

Diversity in Unity

Making interfaith marriages work

Bharti Sharma



Master's thesis in South Asian Studies – 60 credits
for Asia- and Middle East Studies

Department for Cultural Studies and
Oriental Languages (IKOS)

UNIVERSITY OF OSLO

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Summary

This thesis concerns interfaith couples in India. It looks at their handling of their ritual/religious lives. Despite the differences that may emerge in interfaith marriages, this study tries to explain how interfaith couples create a common religious, spiritual and/or ritual platform in order to maintain their marriages. Ritual practices, festivals, God-belief, religious authorities, families, and gurus and saints are central topics showing their ritual engagement in their day-to-day lives. With a pressure from family and relatives, couples presented in this thesis, mainly discard the orthodoxy and rather share a mutual religious ground of inclusiveness to make their marriages work. The aim of the thesis is to show that the interfaith couples' capability to maintain an interfaith dialogue is greater than previously understood.

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1. Introduction

India is said to be a land of ‘unity in diversity’. This indeed is a country of 1,2 billion people in varied communities who have been living in togetherness for centuries. Living in an interfaith society is a well-known phenomenon in India. Though, it is impossible to overlook the existence of religiously based conflicts occurring from time to time, it is equally important to not exaggerate such conflicts and to balance them by examining the cohesive effects of interfaith relations in India.

To understand the inter-religious encounters in India and examine what happens when Indians are confronted with religious alternatives in their day-to-day life, this thesis will look at the dynamics of interfaith marriages. In my thesis, I am looking at interfaith couples in India, here defined as marriages between people from different religious backgrounds, to study how they manage religious and ritual diversity. As the theme of religious inter-relations is gaining increasing attention in religious and cultural studies in the West and elsewhere, I would say that interfaith marriages constitute an important micro terrain where interfaith relations are negotiated at an intimate level.

Turning my attention to interfaith marriages in the religiously diverse country of India, my research question is as follows: How do interfaith couples handle their ritual/religious lives?

In this thesis, I will show that the interfaith couples’ capability to maintain an interfaith dialogue is greater than previously understood. Despite the differences that may emerge in interfaith marriages, I want to show that the religious conflicts and the political interest in keeping them alive, which forms such a vital part of the history of South-Asia we are made to study, it can be equally, if not more important to study ordinary people’s efforts to stay united by managing differences. In this study, I am going to show how people from different religious convictions share, or live with one another’s ritual practices, and how these can come together and produce a common ground for interfaith couples. While this mostly occurs in the type of marriages that Indians refer to as “love marriages” or self-chosen marriages, it is nevertheless true that interfaith marriages/relationships encounter considerable social resistance. This social resistance is related to the historical preference for endogamous marriages and constitutes a crucial contextual background for this study.

1.1. Religious (in)tolerance

The social resistance can also be explained through older generations' past experiences in India's modern history; where interfaith conflicts and violence have arisen from time to time. Numerous conflicts have occurred, and are relevant factors for many people's hatred towards 'the other'.

The period around partition (1947) invoked religious nationalism and resulted in a territorial and persistent Kashmir-conflict between India and Pakistan that affected Muslims and Hindus (in India) in the name of religion (Ruud 2004, 48, 307). Ayodhya riots in 1992 for *Ramajanmabhumi* (Nussbaum 2007, 177) was another religious conflict that caused Hindu-Muslim bloodshed in the name of the Hindu god, Rama (and his birthplace, Ayodhya), and the Babri-masjid (mosque) built by the first Mughal emperor, Babur (Ruud & Heierstad 2010, 39). This conflict has received increased media coverage. The political aspect of this conflict is too broad to cover on this thesis, but simultaneously cannot be explained without relating it to the important Hindutva-figures or Bharatiya Janata Party's, (BJP) leaders whose legal charges for criminal conspiracies were recently updated in Indian newspapers (ToI, 2017). The Ayodhya-issue is said to have marked a political breakthrough to Hindunationalism (Ruud & Heierstad 2010, 39). Ayodhya-conflict followed with bomb-explosions in Mumbai in 1993 (Nussbaum 2007, 177) and pogroms in Gujarat in 2002 (Nussbaum 2007, 20). Again, Narendra Modi, India's present Prime Minister, who was positioned as a Chief Minister in the state of Gujarat in 2002, was held responsible for the riots (Mahurkar, 2002). In 2005, BBC News reported that "790 Muslims and 254 Hindus were killed" and many more were missing and injured (BBC, 2005). These conflicts are such happenings that have left scars in many Hindu and Muslim hearts- that do not heal easily.

Another conflict representing religious (Sikh) nationalism occurred in 1980's in the state of Punjab when India faced an extremely violent war between Sikh militants and Indian police (Ruud 2004, 377). This conflict resulted in massive riots between Hindus and Sikhs, and in 1984, India witnessed the assassination of her Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi.

However, the question rising here is how the Indian population handles its enormous linguistic, cultural and religious diversities. Even though India is an amalgamation of many features, it seems like the 'religio-political' aspect has gained great attention in the Indian history. The religiously based conflicts, largely between and among Hindus and Muslims,

have questioned the Indian society's religious diversity and whether it is flourishing well or not.

Asim Roy, (historian and a senior researcher in religion) presents a few perspectives on the linkage between the religious conflicts in the past and present. He argues that these conflicts are not a recent phenomenon in the Indian society, and explains it through the pre-colonial religious conflicts in India as history and discourse. This concerns the point of historical origin or beginning of such conflicts in India, and also another point, partly overlapping, involves their historical roots or causes (Roy 2010, 36). He emphasizes that in order to understand contemporary India and the present situation between Hindus and Muslim, it is important to look back at the pre-colonial time, the Moghul period, and the communal violence perpetrated in the name of religion. He maintains that conflicts and politics in the name of religion has been an old subject among Indian leaders and civilians; including the *Hindutva*-ness, its cause for intolerance, and the allegation for being attacked and destructed by Mughals. In fact, he traces the time long before Akhbar The Great (sixteenth century), acknowledging that there is an imbalance of data evidencing events from that period. One of the topics he discusses (in the context of pre-colonial India's linkage to the present) that has long been of political interest, is the issue of communal violence. He points out a very important factor about communal violence: "provocations on either side of the religious divide involving emotive symbols such as the cow (for the Hindu), and the pig and music before mosques (for the Muslim), have been responsible for many a communal riot over the centuries" (Roy 2010, 45). Finally, this, according to Roy raises a wider and more seminal historical question concerning the notion of contemporary India's tolerant and pluralistic religious-cultural tradition (2010, 41), where he criticizes the Hindu extremists for having negated India's plural and tolerant religious tradition, and simultaneously claims the secular Indian nationalists for having failed to give an immediate and adequate response to *Hindutva*-ness targeting the Muslims.

In May 2014, fifteen months before I embarked on my fieldwork, the former Chief Minister of Gujarat was elected to be the new Prime Minister with a landslide of the votes. The violence committed in the name of religion is still a strongly politicized issue in Indian society and therefore not possible to avoid, thus it is a wise starting point from which to discuss the notion of tolerance/intolerance. Is the desire of Hindu statehood rising again? Is it possible to maintain the interfaith tolerance while the *Hindutva* politician or the ex-Chief Minister of the state Gujarat (where riots in 2002 continued uncontrolled over many days) has won many

Indian hearts and elected to lead the country's present and future? This indeed gained increasingly attention among Indians in 2015 when the Indian state was accused for "raising intolerance".

Present time

At the time of my fieldwork (2015) on the day of Eid-al-adah, a mob in Dadri, Uttar Pradesh killed a 50 year old Muslim man, Muhammad Akhlaq, who was suspected and accused for cow-slaughtering and consuming beef (Aditi Vatsa 2015 and Rituparna Chatterjee, 2015). For many Indians, the worrying development, (at least as what they expressed in Delhi during my fieldwork) after the "Dadri –lynching", was the spreading of a mood of intolerance in India, as well as a weak response from the Indian government to this murder. It also raised troubling questions about India's secularity which relies on the idea of equality, regardless of people's faiths (Mander, 2015). Over a hundred writers, artists, authors, scholars, scientists and historians returned their national awards or The Sahitya Academy Award (Bhardwaj, 2015), as a protest against the Indian *Hindutva*-government under the prime-ministership of Narendra Modi. While this became a political issue that dominated the mass media, I met a number of people who were seriously emotionally affected by the image that Indians were creating of their nation. I also came across people who were concerned about India's image in the global world. I even witnessed the "march against intolerance- propaganda" that the famous Bollywood actor, Anupam Kher, led in Delhi (Firstpost, 2015). This was a march alleging that the *Award-Vapsi* (-return) campaign was initiated to defame the country by projecting a 'wrong' picture of the situation (ibid). The media was also blamed for having spread the mood, as the media and journalists were aggressively handled by the public who did not want any disturbance during the informal speech of Anupam Kher in Delhi in November 2015.

Anupam Kher and Asim Roy have diverging perspectives on what 'tolerance' means. Anupam Kher, whose wife is a member of BJP, criticized Indians (those who demonstrated against intolerance) for not appreciating their *janamabhumi*, their birthplace, and instead accused them for decreasing India's democratic image. He even asked the audience if they had "ever heard the word *intolerance* before?" explaining the opposition's intention to defame Prime Minister, Modi.

During his speech in Delhi, Anupam Kher and his audience appeared sensitive about this issue, and it would be safe to say that he seemed loyal to *Hindutva* sentiments as well, insisting that India has a history of patience and tolerance for other faiths, apparently pointing at the Mughal and British invasion. While Anupam Kher is in the course of protecting his nation's 'tolerant history', Roy's view is that the issue of 'intolerance' in Indian civilization needs to be treated with great circumspection (Roy 2010, 59), and that the complexity of communalism and ethnicity has continuously existed in the last four millennia of the South Asian history. He further adds that historical records of civilizations, cultures and societies are as much about tensions, rivalries, intolerance, hatred and conflict as about stability, co-existence, co-operation, tolerance, love and peace. While my point is the opposite; emphasizing the latter to be understood as an integral and vital part of the Indian history, I would argue that even though the Indian society did not deal with the equality everywhere, it would be insufficient to suggest it was an 'intolerant' society. Agreeing with Roy, that the determination of the importance of each strand of the Indian society is perhaps the most complex and daunting problematic of South Asian studies (Roy 2010, 60), I further appreciate his concluding note, that:

What makes Indian civilization stand out is, therefore, not the absence of such common traits of human history in it, but its staggering capacity to survive, renew and continue over millennia notwithstanding the enormity of its physical dimensions and the depth and spread of its diversities.
(Roy 2010, 60).

Understandably, Modi, with *Hindutva* and the notion of 'intolerance' are perhaps one of the most enigmatic elements of contemporary Indian society. They question the topic of interfaith; Whether the Indian government is tolerant about it, or not.

Love Jihad

Another political conflict that forms part of the context of my fieldwork arose in 2013, a year before Narendra Modi, the ex- *Hindutva*- organizer came to power, and continued even after the Dadri-lynching. Here, Hindu extremists accused young Muslim boys for alluring Hindu girls into love-relationships and marriage in order to convert them to Islam. So-called 'love jihad' had in fact kicked up much dust in 2009 in Kerala and Karnataka after Hindu groups started to campaign against alleged Muslim attempts to lure young Hindu women, feigning

love and using them for ‘immoral’ and ‘terror’ activities (Radhakrishnan, 2012), and at that time, beside the Hindu political groups, the Kerala Catholic Bishop Council stated that more than 2600 young Christian women had converted to Islam since 2009. Both Hindu and Christian groups were thus on guard against this phenomenon, and called for investigations and inquiries about such cases. However, the former chief minister of Kerala concluded in 2012 that there was no evidence for forced conversions in the state and that the fears of love jihad were baseless. He also added that neither would forcible conversions be allowed, nor would the government accept the spread of hate campaigns against Muslims in the name of ‘love jihad’ (Radhakrishnan, 2012). The idea of ‘love jihad’ nevertheless succeeded in catching on amongst Hindu radicals, and there have also been cases of interfaith couples eloping, resulting in the girl’s parents filing habeas corpus petition against Muslim boys, partly to save their own- and their daughter’s honor.

The ‘love jihad’-campaign had a strong impact on the interfaith couples I studied - not because the couples were in the subject of intolerance or love jihad, nor because they explicitly distanced themselves to such, but since it affected their friends and families, and thus, their family life. Knowing that the state and government potentially could be involved in molding such cases for their political interests, made it all the more important for couples who were already married across religious boundaries to resist these campaigns by holding up a viable alternative.

The reason why I touch upon these historical flashes is because they help explaining why some people (mainly upper caste Hindus and also Muslims) have problems handling religious plurality as close as in their own families. Having a morning cup of tea with the Muslim neighbor outside the home is not an issue for many Hindus. The problem occurs when he drinks from the same cup that the Muslim neighbor is drinking from. Living in a country with such diversity, the question is not whether or not Indians socially engage with persons from other religious convictions. The purpose of this thesis is to find out how acceptable it is to invite ‘the other’ into one’s own home and family, and if so, how it is being handled.

1.2. Marriages in India

Indian marriages are endogamous; they are still typically arranged by parents and families, and within the same religion, castes and communities. However, self-chosen marriage is not an unfamiliar phenomenon in contemporary India. Even though an overwhelming numbers of marriages remain arranged, the acceptance for self-chosen marriages is growing, and with that, the possibility of interfaith marriage.

Traditionally, it is the woman who converts to her husband's religion. This has to do with the traditional structure of society, especially in North India where kinship is patrilineal. If a Hindu woman and a Muslim man marry each other, it is most likely the woman who converts to Islam. To gain acceptance in her husband's family, this is usually the only solution, whether her conversion is pro forma (the easiest way), or invokes taking up a new ritual/religious practice in sincerity for lifetime. Even in cases of conversion, the question of ritual diversity in interfaith marriages needs to be opened up to a more detailed analysis.

With a gentle nod towards the age-old sociological debate or relationship between agency and social structure, I would say that agency is getting grand: Despite the resistance caused by factors like religion, caste, class and gender, self-chosen marriages including interfaith marriages seem to be on rise in contemporary Indian society.

1.3. Former scholarship

I have found very few studies of interfaith marriages in India that pertains to couples' handling of their ritual/religious life. There are however studies that contextualize interfaith marriage from the perspective of law, and I want to make my point of departure from Parveen Mody's book, *The Intimate State- Love marriage and the Law in Delhi* (2008) as a background to gain a deeper understanding of how interfaith marriages have become possible through the institution of civil marriages.

The Indian legislation of civil marriage, has allowed mixed marriages since 1872. Furthermore, the state is obliged to protect individuals against harm and exasperation from their families if and when a self-chosen marriage leads to threats and violence. Parveen Mody writes that in reality, the state (court and police), and kin groups are implicated in their exercise of what the Indian historian and feminist, Uma Chakravarti calls 'sexual governance'

(in Mody 2008, 256). This term is mainly related to having control over young Indians, especially women. Chakravarti explains that marriages in India are highly politicized. This includes parents who register a police case to get help to retrieve children who have married without their consent, for instance. Another example could be of a man (in a self-chosen marriage) who registers a similar case for help to find his legally registered wife, who has been abducted by her natal family. According to Chakravarti, the police gladly helps parents and relatives who demand to get their children back, usually to regain control over them and/or to sanction them. With this, Chakravarti believes that with the current debates on ‘custodial’ killings (or ‘honor killings’, as it is often called, we can ponder some of the ways in which women are held hostage and killed by their own relatives (Mody 2008, 21). Yet, the study of India’s marriage legislation is still a useful backdrop to the study of interfaith marriages that have *not* been met with violent sanctions.

The state and law

The law on civil marriage was introduced in India in 1872, and is known as Act III of 1872 (Mody 2008, 61). It was introduced on the basis of a petition in 1868 by Keshub Chandra Sen, on behalf of a modern and liberalized fraction (Keshubites) of the Brahmo Samaj, who despite being Brahmin, did not follow traditional, Hindu orthodoxy. Instead, they wanted to allow men and women in their ‘sect’ to be able to marry of their own volition, and to do so, they needed a law to enable such marriages. Act III of 1872 was contingent on certain written statements that the bride and groom had to fill in order to settle such a marriage. “I do not profess the Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Mohammadan, Parsi, Buddhist, Sikh or Jaina religion”, was an avowed declaration showing that one does not belong to any of the eight religions in India, but rather to the category, ‘non-community’ of people (Mody 2008, 61).

The couples were in other words made to leave their faith if they were to enter a self-chosen civil marriage, thus ending up in a group of ‘non-community’- people. When one looks at the Indian society, where religion is such a strong feature, it is almost impossible to envision such a marriage carried out in practice. This did indeed become difficult, and in 1923, the law was amended in such a way that one could now belong to Hindu- Buddhist- Sikh- or Jain- community, and register a civil marriage. The restrictions for the remaining religious

communities remained still the same until the British Empire had come to an end and the Muslim-majority provinces had been carved out of India.

Secularization of civil marriage in 1954

After Independence, what remained of India became a secular state with a secular law. The civil marriage law, the Special Marriage Act of 1954 that Nehru's government enacted, legalized inter-community marriages in a broader sense than before. Now, one could marry anyone, regardless of their religious and regional background. Those who were already married under the Act of 1872 could also register their marriage all over again, under the legislation of inter-community marriage that included all religious communities (Mody 2008, 92).

In 1955, the Hindu Marriage Act was introduced. The Hindu Marriage Act is said to have had three direct effects: firstly, it gave the right to marry in a traditional/religious way, solemnizing marriage among Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs and Jains, regardless of caste. Secondly, it introduced a divorce law that was equal for men and women. And thirdly, a principle of monogamy was added, regardless of the form of marriage (Mody 2008, 92).

Since 1950's, India's legislation has thus offered possibilities both for traditional religious marriages and for civil interreligious marriages.

The social context around 'love marriages'

Despite India's progressive legislation, the Indian society has largely been negative to love-marriages. The hostile attitudes have not only been directed at interfaith marriages but also at pre-marriage courtship, whether inter- or intra faith. In the past two decades, the right-wing-Hindu nationalists in particular has believed that the young generation growing propensity to hang out in groups (boyfriends, girlfriends and love affairs) is an imitation of the West, that runs counter to *Bharatiya sanskriti*, the Indian culture and tradition (Mody 2008, 104). In 1999 and 2000, the youth wing of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) ravaged and blackened the faces of couples celebrating Valentine's Day in Kanpur in Uttar Pradesh, and accused them of copying western customs and values (Mody 2008, 104). The police was also implicated

(Mody 2008, 104). The same happened in Delhi and other north Indian cities the following year where self-styled guardians of Indian culture messed up situations where couples were preparing for romantic dinners in restaurants and other similar arrangements (Mody 2008, 104). In Mumbai, Shiv Sena, a Marathi-Hindutva party, used canes to penalize couples who celebrated Valentine's Day (Mody 2008, 104). Not only Hindu nationalists, but also Muslims came together to protest the new youth culture, that celebrated pre-marital courtship, and some leaders among the Sindhis even went to the extent of banning the use of mobile phones for young Sindhis (Mody 2008, 105).

Violent campaigns such as this have had obvious implications. Parvez Mody states that in her work on love marriage couples in Delhi, not a single informant mentioned having celebrated Valentine's Day ever. Rather, these couples expressed that it had been important to meet up during holidays and festivals such as Diwali, Holi and Eid (Mody 2008, 104), rather than to risk being discovered participating in ostentatious celebrations of pre-marital love such as Valentine's Day. The Indian social structure is predominantly conservative. Unrelated boys and girls walking together in public is seen as shameful, especially for (lower) middle class families, who cannot compensate a tarnished social reputation with money. Moreover, such couples are surrounded by fear that family, relatives, or neighbors will spot them. While such attitudes concern all unmarried couples who are claimed to copy the Western youth culture, the sanctions that interfaith married couples meet are often even stronger.

In November 2016, an Indian Administrative Services (IAS) officer named Tina Dabi announced that she was getting married to a Muslim man, only to be treated with resistance and irk by the Hindu Mahasabha in Meerut. The Mahasabha asked Tina's parents to cancel the wedding or at least convince her Muslim fiancé to convert to Hinduism (Bhatia, 2016). The Mahasabha's request was that if the wedding took place, this would promote 'love jihad'. If the couple still wanted to get married, the Mahasabha urged Tina's parents to put their prospective son-in-law through a *ghar vāpsi* ritual. This ritual literally means returning 'home' by converting to Hinduism. The 'home' in this context refers to Hinduism, by *Sangh Parivar* or *Hindutva* forces because they apparently mean that all (Indians) were Hindu before Mughal-time. Hindutva's ideology apparently who believe that Hindus who were converted to Islam and Christianity during the Mughal- and then the English rule can now have the opportunity to convert back to their religion. While this contributed to politicize the event of a Hindu IAS officer intending to marry a Muslim IAS officer, the couple announced their decision on social media, adding that none of them were going to convert.

Additional negative opinions about interfaith marriages were reported in the newspaper *The Hindu*. In a report from a survey called Social Attitude Research for India (SARI) conducted by Amit Thorat and Diane Coffey in two different areas, Delhi and Uttar Pradesh, the newspaper claims that the desire to stop other people from having inter-caste or inter-religious marriages is not as uncommon as we might like to think (Thorat & Coffey, 2016). The survey was based on interviews of almost 3000 adults aged 18-65. What is relevant for my discussion is that the survey shows that more than 50 percent (altogether) wanted a law to stop inter-caste marriages. The number is lower in the capital of India than in Uttar Pradesh. Thorat and Coffey add the important factor that stresses with the social security, rather than the attitudes caused by age differences between the old and young:

Of course, in a society that is so divided on caste lines, inter-caste or inter-religious marriages can make a person an outcast among his family and neighbors. He may even be barred from family inheritance. Even when families are not adamantly opposed to an inter-caste marriage, there is a strong belief that it is more convenient to settle down with a socially and culturally familial person (Thorat & Coffey, 2016).

These attitudes of distinction tell us that in rural areas, the desire to stay in unity with family or kingroups might be greater than in urban areas, where the independence of individuals is stronger.

A comparative glance beyond the shores of India may also be helpful. In a study of interfaith marriages between Muslims and Christians in *Australian Social Work*, Mark Furlong and Abe W. Ata argue that interfaith couples express an opposite effect of such a marriage, than what the surrounding society does. Sometimes interfaith couples reported that they had experienced nervous and tense reactions from relatives and friends, and that they had come into focus for social concerns (...) (Furlong and Ata 2006, 253). While for interfaith couples themselves, marrying across religions often contributed in strengthening relationships (ibid). It is often clearly signaled from the traditional community around that interfaith marriages do not work in long run because of differing ritual practices. Thus, it is by no means only in India that interreligious marriages are discouraged and fraught with hindrances.

It is important to notice that in an Indian context, rituals and religious affiliation are important factors in family life. Furthermore, those who are against interfaith marriages regard children

of interfaith couples as the worst affected in the sense that they can get confused or insecure when they have to deal with two different religions or faiths. Personality development of children with interfaith backgrounds could well warrant a deeper psychological investigation, but in this thesis the aim is rather to look at how parents handle their religious/ritual difference. Interestingly, my informants do not suggest the view that their religious differences is confusing to their children. Interfaith couples rather say that they have found it beneficial for their children, as it makes them learn more. It is educative, and they become more flexible with respect to adapting to new things in life as they will have to do in their future, and they will also learn to accept more from others. As I will show, many of the couples are cultivating their own practices in such a way that they converge on a common spiritual, ritual or religious stage, despite their different religious upbringing.

There is certainly a significant distinction that makes partners in an interfaith marriage different from each other in the first place. Secondly, their natal families and their upbringing are also involved in downplaying or aggravating these differences. If X' family is more orthodox, will her/his religion be more dominant in her family life? What happens when Y comes from an unconventional family, but marries one from a traditional background? How do they negotiate religious difference, manage intentional or unintentional religious change, and cultivate their religious practices and beliefs so that they may form a mutual ground.

1.4. Interfaith marriages in talk and practice

During my first days in Delhi, when I was slightly worried about how to find my informants, I used to take evening walks in the park, nearby Karol Bagh where I lived. Here, I sometimes mingled with ladies and elderly men, addressing them as 'aunty' and 'uncle', which is normal for young people to do in India when they talk to older people. They noticed that I was not an Indian citizen, and I was always prepared for questions about what I was doing there, and why I was staying in Delhi. In hope of coming into contact with informants through them, I generally informed them that I was a student wanting to learn about interfaith-couples. As I expected, they would either shake their heads, saying "it is difficult", or they would say that "you will not be finding any such couple who is ready to unfold their lives". Evidently they held the number of such marriages to be very low, and the stigma affected to them required them to keep their heads low. Such statements frustrated me even more, but at least I

understood that many people consider it next to impossible to live a happily married life with a spouse of another religious conviction.

To understand my group of informants, I also find it useful to contrast the viewpoints I was confronted with at the onset of my fieldwork, with some observations I made as a young Hindu in Norway. Similar attitudes shape the discourse of inter-religious marriages among the Indian diaspora in Norway. Here, the idea of Hindu-Muslim marriages has the additional complications of usually being an Indian-Pakistani one. This is largely unacceptable due to the conflict-ridden historical relationship between these two countries.

All the same, religious crossings are not unknown. Ever since childhood, for instance, I have attended the annual *jāgran* (overnight worship/prayers in honor of Goddess Durga) arranged by the Hindu denominations in Oslo. Every year these *jāgrans* attract a few Sikh families. Until my fieldwork started and I one day visited the Jhandewala temple near Karol Bagh in Delhi, also called *Jhandevalī mā kā mandir* (The temple of Goddess with the sacred flag), I realized that I had always been overlooking the sight of Sikh families participating in *jāgrans* in Oslo. The Jhandewala temple in Delhi is where its custodians say that an avatar of Hindu Goddess Durga, the *ādi shakti* or the eternal power is present. Every time I went there, whether inside the temple doing puja, or outside the temple collecting my shoes, I saw at least two-three families coming in or going out, where the fathers or sons were wearing a Sikh-styled turban, a *pagri* (for adults) or *patka* (for young boys). This gave me flashbacks from my childhood, when I used to see Sikh people attending the *jāgrans* in Oslo's Hindu temples. Having observed many 'reverse' instances of Hindus doing puja to Sikh gurus, Frøystad writes: Many Hindus have high reverence for Guru Nanak, but since iconolotary and idol worship (*murti puja*) were among the key factors that made Sikhism crystallize as a separate religion, doing puja to Guru Nanak seems to be a double contradiction at first sight (Frøystad 2012, 15). This argument does also seem to hold validity for the Sikh families who did puja to Goddess Durga, on the ground that Sikhs ideally should not be doing 'murti puja'.

I had never ruminated about it earlier, but the analytical gaze I was about to activate as part of my master studies suddenly made me notice things I had previously taken for granted. As the daughter-in-law in Frøystad's host family used to worship the idol of Guru Nanak (Sikhism's founder) among other Hindu deities in her house temple, I now saw Sikhs worshipping Goddess Durga in Jhandewala Mandir.

In my examination of the religious practices of interfaith couples, I wish to look beyond the differences and switch to examining ritual and religious engagement across religious boundaries/traditions. In other words, I aim to understand how interfaith couples actually handle their ritual/religious lives after ten years (and more) after their weddings, whether they end up practicing their rituals separately- or end up practicing one another's religious rituals or composing a mutual repertoire of their own. I am partly inspired by the concept of 'religious intersections' derived from an article by Kathinka Frøystad (2012), where her anthropological research in India shows that despite the religious politicization and occasional interreligious violence that has occurred, people of different religious faiths and background still engage in ritual practices of other religions than their own. Besides documenting Hindu worship, her examples include a Hindu priest apprentice prostrating in front of the tomb of a Sufi saint, a young Hindu opting for a Muslim-style fast rather than a Hindu fast in hope of fulfilling a certain wish, and the religious plurality within a single family that incorporates modes of worship from Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism and Sikhism.

A similar analytical gaze directed at interreligious couples is intended to open up an examination of how these couples deal with a religious tradition other than their own. How important is it for them to retain their family-based beliefs and convictions? If not important, how easy it is to discard it when it has been such an incremental part of their everyday family life prior to getting married? To what extent do the spouses take part in each other's religious practices? What impact do the Indian religious festivals have on such couples not only within the community or the society they live in, but also within their families? How do they compromise with each other and their natal families in terms of ritual practices?

This is what I wanted to examine in 2015, when I departed for fieldwork in India for four months. The couples I worked with are from different places in India; Varanasi, Delhi, Punjab and Mumbai. While their place of living and regional background may have some implications on the issues they have faced as interfaith couples, the regional dimension is not one that will be emphasized in this thesis, partly due to the fact that regional comparisons would require a larger number of informants and a greater attention to regional socio-political context than to intra-familial religious dynamics. This thesis is primarily concerned with the hurdles and solutions that emerge across my sample of informants.

1.5. Closer approach

Data for this thesis has collected through in-depth interviews with and observation of twelve interfaith couples in India, predominantly from the North-West, many of whom are settled with their spouse and children in Delhi. During fieldwork, I found it necessary to understand my informants as closely as possible through detailed conversations, in which they could use their own language and expressions, thus unfolding details concerning their social- and personal lives that occasionally could be difficult to articulate. This made it easier for me to access the topics that were of interest to my analysis.

One factor that emerged during the study was that the long conversations with my interviewees needed considerable attention for further analysis. Having compressed my material into a text, I realized that it was in the lengthy details the most interesting points were hidden. “The devil is in the details”, as the expression goes. To compress the material even more in order to present and unfold all the twelve couples that I interviewed (twenty four informants in all) could have been interesting, but in order to give proper analytical attention to the patterns that emerged, I looked at seven of twelve couples (excluding two in Punjab, one in Mumbai, and two in Delhi. Keeping those seven couples in focus in this thesis, however, I will rather zoom more closely in on some couples than on others. In the coming chapters, each main topic will be exemplified by a small selection of couples that allow me to bring out all the familial complexities involved.

1.6. Chapter Outline

In chapter 2, I present additional details about my interlocutors and my fieldwork. Beside explaining how I found my informants, and which methods I used, this chapter will also presents challenges I met during my fieldwork, and how my Indian identity sometimes solved, and other times confused my position as a fieldworker.

In chapter 3, I turn my attention to my interlocutors' efforts to find a common religious ground. Here I am particularly interested in the interfaith couples who claim to have moved from "religion" to "spirituality". According to these couples, 'religion' is something organized that comprises ritual practices established by religious authorities who also promote the correct/right way to live. According to these couples, 'religion' thus detaches people from one another. 'Spirituality' in contrast, is seen as pertains to a personal belief (God) and takes distance from the 'rigidity' of religion. Spirituality is also associated with gurus in India who teach meditational learning and ideas about harmony and inclusiveness. On the whole, this chapter recognizes that 'spirituality' functions as a common ground for at least three of the interfaith couples I interviewed: Sajad and Maya, who are the founders of *Rangilā* (organization for interfaith couples), Vinod and Aisha from Varanasi who named their child after *Kabīr*, a saint in India from fifteenth century, and Ravi and Halima whose thoughts revolve around God and religious or/and spiritual gurus.

In chapter 4, I examine how interfaith couples engage in various religious rituals in their daily life. It questions the conception about interfaith marriages as inherently conflictual by showing that many interfaith couples start their married life by practicing their own respective religions but gradually become religiously 'intersected' in the sense that the partners cross religious boundaries and participate in the ritual practices and beliefs of their spouse. Four of the twelve couples I interviewed represent this development, all ending up as interfaith couples whose marriage revolved around at least two world religions. Topics discussed in this chapter include: daily ritual practices, participation during festivals and religious events, religious authorities, concepts and interpretation of their respective religions. The first two couples are Muslim men married to Hindu-Brahmin women; Shamsheer and Amrita who are journalists in Delhi, and Harshita and Nadim who were best friends in their hometown, Lucknow, and moved to Delhi for work and got married. The third couple is; Jennifer, a Christian woman whose Hindu ex-husband died a few years after her (first) marriage, but during my fieldwork, she was married to a Muslim man, Abdul. The fourth couple is a

Christian-Hindu couple, Cathy and Ajay, where Ajay claims that they have no strong investment in ritual practices, but when Cathy travels from Varanasi to Gujarat (her hometown) via Mumbai, another perspective emerges.

In chapter 5 I turn my attention to religious pressure emanating from the spouses' parents and other relatives. This chapter is based on the third section of interfaith couples where each spouse has a family-based affiliation that tries to influence them, even though they do not necessarily have strong investments in religious traditions for their own sake. Their religious attendance is most likely to be subject to pressure when they are newly married and already are subject to pressures of conversion, or when they take part in family gatherings and ritual occasions in which extended kin gathers. This particularly happens when older generations have stakes in the continuation of family traditions, or have strong beliefs in the doctrines of deliverance and/or liberation. Either one family has stakes and claims, or both does. The couple may well be pluralistically-minded in the beginning, but the family position determines more about how their ritual life develops after they get married. Because the pressure mainly lies on the women, this chapter brings out the gendered dimensions of negotiating ritual life in interfaith marriages.

And finally, in chapter 6 I summarize the argument and provide a few points for possible future research on interfaith marriages.

For now, however, I want to proceed by presenting a few more details about my fieldwork, which turned out to become less straight forward than I imagined when I drafted my research proposal.

2. Methodological reflections

Before one leaves for fieldwork, it is crucial to plan the techniques and methods that are likely to provide us with the best possible data. The choice of method relies on the question/matter that is being investigated. My topic question deals with interfaith-couples in India and how they handle their ritual/religious lives. In my case, this is directly linked with people and their personal experiences; thus it is necessary to use a method which is best suited to illuminate the matter. The fieldwork techniques I have used are interviews and participatory observation. In depth conversations with people living in interfaith marriages, a qualitative approach gives a foundation to achieve an understanding of social phenomena that is based on rich data of people and situations (Thaagard 2003, 11). I have availed myself on qualitative research method supplied by an interview guide to obtain the empirical data needed for this thesis. In order to make it as successful as possible, I have combined interviews with interfaith couples, with their own narratives and observed them at the same time. My interview-guide contains questions related to “religious” topics which I found important to draw attention to; daily practices and beliefs, festivals and celebrations, families and conversion.

Referring to the sensitivity of the topic and the possible effect of my fieldwork that could touch my informants’ lives, it was a determining factor that I largely had to reflect on the ethical questions before, during and after my fieldwork. Yet, it has not been easy to take appropriate ethical decisions during my conversations when I, myself have been affected by religious topics that revolve around my (religious) identity as well.

I start by clarifying a few factors that are related to the ‘access to my informants’; establish relationship, my position in a professional role, and most emphasized, the manner in which my multiplex identity and my self-representation have mattered when I have approached my informants.

In order to maintain the anonymity of my informants, I use pseudonyms in place of their real names and their working places.

2.1. Informants and access to the field

Before my fieldwork started, I was aware that I had to be in an "exploration mode" all the time. I was continuously in search and need of as many couples as possible, as I wanted to produce as rich a body of empirical material as I could before I began to write my thesis. I began by searching for my informants through my own personal network in India. The reason behind it was the sensitivity around this topic, which I have elaborated on the previous chapter. Yet, fieldwork as we know does not always proceed in the way we plan it. Initially, I relied on the "snowball-method" alone, but as soon I stepped into the field, I became dependent on the availability of informants that I had.

My personal contacts

Thagaard explains that in qualitative studies, it is sometimes difficult to find people that are willing to serve as informants (Thagaard 2003, 53). I have experienced this to be true during my own fieldwork. I started with establishing some crucial contacts before I left for India; through my family, friends and acquaintances. All the same, these people whom I expected to be my first interviewees turned out to be the last ones instead.

Firstly, two of the cases were accessed through my father who was in Punjab at the time of my fieldwork. This was something he found difficult; Asking somebody else if they know couples who have married across religions. At that time, I did not understand his dilemma until I realized that it cannot be easy to ask about such things among his own people in Punjab. Since he has never touched upon this topic among his family and friends before, his family and friends must have wondered why his daughter chose to interview 'transgressing' couples, whom they may not support. Though he did help me out and left his visible concern unsaid, I can certainly say that it is somewhat challenging to find interfaith couples who are willing to serve as informants for MA- thesis. Most likely the vast majority of such couples might not 'wish' or 'dare' to expose themselves in public or be a part of a research, even if full anonymity is granted.

Secondly, two of the couples whom I got connected with through my friends, unfortunately withdrew without informing me. One of them even expressed worries to my friend about being asked questions related to his personal life, and when religion was the obvious theme, he never met up for an interview/conversation with me and his wife. One important factor was

evidently that this man hails from a family of scheduled caste converts to Christianity, who moved on to marry a Hindu girl. Poking into his family background would thus have involved a painful reminder, if not disclosure, of his caste positioning, a position his family had spent a long time to overcome.

No matter how much I twisted or molded enquires around religion and interfaith marriage, this was a sensitive issue to talk about. Even though, I was prepared for this from the beginning, I did not reflect sufficiently on why such matters appear to be so sensitive in such a diverse and interfaith society. In no case can we presume that everyone is willing to serve as informants; Rather we should understand that talking about topics related to one's social position and affiliation (religion, caste, economic status) can be touchy and difficult for people to talk about. Therefore, Thagaard further advises us to use a method of selection which ensures us people who are willing to take part of the investigation (Thagaard 2003, 54). This is what she terms a 'convenience sample', and following the problem I had with recruit informants through my own network, this became one of my main methods to recruiting new informants. However, I cannot say that I did not succeed at all in finding couples through my personal contacts, but interestingly all of them turned up during the final month of my fieldwork.

2.2. Rangīlā

After many searches on the Internet, and Facebook, I stumbled across *Rangīlā* (colorful), an organization that works for interfaith couples. I called Rangīlā, and came in contact with its founder, Sajad, to whom I introduced my motive of calling and asked for a meeting. He responded positively, and welcomed me to their office in South Delhi two days later. Since this organization became the main source for informant recruitment, it deserves a brief introduction.

When the day arrived, I ended up in a villa where the organization has its office in the second floor. Expectedly, it helps interfaith couples for legal and supportive counseling and guidance. When asking what kind of couples who come to seek for help, he told me that all kind of "youngsters" initially write an e-mail to them. Mostly, they want guidance for what they should do, and where they should begin, when discovering that their parents will not support their plans of marrying across religious boundaries. Sajad further told me that there are

couples from both upper and lower middle class that face the same challenges from their extended families. Even couples who are too young to get married legally approach the organization for advice, but in such cases Sajad helplessly tells them that “there is no solution, you will have to wait...”. “How about those who want to convert”, I asked. He replied, “Then it is not an interfaith marriage.” He was explaining this by saying that when a boy comes and says that his girlfriend is ready to change her religion, he asks the boy if he could do the same. In other words, Sajad urges the couples to accept each other as they are, and to make their union succeed as it is.

I asked him what made him start this organization. He told me that his initial motive was personal. Sajad is married to a Hindu woman, and as they experienced a tough time during their starting phase of their marriage, and had no guidance or other support to rely on, they wanted to initiate a support group for those who were undergoing the same challenges.

Rangīlā started its work in 2004, but its emergence goes back to 2002, when the riots in Gujarat created severe tensions between Hindus and Muslims in India, in a way that also affected interfaith couples. Sajād narrated that in *The Week*, there had been an article where records of Gujarat riots were written: People with interfaith background (couples) were listed for threats and many were beaten.

Though I have been unable to find the article which is more than one decade old, I would still like to exemplify how interfaith marriages and communal tensions between Hindu and Muslim communities are interwoven. One such example is a case from Dhamtari district in Chattisgarh where an interfaith marriage led to communal tension in 2015, according to *The Times of India* (Jaiswal, 2015). A Hindu boy who converted to Islam to remarry his girlfriend, with whom he initially eloped to get married (three months before), contacted now some Hindu organizations and expressed the desire of ‘reconverting’ to Hinduism. The boy was apparently pressurized by the girl’s family to convert to Islam and do an Islamic *nikah* (wedding) with the girl. When the boy’s family found out, they had reportedly lodged a complaint of kidnapping with the police. When the girl’s family came to know several youths from the Muslim community gathered up at the police station, allegedly armed with rods and swords. From the boy’s side, the Hindu organization's volunteers and the family members and friends reached the police station. It resulted in a violent clash and four people, including an Assistant Superintendent of Police (ASP) in the district Dhamtari were injured (Jaisval, 2015). Though this was controlled and did not generate further tensions, it is from here (regardless

whose intention) one can look back at time, and question how communal riots, like the one in Gujarat, where hundreds of people lost their lives in the name of religion, have affected interfaith marriages/affairs.

Sajad, his wife and few couples of friends who were inter religiously married discussed what support they would have if such riots would occur (again) in Delhi. Their worry was that Hindus would only help Hindus, and Muslims would only protect Muslims. The question that followed was: “Who will support us”, Sajad explained. Given such identity politics, their concern was that nobody would help interfaith couples such as them, and accordingly Sajad and his wife decided to initiate Rangīlā.

Till now, Rangīlā has worked as support group where such couples can share experiences with similar couples and simply provide a platform to discuss and solve difficulties and obstacles. Rangīlā has also matured into an organization that offers legal and supportive advice and guidance, and has also contributed as witnesses during court weddings. According to the founder, there are about two hundred couples who have attained support through Rangīlā until my fieldwork in 2015.

Sajad’s personal life aroused a lot of interest in me to interview him and his wife, but I was unsure about whether to ask him to be one of my informants, so I decided to wait. Anyhow, Sajad solved much of my problem with recruitment of informants by introducing me to several of the couples who were active in this organization. I thanked him, but I was still not satisfied as I had doubts regarding the choice of selection. Would I end up with a group of newly married couples? Would I have to reformulate my questions? Would they be able to share any ‘ritual experiences’ or would they only narrate the difficulties they had with their families before their weddings? These were the questions that buzzed in my mind during my initial meeting with Sajad. As I had planned the project before I departed for fieldwork, it was essential to talk to more ‘experienced’ couples, namely those who had been married for minimum five years and had children, as only such couples could help me to shift the attention from obstacles to *entering* interfaith marriages to the ways such marriages are handled once they have come into being.

As I worried about these questions, my participation in a ‘solidarity meeting’ which Rangīlā arranges for their members once a month, gave answers to my questions. Firstly, this meeting introduced me to a majority of adult members that would be highly suitable for my project.

Secondly, Sajad and I agreed to let the couples get introduced to me and my research before I started to interview them. This decision is in accordance with the principle of Informed consent specified in the ethical guidelines that all research at the University of Oslo (2016).

To sum up my informants, my fieldwork is based on in-depth conversations with twelve interfaith couples. Seven of them are from Delhi NCR, two from Varanasi, one from Mumbai, and two from Punjab. In my selection, I found it beneficial to move to other cities to counteract ending up in the same networks, especially when using the snowball method in order to select my informants. Though their place of living and their regional background may have some implications on the problems they have faced as interfaith couples, the regional dimension is not one that will be emphasized in this thesis. As mentioned, a regional comparison could have required a more quantitative material and input. This thesis is more concerned with the common hurdles and solutions that emerge across my sample of informants.

2.3. My identity and self-representation in the field

My identity on the whole has contributed much to understanding the relation that a researcher and an informant can establish. My self-representation was being a Norwegian master's student from Oslo who wanted to interview interfaith couples. But was my identity as simple as this? Do I look like a Norwegian young girl with fair skin? To my informants, the first impression would certainly be that I am an Indian girl, so it was necessary for me to further introduce myself as a Norwegian/Indian girl, born and brought up in Norway. This had profound implications for the trust I had to build as a researcher who studied a sensitive topic. It was important for me to appear as an "outsider" or a distanced person, as this could make my informants more comfortable while unfolding their personal experiences. Thagaard points out that it is beneficial to seem distanced, while it gets easier to ask the informants questions they may expect me to already know. Because of this, I was conscious to act professionally and strategically. This method became crucial at least in one case when I learned that one of my informants had not been willing to serve as an informant for a similar study conducted by an Indian student one year earlier. The Indian student unfortunately never managed to meet this couple, while I was invited to interview them at their home. This incident made me confident on the method I was cultivating to build trust between me and my informants. Also,

it might have made a difference that my thesis will be published in Norway, not in India. This can make them ‘safer’, in a way.

On the other hand, no matter how much I tried to maintain the distance stressed by Thagaard, I was frequently reminded of and asked about my own family background. My identity of belonging to a *Brahmaṇ- parivār* (family) was for instance high-lighted in many contexts. The first experience was at Rangīlā’s monthly ‘solidarity meeting’ in the house of one of the member couples. When I introduced myself to the hosts with my full name, the host immediately emphasized my surname, ‘Sharma’ and commented that “ohh, now we have two Brahmaṇs here....” His wife is also from a *Brahmaṇ- parivār* and has the same surname as mine.

Another time, during my fieldvisit in Varanasi, my surname was again enquired about, when some acquaintances (initially my informants’ associates) asked me whether I am a ‘Sharma as in Brahmaṇ’. In Uttar Pradesh, unlike in Punjab or in Rajasthan for instance, people who call themselves Sharma, do not necessarily belong to a Brahmin caste. Many Sharmas in Uttar Pradesh are *Barhais* (sub caste of carpenters). Coming back to the question regarding my ‘Brahmaṇ -ness’, and in their course of the validation of what kind of Sharma I am, these people even asked me which *gotra* (linage/family-name among Brahmaṇs) my family and I belong to.

Returning to the ‘solidarity meeting’ of Rangīlā, even though I was a little embarrassed of the fact that my caste background was handled with so much positive attention, I also realized that this was giving me an opportunity to be ‘one of them’, in regard to understanding their backgrounds. Even though I do not take part in all religious activities, ideas and practices related to Brahmaṇ-culture, I am certainly familiar with most of them as I descend from a Brahmin family, where restricted rituals and *Brahmaṇtā* (-ness) have frequently appeared in sight or been told/ practiced by the older generation in family.

By checking and reconfirming my identity and asking questions about my family background, I think my informants (and their friends) who were Brahmaṇs or had a Brahmaṇ spouse tried to assess my positioning and level of understanding. This was a possible reason for how they managed to relate to me during our conversations. I have also experienced it to be true that “it is necessary to be attached to the other culture to be able to understand it” (Thagaard 2003,

75). This made it easier for me to formulate the questions with sensitivity, on the background of what they would accept or not.

My Indian family background has been strongly beneficial in terms of language. Communication in English in cities like Delhi is increasingly common, particularly among people from the 'white-collar' segments of society. In other cities, like Varanasi and Punjab, my two oral (Indian) language skills, Hindi and Punjabi have been strongly beneficial when interviewing or communicating. Punjabi is spoken in my family and relatives, and I am very familiar with it. Hindi has also been practiced, and I have studied it at the University of Oslo. I now master it fairly well. My first informants were located in Delhi, and they usually initiated the talks in English. I noticed that many expressions in Hindi were preferable by them, so they frequently asked if I could understand what they said. In the beginning, I was quite skeptical about revealing my Indian language skills as I felt it was connected to my identity or origin. But this did not create any disadvantage for me, rather it showed to be very helpful as it led them to express things better in their native language. I continued mixing English and Hindi according to what suited best for the questions and responses.

How Native is a Native Anthropologist?

Kirin Narayan, a writer and an Indian-born American anthropologist, raises this question in the title of her article: *How Native is a Native Anthropologist?* As the debate about this revolves around that "a native anthropologist" is believed to write about their own cultures from a position of intimate affinity (Narayan 1993, 671), this article, written by Kirin Narayan, argues that we need to situate anthropologists, instead of fixing them as either 'native' or 'non-native' figures. She proposes that we should view each anthropologist in terms of shifting identifications amid a field of interpenetrating communities and power relations (Narayan 1993, 671), and what we must focus our attention on is the quality of relations with the people we seek to represent in our texts (Narayan 1993, 672).

She gives an example of her own 'multiplex identity' with a strongly stressed (Hindu) patrilineage that seems to mark her as an Indian, and therefore a "native" anthropologist when studying India (Narayan 1993, 675). She also talks about Shrinivas, one of India's most respected anthropologists, and in India known as a sociologist. Shrinivas was a male Brahmin educated in Oxford in the 1940s, and who returned to his ancestors' village in Mysore in

Karnataka for fieldwork. As Kirin Narayan explains her point of shifting identifications, Shrinivas hoped that his study would enable him to better understand his personal, cultural and social roots (ibid), how he interacted with the members of the community: sometimes aligned with particular groups, sometimes set apart. He also confesses that it was only in the village that he realized how far he (and his family) had travelled away from tradition (ibid).

My position of being a blend of *Norwegian-Indian-Hindu- Brahmin-Panjabi* links to the questions about what I see and not, my level of pre-understanding, language confidence and how I am seen by others and how I can engage in a fieldwork in India as a ‘researcher’, when I study ‘my own people’. As I have explained, my connection to my informants was the most determining factor during my fieldwork. My ability to understand them depended on what Narayan points out, that:

we would most certainly be better off looking for the natives’ point of view to realize their visions of their worlds while at the sametime acknowledging that ‘we’ do not speak from a position outside ‘their’ worlds, but are implicated in them too: through fieldwork, political relations, and variety of global flows (Narayan 1993, 676).

When I had to establish trustworthy contacts in my fieldwork, I was not far from the assumption of being “a native fieldworker”. Yet, the question revolves around how distanced and close I am to the “native” that I study. As I have explained earlier, it was not easy to term myself either as this or as that, but Narayan gives answers to this with factors like education, class, emigration. These factors make ‘a native anthropologist’ distanced from the societies that he/she is associated with (Narayan 1993, 677), “... and with the shifting identifications, even the most experienced of ‘native’ anthropologist cannot know everything about his or her own society” (Narayan 1993, 678). As for me, and relating it to the access to my informants, my Hindu–Brahman background was not necessary always an asset when meeting my informants; My Scheduled caste–Christian informant pulled out, and when meeting Muslim informants, I was certainly not studying them from a position of intimate affinity that ‘a native anthropologist’ is assumed to do. Though I am a daughter of an Indian family and could seem more close to my informants than a ‘non-native’ does, the fact that I was born and raised in Norway, with a mixed cultural background provides no factual answer to whether I am an ‘insider’ or an ‘outsider’ while out in the field. Relating it to my informants, despite

being an ‘insider’, the ‘native’ would address me as an ‘outsider’ because of my Norwegian background.

Therefore, I agree with Narayan who suggests enactment of hybridity. Instead of fixing the anthropologist as either ‘native’ or ‘non-native’, ‘insider’ or ‘outsider’ that leads to no answers, she makes a crucial point while tacking between situated narrative and more sweeping analysis, that we must accept that at a moment in which scholarship has a ‘multinational reception’, it seems more urgent than ever that anthropologists acknowledge that it is people and not the theoretical puppets who populate our texts, and that we allow these people to speak out from our writing (Narayan 1993, 681). While I am in a position to write and zoom into my informants’ narratives and simultaneously analyze, I stick to Narayan’s conclusion, that writing texts that mix lively narrative and rigorous analysis involves enacting hybridity and to melt down the world of engaged scholarship and the world of everyday life, regardless of our origins (Narayan 1993, 682).

Meanwhile, the challenge was how to handle my informants’ interpretation of *my* level of understanding. In many cases, I experienced that my understanding about their situation was taken for granted because I am of Indian origin and according to them aware of their cultural issues. This is partly true, but not fully. Though I was familiar with many dimensions of Indian family life, I could never be certain of how they would handle specific issues related to interfaith- issues within their homes. My religious and family-based affiliation provided no answers for this.

My informants usually brought up the phrase “you know how it is...”. Did they say it because they thought I was familiar with it, or was the case that they did not want to unfold everything to ‘another Indian’- (to me)? In any case, both possibilities could be possible because beyond everything, I was unknown to them.

For instance, the topic of ‘religious pressure’, which most of the couples deal/dealt with, was somehow challenging for me to talk about, as my informants initially seemed hesitant to share information. This limited me as a researcher. Perhaps they did not want to disclose details about personal experiences in which their extended families were involved. Alternatively, they left the topic with an emotional expression, which they expected me to understand. Anyhow, these phrases and expressions turned out to be important data as it made me aware that even the most ‘successful’ interfaith couples did experience ‘religious pressure’ at some

points of time in their married life. Even though not everyone unfolded detailed narratives, it was nevertheless visible on their facial expressions or through their understanding of *my* understanding, which I could tell was taken for granted. On the one hand, I settled my analysis with this information, but on the other hand, such expressions limited me from enquiring further. For ethical reasons, I did not want to push my questions in directions that would make my informants uncomfortable, and given my double role as a cultural insider and distanced researcher I know that emotional expressions or statements of “you know how it is...” were bringing me close to the limit. I could not risk turning this to an emotional session and compromise my position as a fieldworker, so I intentionally changed the topic to one that was even equally interesting, but maybe less emotional.

Questions of my identity did not only pertain to what my informants thought I would understand. Once I encountered a big challenge of being an Indian Hindu Brahmin. One of my informants, who was Muslim, entered into an aggressive mode during the interview, and started to express distaste against Hinduism to a large extent. During a tea-break he taunted me by asking if I do not feel ashamed of worshipping “the *lingam* of my God”, pointing to Shiva. This, and many of the other comments he made, forced me to reconsider whether I wanted to continue the interviews or not. My identity as a Hindu was under attack. I had to restrain myself to avoid reverting with an inappropriate comment, yet this incident made me unfocused and left me demoralized, which I feared could affect my further work. Fortunately, I managed to re-activate my role as a researcher with a professional and distanced conduct. Potential inner conflicts between being professional and the involvement of feelings is a very important point to be aware of before starting a fieldwork. *Countertransference* is a term used by Thagaard to explain the emotional reactions of the researcher which prevents him or her to establish a responsive contact with the informant (Thagaard 2003, 105). This concept captures well my reactions during the incident I just mentioned. The worst-case scenario is that the researcher’s response turns to be negative towards the informant, which we all should try to avoid.

Talking about religious views and going deeply into them can be very delicate and must be handled with respect. Even so, I should have been even better prepared for such tense moments during fieldwork, or even better, managed to avoid them completely. Still, it is impossible to be prepared for all eventualities.

2.4. Interviews

Because of the sensitivity around my topic, I had decided to avail myself of the unstructured interview which normally is considered to be a conversation between the researcher and the informants around a given topic, unlike a structured interview with framed questions and limited responses and is a formal type of interview. Unstructured type of interview marks a comfort zone around the informant to speak freely, and downplays the concept of ‘interview’- which sounds frightening for many people in the beginning. Therefore, it was my duty to structure an interview with which both parties (the couples and I) were comfortable with. This gives the informants the space and ability to have an open conversation, and let them bring up themes which simultaneously functions relevantly for my further work.

My interview was complemented with an interview guide, where I had prepared questions related to the themes which I wanted to focus on, to ensure a certain degree of comparability across the couples. In addition, it worked as a tool for me if ever I got distracted or any silent/awkward moments would occur. Normally, I tried to avoid depending on my list of questions, as I wanted the conversation to seem as natural as possible. And gradually, I became totally independent of it. The difference between using it and not was very clear; my informants seemed less nervous and more progressing in terms of open-talk, which was for all reasons beneficial for me. There were few cases where I relied on the structure of my interview guide, and it was an absolute need when my informants were/felt shy and unwilling to speak openly- which also positioned me in an awkward situation. So here, it functioned well to rely on the follow-up questions I had prepared, having exactly this reason in mind. The success of using the unstructured approach where I could put aside my interview guide and focus on what my informants’ had to say, was highly dependent on me, who initially was an explorer/discoverer/”verifier” (to them) , and them, who seemed sceptical (to me). The relation between me and my informants and our open and flexible conversation could never be possible without the confidence we built towards each other.

2.5. Observation

Initially, I had planned to spend time with my informants so that I, in addition to conversing with them, could observe how they brought up their children, celebrated religious festivals, etc. Given my informants' busy schedules, and the fact that they were settled across not only Delhi, but most of north India, I had to limit my observation somewhat. That being said, I was fortunate to have access to all of my informants' homes when interviewing them. Another factor which counts is the duration of the interviews. I had initially planned them to last for maximum 45 minutes, but they always continued for the next one hour. All my interviews have lasted in between one and a half and two hours. This was strongly beneficial since other events were not accessible for observation. That being said, I have also applied participatory observation to a lesser degree. This implies that the researcher performs an active role in relation to the informants, and to a certain extent participates in what they do. The monthly 'solidarity meeting' of Rangilā where I had little expectations of what the outcome would be, gave me a lot of information about the Rangilā-family. It was an excellent opportunity for me to observe them and their interrelated behavior where questions related to religious attendance were the core topics. I had a pen and paper to write down my notes, and could seem like a non-participating observer. But since I was asked my opinions about certain matters which they were discussing, I also participated to some extent, but stayed neutral in my responses. These meetings gave me a lot more information than I expected; an insight in their different religious backgrounds, their tolerant/intolerant comments on religious arguments, and in general which matrix they were positioned in while defending or contradicting each other's statements. The benefit of observation gives us the opportunity to see things closer and in new perspectives, by registering other relevant and different features as well.

Observations at my informants' homes also provided me answers about how they were involved in their ritual lives. Details like decorations of religious symbols (*aum*, cross, moon), paintings of Kaba in Mekka, calendars with Krishna's pictures on, alters with Jesus Christ and Mother Mary, temples with Hindu deities, and statues of Sai Baba and Buddha were giving me some kind of sense that religion and rituals did matter to these couples. So, the question about *how* religious they were was immediately discarded when I saw that such details were brought into their homes, especially when I initially imagined that such things would not be seen in an interfaith home. It rather gave me information about what their children (for instance) were familiar with, and which environment the family was positioned in.

I came across homes where the Muslim husband did not install his/her Islamic decorations, but accepted his/her Hindu spouse's *murtis* under the same roof. Homes where everything was mixed and kept together that was the most interesting part (will return to it in chapter 4), and also there were few who eagerly had installed their own 'religious things' in their own 'religious corners' in their bed rooms (notice the single room), in order to hide it from other people.

3. Finding a “common ground”

Discussing religion and its different aspects can be very interesting. As the debates about religion increases, especially in the academic world, it has become equally important for us to see the significance of religion, and how it shapes people’s lives. While the concept of religion is giving us room to include new perspectives to discuss, this concept is also being criticized both by the theorists and the people we study. One of the notions that have been suggested as a preferable alternative is ‘spirituality’. This concept involves many ideas from different points of views; both from collective to individual and from Western to Eastern and to Indian. ‘Spirituality’ – in the sense that people in the ‘The West’ are familiar with, has much in common with ‘New Age’ tendencies with a diverse set of beliefs. As we understand it on a broader level, we can claim that it stems from South Asia – especially from Indian religions (Hinduism and Buddhism), by including elements like karma, meditation and yoga, astrology, chakra for healing, to mention some. Although Indians are familiar with such, it is not always being practiced on the same level (as in the West) among Indian lives.

The notion of ‘spirituality’ was not a planned idea to work with before I started my fieldwork. Yet it repeatedly came up during my interviews which turned it into an interesting topic to examine. Whereas a large proportion of my informants felt comfortable with the ‘religion’-concept, some also rejected it and claimed themselves to be ‘spiritual’. As both religion and spirituality are broad concepts that include many visions and perspectives, this chapter is limited to examining the interfaith couples who claimed that they have gone from ‘religion’ to ‘spirituality’. This chapter discusses the relation that my informants have to the concept ‘spirituality’, examined through their descriptions, explanations, and how they contrast ‘spirituality’ with ‘religion’. Generally, peoples’ religious lives largely grow from their family-based ritual activities, ideas and beliefs, but here, it is important to see that those individuals are now dependent on their spouse’s understanding of religiosity, a wife/husband who comes from a different set of religious practices (family-based), and is perhaps of a completely different religious conviction. Is it possible that one- or both the members try to build a platform where spirituality functions as a common ground? The distinction between these two notions- ‘spirituality’ and ‘religion’ is typically presented by holding religion to be organized, comprising ritual practices designed by religious authorities who promote the ‘correct/right’ way to live – thus, according to the interviewees, detaching people from one another. Spirituality, in contrast, is presented as relying in God and takes distinct itself from

the institutional rigidity. It also entails to the spiritual gurus in India who promote ideas about harmony and inclusiveness of people across differences, in addition to showing the way to the 'God within'.

In a thought-provoking book titled *The spiritual Revolution: why religion is giving way to spirituality*, Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2004) discuss the concepts 'spirituality' and 'religion' as it emerged in a study conducted in Kendal, UK. Most of their work concerns religious involvement in contemporary world where spirituality was growing and acquiring a great significance in many people's lives. By comparing the findings with evidence from the USA and Europe, they argue that the 1990s saw the emergence of a veritable "spiritual wave". One of its most important tenets is the distancing from "religion", which is typically associated with ritual orthodoxy. Heelas and Woodhead suggest two formulations to explain the separation between 'religion' and 'spirituality'. In 'Life-as' forms of the sacred, the expectation would be that those forms of religions that tell their followers to live their lives in conformity with external principals (...), will be in decline" (Heelas & Woodhead 2004, 7). As this study was conducted in a Western context, Heelas and Woodhead primarily refer to churches and chapels that fall into the category of 'religion'. What was growing in the West according to them was 'spirituality' or 'subjective-life' forms of the sacred that emphasized inner sources and helped people to live in accordance with the deepest sacred dimensions of their own unique lives (ibid). Heelas and Woodhead's main point relies on the many holistic practitioners of Kendal who intended to enable the participants to focus on their inner sources like feelings, knowing themselves, and building upon their own resources, rather than imposing external religious values (Heelas & Woodhead 2004, 30).

As the spiritual movement in the West often encompasses yoga, reiki, meditation, Tai Chi aromatherapy and numerous of other such activities, it does not necessarily explain the way in which interfaith couples presented this term to me. Here, the main discussion relied on a distinction between ritual practice and personal faith.

This chapter recognizes the effort to develop 'spirituality' in practice as a common ground for three interfaith couples, but the question is how this worked for the couples I interviewed. Can this be answered through the understanding of their upbringing or how they apply the annual festivities in their lives or through their ideal perception of Gods and gurus?

3.1. Family and upbringing

Because the religions are different within the marriages, it is unavoidable that the couples' thinking would also somewhat differ. This is probably caused by their family-based religions and the backgrounds they come from and have been brought up in. Keeping this in mind, I would now like to give a brief introduction of the couples, following an overview of their family background and their religious upbringing:

The RANGILA founder and his wife

Sajad and Maya have been married for the last sixteen years and have two daughters (nine and eleven years). They are both from Uttar Pradesh but went to the University of Delhi, where they first met and knew each other for two years before they got married and settled down in Delhi. At the time of my fieldwork, Sajad worked for a Child Welfare Committee in North Delhi, with an emphasis on children, their care and protection. He has been connected with Rangīlā from its beginning and was one of the founders. Maya works for a corporation and supervises the entire group of companies in the corporation. Their house is located in a middleclass residential in Delhi (east), where one playground is situated in the middle with the houses. Sajad and Maya live in a two-floor house, with a flowery garden at the entrance where I arrived just a moment after Sajad had come from work and brought his daughters from school now unlocking the main door to welcome me inside their house.

Sajad and Maya have been working a lot on their own relationship to develop a mutual religious platform that can lead them to function peacefully in their daily life, as they stated it had been somewhat troublesome before. Maya grew up in a Hindu family. Her family had a lot of faith in 'God', but the emphasis on rituals was not strong, and she narrated that she and her siblings were never asked to keep fasts or perform puja. Rituals were of lesser importance; It was more about the faith in God in her entire natal family; To have the awareness that something bigger than us exists, who leads us to the right way, and not to forget, "being good can link you to God", as told when she was a child. She further explains in Hindi that they are of that kind of belief that says: "*mann hai to karo, nahī hai to nā karo*", which means that if you wish to do, then do it, otherwise do not do it. The expression "*karna chahiye*" (or "one should do") was not used, she explains, when talking about ritual practices in her natal family. Sajād's natal family on the other hand is devout Muslims. He describes his family as "five times *namāzī*" (pray five times a day). Besides *namāz*, his family 'follows' the other four pillars; *rozā*, keep fasts, *zakah*, pay a religious tax- determined by the wealth and income,

'hajj', have been on pilgrimage to Mecca, and the most significant *shahada*, the testimony or the faith in Islam. So, as Sajad explains it, his family is strictly following an Islamic ritual repertoire.

As I glanced around in the living room when we talked, an Indian sofa which looks like a bed was furnished and covered with a flowery bed sheet and bolsters (long supporting pillows) on. This is usually found in many Indian homes, and gives a luxury feeling for the guests, sitting on it. My eyes focused right above that sofa, and I saw two copper-made decors hanging on the wall: On the left side, Ganesha and on the right side, the Buddha.

Before presenting what Sajad and Maya had to say about how they managed their religious differences in their everyday lives, let me continue with presenting the family backgrounds and religious upbringing of the next two interfaith couples I discuss in this chapter.

Interreligious love in Banarsi village:

Aisha and Vinod have been married since 2012 and have one son, Kabīr, who was three years old by the time I interviewed them. Aisha is 36 years old and Vinod is 34. They have lived their entire lives in Varanasi, but moved to a village near the town after marriage. Aisha had been working as a literacy coordinator for an American NGO since 2003. The NGO stands for social activities such as education, empowerment, awareness, and even meditation, wherein Vinod is currently working and writing on a project dedicated to *khādi*, hand-woven cotton, which usually is associated with simplicity, he says. Further, Vinod also addresses himself as a 'social worker', and a teacher. Right now, he stays at home, taking care of their son, besides volunteering and teaching English to pupils and giving classes in accounting for older village students who cannot afford private tuitions due to their family's poor financial condition.

This is the only couple whom I knew from before, from the times when I attended the language (Hindi) course in South-Asian studies (Bachelor program) in Varanasi. Vinod was a teacher in Hindi, while Aisha used to have cooking classes for students who wished to learn Indian cooking. They were only friends then, and used to hang out together. Even though their Hindu-Muslim friendship was not accepted due to their different religious backgrounds, by Aisha's aunt, they somehow managed to meet each other in their spare time. Once or twice a week, they even used to invite me for evening walks- and *ārtī puja*, (a form of worship where camphor is offered for the Hindu deities) at the riverbanks of the Ganges. They used to sing *ārtī* with me. As beautiful and peaceful as those evenings were, we used to talk a lot about

religious differences, whether or not I believed in God and had any affiliation to the Hindu religion despite living in the West, and also about interfaith marriages. I had a hunch back then that they wanted to get married, but I never asked as it was a very sensitive topic, and they did not disclose any plan to me. One year later, I received an invitation for their marriage.

As far as I could see when meeting them, they had hardly changed their looks or personalities since 2011. Vinod who was dressed in informal pants and shirt previously, was still wearing the same kind of outfit. Aisha was still wearing *salvār kamīz*, but with one significant change; she was now wearing a red dot on her forehead, which Hindu women usually wear to signify that they are married.

Aisha and Vinod live in a village which is about two hours away by car from the airport in Varanasi, and twenty minutes from Rajghat. The main road to the village is quite bumpy and therefore one has to drive slowly when reaching it by car. The village was not big, but the people there were quite welcoming, and apparently Vinod and Aisha were highly respected in this area. Interestingly, they are both from the city, but enjoy living the village-life now. Their house has two floors and is maintained fairly well in terms of the standard we usually find in villages. They have two bedrooms, one little bathroom, one small garden, and a garage on the first floor, while the second floor has kitchen, dining room, and a big terrace with a beautiful view of the village. In the couple's bedroom, where we used to sit and watch TV, they have kept three religious scriptures, the Quran, Bhagvad Gita and the Bible, all in small sizes and translated into Hindi.

Vinod is brought up in a family where religion or Hinduism was practiced in a very detailed manner. His mother used to do puja every day, took a bath in the Ganges every morning, and the family celebrated all the Hindu festivals maintained by their social stratum in their region. He was of course influenced by this as he followed his mother's footsteps of the Bhagvad Gita to understand it deeply, but he and his two sisters were never forced to practice the religion in a rigid way. Socially, they were never prevented from visiting Muslim friends at their homes, unlike many of his Hindu friends. "What about taking bath in the Ganges", I asked. To him bathing has no connection to Hinduism or purification. Rather he explains that bathing in the Ganges was an opportunity for him and his friends to learn swimming. He even says that had it been any other river, he would have been equally enthusiastic to learn swimming and take bath. He comments that mostly, people who live in Varanasi feel lucky

and believe that it is a part of the karma in their previous lives, to live close to the banks of this holy river. Yet Vinod does not believe this.

Aisha moved to her aunt (father's sister) in Varanasi when she was very young. All she remembers is that the ritual of doing *namāz* (or salat: Islamic prayer, one of the five pillars in Islam) was very important for her family. When narrating about her grandparents, whom she was very close to and lived most of her childhood with, she explains to me that they were never staunch believers, or had an orthodox understanding of religion. Her grandfather never forced her grandmother to wear *naqāb* to cover her head, and she never wore one. *Namāz* is something Aisha relates to her grandfather. He never used to pray five times a day, but the Morning Prayer was a daily routine. He used to claim that *namāz* is a psychological exercise that helps to build concentration, which is a main reason why Aisha occasionally reads it. She narrates that at times, when she feels unfocused, she relies on this method. Vinod shares the same opinion about worshipping; that one obtains a 'meditative mode' when focusing on deities or doing puja by chanting Vedic mantras. Apparently, both Vinod who is a Hindu, and Aisha, a Muslim, believe in bringing out the best from each religion. By keeping holy books of other religions than their own, they emphasize the equal value of religions and people which I believe they want to maintain. But what about spirituality? How do they fit into this chapter? I will come back to this after introducing the third couple.

Unity within a Hindu- Muslim marriage in Delhi:

Halima and Ravi met each other at college and dated each other for five years before they got married in 2004 in a Arya Samaj temple- through the Hindu Marriage Act. They have two sons (ten and four years old) and live in Delhi. By profession, Ravi runs a business of water purification, and Halima is a psychologist, working with school kids. Their parents did not agree to their marriage, and because they had to register their marriage and find the easiest and fastest solution, Halima had to convert from Islam to Hinduism. A few months later, after fights and disagreements from both sides, Ravi's family agreed, but only on the condition that Halima had to do a *śuddhi karan* (purification) in the temple in order to convert her religion.

Both their fathers died few years after their marriage due to illness, and at the time of my fieldwork, Ravi's mother stayed with the couple. Ravi's mother and his extended family are very pious in terms of observing the Hindu rituals. Keeping fasts during the Hindu festivals is something his mother always does, and Halima admits that she has to do the same, because her mother-in-law expects her to do so. Halima's family (mother and two brothers) seems to

be moderate in the practice of keeping fasts during Ramadan, but they do stick to the important ritual of reading namāz every day, especially her mother, who does it five times a day. Halima's younger brother is married interfaith with a Hindu girl, but in his case, the girl has not converted and she follows her religion and its rituals as she likes. Ravi's childhood was only limited to Hindu rituals, but he has never been extreme about performing the rituals. When he grew up and wished to explore elements of other religions, he could not share it with his family because they disagreed with the belief that all religions are equally real, as Ravi believes. While this was the situation in Ravi's family, Halima was never stopped from visiting Hindu temples with her Hindu friends. Unlike her other Muslim friends, she never felt any hindrance for joining her palms (in Namaskāra posture) and worshipping the idols installed in the temples. Even though she knew that Islam does not permit idol worship, Halima was not bothered because her core belief relied on equality, just like Ravi.

In their explanations, the couples' gave detailed family-background information that helped me contextualize their statements according to their religious upbringing. While the viewpoints of their natal families may influence their views, we will now move to the point where the three couples describe how they have developed their ideas about the sacred since they got married.

3.2. Perceptions about religion and spirituality

My informants expressed a clear separation between the notions of 'religion' and 'spirituality'. Analytically, these two terms can both overlap and be discussed as an opposition, but in this context, I primarily rely on my informants' understanding where being religious firstly means to follow and attend ritual practices directly related to either the holy scriptures or the background of their family-based rituals they have been practicing long before their marriages. Secondly, their characterization of religion connotes rigidity and orthodoxy that certain religious groups and authorities promote as the 'correct' religious practice. As the observations I discuss in this chapter will show, it generally gets problematic for an interfaith couple to handle the idea of religion, since it promotes divisive rather than overlapping practice. Spirituality, to them, on the other hand is disconnected with ritual orthodoxy. As my informants explained it, spirituality focuses rather on harmony; relationships, love and the belief that everyone is equal. It entails establishing a connection

with divinity that does not rely on the ritual advice or religious authorities. During my interviews and conversations, my informants have expressed that after marriage they have gradually developed from following rituals to becoming connected with God with a ‘personal faith’ or in a ‘different way’.

In the course of my conversation with Sajad and Maya, they narrated that in the early phase of their marriage (15 years before I met them), they used to have an agreement, that “you are a practicing Hindu, and you are a practicing Muslim - so you follow yours, and I will follow mine”. Back then, Sajad used to pray or do *namaz* when he was at home and went for “Friday prayers” to the mosque. During the month of Ramadan, he kept fast, but not necessarily every day. However, by the time I met them, he claimed that these practices had gradually faded with time, and he now only sticks to the *namāz* of the two annual Eid festivals. While Maya was not so ritually inclined, she did keep a temple (altar), or a *puja ghar*, in their house during the first years of marriage. This was a statement for her, she said. She seems like an assertive woman, and confirmed to me that she wanted to preserve her identity as a Hindu. A comparable emphasis on preservation was also expressed at my first meeting with Sajad at Rangīlā. Here Sajad laughingly told me that his wife is a Hindu who has never taken off the red *bindī* (dot) on her forehead when she goes out in public. As the *bindī* is a Hindu symbol, it is significant in communicating a woman’s marital status, just like Aisha in Varanasi does, and Halima in Delhi, regardless of their religious affiliation.

Maya further continues that it was important for her to convey to her parents and others that she had not converted, and that she had a husband who respected her religious preference. It was important for her to build a trust towards her husband within her natal family. She used to keep two to three *vrats* (Hindu fasts, usually kept by eating only light food like fruits and drinking milk) each year, and even the popular *Karvā Chauth-vrat*, for the husband’s longevity (absolute fast lasting from five in the morning until the moonrise). Yet, she explains that her maintenance of *vrats* did not last for long as she never used to keep fasts before marriage, and they gradually became too difficult for her to perform. To keep a temple and worship the idols in it was not her greatest way to follow her religion either, she reasoned. At times, she did not even have time to keep it clean; she had to rush to work in the morning and when coming back, she got busy with other household work. While it was still unclear for me how much and to what extent she dismissed the entirety of ‘religion’, I asked whether she had still kept any ‘altar’ at home, where she could do *puja*. She said she kept it for eight-nine years after her wedding, but now she does not have one. At this point, Sajad laughingly

interrupts, saying that she still has one. As they lightly argue on this topic, she admits that she has retained one idol, but proudly adds that she has a small Kaba too, the large black stone in Mecca that worshipped in Islam. Maya keeps them both together, but there is no *mandir* (temple) at home, she clarifies. This indicates that she must have kept both images of Hinduism and Islam as decoration rather than as objects of worship, as a statement inferring that they have the same significance. However, Sajad claims that he is indifferent to keeping ‘such things’ as decorations at home. The images to which she referred were surely not properly installed and did thus not require daily puja and cleaning, since she has already expressed that she has left daily puja practice.

When Maya started discarding certain Hindu practices and failed to see their significance, she gradually started to evolve. She explains that “religion and such and religion’s social context is the biggest barrier to people who want to unite”. According to Maya, religion can drive you crazy to the extent where you are ready to leave it, and in her option, that is not what religion should be about. Maya’s way of distinguishing between religion and spirituality is largely based on restricted versus unrestricted religious practices. For her, the ‘organized’ religion is related to external symbols such as the Hindu scriptures, idols, rituals, as well as the Islamic ‘set of rules’, which restrict their way of living and control what people should believe or not. Relating to spirituality on the other hand gives her the opposite effect; she feels free and can choose her way of living without being pressurized for what she should follow and not. Similarly, Ravi explains that he and Halima do not give priority to religion. According to him, religion should be teaching you something good, but since many people look for elements that create division between religious communities and people, the notion of ‘religion’ has acquired problematic connotations for Ravi and Halima. Halima agrees and shares the same opinion about rituals as Maya, saying that rituals create so much friction in the family, at least according to her experience, that she does not feel like performing them anymore. She narrates and gives an example about wearing clothes. She never used to wear clothes printed with any kind of figure with religious connotations; like feathers of a peacock. Because according to Halima, Islam tells that once you have worn such an item, it means that you are worshipping it. However, she explains that she gradually started buying such clothes, thinking that she respects animals and she should have the right to wear such, and does not commit any crime by wearing clothes with animal print. She further explains that something has changed, if not everything. She can now decorate her house with idols, or anything else, like the beautiful photo of Krishna and his mother, Yaśaodā (symbolizing the love between a mother

and her child) which is hanging on the wall inside her room - without feeling any compulsion of devotional investment.

Aisha believes that many people are devoted in a way that refrain them from bothering about what happens around in the world, “just all the time worshipping and sit in the temples for hours”. So this, she explains, is not a part of her religiosity. Commenting on worshipping, an interesting point that Vinod brings up is ‘working with ourselves’, which I believe is significant for understanding their transition from ‘religion’ to ‘spirituality’: “when we pray, we usually ask God for love, peace, power, bliss and so on... But all these qualities lie inside us! How can we ask God for something that we already have?” Vinod believes that if we cannot work for it, retrieve the qualities within us and make an effort, we should not have the right to ask for these benefits. Because ultimately, according to him, you are supposed to bring out your original *samskāras* (qualities), which he believes get hidden when you have your focus and using energy on other things. Vinod is apparently informed by ‘spiritual teaching/theories’ and take them into practice when he becomes unfocused and disturbed. In many ways, his statements resemble Heelas and Woodhead’s formulation of ‘subjective-life forms of the sacred’, earlier in his chapter, which stresses the inner sources, and the ‘original *samskāras*’.

Maya and Sajad believe that they are still together as a couple because they moved from being ritually involved to discarding ritual practices, and then understood that they have to find inner peace and draw their attention to something bigger than traditional religious practices, spaces and ritual. “So that is how I am today; I am not an atheist, I am a believer. I believe in God. I have my own connection, but I refuse to identify myself as religious person”, Maya declared and smiled. Similar thoughts were expressed by the other two couples. Aisha admits that she for all reasons believes in God. And that God is only one. “We address God in different ways, according to what we like and want”, she adds. She does not do any weekly or daily prayers, but during a few festivals, or if any serious problem has occurred, she does connect with God, sometimes in the form of namāz (3-4 times a year), and also by making requests that ‘this particular thing’ should be solved, and at the end she even thanks Him if her problems dissolve. How Maya explains that she has her own (personal) connection with God has a deep resonance in the scholarship of the growth of the spiritual movement. As Heelas and Woodhead have shown, during the last two decades, respondents in the West describe God “as personal”, as “a spirit or life force”, or that “there is something there” (Heelas and Woodhead 2004, 73). Though it is beyond the scope of this thesis to engage with

the scholarship on the growth of the spiritual movement in India, it seems safe to conclude that it has emerged as a welcome common ground for many interfaith couples.

3.3. God as a “personal belief”

Since my informants’ understanding of God was so varied, it was interesting to find out how they differed from the descriptions of the divine found in the scriptures and academic books. How do people who claim to be ‘spiritual’ rather than ‘religious’, understand God - and do their different religious upbringings make a difference?

Maya defines God as someone she looks up to or remembers spontaneously when she feels helpless. She believes that if God has made us all, the entire universe, and different people, why would he want us to fight about these differences? “And why does terrorism even exist in this world”, she asks. That is why she has come to an understanding that God has not made the religions. According to her, that is why we undergo so much destruction: “The trees have never caused us any problems, nor the animals... but religion has. Caste differences have. Because that is all man-made”, she states in a louder voice. Sajad breaks in by saying that they certainly have a belief that there is something, somewhere, though it does not really a proper way to reach to it. I could not miss the opportunity to ask Sajad what he thinks of the understanding of God given in the Quran. He was clear that it is Allah he has faith in. Yet, his core belief is that God is something supernatural which is within us. He explained that if we start looking for God, we will end up searching everywhere, so it is unknown (for him) where God exactly is. “But if we ultimately see Him”, he concludes, “all the values that exist, and the virtues; God has to be in these basically, where else and what else?”

When asking about the difference in believing in a singular God compared to the many Gods and goddesses of traditional Hindu beliefs, Maya interrupted by saying that she only believes in *Paramatma*. When translating it literally in Hindi, it says *param*, which means ‘supreme’, and *atma*, ‘the true self’ or soul, as we are familiar with. Further, she says that if she believes in Hinduism, then she believes in *Paramātmā*. “He is the only one”, she concludes.

I have heard people say that “God is one”, and being a Hindu myself, even I may settle around this ‘thought’, but how to explain this statement when there are so many gods and goddesses to worship? My informants’ understanding of this is that, this is said to avoid

distinguishing a Muslim, Christian or a Hindu understanding of God. Further, it expresses a connection between the differences in a sense that there is only one ultimate force, energy or spirit who protects or ‘manages’ the whole existence, even though we use different names for it. This can also be compared to what Sai Baba (in Shirdi), who was a Maharashtrian saint, said that “*sab ka Malik ek hai*”, which also means that “there is one Lord of all”. To elaborate this, Aisha refers to the idiom that “they are two sides of the same coin”, whether *Bhagvān* or *Allah*. To explain this point, she makes the interesting analogy of her own name:

You would address me by my nickname. In my office, they would call me, *Aisha*.
For my son, I am his *mother*, for my husband- his *wife*, for my parents I am their *daughter*, and it goes on and on”, she explains, “but I would still remain *one* person”,

In that sense, unless somebody had seen her, they might think that she was five different people, though she would of course still remain that *one* person.

Returning to Halima’s narratives about buying printed clothes and keeping/decorating idols in her room, she speaks more about God and how she expects God to treat her. Her thoughts revolve around questions like: “If Allah is said to be so strong, would he really run away by seeing an idol?” “Would Allah never send *farište* (angels) in my house just because Ganesha is installed in the main entrance? And if so, would the angels only reach me or my home through the main entrance, and do the angels really have to open the door to get inside?” She says that she now has put some logic into these questions, and after so many years, she has concluded that Allah would never leave her just because she has kept idols in her house. She has been asking her mother and family whether God only exists to punish people. For Halima, it seems like it does not make any sense to fear God when she has been told that Allah is equal to 300 mothers. She claims that “when one mother cannot cause you any harm, then if someone loves you like 300 mothers, how can it happen that He leaves you just for keeping idols or wearing animal-printed clothes”.

Ravi shares many of Sajad’s thoughts about God. He does not necessarily keep any deity in mind while praying or worshipping, but he does believe that “there is someone, somewhere”. Just like others, he considers God to be *one* energy that protects everything, but he does not know where that energy is; whether it is somewhere far away in the universe, or inside us. However, he tries to connect to it when he is alone; he cannot express exactly how he does it,

but he tries to use meditative approaches to feel an inner peace, which he believes is given by God.

As for Vinod, he practices meditation as well, but for him, God is nature, and God is the soul. When he sits in natural surroundings, he says he already feels connected to God. When he then continues meditation, he expresses to me that he gains energy and peace of mind, which he believes already exists inside him, but which he now has the focus to recognize, and that is when he feels connected with God.

Leaving the topic of who exactly God might be and how they feel the connection with God, I will now move to an aspect that is still connected with God, but maybe less mystical, and more easier for interfaith couples to handle.

3.4.Saints and gurus

Throughout my work, I kept coming across new dimensions of my informants' way of expressing their 'spirituality'. In addition to characterizing a particular way of describing their 'spirituality', it is also informed by including the saints and gurus (from back in time) in their lives, which I now will look at in some more detail.

Confirming with an inclusive attitude to religious beliefs, Maya stated that if it was one religion that she could possibly convert to, or include in her belief and faith, it would be Sikhism. She goes back in time to the days when they were newly married, and narrates the very first religious place where they went together and bowed before God, which happened in the Golden temple in Amritsar, or *Harmandir Sahib* (the abode of God), a shining monument or the first institutional development to the Sikh faith that remains the central symbol of the community until this day (Pechilis & Raj 2013, 227). Punjab was the first place Maya and Sajad moved to right after their wedding, as they both were posted to work there. Maya claims to be inspired by Sikhism, especially the initial point of Sikhism which relies on Guru Nanak Dev's (the first Sikh guru) message of love and understanding, and his criticism of blindly following rituals. For Maya, this is a significant spiritual guidance which earlier led to a sense of attachment, since it emphasizes harmony and acceptance for everyone, saying that "I really feel that... This is the spirituality". Additionally, she reconfirmed in Hindi that

everyone's belief is valid, no matter the religious belief. To say that this is the right way of believing or worshipping, or accuse each other of following a 'wrong' religion, is a problematic attitude that she claims to have deep problem with.

Ravi also confronted what *he* believed was something alike following spirituality. He talked about Hindu deities as ideal gurus in *Bharatiya samāj*, Indian society. "And they were good *ātmās*", he continued "and they are everywhere".

Interestingly, he says that he believes in karmas, but simultaneously not following the whole theory of karma because he does not believe in rebirth. However, he agrees that "even if you exist, or do not exist, your *karmas* will always 'be there'".

Excluding the Hindu philosophy of karma with its fundamental concept about samsara, Ravi's idea about karma is explained through the gurus whose *energy* is still existent. (Energy in this context pertains to the karmas of gurus). When one dies, according to Ravi, his/her karmas are remembered by family, friends, acquaintances, and sometimes also influenced in such a manner that the same people make a replica of the actions (karmas) of the dead. This is where we talk about the saints, prophets and avatars; all as gurus.

Prophet Muhammad, was according to Ravi, a guru, and his teachings about God or *Allah* influenced a group of people in Arab and its proof is the *Hadith* itself, "and so happened when Rama and Krishna came", referring to the Hindu texts, *Ramayana* and *Bhagavadgita*.

To start with, Akshaya and Rabiya has a small idol of Sai Baba (of Shirdi) in their cupboard. I carefully asked if it was Sai Baba, and Halima immediately answered that they believe Sai Baba and Kabir Das (poet from Varanasi) were 'good soul' and Kabir Das is the secular guru whom Vinod and Aisha's son is named after.

Ravi continued what he meant with karmas. Sai Baba according to him, are remembered because of his karmas. They are both fond of Sai Baba's 'ideologies' or aim about 'sameness' and this is when Ravi says: "He was the one who said: '*Sab ka malik ek hai*'", which means that 'everyone's Lord/God is One'.

Even though little is known about Sai Baba in Shirdi, Mcline Karline (2011), professor of Religious studies at Bucknell University wrote an article called, *Be United, Be Virtuous*, about Sai Baba movement's growth, his 'sayings' and 'teachings', and she describes Sai Baba's *composite identity* through his devotees' oral histories and his printed photographs and god

posters that have even challenged the Hindu nationalism or religious fundamentalism in India. Assuming that Sai Baba was a Muslim *faqir*, (Karline 2011, 26), I witnessed during my fieldwork that huge crowds of Hindu devotees who come from far and wide, stand in lines for hours to get *darshana* of Sai Baba. Even though the majority of Hindu devotees believes him to be an *avatar* of Hindu gods (Karline 2011, 39), Ravi, being a Hindu, does not believe in reincarnation, thus, respecting Sai Baba as a *guru* who taught/ still teaches the society about sameness and religious inclusiveness, and also helped people in social issues, and did ‘social work’. As Karline writes, Sai Baba’s devotees were drawn to Sai Baba’s reputation for possessing miraculous powers, especially the ability to grant offspring to childless couples and heal illnesses (Karline 2016, 27), what Ravi apparently also indicates to, but with lesser traditional ideas (superstitious beliefs).

Ravi’s karma theory makes me come back to the main point about Hindu deities. He believes that they were ‘good *ātmās*’ when they did ‘good karmas’, and they were *siddha* (perfect; enlightened) gurus, (note: not God). When he sees Hindu Gods; Krishna, Rama, Shiva, Goddess and Hanuman as (just) enlightened gurus, not Gods, it is even more interesting when he lists Gandhi, Ambedkar and even Abdul Kalam in the same category. How to explain it when he assimilates Hindu deities with Indian political leaders and Indian historical legends?

It is very interesting to see how these couples distance themselves from religious authorities, and at the same time coming closer to saints and gurus. It would be safe to mark that the couples understanding about the gurus is that they were spiritually ‘ripe’ and the gurus’ message about inclusiveness is something the couples do not want to avoid.

3.5. Festivities and celebrations

Festivals and religious events was one of the central topics in my research. It was usually brought it up by asking if my informants celebrate festivals, and if so, how, or what they did last Divali or Eid.

As far as rituals are concerned, Sajad believes that they are just limited to be performed within the homes. This only happens in their natal homes. The festival of Divali is celebrated with prayer, Ganesha and Lakṣmi-puja at Maya’s mother’s place. The same happens during Eid, when Sajad goes to the mosque and his parents’ place to do *namāz*. Their two daughters do not participate in the mosque *namāz*, as girls do not attend mosques in South-Asian Islam.

Although Maya had said in the beginning of our conversation, that for her family “rituals were the last thing”, but they nevertheless seem to do pujas at least during festivals, and also relate to externals such as idols, at the same time as they experienced the divine in an internal sense, she argues. On this topic, Maya’s words were very clear:

For example, there are certain festivities which we do for our house. If it is Divali... I don’t know whether you call it religious practice or not, but we bring mithai (sweets), we decorate our house and also put a Ganesha-idol. For Eid, we make *savaiya* (sweet noodles), and then we even have Christmas celebration in our house. We have a tree, which is decorated, Santa comes home, he gives some gifts and the kids are all around, that’s it. So it is more of a celebration part, keeping intact the diversity.

Aisha told me that they celebrate many festivals. Not each and every festival because she does not really believe in them all and particularly not in those that involves fasting, but they do celebrate the main festivals such as Divali, Eid and Holi. She says that it is difficult to reject all festivals when living in a society like the Indian one. Aisha used to keep few fasts during Ramadan before and right after they got married. When asked if she ever fasted to fulfill her wishes, knowing that wish-fulfillment is a common reason for fasting both among Hindus and Muslims, she answered in the negative, stating that she just did it because her grandmother used to keep fasts. In this way fasting had become an inseparable part of the festival of Eid that she still celebrates. She totally rejects that it had any religious motivation.

Leaving aside the ritual dimension of festivals, the couple does a few things to keep up social appearances for their neighbors, and above all this, they do it for their son Kabir, for his happiness. So they say they celebrate festivals for the sake of happiness and unity, just like Sajad and Maya. The couple celebrates Eid with new clothes, visiting people, and making sweets. Similarly, they celebrate Divali. Last Divali, Aisha explains that they decorated their house with more than 500 *diye* and *mom bhatti* (oil lamps and candles). She expresses that she loves to spread light, and to decorate the house with lights. She even believes that this is a festival of lights, so in this way they wish that everyone’s life should get filled with light and wish that Divali, Eid and other festivals bring everyone they know a good and healthy life. They want to spread the message that all festivals should be celebrated by everyone, no matter their religious affiliation, so that people learn to live harmoniously, by including all and everyone. Apart from that, they express no specific religious motive to celebrate ‘religious’ festivals.

The couples apparently distinguish the celebratory aspect of religious festivals from their ritual aspects, where the celebration-part is necessary to retain familial and social cohesion. What they infer is that religious festivals in India are not only limited to the ritual aspects, but have a profound social and cultural dimension too.

Now that we have looked at some 'unusual' and different views about how interfaith couples in Delhi and in Varanasi describe their faiths and beliefs, we will now move to another aspect of interreligious couples who do not distance, but step forward in one another's ritual life.

4. Religious and ritual crossings

As I started my fieldwork in Delhi, I was clear about my ambition to find out how interfaith-couples handle the religious aspects of their marriage. According to the existing academic literature (introduced in chapter one), which is yet scarce, the usual tendencies of such couples are somewhat complicated or confusing. First of all, the faith is presented as creating a difference between them in how they understand the world. Second, the religious conversion that sometimes occurs can be problematic and emotionally challenging. Third, when children are born, the parents (couples) can unintentionally become more conservative in consideration of forming their child's religious belief.

As Rubert Wuthnow, the American sociologist puts it while discussing mixed-marriages and religious diversity in America (2005), people who marry outside their religious traditions have to consider what they believe and how they wish to practice their faith in view of having a spouse whose beliefs and practices are of a different kind. With religious diversity as part of their daily lives, he adds that interfaith couples nevertheless (should) confront difficult questions such as: “where shall we attend religious services, which holidays should we celebrate, how should we raise our children, and what should we say to our family and friends?” (Wuthnow 2005, 259). Of course, these are questions related to their daily lives too, but the interviews I present in this chapter nevertheless suggest that many interfaith couples in India initially are less concerned with such details. I would argue that many rather agree to perform their respective religious rituals- and beliefs separately before they get married.

As presented in the introduction, I aim to understand how interfaith couples actually handle their ritual/religious lives after ten years (or more) after their marriages, whether they end up practicing their rituals separately or end up developing “religious intersections” by occasionally practicing one another's religious rituals or composing a mutual ritual repertoire of their own.

As I mentioned in the introduction, I was often puzzled by seeing Sikhs visiting the ‘Jhandevala’ temple, and participate in worship of the Hindu goddess Durgā in my hometown of Oslo. In this chapter I continue to look at such ritual crossovers initially by comparing my observations with the daughter-in-law in the family which Frøystad observed, as discussed in chapter one. She used to worship the visual image of Guru Nanak (the founder of Sikhism)

alongside other Hindu deities in her house temple. On the ground that Sikhs ideally should not be doing murti puja, Frøystad however suggests that “making such an argument would however be to value theological principles over ritual, consistency over bricolage, beliefs over practices, ontologies over ontopraxis, and purity over polytropy (Frøystad 2012, 15). This argument forms a useful point of departure for my own study, where I present how my informants’ beliefs and practices are shaped by their own interpretations of religious tenets combined by considerable ethical respect for their spouses’ religious background, thus often resulting in a combination of bricolage, re-interpretation synthesis and compromise.

I begin by giving a brief introduction of the three couples who exemplify the theme of ‘ritual intersections’ most clearly. How do Shamsheer and Amrita, and Harshita and Nadim integrate in each other’s ritual lives in Delhi? Jennifer, who has children from a Hindu man (who died), and who is now married to a Muslim - how does she handle the everyday life with three religious convictions? And what about Cathy from Varanasi, who attends the annual days of Navarātarī- what makes her travel all the way to Gujarat, via Mumbai every year?

4.1. Family, rituals and daily practices

As I mention briefly in the previous chapter, the couples’ religious thinking may differ. This is caused by their religious upbringing and practices they have been following until they stepped into a new period in their lives. The question here is not whether they want to discard or retain the ritual practices given by their natal families, but this chapter emphasizes the essentiality of the family-practices that are bringing them together to a point where they happily cross the boundaries of their own religious circles to participate in the others.

Rituals are not only rituals because they derive from temples and *pandits*, nor are they concerned with central doctrines. Rituals, in this context, are rather determined by how families or the older generation of the family have been retaining their traditional and religious settings. The types of rituals that I talk about here and with my interviewees are everyday rituals; worship, food, *vrata* (fast), dance and music, and also visits to temples and the deities enshrined there.

“Delhi” journalists:

Shamsher Khan is a 47 year old man, born and brought up in Agra in Uttar Pradesh, and Muslim by religious background. Amrita Sharma is from Aligarh in Uttar Pradesh, and presents herself as Brahmin. They have a daughter who was eleven years old at the time of my fieldwork. They are both journalists in Delhi. At the time of my fieldwork, they had been married for the past 15 years. Their marriage was registered through the Special Marriage Act of 1972, and they had a small arrangement or party for family and friends. They did not have any ritual wedding, neither in an Islamic way, nor a Hindu.

Shamsher and Amrita claim that they follow their own religion, which has functioned well in all the years of their marriage. Shamsher is a practicing Muslim in terms of offering namāz and reciting the Quran every day. He admits that due to professional commitments, he never manages to do it five times a day, as the Quran teaches, but at least once is a must, he says. He also goes for Friday prayers in the mosque, as a weekly routine from when he was a child, and he usually goes with his closest Muslim friends, or the men in the family. Amrita has no specific weekly or daily practice.

However, Amrita says that her natal family follows the Brahmin traditions of maintaining a vegetarian diet and performing morning puja by lighting a *jyoti* (ghee lamp) every day. They are also particular about celebrating all the annual festivals according to the Hindu calendar followed with required observances such as inviting a *pandit* (Brahmin priest) for doing official puja in the proper/correct way, including the chanting of Vedic mantras. The very important *śaraddha* days, or the fifteen lunar day’s period (*pitru pakṣa*) which usually falls in the months of September-October, when many Hindus commemorate their ancestors by offering food, is also being practiced in her natal home. During these days, Amrita adds, no celebration whatsoever can be held. Amrita proudly claims that she follows her religion in the same way as she used to do before marriage, including the observance of *śaraddha* , with its prohibition of festive celebration.

Marriage of two best friends from Lucknow

Harshita and Nadim were best friends before marriage. Harshita is a Hindu-Brahmin and Nadim a Muslim. They are both from Lucknow, but have lived in the Delhi Gurgaon area for the last eight – nine years before I met them in 2015. Harshita is 40 years old and works in a

private company. She is a Kumauni Brahmin (belongs to a Brahmin family with ancestors from Kumaun in Uttarakhand). Nadim has been working in Indira Gandhi International – Delhi, Airport since 2006. They have been married since October, 2008, and have a son who was five years old at the time of my fieldwork. Harshita's mother was there when I met them, as she permanently stays with the family.

Harshita has been a practicing Hindu-Brahmin in a very ritualistic way, which has completely changed after she moved to Delhi. She explains that both her parents are from Uttarakhand, where they were highly positioned in the social hierarchy, coming from a family with dominant caste and lineage with high social presence. In Lucknow, she mainly grew up with her paternal grandmother, and lived in a joint family. She explains that while her mother was taking care of the entire household and the family, somebody else 'had to hold the child', and that was her grandmother. She took the ritual lead from her; her grandmother was very pious and particular about ritual worship. She and her grandmother had a set of idols installed in the puja room or the mandir. They used to give them a bath every morning, prayers had to be done and *diyā* was also lighted. She took these practices from her and did it accordingly even after her grandmother's death and also when she moved to Delhi when she was alone, until the time she moved to Gurgaon.

Harshita further explains how her ritual life changed when she moved to Delhi for work. She moved into a one-room apartment, but her idols or her Gods were still in Lucknow, and she did not know how to start afresh. However, she continued her prayers and lightning of *diyas*, and she always carried a small idol of Ganesha with her. Yet, since she still considered Lucknow her home, she had to leave the daily bath required for the worship of a properly installed idol to someone else. Fortunately, her mother replaced her, which relieved her mind, she says, placing her hand on her heart. While the Gods were in safe hands in Lucknow, she made do with chanting and doing path (recitation) for Ganesha in her new life as a work migrant in Delhi.

Similar to Shamsheer (Amrita's husband), Nadim's daily practices are also limited to namāz not on daily basis as Shamsheer who manages at least one of the five times, but he has been regular with his Friday prayers. He does not perform them in the mosque, as Shamsheer does, but rather at the office where they have a space for Friday prayers. Shamsheer and Nadim's religious family backgrounds seem to be of the same kind in terms of following Islam as

articulated by the Quran, while they both claim that their families follow Islam in its ‘true sense’.

Today, Harshita does not have any daily practice, except one: The first thing she does when she wakes up in the morning, is to open the shelf in the cupboard placed one meter away from their bed. This is their ‘religious corner’ in front of which she bows of every morning. Here are idols of Hindu deities, Lakshmi and Ganesha, one received on Divali from one of Nadim’s vendors. As an ethical cooperate practice, they normally do not accept gifts. On one occasion, however, Anwar despite being a Muslim, was gifted a framed picture(s) of Goddess Durga. When he tried to return the gift, his vendor said that since this is a Goddess, one cannot return it as it has emotional value. Without giving it much thought, Harshita and Nadim then installed it in their *mandir*. The Lakshmi idol is a colored plate, imprinted with nine square-shaped images of the goddess in silver, framed in a black big frame with golden design. This reflects the nine forms of the goddess, or the nine forms of powers/energies that Hindus believe in. When I went over to the cupboard temple to take a closer look, I noticed that in addition to the Hindu deities placed there, there were two Islamic incantations in Arabic engraved with silver on a black plate, framed with gold, placed at the same corner in the temple. This Islamic object had been given to Harshita by her father-in-law. A Quran is also kept in the house temple beside the Bhagvad Gita. Interestingly, they also have an idol of Mother Mary in the temple:



Harshita's temple. Photo by the author

Referring to Frøystad's article again, and the example of the daughter-in-law's house temple, this house *mandir* seems more inclusive on the same ground that *murti puja* is not acceptable to mix with *namāz* according to the Islamic directions. While this seemed to me like an exceptional case, I later came across more inclusiveness of religions among my 'boundary crossing' - couples.

Jennifer's religious journey

Jennifer is 59 years old, born in Kanpur, and settled in Delhi with her family when she was a child. She is an Anglo-Indian and comes from a Roman-Catholic background. She is married to Abdul Khan. They live in Delhi and have been married for twenty years. Abdul is 57 years old, Muslim by religious family background, and he runs his own private business in catering. He has been living in Delhi since childhood, but has roots from Rajasthan. Jennifer has four children from her first husband who was a Hindu-Punjabi who died just few years after their children were born. She further narrates that because her children's father was a Hindu, she

wanted them to learn the same. In other words, she did not want that to take the Hindu belief away from their religious lives. Abdul came into her life as a friendly support right after her first husband died, and shortly after two-three meetings, proposed to her in order to be a life-time support. Jennifer is Abdul's first wife, and they do not have children together.

As Jennifer goes forty years back in time, she recalls her first wedding which was held in a temple with two-three witnesses. She regrets not having been able to making it in a church; She lost both her parents at a very young age, with two younger brothers to take care of, and her decision to marry a man of another religious background was never supported by her family. They did however receive blessings from the priest ("Father", in Jennifer's parlance), which she found equally important. Though Jennifer did have an aunt who married a Muslim, and converted to Islam, Jennifer told me she, herself never thought of converting. Comparing her own case with her aunt's, she says that, whereas her aunt's family rituals became completely Islamic, her own family celebrates Divali, Christmas and Eid with equal devotion and enthusiasm.

There is, however, an important qualification to be made on whether these festivals are celebrated in full ritual depth or mainly as social festivity with seasoned food, decorations and get-together, shortly I will examine in more detail later in this chapter.

During my fieldwork, Jennifer did not go to the church or temples on regular basis, but when she goes, she said she does it with full devotion. She goes to temples, *dargah* (Sufi shrine), and even to Gurudwara where she has been doing *sevā*, to render service to others in the form of mutual help and voluntary work (Pechilis & Raj 2013, 233). She finds peace everywhere, she says. When she makes herself a promise to go to the temple, for instance, she does it continuously for nine days, regardless any festivals. Even though for five minutes of *darshana* of Mātā rani in the mandir, (glimpse of the Goddess in the temple), she feels that some kind of energy is attracting her. This makes her visit the temple.

Jennifer's religious eclecticism is also reflected in the "religious corner" of her home. Here she has a little alter with Jesus Christ and a picture of Mother Mary, as well as a *mandir* where she does puja, saying that every evening, she lights *agarbatti* (candles) in front of her *mandir* and the alter. Whereas Muslims do not light candles (except in *dargahs*), she does keep a plate with the name of Allah (in Arabic), as well a replica of the *Kaba* and the mosque

in Medina in her alter. In other words, Valerie has two shrines, one Hindu, for puja, and one Christian-Muslim for prayers.

Christian-Hindu marriage near Assi ghāt

Cathy is a Christian woman from the state of Gujarat who moved to Varanasi after her marriage with Ajay, a man with a Hindu-Brahmin family background. They both met each other when they were tourists in Rajasthan many years ago, and were married for seven years at the time of my fieldwork. They live near Assi, known for being populated with students and tourists, and the southernmost riverbank alongside the Ganges, called Assi *ghāt*. They own a shop near the Ganges and sells bed sheets and clothes of Indo-Western style, with different fabrics such as silk, pashmina and cotton. They have many tourists as customers. I met them for the first time in 2011, during a Hindi course in Varanasi I attended as part of my studies when I was their customer. Sadly, I did not manage to interview the couple as I planned, and ended up talking to Ajay alone, at his shop, where customers were rushing in and out. Ajay was apparently positioned in a professional role as a seller, resulting in a superficial interview. Ajay had nothing specific to share, other than that they were not ‘very religious’. While his statement left me a little confused, I think Ajay was trying to make their marriage look as problematic-free as possible.

However, the day after, on my way to Mumbai from Varanasi, I was lucky that Cathy was traveling in the same flight when she was going to her natal home in Gujarat, the first day of Navarātarī. In the morning itself, when I was arranging for a taxi near Assi, I came to know that Cathy was traveling with me, and we agreed to share a taxi to the airport. “*Jai Ganesh*”, I heard them both greeting to each other.

4.2. At the time of crises

When I asked Harshita why she had kept an idol of Mother Mary, she responded that the first domestic help during her pregnancy was a Christian. Arti narrates that during her pregnancy, she suffered a lot of complications. Doctors recommended her to abort her child, as going through the pregnancy could lead to further health complications for her. She did not agree to this, as she already had problems in conceiving before this, so she approached help from the religious world. Her friend asked her if she could travel to South India, to a church of Mother Mary, named *Basilica of Our Lady of Good Health* in Velankanni in Tamil Nadu. Harshita followed this advice, and believes that the blessings of Mother Mary saved her child.

Another interesting point that emerged during our conversation pertains to the time Harshita's mother fell seriously ill three years earlier, at the same time her father-in-law was in an intensive Care Unit (ICU) for forty days. She narrates how desperate she became to make sure they got well again. She prayed, did remedies, and was ready to again seek help from anywhere. Coincidentally, Harshita met a Sufi baba, *pīr* or *faqīr* (saint) who proposed her to take him with her, to let him touch his hands on the critical patients in order to heal them. So she did, as an attempt to cure her mother and her father-in-law. She fed the holy cows, broke coconuts in the temples in hope of fulfilling her wish. As she explains, "desperation makes one do things". I would agree on her point, as when I observed Harshita's expressions when talking upon difficult times, I have an impression of that in the times of crisis; religious boundaries are perhaps more frequently crossed than other times.

On the topic of God, let me now go into Jennifer's connection to Navarātārī and why she might goes to the temple for nine days, when she first makes up her mind. She talks about *Mātā rānī* (goddess Durga), and narrates about what she believes was a miracle. After her husband died and she was facing a lot of problems with her health, relations to family and friends, and her financial situation, expressing that she was in "head to toe with debts" and her mind was not at all stable, she suddenly told Abdul (who was her friend at that time and had financial problems as well), she wanted to go to Vaisho Devi (manifestation/shrine of the Goddess in the of Jammu and Kashmir), explaining she did not have any specific motive other than doing *darshana* and relieving her mind. Despite having no money, not even five hundred rupees, she was very eager to go. What happened next was that she came across her neighbor (who she never had talked to before), on the road, who was a money-lender, and to whom she asked if he could do a favor for her of borrowing her money. On the road, she says, the

money-lender gave her ten thousand rupees, and on the same evening, without any reservation for train, Jennifer and Abdul boarded the slow-running train and went to Vaisho Devi. She expressed that when she arrived and did *darshana*, and when they returned back to Delhi, she felt the relief that she was looking for. Interestingly, she explains that after seven to ten days, things started changing in her family; people who were harassing her before, stopped doing it now, her health got better, and even the financial part was getting on right way. In that way, her faith towards the Goddess became stronger. Hence, she cannot compare goddess Durga with Mother Mary. She is unable to describe her, while goddess is a *devī*.

4.3. Festivals and participation

Festivals in India are well-known for being enormous and colorful. One does not have to be a Hindu to celebrate Divali, or not a Muslim to celebrate Eid. As we talk about the diversity, the Indian society mostly celebrate the festivals in a conjoint manner in modern time. Yet, the question to what extent is a person willing to cross her/his religious boundaries when they participate in religious festivals. Are the festivals only limited to enjoyment, which tends to be a “disengaged celebration”, or can it be possible to take part in the actual participation” of rituals which are essential for the given days?

On the day of Eid, Shamsheer offers *namāz* in the morning at the mosque. Before, they used to visit his parents in Agra, but after 2005-2006, when his parents died, the family now only visits Shamsheer’s sister who lives in Ghaziabad (near Delhi). Amrita tells that they eat *sevaiya*, have dinner, spend the whole day on chatting and receiving other guests, and get gifts. Amrita proudly shares the fact that since she is a vegetarian, her sister-in-law prepares vegetarian food for her. Similarly, Shamsheer visits Amrita’s parents on Divali every year. When asked what they did for Divali last year (2014), Amrita admits that she wanted to arrange it herself this year at her home, involving her daughter so that she could learn the preparations of Divali. The family started already at *Dhanteras* (five days before the final date of Divali) to symbolize the wealth or Lakshmi. Like in most Hindu homes, they also purchased new kitchen utensils; they gave their apartment a proper and thorough cleaning, and on the final day decorated the house with candles and light. As Amrita says, she and her daughter decorated the whole house and the very beautiful *mandir* or her “meditative corner” with numbers of candles or *diye*. What makes the Divali celebration of this family interesting is

that ever years, around eight o' clock in the evening, when the puja of Goddess Lakshmi and Ganesha is performed, Shamsheer includes himself in the puja with what I call, 'actual participation', by chanting textual mantras, and singing the *Lakshmi arti* (the final prayer to praise the Goddess of wealth).

Shamsheer's participation in Amrita's pujas reminds me of Sajad, who also took part in puja at Maya's parental house, on the day of *Janamashtami* which was celebrated in India two weeks before my conversation with Sajad and Maya. Keeping in mind that they do not prioritize ritual practices, I believe this point merits a brief revisit to the case of Maya and Sajad in this chapter. What occurred during a casual talk that began when Maya praised her husband for being a good singer; I asked Sajad if he could sing a song that he feels comfortable with. Happily he closed his eyes and started to sing with his beautiful voice, and in very high range. The song's lyrics are in *braj bhasha* and goes as following:

Kanhā tori bansari nek bajaū, O Kanhā tori bansari nek bajaū

Jo tum tan kaho murali me, Jo tum tan kaho murali me

Sohi sohi gaya sunau, Kanhā, sohi sohi gaya sunao

Kanhā tori bansari nek bajau, nek bajau, nek bajau...

Oh Krishna, I shall play your flute,

As you have filled the flute with musical phrases,

I shall sing songs on it,

Oh Krishna, I shall play your flute, shall play, shall play...

Hearing Sajad singing this song made me so surprised that it must have shown all over my face. My surprised and overwhelmed face made him laugh modestly and unfold the fact that he had sung this song during *Janamashtami* that year (2015), when they celebrated it at Maya's parents' house. Not only this, he states that he also had sung songs for Lord Ganesha earlier, and when Maya and Sajad lived in Gurdaspur in Punjab, he even used to go to the *mandir* at evenings to sing devotional songs (*bhajan*) with friends.

Returning now to Shamsheer and Amrita, Shamsheer tells me that he takes part in what he calls 'Amrita's festivals', and vice versa. He sits in puja with her, performs the rituals with her and elaborates that "I do not have any reservation that since I am a Muslim, I will not be sitting in the puja or that I am not going to follow any other rituals from another religion. I sit in each and every ritual which she does". Interestingly, Amrita points out that a crucial difference

between Hindu practices and Islamic ones is that when Shamsheer does prayers or offers *namāz*, he has to do it all alone. All Muslims do it individually. As for Hindu mode of worship, however, it is often collective. When doing *ārtī*, for instance, Amrita tells me that, “you must be knowing the way, that we rather sit five to six people (the whole family), and sing prayers for God”. I recognize well what she was saying from the rituals we conduct in my own natal home. When Amrita sings *arti*, Shamsheer sits with her and participates as well as he can, while Amrita does not take part when Shamsheer offers *namāz*. “But what about when you recite the Quran”, I asked Shamsheer, “have you ever recited along with Amrita?” He then says that Amrita does not understand the Arabic language, which makes it pointless to recite in front of her. However, they do discuss their religious scriptures with each other; the teaching of the Quran, what the Vedas or the Gita have to say; especially the Mahabharata, and even the Ramayana.

Significantly, Shamsheer’s participation in Amrita’s rituals, makes him violate the Islamic prohibition of *shirk* (idolatry). Though *shirk* has no Hindu parallel, it is Shamsheer who crosses over, not Amrita- as an effect of the nature of Muslim worship. As John R. Bowen puts it, Islam’s monotheistic belief of God rests on the principle that “He is prior to all things, the Creator of all” (Bowen 2012, 13). When Shamsheer does idol worship, or does *puja* to any other divine being than Allah, it makes him a practicing polytheist of sorts, which according to Islam is the ‘gravest sin’ (Bowen 2012, 13).

Ritual crossings are likely to be seen on festivals or religious events. As mentioned, Cathy and I traveled in the same flight as mine. “Jai Ganesha”, I heard the couple greeted to each other when Cathy and I left for Mumbai. This was not her first Navaratri-trip to Gujarat, as she explained. She goes every year for Navaratri, and talks about the nine nights, where they dance *garbha* throughout the nights. Before leaving from Varanasi, she makes sure that she designs traditional clothes to wear during the festival. Though she is not a Hindu, she and her natal family have never missed the nine days of Navaratri. They dance, sing, apply henna on their hands, eat traditional food, mingle with friends, and at the end, they also do *ārtī*. Her belief was that if she skipped even one of the many activities, the thought of it troubled her until next years’ days of Navratari.

When arriving to Mumbai, she invited me to do *darshana* at the Siddhi Vinayak temple in Mumbai, and we also went to the Mount Mary Church in Bandra in Mumbai. Cathy’s practices at the temple left me surprised. After taking blessings from Ganesha, Cathy

proceeded to the queue leading to Ganesha's 'mouse' (statue of it) known as Ganesha's 'vehicle' in Hindu mythology. We finally ended up standing on each side of the mouse's ears. Cathy asked me to whisper my greatest wish in the 'mouse's' left ear, while she whispered a 'long message' on his right ear. The mouse installed in the temple is not just an ordinary mouse. "Through him, we can fulfill our wishes, he will tell Ganesha", Cathy commented on her annual ritual practice, while changing the 'side' to whisper a wish in 'his' other ear.

Ritual crossings or practicing other religious rituals than one's own, is not only a family-culture in Cathy's natal home in Gujarat. In Delhi, as well, elderly people like Jennifer do also cultivate such an atmosphere in their homes.

On Christmas, Jennifer, Abdul, Jennifer's brothers and her children all go to the church to attend midnight mass. She and her Catholic friends bake cakes at home, and she also orders them from a bakery. Every year, on the 25th of December the day of Christmas, she says that she has a big gathering at her place with up to fifty-sixty people including her family and friends, with "jingle bells" and massive celebration with dancing, singing, food and drinks all planned and prepared by herself.

On Divali, Jennifer expresses that they decorate the whole house with lights, and do a puja of Ganesha and Lakshmi, so that their family stays blessed. Interestingly, Jennifer is closely attached to the Goddess. During the days of Navaratari, she keeps all the nine fasts, and her youngest son follows the same routine during these days. They do not eat any non-vegetarian food, and not even traces of egg, as she says, and nobody is allowed to bring it home. Indeed, she claims that even if a Very Important Person (VIP) would enter her house at that time and expect to be served non-vegetarian food, she would never do so, as that would violate the *sathvik* purity required to please the Goddess during her nine day Navaratri presence. She concludes that her family celebrates all the Hindu festivals, in a Hindu-ritual way.

4.4. Religious views

So far in this chapter I have examined the ritual practices of the interfaith couples I interviewed. But what about their religious views and beliefs? Could they also reflect religious synthesis of the work (of religious crossings) I have just examined? To pursue this question I now return to the interviews I made, beginning with Nadim, Shamsheer and Amrita.

While Nadim himself states that he is not very religious, but he believes in the ‘five pillars’ of Islam; it makes me interpret his belief of the five pillars as a standard answer; At one side distancing himself from religion, and on the other side he expresses that he follows the five pillars. Shamsheer, on the other hand, makes an interesting turn during our conversation on his views of Islam. His ultimate view is that there is no requirement of any amendment in Islam. Keeping the ‘five pillars’ in mind, I asked him what he follows in the Quran or in Islam. His response came as very unusual, saying that “I follow the four...” where upon he faltered. He did not recall the word, so Amrita tried to help, asking if he is thinking about the prophets, but no. Next I suggested that he was referring to the four *khalifas* or the four Islamic successors after the prophet. “No”, he said. I carefully asked if it was the “five pillars”. “Pillars!”, he answered, “I follow the four pillars”. Confused I tried to correct the numbers of the Islamic pillars (there are five), but he refused, saying that there are four pillars of Islam, and that he practices his religion according to those four pillars.

The interesting point was that he never mentioned the very first and perhaps most important pillar in Islam, which is to believe in the testimony (*shahadah*) itself. As far as I can see, this is tantamount to a reinterpretation. Shamsheer may well have interpreted ‘his Islam according to his own honest belief. In other words, if he had believed that Allah is the only God, he would have had to accept that his wife’s Bhagvān is either “false” or not a God - which seems to be an implication that he does not want to recognize. What strengthens my interpretation is when Shamsheer later in the conversation opined that all staunch believers would say that their own religion is better than that of others. His opinion is in contrast that all religions show the path of truth and honesty. “The way to follow the religion is different”, he says, “but all the religions nonetheless take us to the same destination”. Additionally, he considers that each person should read their scriptures and analyze them independently, passing by the authority of priests, *maulvis* and gurus.

Consequently Shamsheer has come quite far in ‘relativizing’ Islam, and his failure to recall the final pillar of Islam thus seems to have a deeper root than being a mere forgetfulness.

Amrita shared her view, and said that following gurus and other religious authorities would never help them living a peaceful life. The same she stated goes for everyone who live in interfaith marriages who need to make their thoughts; beliefs and practices converge in order to nurture their relationship. What could possibly work according to Amrita, as well for Vinod and Aisha in Varanasi, is the 400 year old religion *Din-i-Ilahi*. This was founded by the Mughal Emperor Akbar the Great, who aimed to merge and unite the best elements of all religions that existed in Hindustan at that time into a single religion. To this end, he included Islam, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity and Buddhism, as his official state policy was “peace with everyone” (Pechilis & Raj 2013, 208). Because *Din-i-ilahi* did not succeed and did not last long, as Amrita well knows, she often mentions to Shamsher that if Akbar or his religion still existed, she would have liked to be part of it. Knowing that Akbar did not discriminate anyone on religious grounds, Amrita believes that he was an intelligent man who knew how to run a state, and this, she says, would at least have been favorable for couples like them.

Returning to Jennifer and Abdul, this couple believes that ‘God is one’, and present everywhere, ‘even in the statue’, as Jennifer says. At the same time, she is well familiar with the first commandment in Christianity which states that “I am the Lord, thy God. Thou shall not worship any false God before me”. Despite knowing that Hindu idoletry it is a sin according to Christianity, her heart and mind do not allow her to think idol worship as a sin, apparently valuing her own feelings over the Bible. Likewise, when Abdul bows in front of *mandir* and goes inside when he wants to apply a *tika* (red mark) on his forehead, he never hesitates, but goes in immediately, saying “Bas dil karta hai..”, which means “I just feel like...” or “I follow my heart”.

Having varied ideas and perceptions about God, it is clear that all the individuals have their own way in expressing their faiths, by including one divine power or deity, and other times by excluding another.

Shamsher believes it is an energy or light (*nūr*, written in Quran) which guides you to follow the right path. Because Amrita has a faith in Sai Baba besides the Hindu deities, I asked Shamsher whether he did the same. Shamsher explains that Islam only follows the elements which are written in the Quran or in Hadith, or practices that has an acknowledged background, in the history of Islam. As a religious guru, as a saint, Sai Baba is a much respected man according to Shamsher. But if you ask any Muslim, he claims, none of them

will accept Sai Baba as a prophet, a *nabi*, or a *rasūl*, because nothing is written about Sai Baba in the Quran, Hadiths or in any other Islamic books. Moving to a discussion on whether Sai Baba is an avatar of Shiva, as many of his Hindu followers claim, we suddenly arrived at the topic of rebirth. At this point I asked Shamsheer what he thinks of reincarnation. Interestingly Shamsheer volunteers that there are certain things that seem to validate the notion of reincarnation. Let me quote Shamsheer's response in full, as it exemplifies so well the in-between ontological space that may emerge in interfaith marriages:

On that day also, I raised the same question in front of everyone.
What is the definition of God? Does God exist? What is the evidence?
Does anybody have any evidence that God exists on this earth?
Like this, I ask people from my religion also, do they believe in rebirth?
Do they believe in reincarnation? Because, see, the difference between the rich and the poor on this earth. God has created every human being.
So why is it so much of disparity between these two human beings?
You got my point? Like the rich is getting richer, the poor people are getting poorer. At one side you are saying that everyone is God's creature, or God's child. If all human beings are God's children, then why is God doing discrimination between his children? One is poor, one is rich. On this point, I agree to Amrita's view, that what you have done in your past life/birth, you will have to face that thing in this life. If you have done good deeds in your past life, then this life will be rewarded. If you have done bad deeds in your past life, then this life of yours will be horrible. I believe in this!! Because of this, there is so much of disparity between two people. Otherwise, when everybody is God's child, then why is it so much of difference between two people? I agree with her. This is the only reason. Because of this, there is so much of disparity.

Apparently, Shamsheer is referring to the law of karma. As many other Muslims, he could have discussed the philosophy of karma in relation to Islam; which connects sinning to "doomsday" or (*qayāmat*) where everybody will be sanctioned (in hell or in heaven) according to their actions. But Shamsheer does not point at the situation after death, rather his thoughts revolve around how differently we humans were born on this earth in terms of circumstances and situations; According to his understanding, this must be in God's control. Since Islam does not provide him with an immediate answer to this problem, he concludes that the only reason could be our previous life's karmas. Perhaps one could say that when the

linear Islamic thinking on birth and death is inconclusive, he falls back on a cyclical Hindu model of samsara.

Cases where 'religious/ritual intersections' or ritual crossing of a double kind are taking place are perhaps the most motivating aspect of an interfaith marriage, to study. It is unclear whether these couples have stable statements about what they believe, thus the interesting thing to look at, is their daily efforts to complement each other religiously. While such couples are striving to survive their relationships, and are largely confronted to only their spouse and child in day-to-day life, I will finally present couples who besides their spouses have to deal with their parents-in-laws religious beliefs and practices.

5. Religious pressure

Because marriages in India are traditionally arranged by parents, it might become somewhat problematic for some parents to agree with what is known as ‘lovemarriage’. In the case of interfaith couples, their children marry not only a person of their own choice, but also a person of another caste or religious community. In the latter case, families might not wish to compromise with the ‘new’ religion that the ‘new’ family member (usually the bride) brings into her new family (groom’s side), resulting in huge pressure on the couple. Such pressure I found is particularly common in couples where each of the spouses has a close family-based religious affiliation, but not necessarily strong investments in orthodox religious claims and traditions for their own sake. This particularly happens when older generations have stakes in the continuation of family traditions and for the sake of deliverance. Either only one family has stakes and claims, or both have it. According to my informants, negotiating with their families on religious issues is not an easy task. Though the couples themselves could be highly pluralistically-minded in the beginning of their marriage, the spouses’ respective families also have a large impact on how their religious lives unfold. For my informants, orthodoxy religious pressure was most strongly felt when attending gatherings and occasions where their (extended) families were involved.

Religious pressure is something that the couples mostly face in the beginning phase of their marriage. As I mentioned in the introduction and background chapter, interfaith couples encounter a lot of hindrances and resistance during their marriage-processes and even after. Because the couples remain attached to their natal families and want to involve the families in their own lives, they work hard to make their parents accept their choice of spouse. Initially, I refrained from asking questions regarding religious pressure as this topic generally could put a full stop to my interviews, but without my prompting, the topic came up naturally when we talked about conversion and attendance of family celebrations, especially when they described the first years of their marriages.

In this chapter, I take a brief look at the religious pressure faced by some of the interfaith couples I met during fieldwork. However, it needs to be mentioned that my sample of informants represent rather special cases given the fact that none of them had succumbed to potential pressure of not marrying across religious boundaries, nor of converting.

I focus primarily on three couples here: Aisha and Vinod (in Varanasi) dealt with a lot of issues when they first got married. Being the second youngest couple whom I interviewed, they had fresh narratives to share with me. Maya and Sajad still undergo a lot of pressure from Sajad's parents even after fifteen years. Halima, who has undergone *śuddhi karan* (Hindu conversion) twice, has no other option but to follow Hindu rituals according to how her mother-in-law practices them. A fourth woman, Harshita seemed to suggest by her facial expressions that she has endured religious pressure from her in-laws, but could not go into details as her husband was present in their apartment throughout or conversation.

5.1. The natal families and their 'religious' expectations

Vinod is the only male among those who have experienced 'religious pressure' from his spouse's natal- and extended families. Karima and Vinod got married through the Special Marriage Act 1972, and Vinod also did *nikah* (Islamic contractual marriage) with Aisha, as an intention to preserve Aisha's (his wife) religious identity within the Islamic community. Despite this, both lost contact with their natal families, until their son Kabir was born and they were invited to attend a family-gathering where Aisha's uncles, aunts, sisters, brother-in-laws, and cousins were present. The question raised during this gathering was why Vinod is not involved in Islamic traditions despite accepting Islam during their wedding or *nikah*. Vinod's answer to this was that he has definitely accepted those "good things" in Islam, "why shall I accept the bad things", he said to them. He explained to me that he tried to make them understand that he was aware of what he should discard and retain, which Karima's family did not find sufficiently affirmative. Later on, Aisha's uncle invited a few Islamic authorities to ask Vinod certain questions related to Islam. The condition was that if he agreed to their claims and questions, it would have been satisfactory. If not, he and Aisha would be 'banned' from meeting family, and attend Mosque and other Muslim institutions, reasoning that their children and coming generation would be affected by this.

Nida Kirmani has written a book entitled *Questioning the Muslim women: Identity and Insecurity in an urban Indian Locality*, where she examines a number of narratives from Muslim women in a predominantly Muslim *muhalla* (neighborhood), called Zakir Nagar, in Delhi. Kirmani writes about religious boundary crossings among residents in Zakir Nagar, where narratives and comments relating Hindu - Muslim marriages are told. As she explains:

“Very often, people justified their disapproval for inter-religious marriage in terms of the negative effects on the family members of the transgressing couple (Kirmani 2013, 120). Without concluding on whether the interfaith marriages were inevitable or not, Kirmani writes that some Muslim women expressed that interfaith marriages were unavoidable and natural, while others described the sanctions of getting interfaith married as causing a damage in family life. The latter is primarily related to which direction the family should go in terms of religious practices and faith, and stresses the confidence of some Muslim women (Kirami’s interviewees) that marriages across religious boundaries should be avoided for the sake of children, who would grow up ‘confused’ about their identities (Kirmani 2013, 120). Relating it to the present case, Aisha felt that her natal side was pushing the couple (or Vinod) to do certain rituals; 1) Vinod had to ‘revert’ to Islam (as he did a written conversion during the *nikah*, 2) Vinod had to read *namaz* five times a day, and 3) the ritual of circumcision had to be done on their son. By emphasizing the ‘confused’ identity of children (of interfaith-married parents), Kirmani exemplifies a woman who mentions that there may be conflicts arising over rituals, such as circumcision. Understandably, the couple had no such ritual conflict in them between, but as Aisha explains, the pressure from her family’s side was too big to handle, recalling that the gathering by her natal family was dedicated to their son’s religious identity and the acceptance of the family in the Islamic community.

While this is related to Vinod and his son’s religious identity, I am now moving to how the parents are affected by their children’s choice of spouse from another religious confession. The expectations that the parents have for their children to marry one from their own religious affiliation is by all means involved with the family’s religious continuation, predominantly retained by the older generation. Following Kirmani, her interviewees mention cases where the mother and father tussled over the religious upbringing of their child, which ended up dividing the family (ibid). After long conversations with my informants, and having heard their narratives, I consider that this is the point where the parents resist, as they believe that the action of getting interfaith married is an action of crossing one’s own religious boundaries. According to the parents, this is influenced by the ‘other’s’ religious customs and results in discarding one’s own religious practices and beliefs. Consequently, and according to my informants, for their parents or the older generation in their extended families, this particular boundary crossing, or the pluralistic ‘change’ divides the family.

Further, when an unexpected situation like interfaith marriage occurs in the family, it also relates to the “social pressure” that the parents have to handle among their socio-religious

communities. The parents' concern typically revolves around the social sanctions in form of shame, ridicule, sarcasm and criticism, given by the society or the community they live in. Kirmani's interviewee narrated about her Muslim friend in Old Delhi who married a Hindu man and had to change her name. Although she is happily married, she concerned about how it affected her friend's mother, who had to bear the responsibility and associated shame of her daughter's contravention of social boundaries (Kirmani 2013, 121). As I discuss this, it is also reminiscent of Maya who did *nikah* with Sajad, and became legitimately Muslim, but conveyed to her parents and others that she had not converted. This is certainly related to what Kirmani writes about the effect of interfaith marriage that can cause the parents (ibid). The reason why Maya desperately kept *vrats* and kept *mandir* at her home, was to avoid that her parents face or bear any kind of 'shame' of their daughters "conversion" to Islam, which happened during Sajad and Maya's wedding. During the process of their *nikah*, Sajad tells me that his parents were "ok" with the wedding because they believed that Sajad was doing a good "deed" by inviting Maya to Islam and 'make' her a Muslim. While getting married through *nikah* was a method to avoid further complications and criticism from Sajad's natal side, Sajad's family had now accepted Maya to be a "valid" daughter-in-law, to whom they could relate easily.

5.2. The couples' experiences

According to what Maya narrates, she and Sajad did not live at Sajad's parents' house for long time before they moved to Punjab for work. In the little time she lived with them, she says, she felt a lot of pressure being a "Hindu" daughter-in-law of "Muslim" parents-in-law. One thing that Maya remembers from the initial days after their wedding is that her mother-in-law felt that she was not practicing Islam 'well enough', despite her conversion to Islam during hers and Sajad's *nikah*. Every day, when Maya arrived home (to Sajad's parental house) after work, her mother-in-law used to hand her books, saying "do read these books, they are very good and educative". Maya tells that she did take the books, as she could not disrespect her by not receiving them, "but they were all about why Islam is the best religion, and how women in Islam is supposed to behave and conduct". However, at present time, Sajad's parents do not expect much from Maya in terms of practicing Islam, as Maya has resisted. However, Maya is now being blamed for Sajad's religious change.

As I have introduced in this chapter, the ‘religious pressure’ is usually experienced from the spouse’s family and it is most often woman who is the victim of it. India or parts of Indian societies are patriarchal societies. Further, gender operates in a way that it is the daughter-in-laws who generally are subject to the “religious pressure” given by their husband’s families. In her description of ‘classical patriarchy’ in Middle East and Asia, Kandiyoti (1988) discusses the cyclical nature of the power accorded to women depending on their place in the life-cycle (Kirmani 2013, 171). While young daughters-in-laws are generally subject to the dictates of their husbands and in-laws, women generally attain a certain degree of autonomy as they get older (...) (Kirmani 2013, 172). While women in most Indian households share a common position and role where the husbands or the husbands’ families have power over the daughters-in-law, I now suggest that in an interfaith marriage where religion plays a powerful role, it is not necessary the women who suffers the pressure, and not necessary the in-laws who put the pressure.

When relating it to the males, I would firstly give an example of Vinod, with whom I started, and who experienced the pressure from his in-law’s side, and secondly Sajad, who has undergone the same, but from his natal side. Especially after Rangīlā took its real form, and when Sajad’s family and relatives saw Sajad and Maya on television, actively involved in the topic of ‘interfaith-marriages’, the family situation became more intense. As described in the second chapter, Sajad feels that the rituals; fasting and Friday-prayers have faded with time (page). When asking how his parents reacted to this, he replied that they do have issues with it. Comments like “now, we will have to teach our son” from Sajad’s parents, or “who will teach the grandchildren”, are something that Sajad finds extremely hard to handle. He explains that they are not happy with his current change, but they continuously try to persuade him even though it does not make any difference. And when nothing works, they will always make an effort to teach Islam to the kids. This has led to several heated discussions between Sajad and his parents, and this is expressed by the couple as “emotionally traumatic”, and Sajad admits that this conflict has affected the couple to a large extent; Sajad received threatening phone calls from Islamic authorities (*maulānās*) in agreement with his family, to stop misguiding young Muslims, “otherwise they would give him consequences”, as Sajad explains. Moreover, Sajad and Maya even fought in them between over that Maya did not want to visit her in-laws, while Sajad wanted her to accompany him. At the time of our conversation, Maya admits that she did not have courage to handle the pressure at that time, but she says that the pressure is not as much as before. Without being explicit about how

parents get affected by such, it is reliable to say that Sajad's parents express the same worry as Kimani's interviewee mentions; that "the whole family goes to hell" (Kirmani 2013, 120). From Maya, there is no expectation, while towards Sajad, there is still a lot of pressure to make him lead the religious direction of his family to Islam.

5.3. Conversion

Halima, who has had *shuddhi karan* twice in Arya Samaj- temple, practices the Hindu customs and rituals according to her mother-in-law. As she explains her expectations before she and Manish got married, she thought that "life would be merrier", by including both religions and celebrating both Islamic- and Hindu festivals. This 'hope' was unfortunately left behind, as Halima feels that it was less celebration, but more restrictions related to which rituals and celebrations the family should follow. To get an insight about how this "religious pressure" alternates in Halima's life, I illustrate the ritual of keeping fast, *vrat* (hindi) or *roza* (urdu). When asking Halima, if she keeps *roza* during Ramadan, she replied to be that she does not practice any of her (Islamic) rituals, reasoning that she still lives with her in-laws, and that they have converted her, saying "I do only follow Hindu rituals". When we talk about fasts, Halima narrates the difference of keeping the *vrat* of the popular *Karva Chaut* and the *vrat* of Tij, which both symbolize the "marital bliss". Although both the fasts denote the same significance, for Halima, the *Karva Chaut- vrat* is a voluntary fast, while *Tij-vrat* is the one kept by pressure from her mother-in-law. Halima narrates that she once asked her mother-in-law if she could "let go" of the "*Tij-vālā-vrat*", as she already kept *Karva-Chaut*. Her mother-in-law's response to this was sadly negative, commenting that "you do not care about my son, do you". For Halima, it was a very unhappy moment, as she always kept the fast of *Karva Chaut* with full devotion for her husband's longevity. In addition to these, Halima was also obliged to keep the "Monday-fasts", and the fasts of the month of *Shravan* (monsoon) for Lord Shiva, and the fasts of Navaratari, for the goddess Durga were inescapable until one year before the upcoming Navaratari at the time of my fieldwork, when Halima eliminated the core ritual of Navaratari, called *kanya puja*, along with the fasts. *Kanya* or *kanjak* means young girls or girls who have not yet attained puberty. During Navratari, usually the last day, many Hindu households perform this puja. Here, the nine *kanyas* or the young girls are seen in the form of goddess, and the devotees perform this ritual by worshipping or honoring the girls; wash their feet, offer them food, apply *tikā* on their foreheads, and at the end, touch their

feet and give them *dakshana* (donation/gift: money, clothes, toys or candy), just in a way the devotees worship the goddess.

However, at the time of my fieldwork (2015), I was invited to celebrate Eid with Halima and her natal family in a village in Ghaziabad. As this was the very first evening, where we could actually feel the weather changing from a “hot” summer to a more “pleasant summer” (autumn), Halima’s family placed the chairs outside their house, so we could enjoy the gentle wind for the rest of the evening with a few cups of tea and snacks. Having completed our second tea, Halima went inside to wash the dishes in the kitchen. In a hope to be asked to join her inside the house, I waited for another five minutes. Finally, Halima suggested that I could sit inside along with her (to avoid the dengue as there was a high risk of being transmitted). This is the only couple, whom I could observe individually, because this time, Ravi was sitting outside, and Halima, whom I understood were undergoing ‘undesirable’ experiences, was clearly interesting to attend in private. We came across the topic of ‘female foeticide’ in India, where I told her that I bumped into an episode of the popular Bollywood star, Amir Khan, who held a television talk-show based on issues in the Indian society, called ‘*Satyamev Jayate*’, where Amir Khan stressed about the ‘girl abortion’ in India. This is where Halima told me the miserable incident, which led to eliminate the ritual of *kanya-puja*.

I could already sense that this is a topic close to her heart. She was getting emotional while talking and finally she asked me: “Do you want to know why I have lost faith in rituals and all?” I nodded “yes”, and she narrated an incident related to her mother-in-law. Halima’s mother-in-law’s brother (Ravi’s uncle) came to Delhi from U.P in 2014, and was worried about his daughter-in-law was going to give birth to a girl. After detecting that it certainly was a girl, Ravi’s mother-in-law suggested and advised to her brother to make his daughter-in-law do an abortion. In some way, secretly and unknowingly, they convinced the pregnant woman to come to Delhi, and made her do so. By the time Halima and Ravi were pondering over how they would convince the pregnant lady to avoid abortion, it was already done. In other words, Halima and Ravi did not know it, before it had already happened. Halima started crying while telling me this, and of course in details. She said she felt disgusted and even more because it happened on the first day of Navaratri. For Halima, Navaratri used to mean a lot, because she loved the way Hindu households gather young girls to “worship” them on the ninth or last day of Navaratri, considering them to be the Goddesses and treat them accordingly. “I love it, and I do this puja with full devotion every year”, she confirmed. Halima explained that this was the worst experience in her life. Because she is Muslim, but practices the Hindu rituals, it

took her time to accept several rituals, reasoning that she could not find logic in practicing them. But as she puts it, Navratari and its rituals were always close to her heart, apparently because it commemorates the Durga's "victory" over the demon (Fuller 2004, 108), thus women's *shakti* or power to fight the evil, which positions women in a "superior" role in the Indian society (at least in this setting). However, Halima clearly told her mother-in-law that such gathering of young girls (*kanya puja*) should never happen in their house again. At least she would never participate, she declared to her mother-in-law. Consequently, if any force would take place, she threatened her mother-in-law that she would spread it to the neighboring community- the fact of what she did.

In this particular case, I would take the liberty to say that religious practices and religious sentiments are interwoven, basing it on the popular idea of that religion is a "personal" matter, thus involves emotions. In one way, we could say that Halima liberated herself from Hindu orthodoxy by closing the matter of Navratari, the way she did. She suddenly had the choice to leave other core practices as well. But if we take a look at her feelings related to Navratari, and the responsibility she took, to avoid any further immoral incidents, her courage to take a decision (on family's behalf) is considerably built by huge pressure (or burden), which was exposed when she cried and confirmed that the nine days of Navratari were very close to her heart.

Returning to the point, where the 'religious pressure' is clearer to be understood, I would like to move to Harshita, who comes from a 'typical' Brahmin family. Talking about vegetarian diet at her natal home, where even traces of egg should not be ingested, Harshita expresses how helpless she was when her husband's sister-in-law served her non-vegetarian food on the days of Navratri. To view a deeper understanding of the unpleasant experience for Harshita, I would first like to illustrate the "Brahmin kitchen" at Harshita's natal home in Lucknow, which explains how difficult it must have been for her to accept the change of food habits. So, the "Brahmin- kitchen" or the "*chauka*-system", as she puts it, was that the chef would be seated at one location in one part of the kitchen. There would be a line drawn to demarcate the chef's area. Nobody could touch the chef, and the chef could also not touch anybody. This would maintain the sanctity and purity of the food. The people, who were to eat, had to sit outside the drawn line on the floor, and the chef sat in the *chauka*, which apparently is a "square designed" sitting area, made of wooden planks. The chef would serve food in a plate made of steel (*thali*), and just passed it on, on the ground, again untouched in the sense that the chef would just push the plate towards you, and it had to cross the drawn line. The

clothes worn while cooking and the wooden plank had to be washed before preparing the food.

Harshita has seen and been a part of this system until she got married with Nadim. When Harshita and Nadim visited Harshita's father-in-law, Harshita expressed the unpleasant and complex situation she found herself in. While at one side, Nadim was not served non-vegetarian food because he already held a vegetarian diet for several years before marriage, on the other side, Harshita was purposely served meat without any regard of that she came from a Brahmin family and accordingly was vegetarian, and above everything, this day was the first day of Navaratari. The sister-in-law (Nadim's elder brother's wife) simply told her to "have the food", while to Nadim, his sister-in-law made an ironical comment, and laughed at him saying "you certainly do not eat as you are influenced by Hinduism", knowing he already was vegetarian. Harshita, being confused and pressurized, apologized to her God, and ingested the non-vegetarian food, "while I never eat- but keep fasts during Navaratari", she added. In the course of our conversation, Harshita admitted that she had been through a lot of pressure, and had made a lot of sacrifices in her marriage with Nadim, which she did not want to unfold in front of Anwar as it concerned his family. At this moment, Nadim was attending a phone call outside the room, and in those few minutes, she offered me information that was suitable to submit in this chapter. Harshita narrates that after this incident, she asked her mother for guidance about how she should react to this, and her mother's advice was "just do as they want if you want peace in your family", and accordingly, Harshita compromised with her husband's family.

The topic of 'religious pressure' frustrates the couples even after ten years of their marriage. It is not only experienced from neighbors and other acquaintances, but most of the pressure happens within their families, both natal and in-laws. Even though the pressure mostly lies on the woman, it is clear that the men also face difficulties in the course of explaining their inclusiveness to their parents and in-laws. Some of them accept the way it goes, while others raise their voices.

Concluding remarks

This thesis has looked at the dynamics of interfaith relations in India with special reference to interfaith marriages. To understand such marriages interfaith couples were the closest approach to gain a deeper understanding of how Indians negotiate religious alternatives in their day-to-day life.

Displacing the religiously based conflicts and the political motivation to keep them alive with a harmonious picture of India's democracy and diversity, would not give us answers to the questions about how India is still surviving the diversities. After all, it is the religiously based conflicts that make it challenging and interesting to examine how people still wish to engage and negotiate their ideas among the politically motivated society with religious discord, in order to be found in an inclusive or inter-religious matrix. Therefore, I suggest that shifting focus from the history of religious conflicts to contemporary India where people have established new interpretations and ideas about religion, gives us best possible results of how interfaith-couples handle their religious/ritual lives.

This thesis reflects on how we, as researchers, fieldworkers or anthropologists can approach interfaith couples in India. The challenges met during the fieldwork were not easy to face, reasoning my multiplex identity and confusion about self-representation. My Indian-Hindu identity both strengthened and weakened my work in Delhi. Thagaard who suggests maintaining the distance, was a key-factor to maintain my position as a fieldworker, and Narayan's discussion about situating the researcher helped me being confident about my pre-understanding that I was going to include in analyzing the couples.

As introduced, these couples are not easy to meet. They do not meet for their own interest because they know they are stigmatized by parts of Indian society. Therefore, I suggest that in any case, if interfaith couples are subjects of research's in South Asia, they need to be treated with great sensitivity. Firstly, they strive to meet up for a talk, and secondly, the topics, 'families', 'conversions' and 'pressure' should be something of their interest, too, to assure fruitful information to work on. Therefore, the phase before their weddings was not something that I looked over at, and asked about, unless they were interested.

Each chapter in this thesis, in one way or another, deals with how the couples try to maintain their interfaith marriage. Sometimes by finding something 'bigger' than religion that they can have in common, while other times by adapting each other's ritual practices. Firstly, it is true

that their wedding processes have not been ideal and there is no secret that the society (family, relatives, friends, neighbors and even the court) has made it difficult to process such a marriage, despite a law for mixed marriages that has existed for more than hundred years, but only took its real form after Independence. Secondly, their thinking does vary from one another as they are brought up in different atmospheres. Thus, different religious upbringings do matter when examining the couples' ritual lives, as their families; especially parents are greatly involved in trying to 'cultivate' their children's religious views, and also trying to attract their grandchildren (couples' children) towards their respective religious convictions. Unfortunately, the couples may distance themselves from the core rituals and orthodoxy in order to assure that no major conflict dominates the platform they have built.

When studying interfaith marriages, it would be unfair to the couples to categorize them in separate sections (as they have much in common) but for my purpose, I have tried to organize them in order to get a clearer picture of how they handle their religious lives through different (albeit not contrasting) ways. Therefore, I have made it possible to invite the single member of an interfaith marriage or the couples in one another's religious discussion. The different ways in which through they handle their religious life must be many, but here, I started with the couples who try to find a common ground to succeed the interfaith marriage, then the couples who cross their religious boundaries in order to take part in their spouse's religious life, and at the end, there are unfortunately couples who also deal and adjust with religious pressure in order to maintain their marriage.

Some of the couples prefer not to stick to their family-based religious convictions. Ultimately, it is not the term 'religion' itself that distance them, it is the authorities behind the term that makes them think something greater than just 'religion'. While trying to build a common ground, they express that spirituality is something that pleases them in order to cultivate their own religious alternative. With reference to Heelas and Woodhead, the couples' beliefs and way of practicing rituals become very personal at first place. This can be seen through their respective religious events, where they have made it possible to depart from being ritual followers to celebrators of their religious festivals. It seems safe to say that these couples do not discard the religious backgrounds they are brought up with, but rather try to melt one another's religious affiliation into something 'bigger'. Admiring spiritual gurus and their inclusive ideologies, singing religious songs, decorating the home with religious symbols are not something that they are bound to do. They gladly perform and include these for the sake of a 'harmonious' marriage.

Next and perhaps the most interesting part is that of couples or one member who voluntarily participates in rituals and convictions of another religion than his/her own. This can be the most perplexing part of an interfaith marriage. Most of the times, they express less about how suitable it is for them to cross their religious boundaries (because they still identify themselves with their family based religion), but these boundary crossings, or the religious intersections are greater understood through their narratives and experiences where they have crossed their religious boundaries without much consideration. One clear example would be Shamsheer, who allows himself to do *murti puja*, and simultaneously acknowledges the consequence of it according to Islamic conviction. The discussion of religious boundary-crossings was perhaps the most puzzling one, but remained the most interesting and worth examining as it strengthened my argument of that interfaith marriage is more capable to survive than what is previously understood.

Couples may also undergo religious pressure from their parents and extended families. It is most likely the woman who suffers the most, as in an Indian context, the women as a daughter-in-law is appreciated when she follows her mother-in-law's footsteps. Their religious attendance is to be understood when they are pressurized to perform family-based rituals or when they have ceased to perform their own respective religious rituals and are even denied visiting their natal homes. In other cases, the members' own parents do not accept their children's "cultivated" views, and it mostly results to permanent conflicts. As explained earlier, this particularly happens wherein older generations have stakes in the continuation of family traditions and for the sake of deliverance. This could be understood as causing distance to religion for the couples, but interestingly, the pressure has also created a platform for some of them; to raise voice against sin or crime, and live religiously and morally correct.

It is through the interfaith couples and the narratives about their families and friends, I have acknowledged that Indians are more likely to endure the religious fragmentation, persisting religious cohesion - than of my understanding about interfaith relations, largely seen in the context of the conflictual past - before I left to India. My approach to understanding their handling of ritual practices and one another's religious beliefs appeared stronger in the field-itself. Thus, it is through the couples: their detailed narratives, their expressions and the lengthy conversations I have come to a conclusion that religious boundaries are more common to cross in India, than what I visualized based on the South Asian diaspora's attitudes and behaviors towards inter-religious practices in Norway.

The interesting point that can be worth examining further is their children's religious and ritual development, and what day-to-day life of interfaith does for them. Despite the 'doubtful' views about religious rituals and beliefs, the couples never stop their children to participate and involve in their grandparents' religious teachings and arrangements.

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