near the end of the session. I later learned that the curtain was necessary because, as Balaji-Hanuman is famously celibate, he must not be visible during possession to female devotees who approach the shrine during this event.<sup>478</sup> The assembled crowd soon started singing *kīrtans*, first for Ganesh and then for Anjani Mata, Hanuman’s mother. They settled on one particular phrase, “*Śrī rām jai rām jai jai rām*,” the well-known *Rām nām jāp* [recitation], repeating it many times. I found out that this is the foundational chant utilized here to invoke the divine, functionally the same as “*Jai bābā kī*” in Mehndipur and Salasar, and it was the recitation of this *jāp* that signaled the moment when the god would enter the healer behind the curtain.

The healer’s several *sevaks* led the crowd in praising key gods and shrines: “Hail, Shyam! ... Hail, Mehndipur Dham! ... Hail, Salasar Dham!” In this moment, at least, Mehndipur, Salasar, and presumably Khatu Shyam were invoked as the major pilgrimage shrines of this part of Rajasthan, thereby delineating the scope of the holy land that I have been discussing. Throughout these acclamations, I heard animal-like growling from behind the curtain. Hanuman had arrived, and was making his presence known.<sup>479</sup> The crowd became quiet, and a *sevak* then called one group forward to consult with the god, and continued in this manner for the next hour. Speaking through the healer, Hanuman was audible but virtually incoherent, as he spoke in staccato spurts rather than well-formed sentences, as if the healer’s body could barely manage this huge input of divine energy. Given this incomprehensibility, the *sevaks* assumed the critical role of interpreting between the god and the devotees seeking assistance. As the actual dialogue was exceedingly garbled—even to devotees—I was only able to follow it on a rudimentary level.



As is so often the case, when each client came forward, the healer initially demonstrated his inner knowledge of his or her “total history” (as devotees said) by stating the nature of the problem at hand. A *sevak* would then confirm with the devotee that what the god had said was accurate. Throughout these consultations, the curtain hiding the healer would occasionally stray to the side, momentarily showing him sitting with his arms seemingly outstretched towards the image of Ramdev on horseback next to Hanuman. As far as I could ascertain, the problems presented were quite typical. One woman was told she had been attacked by a bad *ātmā*, and an elderly man got a spiritual prescription for his sick grandson. Each time, Hanuman would hail Rama or Balaji to signal that a consultation was over. Sometimes the healer would call people forward only to send them back because he had not accepted their *arzī*. After some 15 people had been personally treated, the crowd started to chant the *Rām nām jāp* again. At this point, the healer suddenly lurched forward—an arm now outstretched towards the Hanuman statue—and then fell backwards into the arms of a *sevak*, indicating that Hanuman’s *śakti* had returned to the idol.

Given the obvious importance of the healer’s ability to perform as Hanuman to resolve problems, it could be useful to consider scholarship theorizing possession as a kind of performance. As Richard Schechner has emphasized, performance is fundamentally transformative, for the performer as much as the audience, inasmuch as the former puts on new guises, but also potentially affects relationships with the audience.<sup>480</sup> That is, mediums inculcate a relationship between the devotees and the divine—accepting wish coconuts, calling them forth, and telling them about their problems—which enables them to remove malevolent spirits. But I have found that the discursive element, so critical to the possession seen at virtually all of the shrines in this study, is rather muted in performance theory. In *bhajans*, the words of songs

invoke the presence of the god, which forces the invading *ātmā* to the surface. And when the faith healer treats the possessed, he typically engages the *ātmā* in a dialogue to ultimately liberate it, along with the afflicted. So too, at the Kesri Singhpur shrine, when the healer channels the divine, the meaning of the words he utters is all-important—so much so that *sevaks* are needed to interpret his strange communication.

Of course, scholarly work also focuses on the discursive dimension of performance. As one instance, in a chapter on communication practices between spirits and humans in Zanzibar, Kjersti Larsen describes these interactions as facilitating “negotiations of social relationships and realities.”<sup>481</sup> In the preceding vignette of possession, a relationship with Balaji is indeed being verbally worked out. Given the problem of what to do with the somewhat incoherent mode of divine communication in our case, I would also cite Edward Schieffelin’s work on possession in New Guinea, where he tells us that the actual meaning of words spoken is less critical than the interactional structure of dialogue with the divine, which facilitates a psychic transformation within the audience.<sup>482</sup> Inserting this approach into our own discussion, the choppy style of the healer’s speaking (as Hanuman) conveys the otherworldliness of the being who is channeled, which is critical for the audience to accept what the healer is saying as the words of the god.

### *Mehndipur Balaji in a New Locale*

I will add a note here to elucidate how Mehndipur Balaji has become integral to a locale that is far removed from Mehndipur itself, and closer to Salasar. As with all the shrines in this chapter, our originating point is the life story of the presiding faith healer himself. At age seven or eight—approximately 1994—he was taken to Mehndipur with his family, and acquired a small image of Balaji covered with the word “*rām*,” which sparked his interest in the monkey god. One day, while working alone in his family’s tailor shop, he suddenly felt as if an electrical

current was going through him. As he described it, Balaji's *śakti* entered him from the top of his head, and gradually sunk to his feet. At that moment, he started to growl like a monkey for the first time, which to this day remains his core act of embodiment. However, once this had passed after a few minutes, he stopped talking at all for two years. His worried parents took him to a guru in Junjala, Nagaur District, who perceived that God had entered the boy, and so made him his disciple [*celā*]. Nowadays, that guru's picture stands next to Ramdev and Balaji in the main niche of the guru's shrine.

The guru of Junjala had forecast that an auspicious *jāgrāṇ* would restore the boy's voice. As it turned out, two years later, when the boy was 15, a family in his hometown sponsored a *jāgrāṇ* for Balaji in return for a wish granted. At this event, the boy started to speak with the voice of Mehndipur Balaji, but there was a youth of the host family who also became possessed on that occasion and started to speak as Pretraj, Balaji's assistant and former rival from Mehndipur. The two gods entered into an argument [*baheś*] for half an hour over who had greater power. Eventually, Pretraj abandoned his boy-medium because the boy's faith had not been sufficient. At that moment, Pretraj's medium's cell phone broke (supposedly in 1999), signifying the withdrawal of his ability to conduct divine discourse. Thus Balaji's medium was left as the undisputed charismatic healer of the neighborhood. Although Balaji again left the healer at that point, this boy then demonstrated his devotion to the god in reciting the *Rām nām jāp* 100,000 times in his home, the site of his future shrine, as a confirmation of his faith. And so, he becomes possessed with the god whenever his devotees gather and chant the *Rām nām jāp*. The healer also typically prescribes the recitation of this *jāp* to treat devotees' problems. Devotees said they typically give 100 or 200 rupees to the healer for these services, which the healer acknowledged, but noted that people pay according to their own desire.

The healer made clear to me that it is not simply Hanuman but Mehndipur Balaji who guides him. Although the main statue in his shrine is a generic Hanuman, when the healer is possessed it is truly Mehndipur Balaji who enters him, as the monkey-like growling is indicative of this god's particular fierceness in attacking offending spirits. When devotees' wishes have been granted at Sinduri Balaji Dham, they often visit Mehndipur in gratitude, which proves that they regard that site as Balaji's ultimate home, with the shrine in Kesri Singhpur as a branch. For some difficult-to-treat cases, the healer even accompanies his afflicted followers to Mehndipur. Devotees also routinely stop here [*sab se pehle yahān ānā*] before making a journey to Mehndipur on their own initiative. Inasmuch as Salasar is nearer, many devotees who come to this *dhām*, and the healer himself, go to Salasar up to several times a year for routine blessings. From these practices, we can see that there is little real difference in seeking a resolution to one's troubles at a faith healing shrine affiliated to Mehndipur as opposed to Salasar, and furthermore that healers may visit both of Balaji's main temples. The principal difference has to do with how those main temples are integrated into the treatment; those healers who more closely identify with Mehndipur will send their clients there first rather than to Salasar.

The worship of Mehndipur Balaji at a branch shrine such as Sinduri Balaji Dham, far from the main temple, easily coexists with other belief systems and shrines of the region as an additional option for miracles, and does not singularly stand out in the public mind as a place of spiritual danger in the way that Mehndipur does, with its exorcism and other occult practices. Sites like Sinduri Balaji Dham are not just connected to Mehndipur but also participate in the local social and spiritual landscape. For instance, the healer himself was a follower of Ramdev by birth, and his tailor-caste family regards this god as their *kuldev*. On some occasions, the healer even speaks with the voice of Ramdev, whose figure on horseback is next to Balaji in his shrine.<sup>483</sup>

Due to the *dhām*'s location so close to Punjab, many Sikh devotees come here, just as some go to Salasar. As Ron Geaves tells us, pilgrimage and magical acts are formally frowned upon in Khalsa Sikhism.<sup>484</sup> Geaves notes, though, that this separation is itself a twentieth-century historical development, and was not so evident in earlier times, when Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims commonly visited shrines of all faiths.<sup>485</sup> Finding continuing evidence of such combined worship, Geaves highlights hill shrines where Hanuman and other deities are now worshiped, which constitute “a Hindu [devotional] movement with a Sikh following.”<sup>486</sup> But, I would go a step further in suggesting that even though such mixing of traditions was already normal in the old days, in the last decade we may be seeing a heightened disposition among many Sikhs to go to such healing shrines. This would parallel the popular Hindu turn to miracle shrines in northwestern India, including Rajasthan. The stories of miracles associated with Balaji's local manifestations have traveled widely in Marwari and Jat communities, and I have noted the recent spread of devotion to Mehndipur Balaji in mercantile communities of northern Punjab, so Balaji has entered into Punjabi life from both directions (Salasar and Mehndipur).

I will mention an instance of a Sikh devotee of Balaji met at the shrine in Kesri Singhpur, which illustrates how the search for miracles enters into a Sikh devotional narrative. This man, from a village in Bathinda District, Punjab, described Guru Nanak Dev as his *kuldev*, thus framing Sikh devotion in common Hindu terminology. Further, he said he regularly goes to Salasar to get blessings for his business—otherwise it would “go bad” [*kharāb ho jāegā*]. This point suggests that he has given heed to the many stories of miracles of prosperity connected to Salasar. Additionally, he annually goes to Runicha, Ramdev's shrine in Rajasthan, for its main festival. And so, it happened that when this man wanted a son, his father took a wish coconut to

Runicha to facilitate that. A son was indeed born, but came prematurely at seven months.

Although the child was given close care in the hospital, he died after 17 days.

Seeking answers, the man came to Sinduri Balaji Dham, which he had earlier learned about when selling wheat from his farm to a local grain merchant (*seth*, hence Marwari), who had been a longtime devotee here. Consulting the healer-as-Balaji, he learned that when his father had offered flowers to Ramdev, an electric fan in the shrine had blown one to the floor, which marred the effect of his devotion. This was the cause for the premature birth. Then, he learned, when the child was in the hospital the male nurse on duty was prone to drinking whiskey, which had a “negative effect.” The nurse’s accumulated bad karma resulted in the baby’s death. Indeed, it is very common at faith healing shrines for healers to state that an illness is the result of misbehavior not simply on the part of the afflicted but someone else in the home; one’s environment, such as family, can have an influence.

Having learned what had gone wrong, this Sikh man was of course saddened, and decided that he should seek forgiveness from Balaji. So, he regularly came to Sinduri Balaji Dham. The healer fasted and prayed on his behalf, and soon a second son was born and survived. Then, other improvements came. Due to the healer’s intercession with Balaji, this man was divinely cleared for a loan that had been blocked, and was able to purchase a tractor and a motorcycle. He now reasons that perhaps Balaji had acted in mercy, since his child’s premature birth could have resulted in lifelong disability. This man said that from his experience he has learned the importance of faith, even in times of hardship, which is a kind of test. In this respect, his perspective on the primacy of faith in everyday practice and winning benefits is the same as normative Hindu devotees of Balaji. He observed that Sikhs do not have a system [*vyavasthā*] like Balaji, and so he keeps coming to this shrine. While acknowledging that all gods (Guru

Nanak Dev, Ramdev, and so forth) will answer prayers, he said that Balaji is the “hottest” [*garm*], by which he meant that the god offers the most immediate benefit. From this vignette, and particularly keeping in mind the man’s statement that Sikhism does not offer this sort of miraculous service, I would suggest that this desire for immediate benefits is a primary path for the spread of devotion to Balaji into Punjab, including among some Sikh communities. Indeed, the desire for miracles, obtained through faith, is exactly the reason that most devotees of Balaji cite for the spread of his worship.

## 7.5 Mediating Babosa

### *Babosa as the New Balaji*

Earlier in this chapter, I discussed the elevation of domestic *pitrs* into full-fledged gods serving the public. In this section, I will discuss the similar rise of Babosa, which brings together the themes of new gods, faith healing, and Rajasthan in Salasar Balaji’s core constituency, the Marwaris of the pan-Indian diaspora. I suggest that the rise of Babosa is also linked to a fundamental theoretical problem in the urban Marwari worship of Salasar Balaji: this system of worship, being based in the authority of the Brahmin *pujārīs*, offers no way to seek divine mediation through a charismatic guru within the rubric of Shekhawati-Rajasthani Marwari identity. Salasar Balaji’s urban *maṇḍals* are aligned with the doctrine of Salasar, in which faith healers are rejected as divine intermediaries. The worship of Mehndipur Balaji would of course provide a faith healer-friendly route, but that site lacks the connection to Shekhawati-Rajasthani identity, since no Marwaris trace ancestry to the Mehndipur area. The new faith healing shrines of Rajasthan described in this chapter also provide such a service, but they are as yet small and parochial. As a god who is mediated through a charismatic guru, and whose worship has been promoted in cities across the nation, Babosa thus fills a devotional niche. His core *maṇḍal* has

tirelessly propagated him among Marwaris, and especially in Jain communities in cities around India. In effect, Babosa is a new, improved manifestation of Balaji.

Babosa is not just an alternative to Balaji; he truly appropriates Balaji's esteemed characteristics. In much of the literature put out by the main Babosa *maṇḍal*, which is located in Delhi, the god is formally called "Balaji Babosa," and he is often characterized as an *avatār* of Balaji. Devotional fasts [*vrāt*] to win Babosa's assistance are, like those for Balaji himself, optimally carried out on Tuesday (and possibly Saturday). In some devotional posters that this *maṇḍal* produces, Babosa is shown receiving a ray of divine power from Hanuman (and often Devi as well), which he in turn directs to Manjubai, the Jain woman, now in her late 40s, who channels his power for the benefit of her followers (Figure 7-7). In one poster, the god is shown ripping open his chest to reveal Hanuman within, signifying that the power of the monkey god is part of him. This image is obviously a revision of the famous image reproduced throughout India of Hanuman revealing Rama and Sita in his opened chest to signal his devotion to them.<sup>487</sup> Further, Babosa is always depicted holding the *gadā*, Balaji's emblematic club-like weapon, which again indicates that he embodies Balaji-Hanuman's power. But, Babosa goes one step further than Salasar Balaji in answering the needs of his Jain-Marwari urban clientele: he treats ghost possession through Manjubai's mediumship. Thus, he offers an upgraded version of Balaji, ready to supply any kind of miraculous intervention.

Manjubai has a magical routine whenever she publicly channels Babosa, which demonstrates her charismatic ability to intercede on behalf of her devotees. The way she channels Babosa also demonstrates that this god is a manifestation of Balaji. When Manjubai and devotees sing *bhajans* in honor of Babosa during major religious events, there will invariably come a point when they start chanting and clapping more and more insistently. Manjubai will join them, but





Figure 7-7. A poster of Babosa, Hanuman, and Manjubai in Churu.



before long she starts to lose control of her body as she wildly flails her arms. This signals to all that Babosa's *śakti* is entering her. This is equivalent to what transpires in Mehndipur, when devotees chant at an ever-faster pace in the lead-up to someone's public possession. At the moment that Babosa's *śakti* enters Manjubai, she pinches her eyes shut and puffs up her cheeks



Figure 7-8. A poster of Manjubai embodying Babosa, Guwahati.

to mimic the characteristic muzzle of a monkey, and continues to hold her breath in this way while extending her arms straight out to each side as a kind of benediction for the audience (Figure 7-8). After about a minute, she gradually recovers control of herself, at which point the audience rushes forward to pay obeisance to Babosa, who remains in her for the time

being. So, channeling Babosa also means receiving the *śakti* of Balaji. I had earlier mentioned the theoretical problem of Hanuman-Balaji's *śakti* entering into a female body. Although this is clearly taking place here, the fact that the intermediary divine figure is always represented as a boy (and never a monkey) suggests an explanation not unlike what I reported from Mehndipur. As the boy-like Mehndipur Balaji's devotees said, the fact that he is a child makes it possible for him to associate with a woman.

Faith in Babosa not only depends on the belief that he manifests Balaji-Hanuman, but also on the understanding that Rajasthan—both Salasar Balaji and Babosa's place of origin—is a holy land. Although now a god, Babosa was once a Jain boy said to have died at age 17, around 80 years ago, in Churu District—the same area as Salasar. One can see a photograph purported to be of him, and another one of his mother in old age, in the temple for Babosa that the *maṇḍal* built in 2006 in the city of Churu to augment a smaller shrine that they had set up some years earlier (Figure 7-9). Elsewhere, in the home of the relatives of Manjubai's husband in Hyderabad, where I once visited on my way to a Babosa *jāgrāṇ* in that city, her 79-year old father-in-law pointed out a photograph of a grand *havelī* from the Churu area in which Babosa had supposedly lived. Sadly, he said, the building was later torn down due to an inheritance dispute within the family. Aside from these few photographs, which cannot be independently verified, everything about Babosa is a modern reconstruction from the 1990s, when Manjubai started to serve as the god's channel. Both chronologically and ontologically, then, Babosa is indeed in line with the numerous new shrine deities originating from family *pitṛs* that I described earlier in this chapter.

As the site of Babosa's origin, Churu has become a mecca for Jain-Marwaris wanting to reconnect with their ancestral land. Aside from their patronage of Babosa's temple there, down

the road from it they have supported the *maṇḍal* in putting up a colossal (65-foot) image of Babosa holding his *gadā*, said to be the tallest statue in Rajasthan. This statue is clearly in emulation of the massive public statues of Hanuman with his *gadā* that have proliferated across northern India in the last two decades. Once each year, Babosa's pan-Indian Marwari devotees



Figure 7-9. A photograph of Panna (Babosa) as a living boy, Churu.

converge on these new sites in Churu for their biggest festival, which affirms their rediscovered rootedness in the region, despite many years of having lived far away in the urban diaspora, much in the same way that Salasar Balaji's devotees periodically return to his temple. Major donations from moneyed Jains in particular have made possible all these new constructions, including an expansive *dharmśālā* near the Churu temple.

The names “Babosa” and “Manjubai” likewise suggest a cultural connection to Rajasthan. Devotees say that Babosa’s name is derived from *bābo* [cognate with *bābā?*], the Rajasthani (presumably Marwari dialect) term for *tāū* or uncle. The suffix “*sā*” is commonly added as a term of respect in Rajasthan, like the Hindi “*jī*.” Locals and tourists at Rajasthani culture shows will be familiar with the scene of the picturesque old man in a white dhoti and turban who greets the audience with a personable “*Rām rām sā*” (which has a cultural connotation equivalent to the rural American “Howdy, y’all”). Similarly, in Manjubai’s name, the “bai” is a common term of reference for a Rajasthani woman (as in Meera Bai, the famous devotee of Krishna). At the most formal level, Manjubai is known as Manju Baisa to convey full Rajasthani propriety. Hence, the god and his medium are coded for rustic Rajasthani culture, although they are products of urban life. Since Babosa is always depicted as a boy, it might seem counterintuitive to address him as an elder uncle, but it makes more sense when we realize that this god is fundamentally the same as a *pitr*—an ancestor spirit—and therefore an ontological peer of one’s elders. The phenomenon of Babosa, like the cases of *pitr*s cited earlier in this chapter, illustrates the productivity of *pitr*-worship as the foundation for numerous new divinities in the late 1990s, which I have argued arose in response to increasing pilgrimage to Rajasthan.

Not surprisingly, Rajasthan is invoked as a spiritual commodity in public devotional events for Babosa in Marwari communities around the country. In these settings, many Marwaris are already personally invested in Balaji as a god of their homeland, so playing up Babosa’s connections to Rajasthan finds a receptive audience. For instance, at a *jāgrāṇ* for Babosa that I attended in Guwahati, on the stage behind a standing statue of Babosa, a large prop in the form of a train had been set up to remind everyone that Babosa (and Manjubai) had come to visit from Churu, in Rajasthan. The train cars extended along the entire length of the stage, with labels on



the sides reading “CHU. – DLY. – GHY.” [Churu-Delhi-Guwahati] (Figure 7-10). When announcements were made during the *jāgrān*, the organizers would play a recording of a train in motion to suggest Balaji and Manjubai’s arrival. Notwithstanding this sentimental image, no doubt evoking devotees’ memories of journeys made to or from Rajasthan by train, Manjubai



Figure 7-10. Manjubai passing out sacred string on stage with train prop in background, Guwahati.

herself had in fact arrived by plane from Delhi, where she actually lives. But the fact that Manjubai spends most of her time in the city, and only occasionally goes to visit the Churu temple, fits the model of devotional expansion that I argued for Balaji: the temples in the countryside are not so much the originators of these new devotional cultures as outposts of urban-sponsored religiosity.

Manjubai and her *maṇḍal* tirelessly tour the country to preside over mass devotional events for Babosa. As at Salasar Balaji's events, I could hardly find a single individual at these events who was not Marwari-descended and a Hindi or Marwari native speaker. Moreover, most of Babosa's devotees are Jains by birth. Since, according to *maṇḍal* members, 80 percent of Jains originate in the Shekhawati region, they are predisposed to embrace religious connections to that region as much as Marwaris in general.<sup>488</sup> In this context, Jains could even be considered to be a subset of Marwaris. I was told that nowadays (within less than fifteen years) approximately 50 percent of Jains embrace Babosa. My own informal interviewing of audiences at Babosa *jāgrans* revealed that a large proportion of devotees are indeed Jains and regard the Shekhawati region as their homeland.

Babosa's devotees rhapsodize that this god (like Balaji) is a savior for the whole world in our present Kali Yuga. And yet, the *maṇḍal*'s clientele remains limited to the Jain-Marwari community. Urbanites who are not Marwaris seem indifferent to Babosa, despite some efforts that the *maṇḍal* has made to get them involved. For instance, in Hyderabad, on the occasion of opening a new Babosa temple, I accompanied several hundreds of Manjubai's followers on a *śobhā yātrā* or religious procession through the streets to the site of the new temple in a suburban area known as Shadnagar, which is inhabited by many Marwaris. They had plans to rename the neighborhood "Babosa-nagar [Babosa City]." The previous year, the *maṇḍal* had posted notices only in Hindi, but this year they added a Telugu translation. They also arranged to hand out school supplies to a contingent of local Telugu-speaking schoolchildren, who were thereby obliged to march along with the procession to show the world that the Marwaris wanted harmony with their neighbors. Still, as the procession weaved its way through traffic congestion and fumes, the local Telugu-speaking population just stared in silent detachment at the spectacle of

Manjubai riding on a chariot pulled by white horses, with a statue of Babosa propped up behind her. To these onlookers, this spectacle must have seemed like some kind of Marwari caste tradition (Figure 7-11).

### *The Life of a God*

In this subsection, I will recount how Babosa and Manjubai came into being, and look at the significance of this history for the present-day practices of this group. My interest in this cult's history has been piqued because, to a degree unmatched even by Salasar Balaji's devotional groups, Babosa's devotees come across as being highly committed to propagating faith in Babosa, even though in practice Babosa's following has remained largely restricted to the Jain-Marwari public. How do we explain their remarkable enthusiasm for spreading their belief? Inasmuch as there is no certifiable documentation for Babosa's life as a boy, when he was known as Panna, we have only the *maṇḍal's* very creative presentation. Therefore, the narrative of Babosa, extending from his miraculous arrival up through his entry into the lives of Manjubai and her family, comes across as an extended hagiography. Of course, India has a long history of hagiographic elaboration. For instance, in the twentieth-century, the life story of Sathya Sai Baba of Puttaparthi comes to mind as being loaded with miracles.<sup>489</sup> Babosa's *maṇḍal* has similarly adorned the story of Babosa and Manjubai to make them attractive to current and would-be followers. As the *maṇḍal's* chief spokesman said: "Manjubai has told me [this history] from 'feeling.' I get some guidance from her, and I also use a fair amount of my own imagination ... God speaks from feeling [*bhāvanā*]. '[So], it might not be 100 percent authentic.'"<sup>490</sup> Producing devotional sentiment in Babosa's followers is important, and so stories of miracles are elastic





Figure 7-11. Manjubai and Babosa in procession near Hyderabad.

when the *maṇḍal* pursues that end. The core aim of the Babosa *maṇḍal* is to draw a charismatic line from Babosa to Manjubai, since her ability to perform hinges on acceptance of her divine investiture. This is what we saw in the history at Salasar Balaji, in which miraculous events justify the *pujārīs*' ongoing role as the god's representatives.

In abbreviated form, Babosa-as-Panna's life story goes as follows. A woman named Chagnidevi who had married into the Kothari Jain clan of Churu was known for her strong faith in Hanuman. In recognition of this, the god came to her in a dream and offered to grant her a wish. She said she already had everything she needed, thanks to him, but after some nudging she wished for a child who would have the qualities of Hanuman himself. The god consented but said that, because this boy would be part of him, the boy would return to him when he was 17. Notwithstanding this disconcerting forecast, Panna was born, and subsequently performed such miracles as bringing the grievously ill back to wellness and foiling the schemes of *tāntriks*.

Some of these miraculous events are pictorially represented on the walls of the Churu temple. When the appointed time came, the boy fell asleep in front of the family's Hanuman shrine and his *ātmā* traveled to heaven, where the gods received him. Seeing Panna's distraught community at home, Hanuman entreated the gods to allow the boy's *ātmā* to return to earth as his representative, so as to counteract the effects of the Kali Yuga. To this end, the brahminical gods endowed this new god with certain divine implements, which are now important in the worship of Babosa: multi-colored sacred string [known as *tānti*], which Manjubai hands out to devotees at major events; a jug of sacred water; a rosary or *mālā* for reciting Babosa's name, which is standard practice for devotees (for instance, reciting "Om Babosa" for 21 *mālās* of 108 beads); and, of course, Hanuman's emblematic *gadā* weapon.

For the next 60 or so years, Babosa was worshiped quietly within the family, or was perhaps even forgotten. Upon my questioning, Manjubai's father-in-law speculated that Babosa's younger sister became his channel after his death, and died three years before Manjubai married into Babosa's living family. However, the modern story of the cult of Babosa really begins with Manjubai, when some miraculous events in approximately 1993 led to the realization that she would henceforth be the god's channel. Leaving aside most of the details, I will just mention that Manjubai, already married by this time, initially disbelieved Babosa's power, but then the god appeared to her family and pointed to a ritual oil lamp [*dīpak*] that had no oil in it. The god said, "You see that lamp—now look again!" When they looked at it a second time, the lamp was now lit, yet still without oil. From this miracle Manjubai's family became convinced of Babosa's power, and Manjubai soon began to manifest the god's *śakti* when she found she was able to heal others, even outside her family.

In practical terms, Babosa's capacity to help individuals outside his living family meant that he was no longer performing just as an ancestor spirit but a god for all humanity. The Kothari family's discovery of Babosa happened at a time when the urban Marwari search for ancestral roots was at its historical high point. By this point in history, Marwaris had already acclaimed Salasar Balaji, Khatu Shyam, and Rani Sati as their rediscovered deities of good fortune. Urban families, both Marwaris and others, were also going to Mehndipur at this time and setting up small *pitṛ* altars, and they hired *pujārīs* (representing Balaji) to look after them in perpetuity. It was the perfect moment for Babosa, the new Rajasthani *pitṛ*-god, to enter the picture.

Manjubai in essence became a Rajasthani when she assumed her new role as a channel for Babosa. For, although the Kothari family was descended from Marwaris, Manjubai and her husband's family had not resided in Rajasthan within recent memory. Rather, they had been

living in the city of Patna, Bihar, up until some time after her marriage in the early 1990s. The added “bai” in Manjubai’s name is likely a consequence of assuming her identity as Babosa’s channel. Personal transformation in relation to the identity of a possessing deity is common. By analogy, I visited a faith healer (not a Marwari) in a village of Gurgaon District, near Delhi, who had become devoted to a shrine god in western Rajasthan who had healed him of spirit-produced illness. The man now channels that god for the benefit of others. Whenever the god possesses him he starts to speak Rajasthani, which gives evidence of the god’s presence, even though this man is a native speaker of Hariyanvi and claims not to know any Rajasthani language. Similarly, Manjubai’s adoption of a Rajasthani identity signifies her assumption of the stature of a spiritual leader.

By 1998, widespread violence in Bihar drove many Marwaris to relocate elsewhere. Because of this, Manjubai’s husband’s relatives relocated to Hyderabad, but she and her husband and children may have already moved to Delhi by this time, where they now live in a comfortable townhouse at the end of a gated cul-de-sac. They have since persuaded the Delhi government to rename the adjacent intersection “Babosa Chowk;” the name now appears there on standard street signs. The move to Delhi, of course, brought Manjubai closer to Rajasthan. Around 1996, approximately three years after she had begun her channeling work, she and her followers built the very small first part of the Babosa temple in Churu, which was to be expanded into its present form some years later. This small-to-big temple progression in fact matched the pattern of constructing Marwari roadside temples dedicated to Balaji, which were being built at the same time as Babosa’s temple in Churu. At each roadside temple, a small Sinduri Hanuman image would initially be installed in a very small outdoor cell, to be followed some months or years later by the full-sized temple with a large image of the god. Likewise, a small statue of seated

Babosa was set up in its own shrine before the temple was built. The original image remains a potent object for making wishes. Throughout this time, Marwaris were making public donations in the form of inscribed silver plaques and other kinds of infrastructure in Salasar Balaji's temple. So, all these sites were the product of an encompassing Marwari devotional culture.

The chief spokesman of the Babosa *maṇḍal*, now in his 50s and also originally from Patna, reported that he had never visited Rajasthan, his ancestral land, until he came to this temple in 1998. He had had financial difficulties, and so a cousin who already worshiped Babosa said to go to this god. He came to Babosa's temple in Churu and the next day "got a very big financial deal," which confirmed his faith. As he put it, "By the grace of Babosa, I've got my own house, my own vehicle, my own property!"<sup>491</sup> Wealth-creation and healing is high on the agenda for many of Babosa's devotees. Despite Babosa's purported origins in Rajasthan, few locals from Churu itself go to the temple, and those who are aware of the temple's existence regard it as a place for urbanites from out of town. As one Churu resident observed, "[Babosa's devotees] all make a lot of money! [*Sab paise kamāte haiñ*]!" This assessment sounds remarkably like what we have heard about Salasar, which had gotten its start among Marwaris some years before Babosa's temple.

While most inhabitants of Churu have little interest in Babosa, the Babosa *maṇḍal*'s propagation of this "Rajasthani" deity to the Jain-Marwari urban diaspora is a marketing feat beyond what any of the local faith healers of Rajasthan introduced in this chapter could have done. Some of the healers discussed earlier have made local movements to expand their domain. For instance, in Chapter 4 I mentioned several *pujārī* brothers of Ratangarh who started their respective *dhāms* in the surrounding area. But, the Marwaris themselves are the epitome of a far-flung pan-Indian diasporic community, and so they offer the potential for a truly nationwide

community of believers like no other caste group. Hence, Babosa's *maṇḍal* propagates miracles representing a kind of Rajasthani piety among a spiritually hungry clientele physically far removed from the homeland, now imagined as a holy land. At the same time, the Babosa cult appeals to Marwaris around India by integrating this new god within the normative doctrine of pan-Indian Hinduism. For instance, devotees eagerly reminded me that the god is an *avatār* of Hanuman, and therefore dedicated to restoring morality in the Kali Yuga. Even so, insofar as Babosa is ultimately a Jain-Marwari from Rajasthan, his system of worship retains a place of social privilege for the Jain-Marwari community. Indeed, the Jain-Marwaris' insider status is reinforced by the fact that the god's only channel is one of their kin.

## 7.6 Babosa as a God for the World

### A Turn to Faith

In this final section, I want to further explore what devotion to Babosa can contribute to this study's broader narrative of devotional change. First, I suggest that Babosa is emblematic of a shift toward more emphasis on faith as a critical component of religiosity. Based on the comments of respondents, this development seems linked to the instrumentality of faith for obtaining desired divine benefits. I have noted this mindset in the worship of Balaji throughout this study, but what makes it even more apparent in the case of Babosa is that most of this god's followers started off as Jains. Indeed, they still identify as Jains, but, as I will elaborate, they evidently feel that normative worship in Jain temples had not fully satisfied their spiritual needs. It would be a truism to suggest that religious truth is conservative, and it would be reasonable to suggest that certain individuals within Jainism have all along sought to reform their practice while still adhering to core tenets. My aim in this discussion is not to enter into the doctrinal complexities of Jainism itself, but rather to use the present-day fact of dissatisfaction with

organized Jainism among many of Babosa's followers to reflect both on Babosa's appeal and on broader changes affecting Indian's diverse religious traditions. Indeed, what Jains acclaim in Babosa is hardly different than what Hindus or even some Sikhs (as noted in this chapter) enthuse about in regard to Balaji: he grants miracles, providing that one shows sufficient faith.

It may be that in the pre-modern setting Indian religious practice broadly entailed more emphasis on orthopraxy—the correct performance of ritual or devotional actions. In Chapter 6, I discussed Milton Singer's model of ritual-laden, stable village culture versus the primacy of faith amidst urban social change. I would adapt that model in saying that the last twenty years, in which faith has assumed greater importance in public rhetoric and religious practice (as seen in my respondents, who speak of a rise of faith), undermines the notion that orthopraxy is the norm. Nowadays, as the spokesman of the Babosa *maṇḍal* once said to me, “For Hindus, faith [*viśvās*] is the most important thing!”<sup>492</sup> I am suggesting that in recent history not only are we witnessing a new pervasiveness of faith in popular Hinduism, but also that this may correlate with socioeconomic change. Keeping in mind the neoliberal current that undergirds this study of the growth of Balaji and adjunct deities over the last twenty years, I have suggested that the rise of market economics as the normative system in India has informed the conception of faith as an instrument for the attainment of goals.

Insofar as Hinduism has shown the capacity to produce new deities or upgrade old ones to meet social need—consider, for instance, the popularization of Santoshi Ma as a goddess of miracles after the release of her eponymous film in 1975—it is reasonable to think that changes in India's economic ethos might likewise have some bearing on the course of popular devotion.<sup>493</sup> As I have noted, scholars have linked religious change, and the rise of faith-based cults of miracles, to other emerging economies (Pentecostal groups in Africa, prosperity religion

in Thailand, the Philippines, and Taiwan, and so forth). And further, there are already longstanding traditions in most if not all societies of seeking material benefits through direct appeal to divinities (one instance of which I noted in Ian Reader's study on Japanese materialistic devotion). Like Balaji, Babosa is dedicated to the needs of the faithful in this particular era—indeed, he only became widely known within the last fifteen years—so it is reasonable to think that he would be employed as a divine resource in individual projects of socioeconomic mobility. Further, in this era of materialistic greed and fallen morality, we require the help of a god like Babosa more than ever before. As one devotee said, “In the Kali Yug we have a much greater need for miracles, because there's so much more stress and trouble [*pareśānī*].”<sup>494</sup>

Babosa, then, is but one manifestation of a wave of gods and god-people who have found a welcoming audience in Indian society, as aspirations to make a better life are coupled with the desire to choose what or who works best toward that end (and is the freedom to choose products not the hallmark of the capitalist ethos?). This change seems to be percolating within multiple communities. For instance, I would note the example of Ram Rahim, the Sikh guru-turned-universal guide. He became of interest to me because his *āśram* [spiritual retreat] is located in Haryana near the Punjab border, which corresponds to Balaji's devotional heartland.<sup>495</sup> While advocating meditation as the core of self-realization, Ram Rahim nonetheless facilitates miracles in his followers' lives through their faith in his accumulated spiritual power. When I visited a respondent previously met at Salasar who lived in the area of the *āśram*, he took me to meet a relative who worked there, which afforded a chance to meet the guru as well. At the *āśram*, I was shown binders full of devotees' testimonies that meditating with faith in the guru had caused cancer and other ailments to disappear, and had led to a general improvement in life. Those who



follow Ram Rahim's principles reject the use of idols, and therefore eschew pilgrimage to Salasar, so this guru represents an alternative system for obtaining miracles in the Jat-dominant Punjab-Haryana region, although he has won adherents from much farther afield as well. As my respondents so many times affirmed, whoever can offer miracles receives popular acclaim and becomes the object of faith.

### Jain Devotees of Babosa

I was initially surprised when Jain devotees of Babosa told me that they seldom or never went to Jain temples because they were dissatisfied with the protocol there. They alleged unequal treatment of devotees in Jain temples according to wealth or status, and also complained of the lack of personal guidance and unavailability of treatment for spiritually-originated health problems there. Additionally, they pointed to an overemphasis on getting rid of karma to counter rebirths without sufficient access to miracles in this lifetime. As one Babosa devotee mentioned, Jainism focuses on one's endless rebirths, but Babosa promises "immediate results."<sup>496</sup> And as another devotee said, "Jainism is *dharm*, but Babosa is God!"<sup>497</sup> In other words, beyond the mechanistic rules of the cosmos, Babosa promises a personal *bhakti* relationship that brings rewards. Jainism is indeed popularly known for its austerities, but there is nonetheless a tradition among some Jains of worshiping deceased magical saints, known as *dādāgurus* ["grandfather-teachers"], who miraculously save faithful devotees from misfortune, as Lawrence Babb has described.<sup>498</sup>

Thus, it seems that the issue may be less the possibility of miracles within Jainism or any religious tradition than the efficacy of a charismatic intermediary in facilitating them. In this respect, Manjubai's personal approach to channeling the divine seemingly trumps the typical protocol of *pujārī*-mediated worship in a Jain temple, although I observed that Jain devotees of

Babosa may still keep portraits of revered Jain gurus in their homes. Living Jain saints may be available to give some devotees advice, but apparently they do not lead followers in such a rousing and emotionally connective way as Manjubai. The allegation that organized Jainism offers insufficient intimacy in worship closely matches the argument that some make against Salasar. One can worship the idol and thereby receive the god's blessings, but there is no charismatic guru or faith healer to guide the devotee on the proper path to personal purification and the attainment of miracles. Indeed, as I theorized earlier, this is exactly the gap in the worship of Balaji that Babosa and Manjubai fill.<sup>499</sup>

Through the mediation of Manjubai, Babosa's devotees report many dramatic miracles. Whereas Balaji's miracles tend to fall within the domain of plausible outcomes—success in business, healing from illness, and so forth—Babosa's miracles additionally sometimes seem to go against rational possibility, proving that the god's power is compelling beyond any other source. I will mention a few of the miracles told to me, which demonstrate how faith in Babosa and his channel has been elevated in the lives of these adherents. Manjubai's father-in-law, who owns a plastic comb factory, was going to take a 7,500-kilogram machine from Patna to Kolkata for repair, but it fell on him from a height of 20 feet, and he was initially grievously injured. That night, his wife, who was in Kolkata at that time, saw Babosa in a dream and gave him an offering of red bangles (the sacred color of Hanuman), and the husband then miraculously regained wellness.

In another instance, the wife of a Jain man from Kolkata had gone crazy for one and a half years due to spirit possession, and threatened to kill herself. The wife had become afflicted with a ghost when she was in the hospital (from someone who had died there). In 1996, they came to Manjubai for help, and she gave them sacred water and a red pepper. The woman ate the pepper,

whereupon the spirit within her said, “All right, I’ll leave!” After that, the wife was fine. Additionally, a Jain man from Bangalore said that during his daughter’s wedding, a personal ornament was taken from her room. They prayed to Babosa, and five minutes later retired to bed, and found the ornament there, even though it had not been there before. And finally, when I had come to see the Guwahati *jāgran*, devotees told me that the previous year it had started raining torrentially just before the event, threatening to flood the area. But, as Manjubai arrived, she prayed for relief from the rain, and so it stopped and the water magically receded.

One further story tells us how fantastic the miracles become, even as they are entirely normal within the worship of Babosa. A man from Kolkata said that his brother’s wife had been pregnant, but that after six months she started to bleed. They found out from a sonogram that she was carrying a girl, but the parents had wanted a son. But then, the wife had a vision of a young man cradling a baby in his lap [*god*] (note the similarity to the process of becoming a *pitr* in Hanuman’s lap). The young man, who was in fact Babosa, said, “You’re in my hands, so don’t worry.” The couple then came to Manjubai, and she told them that the baby “should” be a boy [*beṭā honā cāhie*]. Manjubai prayed for them and then said that the baby would indeed be a boy. Nine months later, this proved to be true. Their faith in Babosa had changed the sex of the fetus in the womb. Not only that—the man telling this story said that the baby was born with long hair “just like Babosa!” The child had embodied the *śakti* of the god. These are hardly more than a glimmer of the many miracles that Babosa’s devotees share. Indeed, I was given an issue of the Babosa *maṇḍal*’s annual magazine that documents dozens of miracles that Babosa’s devotees had experienced. In this respect, I suggest that the worship of Babosa is part of a broader, rising culture of faith that encompasses both Balajis, whose miracles have similarly been collected in souvenir books sold at the shrines.

### Expanding the Scope of Babosa's Devotion

One of the most remarkable features of the cult of Babosa is the fervor with which the god's devotees seek to spread his worship. If we recall that Babosa emulates Balaji, then this enthusiasm would be justified, since Balaji as Hanuman is already widely acknowledged in Indian society as a savior in this era of degraded morality. But in this section I want to consider additional layers of meaning in the desire to spread Babosa's worship. While maintaining Rajasthan as a spiritual home base, the Babosa *maṇḍal* has ambitions to expand its domain throughout India. To this end, Manjubai and her advisors have been promoting faith in Babosa among many of the same devotees that are already involved with Salasar Balaji's *maṇḍals*. For instance, in Chapter 6 I noted seeing a promotional poster for an upcoming Babosa *jāgrān* at a Salasar Balaji event in Surat. On such visits, Manjubai not only performs her prescribed embodiment of Babosa but also gives highly desirable private consultations for devotees. At the event in Guwahati, Manjubai was scheduled to see around 90 devotees for one-on-one sessions, but relentless demand meant that more like 140 actually showed up. She also conducts regular telephone consultations, and gives advice by way of the *maṇḍal*'s Facebook site at certain times. Not surprisingly, devotees enthuse that what they like most about devotion to Babosa, aside from miracles, is the availability of Manjubai.

Babosa's devotees in Delhi meet for regular worship each morning and evening in the basement of Manjubai's townhouse, which is the main way to consolidate the community and introduce new members on a day-to-day basis. Manjubai does not usually attend the daily services, but her husband leads the crowd in a highly spirited, fast-talking style of summoning the god that reminded me of the Pentecostal practice of talking in tongues (indicating direct communication with the divine).<sup>500</sup> This segment of the service is bracketed by *bhajans*

dedicated to Babosa.<sup>501</sup> For those needing extra attention, Manjubai conducts private sessions in a special room behind smoked glass on the third floor of the townhouse. On those occasions when Manjubai is present at services in the basement, she personally blesses each devotee—perhaps 30 individuals, or more on a special day—and hears any concerns they may have before comfortingly laying her hand on his or her back. The fifth day [*pañcamī*] of each lunar month is special, as that is when the congregation commemorates Babosa’s birth, death, and date of receiving his *śakti* (as a god) from Hanuman, which all took place on the same day, albeit in different years. This monthly celebration is probably modeled after Balaji’s “birthday” each month on *pūrṇimā* or the full moon, when his power to grant wishes is at its greatest.

In its quest to spread devotion to Babosa beyond the congregation in Delhi, the *maṇḍal* publishes and delivers a colorful monthly newsletter called *Bābosā darśan*, which provides news and photographs of recent Babosa events around the country and a complete listing of Manjubai’s busy schedule. Supporting the foundation of new temples also seems to be important. The Delhi congregation itself reportedly has purchased land to build a large temple, and the Churu temple will be replaced with an even grander one at the edge of town. During the time of my research, the *maṇḍal* was already broadcasting its daily *ārtī* on television (on Sanskar Channel), for the sake of which it appears to have sought funding from devotees. One issue of the monthly magazine indicates a pan-Indian mostly Marwari roster of 67 sponsors donating 1,000 rupees or more for this purpose. On the whole, the newsletters depict upbeat activity, much like the society pages of a major newspaper. One would get the impression that joining the Babosa movement could provide a fast track to social or economic networks for moving up in life.

These newsletters are augmented by larger annual magazines with more in-depth articles and listings of members from Babosa's *maṇḍals* around the country, reminiscent of the annual magazine from the Balaji *maṇḍal* in Dombivli described in the previous chapter. Within each Babosa *maṇḍal*, a youth wing known as the Babosa Commando Force does all the essential work of keeping events in order and distributing promotional posters. I came across one such poster in the humble bedroom of a farmer in a remote village in Churu district. He did not really know who Babosa was, but said that youths were passing out posters in the bus station parking lot of Sardarshahar, so he accepted one to decorate his home.

Beyond these efforts to promote the *maṇḍal*, the biggest undertaking of propagation was inaugurated while I was following the group in its cross-country activities. The plan was to nationally broadcast a weekly half-hour television dramatization of the history of Babosa and Manjubai, so as to introduce the country to the miracles they offered. Each week would present a new set of miracles in the Hindi-language "family drama" style. The day of the first installment coincided with a ceremony to open a new temple in Hyderabad, which I attended. Everyone, including Manjubai herself, gathered in the basement of the temple in front of a large video monitor. Standing before the crowd, the spokesman for the *maṇḍal* spoke of his hopes that "with the cooperation of the media" [*'media' kā sahayog hai*], such as newspapers and television, devotion to Babosa would spread throughout the nation. He added:

I wanted to have it written [in the newspapers] about this serial that, in the same way as the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* [television serials of the 1980s], still another great serial, *Babosa mere bhagvān*, is on its way. But, having seen today's serial, I think that all of you will probably have the feeling that it will carry Babosa even higher, and that even after you have forgotten *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* you will remember your god Babosa!<sup>502</sup>

This statement shows that the *maṇḍal*'s spokesman had lofty hopes to reach new audiences with this serial, and to make Babosa known everywhere, outdoing even the religious serials of past years that had triggered a wave of nationwide devotional enthusiasm for the Hindu classics. However, despite these ambitions, the *maṇḍal* is still primarily addressing the Jain-Marwari community in its day-to-day activities. The first five episodes of the television show itself focused on Panna's life, but beyond that switched the focus to Manjubai's experience in becoming Babosa's channel, and then to fictional devotees who obtained miracles upon embracing Babosa. These later episodes address practical concerns about how to make Babosa one's primary god in a social environment where others may not be so reverent. For instance, in one week, a young woman from a Babosa-centered household marries a man whose family dismisses the god. But after repeated mysterious mishaps start happening, the young woman wins her in-laws' respect after interceding on their behalf through Manjubai and Babosa. So, the idea of Rajasthan as a holy land, although part of the *maṇḍal*'s presentation of itself to Jain-Marwari communities, is muted when it reaches out to a national audience, when it instead focuses on a new miracle each week. The opening theme song of the show likewise makes clear that the aim of this nationwide project is to let everyone know that a superlative source of miracles had arrived. An abbreviated section of the song and a narration after it went as follows:

[Song:] Hail, Babosa, my god ... [he] fulfills all wishes ... the days of suffering are at an end ... [through] Hanuman's [Bajrangbali's] auspicious actions ... hail, Babosa!  
 [Narration:] I am Brahma, the creator ... Brahma is the accumulator of divine power, Brahma is permanent ... When the power of faith in Brahma has reached the highest level, then miracles inexorably start to happen ... By the grace of Lord Shiva [Bholenath] and by the boon [*vardān*] of Hanuman, the people of Churu began to receive Panna's [Babosa's] divine power, and Panna's fame gradually spread far ...<sup>503</sup>

The song and the subsequent narrative introduction highlight that faith is the key to attaining miracles, and that Babosa can accomplish such feats. How, then, would we theorize this relentless drive to propagate faith in Babosa? There is a way of reading the expansion of faith in him that takes into account both the neoliberal narrative of personal advancement and the doctrine of miracles. Even though Babosa's followers acclaim him as a god, his ontological status remains unstable; from the standpoint of his current devotees, he gains stature from acquiring more devotees. I theorize that the reason for this is that despite all his godly miracles and the grand scale of devotion to him, Babosa still cannot entirely escape his origins as a *pitṛ*. A *pitṛ* or family spirit is only helpful if the host family properly reveres it. Otherwise, it may stop protecting the household, start to make trouble, or go away entirely. The loss of an otherwise benevolent *pitṛ* is not a good outcome because this spirit could have been a boon to the household. So, *pitṛs* are fragile and need ongoing care to keep them working for us. Also, as a supernatural being who originated as a living boy, Babosa does not have a long history of divine work behind him like Hanuman and others. His divinity is recent, and so his followers need to convince the world of what he can do, like a *pitṛ*-god who has expanded beyond his domestic domain into public service. The *pitṛ*-gods near Salasar described earlier in this chapter are similarly making the jump from a local to a translocal clientele.

Unlike new gods, such as *pitṛ*-like beings who now serve the public, longstanding gods are generally understood to be self-powered, or at least enabled through higher deities, and therefore less dependent on humans for their existence. Of course, gods may withhold boons from us if we neglect their worship, but their power existed long before we entered into our present lifetimes. Hanuman is immortal, and wants to help us, and will not entirely go away if fewer people worship him. Hence, although Babosa is referred to as a *bhagvān* or god, his ability to



provide miracles is proportional to the degree to which we revere him, like a *pitr*. This viewpoint is suggested in the following statement from the spokesman of the Babosa *maṅḍal*:

Now [Babosa] has thousands of devotees, so his power is increasing ... because those people are taking [invoking] his name. That's why we are promoting him ... the more new devotees he gets, the bigger his power becomes ... this is the theory: all of humanity will be 'jealous' of [impressed with] Babosa ... once someone comes to Babosa, he gets benefits ... if any bad spirit comes to attack us ... it will be afraid ... everybody asked wishes at the Churu temple [but] they thought 'I've already got my god. Why should I go to another god? Why leave [the other god] and go to Babosa? ... But [with the other god], I haven't gotten divine benefits, I haven't gotten my wishes answered ... my problems [*takhlīf*] haven't been solved, and someone has told me I should go to Babosa ... so I go once, and it works! ... That's why his devotional following is growing so much.<sup>504</sup>

Worshiping Babosa and getting the fruits of that devotion has a snowball effect. As more people join, the god's efficacy in responding to those wishes likewise grows. The *maṅḍal*'s spokesman acknowledged to me that in the early years after the boy Panna's death, Babosa was indeed regarded as a *pitr*. But, this small beginning has all along meant that his followers have the challenge of raising Babosa's status to that of a god, which they do by promoting his divine powers. As the spokesman told me, "People believe (accept the god) when they see a miracle (and otherwise not) [*Camatkār to namaskār*]!" The whole business of selling Babosa comes down to convincing the public that he can guarantee benefits, and that the more people join, the bigger those benefits become. This narrative of ever-increasing divine benefits is not unlike the example I provided in the previous chapter of the faith healer of Amritsar, whose *laddū* grew each year as testimony of Balaji's miracles reached an ever-wider audience. In that case, of course, the object of veneration was truly a god, and never a *pitr*, but a similar approach to promotion is in effect. Babosa's Jain-Marwari devotees, anticipating that this god's power to grant miracles will grow in coming years, with bigger and better results for his followers, thus

have a good reason to join in his worship. In the setting of upwardly mobile economic ambition, the narrative seems all the more compelling.

### *Gods for the Modern Era*

The story of Babosa brings this study to a close. This god caps the historical process that each chapter has narrated. In the beginning of this story, which was set in the years around 1990, I described how, in a time of socioeconomic change in the pan-Indian urban diaspora, Marwari merchants claimed the gods of a few small shrines in villages of the Shekhawati region as their own lineage deities. At the same time, these Marwaris started devotional organizations in their urban abodes that sponsored events centered on Balaji, who thereby represented their reconstructed Rajasthani homeland. The visible prosperity of these merchants, as witnessed in the donations they made to build infrastructure in Salasar, attracted an increasing number of Jat pilgrims from the adjacent region where the worship of pan-Indian Hanuman was already spreading. At the same time, Mehndipur too, gained new devotees from advances in infrastructure, and also due to the rise of faith healers throughout northwestern India. One could say that the rise of Marwari interest in these shrines echoes what was taking place at many pilgrimage spots across India. This commonality is certainly true, but what makes the story of Balaji so interesting is that urban merchants, who were some of India's most economically influential citizens, had a particular ideology of ancestry focused on this land that set it apart from other regions of the nation. That is why the story of Balaji, and his cohort of Marwari deities, stands apart from conventional Indian shrine worship.

The rise of pilgrimage to the temples of northeastern Rajasthan developed in tandem with the elite sponsorship of temples along the roads to Salasar, which made these routes all the more congenial for religious travelers. The increased pilgrim traffic stimulated the proliferation of

numerous faith healing shrines in northeastern Rajasthan. These new shrines offered exorcism-related services not available in Salasar. The fact that Salasar, but not Mehndipur, limited such services seems to have actually propelled the development of faith healing shrines in northeastern Rajasthan. These new shrines were oriented not only to Salasar Balaji but also to Mehndipur Balaji, while throughout this tie Mehndipur itself remained comparatively isolated. The lack of an urban community of patrons looking to the area of Mehndipur as an ancestral homeland significantly affected these different outcomes in the regions surrounding the two major Balaji temples. Rising interest in faith healing and the concomitant proliferation of charismatic healers in northeastern Rajasthan, and the Marwari association of this land with ideas of ancestral piety, helped to reify this state as a holy land. But, the lack of faith healing services catering to Marwari identity in the way of Balaji opened the way for Babosa's followers to promote this new deity and his channel, Manjubai, as a more expansive version of Salasar Balaji—performing everything that Balaji could with the addition of personalized faith healing.

I have suggested that all of these developments, at Salasar, Mehndipur, and elsewhere, are subsumed within a broader societal trend that gained momentum during the last twenty years in which people elevated domestic or local spiritual practices as broader public religion.<sup>505</sup> Some of the indicators of that would be the rise of pilgrimage to previously obscure lineage deities, the reconfiguration of family spirits as public gods, and, of course, the increasing popularity of village faith healers among devotees coming from afar to seek miracles. I suggest that the imperative to demonstrate faith as a prerequisite to attain miracles was part of this turn towards the public performance of religion. I have also argued that the popularity of faith for the sake of miracles dovetails with societal narratives of rapid economic advancement in the era of globalized capitalism. In this time of change, Indian society widely bemoans corruption in

everyday public life, where middlemen expedite services for a bribe. Balaji and allied deities, such as Khatu Shyam and Babosa, offer a better alternative for those who are moving up or hope to do so, since they operate by the doctrinally pure principles of prayer and other demonstrations of faith. They are, after all, gods for the modern era, who are dedicated to helping humanity overcome the bad effects of our present-day Kali Yug, when the need for miracles is greater than ever.

## Chapter 7 Notes

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<sup>440</sup> “*Rājasthān devatā kī bhūmī hai... pavitrsthān ... śuddhi! Vatāvaraṇ bahut acchā, rājasthān kā ... is meṅ koī katrā nahīn.*” Interview 9-2b-2011. The assertion that a particular region in India would be sacred is not limited to Rajasthan, but each case has its own history. The many shrines of Uttarkand state, comprising the ancient site of Hardwar and many mountain pilgrimage sites, is likewise often described as a holy land. More recently, government tourism agencies for the state of Kerala have adopted the slogan that it is “God’s own country” as a way of promoting the state’s scenic beauty and cultural attractions.

<sup>441</sup> For comparison, we can consider the way tourism puts a premium on preserving tradition and cultural authenticity. For instance, Howe, p.2 and onwards, describes the tourist brochure picture of Bali as a timeless place of ancient values in contrast to the ever-changing Western culture of its visitors. Inasmuch as pilgrimage to the shrines of Shekhawati amounts to a kind of tourism, in which shrines with spiritual authenticity are valued, charismatic individuals have an incentive to frame their work within a long tradition of native knowledge.

<sup>442</sup> “*Pūre hindustān meṅ saṅkaṭ hai ... [lekin] rājasthān meṅ itnā zyādā nahīn. Vahān kī zamīn pavitr hai. Vahān har devī devatā kā dhām hai ... voh dhārmik sthal hai. Rājasthān meṅ itne sāre dhām haiṅ ... baḍe baḍe mandir ... hindustān se bahut sāre jāte haiṅ.*” Interview 7-14-2011.

<sup>443</sup> “*Rājasthān ke andar itne vidvān ādmī haiṅ—bahut hī zyādā vidvān ... hariyāṇā meṅ itnā gyān nahīn ... pañjāb meṅ bhī nahīn. Sirf rājasthān ke andar sab kuch hai. Vahān ke logoṅ ke paise zyādā, un ke pās. Paise hone ke kāraṅ, log kyā hai, bhakti zyādā nahīn mānte. Bhakti kī kami hai.*” Interview 12-14-2010.

<sup>444</sup> “*Rājasthān dharmprāṅ pradeś hai, paraṅtu sāth hī voh vīrpūjak bhī hai. Aisī sthiti meṅ yahān kī jantā ke hṛdaya meṅ mahāvīr hanumān ke prati viśeṣ bhakti-bhāvnā kā honā sarvathā svābhāvīk hai.*” *Śrī hanumān aṅgk*, p. 445

<sup>445</sup> It would be very interesting to know whether this and similar statements in that book are recent or were already included in it at the time of its first printing in 1975; however, I had not yet obtained the earliest edition at the time of writing this chapter.

<sup>446</sup> However, some people in Haryana stated that because of their relative affluence and better education, they actually better appreciate Balaji than Rajasthanis themselves! Their point is that Rajasthanis are somewhat backward by comparison. Or rather, by this reasoning, Rajasthanis are quite spiritual but naïve—*bholā* [naively innocent] was the term I heard used to describe them—and therefore they are less appreciative of the magical resources close at hand. By contrast, devotees from Haryana and beyond, who are shrewder and know the value of things, better realize what they lack, such as gods of miracles who can help them attain the good life. Pilgrimage to the shrines of Rajasthan is arguably a corrective for the troubles of our modern world, but it is also a kind of intrusion from the outside world. I noted this local perspective in Mehndipur, for example. However, the reality in Shekhawati itself is that Balaji is quite popular there, at least among Jats, Brahmins, and merchants. The critique of superstitious backwardness is more likely the reification of another aspect of Rajasthan as an overriding stereotype. That is, to the south and west of Shekhawati, Rajputs and tribals, who eat meat and uphold other

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traditions of worship, are more common. A pilgrim once suggested that this explains why more visitors seem to come to Salasar from the northern direction, but less from those other areas.

<sup>447</sup> Hooja, p. 8.

<sup>448</sup> Hooja, p. 8.

<sup>449</sup> Babb (2002), p. 26.

<sup>450</sup> Ramaswamy, pp. 8-9.

<sup>451</sup> Bhardwaj, p. 226-227.

<sup>452</sup> Bhardwaj, p. 226.

<sup>453</sup> Bhardwaj, p. 227.

<sup>454</sup> Fuller, p. 218.

<sup>455</sup> Feldhaus, pp. 5-10.

<sup>456</sup> See Sopher (1968), p. 392, for a discussion of shrines in Gujarat and Hindu pilgrimage as an organizing structure. Also see Sopher (1980) for a discussion of the Four Dhams, especially p. 315, as cited in Feldhaus, p. 132,

<sup>457</sup> I saw the following banner on the side of a truck in Salasar [here translated into English]: “*Sirsa* [a heavily Jat-populated district in southern Haryana] *to Ramdevra* [or Runicha the shrine of the popular deified hero], *Ramdevra to Osian* [ancient temples], *Osian to Junjala* [a Muslim pir’s tomb popular with Jats and other groups], *Junjala to Merta* [site of the famous Krishna devotee Mirabai], *Merta to Pushkar* [the famous Brahma temple], *Pushkar to Salasar*, *Salasar to Gogamedi* [another deified Muslim revered by Jats and others], *Gogamedi to Sirsa.*”

<sup>458</sup> Mayaram, p. 104.

<sup>459</sup> Snodgrass, p. 605.

<sup>460</sup> “*Fāydā miltā ... ‘business’ meñ, dhandhā meñ ... ghar parivār sukhśānti.*” Interview 7-19-2011.

<sup>461</sup> “*Śyām bābā kī aśīm anukampā se śrī nareśjī pittar [pitṛ] dev kā camatkār hone lagā hai. Har bār ravivār ko prātaḥ: 11:15 baje se 1:15 baje tak jāte (bujhā) hotī hai. Har samasyā kā samādhān śyām kṛpā se avaśya hotā hai. Jaise bhūt, pret bādhā, ṭona-ṭoṭkā, sampatti meñ barkat ne honā, lāg-lapeṭ kī samasyā, najlā, mirgī, ṭī. bī., kainsar, lakvā ādi meñ aḍṭālīs ghaṇṭā pittar dev parisar meñ bhakti bhāv se rehne par turant fāydā hogā. Pittar dev kī icchānusār mānav sevā sarvāpari haiñ ...*”

<sup>462</sup> Knipe, p. 35.

<sup>463</sup> Walter van Beek and Annette Schmidt have edited a collection of essays on the repackaging of African cultural performance for tourism. Although not oriented specifically to religion, they present the interesting concept of “the tourist bubble,” meaning the space in which traditional culture is preserved in the service of tourism, pp. 12-17. We might consider this concept in talking about the presentation of traditional Rajasthani spiritual performance for visitors from elsewhere looking for a magical experience.

<sup>464</sup> “*Bole, sacce darbār kī jai!*” Observation 7-19-2011.

<sup>465</sup> “*Bole, pitṛ mahārāj kī jai!*” Observation 7-19-2011.

<sup>466</sup> “*Bole, sālāsar darbār kī jai!*” Observation 7-19-2011.

<sup>467</sup> “*Beṭī, merī yādaśṭī kyoñ nahīñ āyā?*” Observation 7-19-2011.

<sup>468</sup> “*Mandiroñ ko vikās karne cāhie ... mere bacne [ke lie] ... [vahāñ pe] merī tasvir rakhnī ... maiñ sujāngadh meñ hūñ.*” Observation 7-19-2011.

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<sup>469</sup> “*Hamāre sāth ho jānā!*” Observation 7-19-2011.

<sup>470</sup> “*Ke nām ho, bhāī? ... Terī perīkṣā khatū śyām ne pūrī le lī ... lekin terī bāteñ yeh hai, bhāī ... mere kahāñ vigraḥ kī śānti se tum kam ā rahe haiñ ... tum soc rahe ke ... yeh to bacā nahīñ ... hariyālī cheini ke bād ... ek hī jagah, bhāī, jot ... acchī honī, bhāī ... samjhāūñ, kis ko samjhāūñ? ... parivār le jā sāth hī ... ek pūjā pāṭh utār de ... voh tār lagā ve ... tumhārā duśmān ko hāth calēñ ... cār lagā ke aur ek nāriyal lagā ke ... tharo lagā ke aur tīrthyā rakh kījiye ... bhagvān, āj ke bād mere putr ko mere parivār ko mere jo duśmāni koī antar aur tantra ke koī tāntrik se gehre ... aur mere parivār bas meñ kareñ ... rakṣā kī śānti ... voh kām karnā zarūrī hai ... yeh pitṛ jī mahārāj ektālis bhitr-bhitr bār ... ‘bole śyām kī jai, bole pitṛ mahārāj ... sāre che ghañṭe śyām, kā ... ‘śrī rām jai rām jai jai rām,’ ... prārth karo, bhāī ... khātū śyām kā śrī yoga, bhāī ... mere ek pitṛ jī kā dhām gayā aur ... ekdam ṭhīk ho jāegā ... aśirvād dhun, bhāī ... amavasyā ... yeh prayās ṭhīk ... to ek kām karo, bhāī—bhabūti kā pālan kā sauk ... yeh āp kā ek pālan karo ... yeh bhāī, vahāñ se āye ho, isko cāī pānī, icchāpūran se khānā khilānā hai, bhāī ... aur apne deś ke pati ... yeh acchī sevā aur mere dhām kī śobhā karne de, bhāī ... us kī sevā karnī hai ... pavitr hai, yeh bhagvān ... is ko khānā khilānā hai ... usko ucit karnā hai ... nāriyal rakho, bhāī ... therā hone ke bād, gyārah din ... sab parivār ko pālan karogā ... aur sab ṭhīk ho jāegā ... Bole, śyām kī jai! ... Bole pitṛ mahārāj!*” Observation and interview 7-19-2011. The medium’s performance has been abridged from my original recording of the session.

<sup>471</sup> Interview 7-18a-2011.

<sup>472</sup> The Ganesh Dham medium’s deceased brother likewise made his appearance at a wedding; this might be expected for an ancestor spirit, since it is a time when the whole family is present.

<sup>473</sup> “*Maiñne mandir par candā diyā 250 nag īñṭ, 21 kilogrām savāmani, saprem mandir meñ bheñṭ kiyā.*” Document received in July 2011.

<sup>474</sup> See *Alcoholics Anonymous*, pp. 80, 83, 98, and numerous other references.

<sup>475</sup> Daswami, pp. 67-68.

<sup>476</sup> But of course, at Ektali Dham, not just prosperity but miracles of recovery are central to the narrative of devotion. With this in mind, I would bring in a comparison to another kind of Pentecostal performance: the televangelist broadcast of immanent miracles as a backdrop to fundraising. Through the medium of live performance (songs and testimonials), including commentary about *savāmanis*, grateful donations, and the need to restore personal piety to society, not to mention miracles taking place (near the sacred fire), this event demanded religious faith. Although I do not suggest any direct connection between this *jāgrāñ* and Christian mass media, Jonathan James has argued that contemporary Hindu televised media in India does in fact borrow from conventions of Christian Pentecostal televangelism, so there might be room to explore a connection. See James, pp. 110-111, and all of Chapter 5, pp. 115-132, for a discussion on the Christian televangelist style of presentation, and Hindu versions of this.

<sup>477</sup> Sax, pp. 103-104.

<sup>478</sup> A parallel kind of segregation occurs during the worship of a family’s *pitṛ*. Inasmuch as women of the house more often perform the rituals for maintaining the domestic *pitṛ* shrine, the wife in the household would be expected to veil her face for reasons of modesty before her husband’s ancestors when serving the *pitṛs* in this way.

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<sup>479</sup> Later, I came across another case of embodying Balaji at a shrine near Khatu Shyam, where a male faith healer both growled as Hanuman and then later switched to embodying Kali, whereupon he diabolically cackled.

<sup>480</sup> Schechner, p. 118.

<sup>481</sup> Larsen, p. 54

<sup>482</sup> Schieffelin, p. 707.

<sup>483</sup> Not surprisingly, the healer also goes regularly to Runicha, Ramdev's shrine. At the time he first became possessed with Balaji, he also performed *pet palāniyā* [repeated prostrations] and wriggled like a snake on the ground, due to that god's association with healing snakebites, for the final five kilometers of the pilgrimage.

<sup>484</sup> Geaves, p. 48.

<sup>485</sup> Geaves, p. 49. Also see Oberoi, who is cited in Geaves' discussion (p. 49).

<sup>486</sup> Geaves, p. 49.

<sup>487</sup> For a discussion of the story of Hanuman opening his chest, see Lutgendorf (2007), pp. 156, 218.

<sup>488</sup> In the previous chapter, I described a Balaji *maṇḍal* in Bangalore in which all but one of the members were Jain. While I was staying at the shop of one of the members I first saw an image of Babosa in his personal shrine. Some of the members of this group also share the same surname as Manjubai's family.

<sup>489</sup> See Sathya Pal Ruhela's telling, among others.

<sup>490</sup> "Manjubai ne mereko batā diyā ki 'feeling' ātā hai. Unkā 'guidance' miltā hai, aur toḍā bahut apnā bhī 'imagination' ... kyonki bhagvān bhāvnā se bolte haiñ-- 'it might not be 100 percent authentic' ..." Interview 5-26-2011.

<sup>491</sup> He stated this in English.

<sup>492</sup> "Hinduon ke lie, sab se mukhya bāt viśvās hī hai!" Interview 7-2-2011; not recorded.

<sup>493</sup> See Das's 1981 article on this film for a structural analysis of social meaning in this film; also see Lutgendorf (2003) for a discussion of the film's significance in relation to the Hindu devotional tradition.

<sup>494</sup> "Kaliyug meñ camatkār kī bahut zyādā zarūrat hai, kyonki zyādā pareśānī!" Interview 5-27-2011.

<sup>495</sup> Jacob Copeman, pp. 159-161, describes controversies in Sikhism around this guru, and gives an idea of the set-up at his *āśram*.

<sup>496</sup> Interview 7-1-2011.

<sup>497</sup> Interview 7-1-2011.

<sup>498</sup> Babb (1996), pp. 102-136.

<sup>499</sup> Reminiscent of the argument that Babosa and Manjubai supply personal meaning missing in standard Jain worship, Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw found that Jain adherents practicing rituals could not explain to them what their actions meant. Respondents did ultimately offer reasons for their actions, but the authors tell us that these answers seemed haphazard and perfunctory, and so they conclude that for these Jains ritual was "meaningless." They outline these findings in the introduction section; see p. vii.



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<sup>500</sup> Among many possible sources, Margaret Poloma and John Green usefully analyze glossolalia and other aspects of Pentecostal practice; see pp. 111-120 for a discussion of the meaning of glossolalia.

<sup>501</sup> The *maṅḍal*'s chief spokesman composes and sings most of the *bhajans*. He cites a wide range of sources, including film songs and even Lady Gaga.

<sup>502</sup> “*Ye pracār ke sāre ‘posting’ aur likhvānā cāhte the ki rāmāyaṅ aur mahābhārat kī tarah, ek aur mahān serial, bābosā mere bhagvān, ā rahā hai ... lekin mujhe dekh ke, āj kā ‘serial’ dekh ke, āp sāre bhāī kī bhāvanā kharīb us se bhī zyādā upar le ke jāēnge, ki rāmāyaṅ aur mahābhārat yād kar ke, un ko bhī jāēnge, aur bābosā tere bhagvān yād karegā!*” Speech given 7-3-2011.

<sup>503</sup> “*Jai bābosā, mere bhagvān ... sab kā manorath pūrṅ karte ... dīn dukhī kī pīḍā harte bajraṅgī ke śubh kalyāṅ ... jai bābosā ... main brahm hūn sṛṣṭī kā sṛjan kartā ... brahm śakti puṅj , brahm akṣay, brahm bhakti kī śakti jab apnī parākaṣṭhā par hotī hai, tab camatkār svataḥ hīhone lagte haiṅ ... bhagvān bhole nāth kī kṛpā tathā hanumān jī ke vardān se pannā ke divya śakti lābh curu vāsī ko prāpt hone lagā, aur dhīre dhīre pannā kī prasidhi dur dur tak phailne lagī ...*” Song and narration recorded 7-24-2011.

<sup>504</sup> “*Now he has got thousands of devotees, so that is increasing his power also, because people are taking his name. That’s why we are doing his’ pracār ... jitne nae bhakt banāēnge, itnā ‘power’ baḍegā ... ‘This theory works behind it:’ sab manuṣya bhī bābosā ke nām se ‘jealous’ hotā hai ... to bābosā ke pās kaun jāte—‘but once’ koi ādmī ātā, bābosā ke pās koi fāydā hue ... ‘if any bad spirit comes to attack us ... he will be afraid ... everybody asked wishes at the Churu temple. They thought I’ve already got my god. Why should I go to another god?’ Us ke chor ke, bābosā pās kyon jānā? Vahāṅ merā koi kām nahīn hogā, merī icchāpūrṅ nahīn hogī, merī monokāmanā pūrī nahīn ho rahī ... merī koi takhlīf dūr nahīn ho rahī, mujhe kisī ne batāyā tumheṅ bābosā ke pās jāo zarūr ... ‘let me try once’ ... ek bār āyā, kām ho gayā. ‘And that’s why’ in kī bhakti—in kī bhakti jo hai, bahut zyādā—‘manifold!’*” Interview 2-13-2011.

<sup>505</sup> Similarly, Nanda, pp. 61-107, discusses the elevation of local deities into broader systems of worship in recent decades.

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