

Inclusivism and its contingencies: Following temple-goers in Kanpur

Kathinka Frøystad¹

India's famous religious inclusivism has long been on the wane. Originally launched to capture the acceptance and appropriation of external religious elements *within* what we now label Hinduism (cf. Halbfass 1988), contemporary studies of inclusivism primarily pertain to appropriation and ritual engagement *across* the religious boundaries established by the Census of India. Their consensus is unanimous: Despite the persistence of certain inclusivist practices, their extent and variety have declined steadily for at least a century due to the steadfast work of religious reform movements striving to “purify” religious practices, followed by an increasingly entrenched religious nationalism. Worried about the fallout for India's fragile interreligious coexistence, journalists and academics became increasingly interested in inclusivist practices, asking how much remains and which what beneficial effects. Today certain liberal journalists virtually cover cross-religious engagement as keenly as anthropologists used to document human life forms that were threatened with extinction. Academics follow suit by detailing past and present varieties of inclusivism, often combined with a keen attention to the societal context that perpetuate and obstruct them. Most studies of present-day inclusivism make their point of departure in Sufi-Muslim *dargāhs* (grave shrines), where inclusivist practices still thrive despite reduced attendance from upper-caste Hindus and reformed Muslims alike. This chapter aims to expand the latter strand of scholarship by asking what a somewhat unusual category of interlocutors for such a subject – passionate Kali devotees and other devout Hindus in urban Uttar Pradesh – reveal about the state of inclusivism in a period characterized by considerable religio-political polarization.

To this end I break free from the common strategy of studying a shared religious site such as a *dargāh*. Instead, I make my point of departure in a Kali temple in the outskirts of Kanpur, from which I follow its protagonists around as they traverse the geography of their neighbourhood, city and surrounding village area to seek divine blessings, assistance,

¹ Fieldwork for this chapter was funded by the Research Council of Norway. I am indebted to the Indian Cosmopolitan Alternatives research group for methodological inspiration and to members of the South Asia symposium in Oslo and the contributors, editors and reviewers of this volume for fruitful comments to earlier drafts.

insight or sometimes merely free entertainment from a variety of sacred sources, each coming with their own sensitivities and associations. My argument is threefold. Firstly, though inclusivism is indeed weakening, many inclusivist practices go undetected since they are done in relative solitude or even in secrecy. Secondly, certain inclusivist practices are fraught with contingency, whether because they are impeded by perceived danger or because they unfold in ways that can spell trouble. And thirdly, following people around as part of one's fieldwork can significantly enhance the ability to detect understudied modalities of inclusivism. That said, inclusivist practices can be a more double-edged sword than suggested by most of the journalistic and academic accounts I have encountered so far, as I was to discover when I went to the north-Indian city of Kanpur in 2013 for what was to become a eight field visits over a period of seven years.

Kanpur and Milanganj in the time of Modi

Located at the heart of Uttar Pradesh, Kanpur is surrounded by places that have left profound impressions on Indian historiography. Best known are the Hindu pilgrim towns of Banaras and Prayagraj (known as Allahabad until 2018) as well the state capital Lucknow, which served as headquarter for the Shi'ite Nawabs of Awadh in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Kanpur itself is primarily an industrial city though its famous cotton mills now blemish the city as padlocked ghost factories. Today its cornerstone industries include ordnance factories, chemical factories, leather tanneries and factories producing the mildly stimulating mixtures of areca nuts known as *pān masālā* and *guṭkhā*. Though many outsiders denigrate Kanpur as a "dirty" city due to its industrial pollution and scarce architectural beauty, those who are born here appreciate their city for its "big heart" that still enables its inhabitants to have time for each other and allows even the modestly salaried ones to afford its delicious street food.

Kanpur's 2.77 million inhabitants comprise 77 per cent Hindus, 20 per cent Muslims, 1.3 per cent Sikhs, 0.5 per cent Christians and a minuscule percentage of Buddhists, Parsis, Jains and "others" (Census of India 2011). Most of the city is a patchwork of Hindu and Muslim, upper-caste and low-caste, middle-class and impoverished residential quarters. That said, there is also a city elite mainly consisting of upper-caste Hindus who reside in the northern part of the city. In the south there is a smaller elite of Muslim tannery owners amidst the low-caste Muslim and Dalit tannery workers. The neighbourhood from which the ethnography of this chapter is drawn is a patchwork neighbourhood at the lower economic end.

Located at the outer periphery of Kanpur, “Milanganj” (as I dub it in my writings) is a residential neighbourhood demarcated on two sides by dusty highways where trucks and long-distance buses thunder past all day. A market street divides the neighbourhood in two on its way towards the city centre, though few of Milanganj’s inhabitants find much reason to go downtown. To the east of the market street are the Muslim-dominated residential quarters; to the west we find the Hindu- and Sikh-dominated quarters. Yet despite a certain dominance of one community, none of these quarters are entirely homogeneous in terms of religion. They are all fairly mixed, a heterogeneity that extends further to class. Here are no gated neighbourhoods of the kind increasingly found in India’s metropolitan cities (cf. Waldrop 2004 for Delhi; Srivastava 2014 for Gurgaon; and Fuller and Narasimhan 2014 for Bangalore), though they certainly have begun to come up in the northern part of the city. It is the double heterogeneity, population density and concomitant panoptic character I want to emphasize by pseudonymizing this locality as Milanganj, *milan* denoting a meeting or encounter and *ganj* signifying a market area.

A note on the political context is also required to appreciate the sense of contingency I address toward the end of this chapter. In May 2014, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power after a landslide victory in the general election. From then on the prime ministerial position was manned by Narendra Modi, well-known for his past as Chief Minister of Gujarat during the anti-Muslim pogroms in 2002, which scholars and critics claim he did little to stop (see e.g. Ghassem-Fachandi 2012). The years that followed were marked several steps that confirmed the long-term ambition of transforming India from a secular state founded on principled distance between the state and the religions (cf. Bhargava 2009) to a Hindu *rāḥṣṭra* (nation, state). Though legal changes were still years ahead, impatient Hindu nationalist extremists quickly initiated several campaigns to kick-start this transformation. These included the “ghar vapasi” (home return) campaign to “reconvert” Muslims and Christians to Hinduism, the “love jihad” campaign preventing Muslim men from “alluring” Hindu girls into marriage and a revitalized Cow Protection movement that struck down on suspected production and consumption of beef, the latter leading to at least 44 deaths, primarily for Muslims (Human Rights Watch 2019). Though the Supreme Court was yet to rule in favour of Hindus in the Babri Masjid case, the Muslim right to instant triple *talāq* divorce was yet to be outlawed, Cow Protection laws were yet to be strengthened and the Citizenship Act was yet to be amended, the political context had already induced Milanganj’s inhabitants with a certain sense of risk. Even though they rarely referred to any of these issues explicitly – presumably to keep them at

bay (as described by Sanchez 2016), if not to distance themselves from politics altogether – they were clearly apprehensive about acts that could spell trouble. Before providing details, let me describe the mobile fieldwork I deployed to get an idea of the extent to which Milanganj Hindus still crossed religious boundaries in pursuit of divine intervention or insight.

Mobile fieldwork: Following temple-goers around

As my fieldwork progressed, I settled on two approaches to trace movement between different religious spaces and practices. The first was to invite myself home to the Hindus I came to know to elicit the history of the objects in their home temples. Interestingly, my curiosity about the origin of each object often made my hosts pull out their photo albums, whether in print or on their phones, claiming that photos would give a more accurate impression of their ritual circuits than the objects in their home temples. As it turned out, their digital photos also depicted religious sites that they *wanted* to visit as well as deities and holy personas they held in high regard but without necessarily paying regular homage to them.

The second research approach was to begin to hang out at one of the temples in the neighbourhood – a Kali temple managed by the Saini community of flower cultivators and gardeners classified by as one of the Other Backward Classes – to trace the movement between this temple and other religious spaces.² Its location right adjacent to a *gurudwārā* (Sikh temple), a Radha-Krishna temple and the mansion of a big-shot with a constant trickle of visitors made the tiny square in-between these buildings into a *milan* within the *milan*, as it were. It was the latter strategy that really ‘opened up’ the field. Besides enabling me to study movement in-between these three temples, many of those who worked in the Kali temple or visited it daily began to invite me home, added me to their social media networks, brought me along to other religious sites they appreciated and sometimes, at safe distance from prying ears, began to disclose some of the deeper motives that made them seek divine assistance beyond the Kali temple in which I first met them. This is how my mobile field method came about, a method that was less of a pre-planned strategy than an adaptation to local circumstances and opportunities. Most of my interlocutors were thus Hindus who frequented this temple or lived nearby, a majority of whom were either OBCs with roots in the surrounding villages or descendants of refugees

² A closer description of this temple is given in *A Kali Temple Inside Out* (2018), an ethnographic film by Dipesh Kharel and Frode Storaas.

from Pakistani Punjab though there was also a small contingent of Brahmins and other upper castes of variable economic means.

Sociologists who advocate go-alongs as a research strategy frequently point to their potential to combine interviews with observation. Margaret Kusenbach, for instance, claims that go-alongs enable scholars to “observe their informants’ spatial practices in *situ* while accessing their experiences and interpretations at the same time” (Kusenbach 2003: 463). Though I agree with this assessment, Kusenbach’s go-alongs differ significantly from my own. Whereas Kusenbach conducted 50 go-alongs with 30 respondents with whom she does not seem to have interacted in other ways, I conducted between 10 and 20 go-alongs with each of my around 10 core interlocutors. Additionally I talked to hundreds of others, participated in rituals within and beyond the temple, visited innumerable homes, shops and religious spaces besides keeping abreast of the religio-political context and its visual culture by means of local newspapers, smartphone memes and billboards. Due to my anthropological background I thus *embedded* go-alongs in participant observation rather than isolating it as a research method in its own right. Though my teaching commitments made me shuttle back and forth far more than I would have liked to, I share the classic anthropological ideal of participating in local everyday life as much as possible to understand the values and motivations that drive action combined with a keen eye to their divergence and change. Interestingly, the many walks, motorcycle rides and rickshaw drives I made with my core interlocutors came to change my mental map of Milanganj completely. The more I followed them around, the more its outer demarcation (described above) gave way to an octopus- or jellyfish-like image marking the spatial trajectory of our movement, an image with the Kali temple at its head and our walks and drives as tentacles or threads (cf. Frøystad 2016). Let me now detail some of the inclusivist practices this method brought to view, beginning with general features before exemplifying the relation between inclusivism and dangerous contingency.

Seeking blessings and divine intervention beyond the temple

Just by staying put in the Kali temple I could easily fill my notebooks with inclusivist statements such as *sab kā mālik ek*, which means that God is one across all denominations of faith. Sitting at the temple steps I could also watch Sikhs crossing over from the gurudwārā to pay respects to Mother Kali or give *dān* (charity) to the beggars outside her temple. Conversely, I could also see Kali devotees – mainly female Punjabi Hindus – entering the gurudwārā to listen to *kīrtans* (hymns, in this case from the holy Guru Granth

Sahib scripture), bow their heads in front of the scripture or help prepare the *langar* (collective meal) that concluded all major gurudwārā events. Though I often joined them, I quickly realized that, to get an idea of inclusivist practices beyond Hindu and Sikh traditions, I had to employ a more person-centred fieldwork that included greater mobility.

The general pattern was as follows. Kali devotees in Milanganj tended to seek general blessings from temples, gurudwārās or dargāhs alike whenever the opportunity arose, even if time only allowed a respectful bow while passing by on the street. Churches and mosques were however ignored. Hindu and Sikh religious festivals were treated with positive curiosity whereas the public festivals of other religious communities were either ignored or regarded as mild annoyances. Explicit critique of Christianity or Islam was hardly ever articulated; the general response was that “they have *their* traditions, we have ours”. When Kali devotees in Milanganj approached religious spaces and specialists beyond Hinduism and Sikhism, it was usually because they had persistent personal problems that had not yet been solved despite consulting both worldly experts and regular divine powers.

A typical example was the young OBC man who fell head over heels in love with a petite Brahman beauty. Instead of sending him packing due to their caste differences, the girl’s father promised that, if he succeeded in landing a government job (*sarkārī naukrī*) within one year, the girl would be his. So for an entire year this unfortunate man ran from pillar to post, first consulting placement agencies but discovering that they charged an unaffordable amount of money, next tiring out his expanded network of contacts, then stepping up the time he spent doing daily *seva* for Goddess Kali. It was only when none of this worked he began to expand his ritual repertoire in a way Carrithers (2000) may have called “polytropic”, paying respect in many (*poly*) manners/directions (*tropos*), bowing his forehead to the floor in every gurudwārā he had time to enter and occasionally offering chādars (decorated cloth) and incense in dargāhs as well, but only if accompanied by someone in the know who could help ensure that he did not do it wrongly, in which case his effort might be counterproductive.

Besides unruly love, other drivers of inclusivism were the desire to conceive, to overcome persistent health problems, to ensure success in exams, to land a secure job, to solve marital problems and to clear family disputes. The tendency to seek divine intervention across religious boundaries was particularly pronounced if their problems had persisted for so long that it made them suspect the root cause to be *nazar* (evil eye), *kālā ilm* (black magic) or unwanted possession. For a few, inclusivism was also motivated by a

desire to expand their ritual skills. It was particularly inclusivism across the Hindu-Muslim boundary that was fraught with a sense of contingency. To exemplify I first turn to public festivals, contrasting my interlocutors' attraction for the Nagarkirtan procession of the Sikhs with their apprehension of the Muharram procession of the Shia community.

Nagarkirtan but not Muharram

One morning in the Kali temple a young carpenter named Kapil asked me and some other temple regulars to join him for the Nagarkirtan procession, which was to traverse the market street in the evening. Seven people joined us, many of whom dressed up for the occasion. Nagarkirtan is an annual procession in which local Sikhs join forces in a parade to spread the message of God throughout the city (*nagar*). Spearheading the parade was a decorated cart with the Guru Granth Sahib scripture and turbaned Sikhs singing *kirtans* (hymns). Next came the elders and representatives of the gurudwārā trusts, some walking, others following in chariots. The third and longest section of the parade was organized by Sikh-run schools and colleges, each institution represented by a combination of alumni and current students. Additional chariots were filled with kīrtan-singing women. The main attraction for the spectators from the Kali temple came at the end: the young men showing their prowess by juggling swords and making human pyramids.

Scholars have long emphasized the entertaining dimensions of religious festivals and public rituals. What the Milanganj Nagarkirtan drove home was the temporalization of the efficacy/entertainment dyad as well as the importance of both even to non-Sikh spectators such as OBC Kali devotees. When the first sections passed by, they watched silently, many with covered heads, as if the parade transformed the market street into a temporary gurudwārā. Once the sword jugglers came, they lit up, removed their head-covering, and laughed and chatted while beginning to take photos. When the organizers distributed free packets of Frooti juice, they supplemented them by some potato crisps, which completed the transition from sanctity to entertainment. Everyone was now *mazā* (merry). To preserve this moment low-cost joy that had unfolded from auspiciousness, the smartphone owners among them began to take selfies, resulting in the same kind of pictures I had often been shown when asking people about their home temples.

The enthusiasm that many Kali temple regulars showed for Nagarkirtan contrasted sharply with their apprehension towards the annual Muharram processions of the Shia community. Each year, on the evening of the ninth or tenth of the Islamic month of

Muharram, Kanpur Shias take out processions to conclude their commemoration of the demise of Prophet Muhammad’s grandson Hussain in the battle of Karbala in 680 AD. Men and boys parade with elaborate replicas (*tāziyās*) of Hussain’s tomb, accompanied by a long trail of men with solemn faces, dressed in black, green or white, if not bare-chested. Nowadays self-flagellation is rare in Kanpur, but some hit themselves rhythmically with their palms while others raise swords and daggers in the air. Having reached their destination, which they term Karbala, the *tāziyās* are buried. Due to Milanganj’s proximity to a Muslim-majority area, I was curious to know whether any of the regulars in the Kali temple would watch. Despite being acutely aware of the academic consensus that Hindu participation in Muharram had petered out in this region long before (Gottschalk 2000: 51; Kumar 1988-16), I could not rule out that some of them would *watch*. After all, local newspapers still reported that certain Kanpur Hindus assisted the *tāziyā*-decoration or sweet distribution (cf. Siddiqui 2018; Alvi 2018), though such instances may well have been newsworthy by virtue of having become so rare.

Asking around if any of the Kali temple regulars would watch only yielded negative replies. The men claimed to avoid Muharram processions due to the traffic restrictions, diversions and delays that would incur whereas the women pointed to the risk of violence, one even claiming that Muharram “always” generates violence. Interestingly, none of the men expressed similar reservations against traffic diversions during the Nagarkirtan or Ganesh Chaturthi processions, and none of the women thought of mentioning the lack of female participation in Muharram processions, which would probably have made them feel highly uncomfortable since it converted the entire procession route into a uniquely masculine space. Though I hesitated to ask directly, their standardized replies made me wonder whether they had ever watched any Muharram procession up close or merely knew about them from hearsay. What seems clear, however, is that my temple interlocutors virtually treated Muharram processions as inverse *tīrthas*,³ that is, as space-time-specific vortices of potentiality that open up towards a phantasmagoria of disarray, danger, destruction and death. Consequently each year on the evening of the Muharram procession their spatial movement contracts, as when an octopus withdraws its tentacles and a snail retreats into its shell. On Muharram it is best to stay close to home.

³ In Hindu traditions, a *tīrtha* is a crossing between worlds, typically between that of the humans and that of the gods. Pilgrim places are archetypical *tīrthas*. *Tīrthas* can also be temporal and indicate auspicious timings for pilgrimages, rituals and festivals. Moreover, one can also strive to reach a “*tīrtha* within” by performing certain actions, meditation being a case in point.

My interlocutors' sense of contingency was not unfounded. Procession-related clashes recur in the scholarship of interreligious relations as instances of friction. The news media were replete with instances of Muharran processions that had involved violence somewhere or the other in the state, whether because they had passed a Hindu- or Sunni-dominated neighbourhood in a manner its inhabitants found provoking or defiling, or because the Muharran processions had coincided with another festival (typically Dussehra, Ganesh Chaturthi and Durga Puja) and their processions crossed paths. Yet the predictability of such skirmishes enables the district administration to plan precautions well ahead of time. The aforementioned traffic diversions were an element of this. Additionally the authorities reinforces CCTV surveillance, deploy additional police and Rapid Action Force personnel, tell people not to spread rumours and restrict unnecessary assembly (see e.g. TNN 2013; HT Correspondent 2014). Religious leaders and elders frequently join in by convening in advance to ensure peaceful cooperation. Yet not even such measures prevented clashes entirely. Only in Kanpur there were Muharran-related clashes both in 2015 (Siddiqui and Malhotra 2015) and 2017 (HT Correspondent 2017; Dixit 2018), and many more were reported from other parts of the state. Additionally there were incidents in which the district administration prohibited Muharran processions due to prior tension (Siddiqui 2015; PTI 2015) as well as incidents in which local Shias shelved their processions for similar reasons (Jha 2015). Though few of my interlocutors were eager news consumers, they were nevertheless acutely aware that Muharran was a high-risk event and had been so for generations. By contrasting their participation in Nagarkirtan with their avoidance of Muharran, we begin to see why they are attracted towards certain inclusivisms but not to others, reasons that may have little to do with perceived ritual efficacy.

Expanding ritual knowledge

Ritual efficacy is however a crucial ingredient in the next examples, both of which concerns a Brahman priest's desire to improve his skills as a *tantrik* ritual specialist. "Paṇḍitjī", as people respectfully call him, lived next to the Kali temple and officiated in a tiny Hanuman shrine inside the Kali temple premises. His secondary job as a *tantrik* was primarily a way of ensuring a sufficient income for his expanding family. To perfection his skills, he frequently exchanged notes with other ritual specialists, whether they be other *tantriks*, Hindu exorcists or Muslim "babas" of various kinds. Despite his profession as a Hindu priest, he regarded Muslim ritual knowledge as being particularly specialized and

potent for certain kinds of problems. This was not something he talked about in the vicinity of the temple or his home. It was only when accompanying him around, whether on the back of his motorcycle, in a battery-driven rickshaw or strolling along the banks of the Ganga, that he felt comfortable talking about what he had learned from such places. As soon as he realized my interest in inclusivism, he began inviting me along.

On two occasions I accompanied him to a Hindu exorcist claiming to master a dual exorcism repertoire. “Dr Thakur”, as I pseudonymize him, was an Ayurvedic doctor in a village an hour’s motorcycle ride from Kanpur who was widely renowned for his ability as an expert exorcist. Panditji was eager to learn from him, claiming that possession is so difficult to treat that devising faulty rituals could easily have disastrous consequences. So far he had thus passed the most complicated possession cases on to Dr Thakur. If only he could tap into Dr Thakur’s knowledge, he once said, he could deal with the difficult cases himself, thus sparing weak patients from a difficult journey as well expanding his source of income even further. Having watched Dr Thakur in action for a few hours, we finally got the opportunity to talk to him. Dr Thakur volunteered that the rituals we had just seen him devising would not always work, as most of them were to be done in temples. In the case of Muslim clients, he explained, the spirit would normally be a Muslim jinn rather than a Hindu *bhūt* (ghost),⁴ in which case temple offerings would be futile. Fortunately this was one of the few conversations I tape-recorded, as Dr Thakur now recited the incantation he claimed to use when driving away Muslim jinns. Interestingly, his recital was so rapid that no matter how many times I have asked my South Asian Muslim acquaintances in Norway to help me decipher it, all they can make out is a mishmash of key Islamic phrases including

....*bi-smil lāhi r-rahmāni r-rahīm* (in the name of God)....

....*subhānallāh* (*God is perfect*)....

....*astaghfiru ’llah* (*I seek forgiveness from Allah*)....

....*Allahumman salli ’ala Muhammad wa Ali Muhammad* (*O Allah! Bless Muhammad and the progeny of Muhammad*)....⁵

⁴ Dr Thakur and Paṇḍitjī concurred that jinns and bhūt are fundamentally different entities and not merely different words for the same kind of spirits, as claimed by many non-specialists. For a fuller account of Indian conceptualizations of jinns, see Taneja (2018).

⁵ I am indebted to Iffit Qureshi and Mubashar Hasan for helping me to discern the discernible of Dr Thakur’s incantation. Neither recognized any Quranic suras in it – not even the famous Four Qul verses commonly used by many South Asian Muslims to ward off jinns and protect against black magic.

Those I consulted also sensitized me to the harshness of Dr Thakur's voice, which differed sharply from the soft, melodious rhythm generally used when Muslims recite Islamic phrases and *sūrās*. Additionally his rapid speed and monotonous voice modulation made his incantation sound more like a Hindu recital than like an Islamic one.⁶ In all likelihood, Dr Thakur had learned this incantation from his father – an octogenarian who now watched his son in action from his cot – along with the rest of his skills. As the years went by, the incantation probably became increasingly Hinduized. Paṇḍitjī was unusually poker-faced throughout this conversation, as if not wanting to divulge that he did not know how to deal with jinns already. But the next time we visited Dr. Thakur, the priest made him recite it once again, this time attempting to make a secret recording with his cell phone under the table. Since Dr. Thakur's incantation was equally rapid this time around, I doubt whether Paṇḍitjī was able to make more sense of it than my Muslim acquaintances in Oslo. Yet the extent he went to in order to expand his knowledge beyond the religious tradition with which he primarily identified, was nevertheless telling. Clearly, this is not something I would have known about without accompanying him around and knowing him reasonably well. Had he talked about such matters near the temple, he would have jeopardized his reputation as a Brahman custodian of divine Vedic revelations believed to contain not only the ultimate Truth but also the source of all religions.

Another place Paṇḍitjī occasionally brought me to was Dargah Muhabbat Shah in Takia, located in a rural area about two hours' motorcycle ride from Kanpur. His wife hailed from a nearby village, which was how Paṇḍitjī had come to know about this dargāh though his wife had never been there. By the time I came to know him, Paṇḍitjī had frequented this place for two decades or so, initially to attend the annual *urs* (Muhabbat Shah's reunion with Allah) that doubled as a *melā* (fair) for spiritual wanderers and ritual specialists of all hues, but increasingly also to meet its main custodian, Sufi Sayyad Ghulam Husein Shah, who also was a ritual specialist of some repute. During one of these visits I was also alerted to how inclusivism could be fraught with contingency.

To reduce the risk of lengthy motorcycle rides along dark highways I had insisted on renting a car, and since the car had extra space, the priest decided to invite his wife, their daughter, son-in-law and some additional relatives along, the plan being that we would first

⁶ A common example from Uttar Pradesh is the rapid Hanuman Chalisa recital done by Hindus who honour Lord Hanuman by reciting this longish text every Tuesday. YouTube contains several examples of fast Hanuman Chalisa recitals.

visit his wife's natal village and then proceed to the dargāh.⁷ For them the dargāh was but a compulsory stop following a visit to their rural relatives. The entourage from Kanpur that entered the dargāh that day was thus a radically diverse one in terms of their familiarity and interest in dargāh culture, which is central to the events that ensued.

The dargah's spiritual head, originally from Mumbai, was just as hospitable as on earlier occasions. Unperturbed by the size of our group, he invited us all into the room he used when receiving clients, a room steeped in green silence decorated with images of the Ka'aba and Islamic calligraphy. The silence felt like a relief to me after the long journey amidst honking cars, but to my companions it could just as well have come across as alienating given the fact that their own religious spaces were saturated with the sounds of bells, voices and rickety loudspeakers blaring *bhajans* (religious hymns). The dargāh head asked us to sit down on the white cloth that covered the floor, and arranged for water, tea and biscuits. As he talked softly about his practices with the priest and me, the others sat silently behind us, either listening or waiting for it to end. After an hour or so, our host's wife turned up, a friendly woman wearing black *burqā* but with the face cover open. Would we care for any food? Paṇḍitjī accepted hesitatingly, fearing (as he later explained) that it would be impolite to reject our host's hospitality. Though he generally stuck to a *sattvik* diet prepared by sattvik people to preserve his priestly purity, his eagerness to access non-Hindu ritual prescriptions occasionally forced him to compromise. "Sometimes one has to do these things", he reasoned. Today was such a day, and as if by an unspoken pact, the rest of our entourage followed suit.

This was when it happened. Before Paṇḍitjī's 22-year old daughter dared to take a bite of the rice, lentils, pea curry and salad we were served (all vegetarian to accommodate the dietary restrictions of Hindu Brahmans as far as possible), she shouted "*om namaḥ Śivāya*" from her position in the back. Loudly. So loudly that it produced an echo in the silent, spacious room. The dargāh head startled. Paṇḍitjī straightened his back and looked discreetly around for reactions. The rest of the group froze, shrank their bodies and looked down at their plates, as if trying to become invisible. The quiet murmur that had begun as the food was served, suddenly gave way to a pin drop silence. Everybody seemed to fear that invoking Lord Shiva in this space would be a considerable *faux pas*, knowing that

⁷ The ethnography I draw on in this section epitomizes how ethnographic observations can be influenced by the observer, which is part of the reason why anthropologists insist on referring to their method as *participant* observation.

conservative Muslims would certainly have regarded this as idolatry (*shirk*).⁸ What would the reactions be here? One second. Two seconds. Three. Four. Five. How long did it take before our host cleared his throat and asked if everyone had been served pea curry? It felt like an hour. But eventually the murmur picked up and people resumed their eating, though nobody seemed particularly hungry anymore.

What would the caretaker have done if he had been offended? Judging from the growing number of news reports about blasphemy controversies originating in similar incidents (cf. Rollier, Frøystad, and Ruud 2019), he could have thrown us out, lectured us about why such things had better be left unsaid in such a space, refused future assistance to Paṇḍitjī or even charged his daughter for violating sections 295A or 153A of the Indian Penal Code, which criminalize expressions that offend religious sentiments and promote disharmony. Fortunately nothing of this sort happened. This does not entail that he was equally “inclusivist” as the priest, an inclusivism that occasionally could be mirrored in Sufi-Islamic spaces. For the female Sufi healer in Hyderabad described by Flueckiger, it was fully acceptable that an ex-Hindu disciple invoked Lord Hanuman inside her premises, albeit as a messenger (*maukīl*) rather than as a deity (Flueckiger 2006: 99, 178). Judging from how Ghulam Husein Shah related to Hindu deities in other contexts, it was highly unlikely that he acknowledged the existence of any Lord Shiva even as a subordinate entity. Consider his treatment of a framed, silver-coated relief of Goddess Durga that he had once been given by a wealthy Hindu client. Now it was wrapped in a dark cloth and placed in a bottom shelf in the storage room. As a gift, it could not be discarded, but as a Hindu goddess, it could not be displayed either.⁹ This was clearly not a suitable place for Hindu deities.

Ghulam Husein Shah’s reaction was thus to try to ignore the young visitor’s *faux pas*. That is, he treated it with interpretive charity, just like the Islamic scholar quoted by Ahmed (2018) argues that offensive expressions arising from ignorance should ideally be

⁸ Ironically, many Islamic reform movements, including the Tablighi Jama’at, consider Sufi Islam as involving *shirk* in itself, holding *pīr* veneration to be tantamount to idolatry (see e.g. Kumar 2018; 2018 for detailed analyses). As the number of conservative Muslims rises, Muslim dargah attendance dwindles. In 2017, the dargah of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar in Sindh, Pakistan, was attacked by a suicide bomber with ISIS links, killing at least 80 people (Callimachi 2017, see also Rémy Delage’s chapter in his volume).

⁹ Why a wealthy Hindu would donate a Durga image to the head of a Sufi Muslim dargāh, particularly if being a former client who donated it in gratitude, is an interesting but unanswerable question. To learn more about this and other enigmatic events, I contemplated to stay on in this dargāh for some weeks to learn more, but eventually shelved the idea due to its lack of amenities (Frøystad 2020).

treated. Evidently he did not want to jeopardize his friendship with the priest either, and he clearly realized the priest's relatives were dargāhs and their Sufi Islamic norms. Perhaps he even sensed their unease over the locality and the food, because he refrained from insisting when hardly any of his visitors wanted a second helping of pea curry.

Some days later her mother enlightened me about the fear that had provoked her outburst. One reason was the food they had been given. Though the hosts had done their best to meet the dietary restrictions of conservative Brahmins, the hostess who had cooked the food was nevertheless a Muslim, which in their eyes polluted the food irrespective of its content. Even though the priest occasionally committed strategic violations, neither his wife nor his daughter were comfortable with doing so. Another reason was their discomfort with death. Although many Hindus approach dargāhs for blessings and boons, Hindus unacquainted with dargāhs foreground the fact that such spaces contain graves. In their understanding, each grave houses an uncremated body to which no last rite has been done to enable its *ātmā* (self) to slip properly out and move on (see Parry 1994 for a detailed exposition of hegemonic Hindu cosmologies of death). To them, dargāhs are thus saturated with invisible bodiless spirits, some of which could potentially be harmful. Since women are believed to have more "open" bodies than men, particularly in their fertile years (Lamb 2000), dargāhs may come across as equally risk-prone for women as regular graveyards, cremation grounds, riverbeds and village peripheries, all of which are spaces where spirits are known to dwell. Whereas the priest's wife was close to menopause and bodily closure, their daughter was risk-prone by virtue of being a young mother. Their daughter-in-law, who had given birth just six months earlier, had not even been allowed to join our excursion even though the priest had seriously contemplated bringing them both to make his Sufi friend bless the baby and maximize its divine protection. On this background, the priest's daughter's invocation of Lord Shiva parallels the way in which Catholics make the sign of the cross to protect themselves from danger.

In the end, then, not much happened, and Paṇḍitjī has visited this dargāh several times since then. Nonetheless, the pin-drop silence and stooped bodies suggest how easily inclusivist practices involving visits to unfamiliar religious spaces governed by unfamiliar dos and don'ts can open an abyss of conflict-related phantasmagoria. Paying deeper attention to inclusivist practices and how their occasional contingencies are dealt with would considerably enhance our understanding of how multi-faith societies survive despite considerable religio-political polarization, and accompanying people around to a variety of ritual sites makes us well positioned to study it.

Concluding remarks

The more polarized Uttar Pradesh and the rest of India became under Narendra Modi and, since 2017, Yogi Adityanath, the more frequently I encountered romantic accounts of religious inclusivism in the liberal press and the blogosphere. Historical examples were constantly dug up, and local journalists appeared to be on a constant lookout for contemporary residuals of religious fluidity, as if the religio-political polarization that accelerated during Modi's prime ministership could be reversed if only people would revert to the inclusivism of a real or idealized past. Perhaps there is a grain of truth in this. By and large, however, nostalgic accounts of inclusivism tend to ignore the contingency that certain inclusivist practices are fraught with, downplays the inherent hierarchization it involves and undercommunicates the political context in which it occurs. To understand contemporary inclusivism, we also need to take seriously the perceived or real contingencies that can impede or surround it. Though inclusivism can certainly promote cosmopolitan interreligious understanding, it can also ignite religio-political rifts.

To arrive at these arguments, I employed the method of following my interlocutors around as part of a long-term anthropological fieldwork, which in my case took shape as annual field visits over a seven-year span. In this way, what I initially had conceptualized as a neighbourhood study of "Milanganj" in Kanpur gradually transmuted into a fieldwork in which I traced the ritual circuits that emanated from one of the temples in the neighbourhood. Looking back at this neighbourhood today, what my inner eye sees is an octopus- or jellyfish-like shape with the temple at its head and the walks and excursions I made with my interlocutors as tentacles. Unlike the prototypical method of studying inclusivism by means of fieldwork in a shared religious space, this approach holds considerable potential to detect modalities of inclusivism that are understudied because they are either idiosyncratic, concealed, fraught with contingency or a combination of the three. Phrased differently, research methods that treat the urban space as a multi-faith field while paying attention to its nodes and the routes between them can put us on the trail of a wealth of unexpected nodal relations and unanticipated routes. If I were to recommend a spatial approach to religious complexity, I would thus encourage more research methods that involve movement.

References

- Ahmed, Asad Ali. 2018. 'Contesting and containing acusatory practices in contemporary Pakistan'. Containing Religious Offence conference, University of Oslo, 7-8 June.
- Alvi, Khalid. 2018. 'In good faith: The Hindus with Hussain'. *The Indian Express*, 21 September, 2018. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/hussaini-brahmins-hindus-muslims-muharram-mohyal-brahmins-5367234/>, accessed 25 January 2019.
- Bhargava, Rajeev. 2009. 'Political secularism: Why it is needed and what can be leant from it'. In *Secularism, Religion and Multicultural Citizenship*, edited by Geoffrey Brahm Levey and Tariq Modood, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Callimachi, Rukmini. 2017. 'To the world, they are Muslims. To ISIS, Sufis are heretics'. *The New York Times*, 25 November, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/25/world/middleeast/sufi-muslims-isis-sinai.html>, accessed 1 February 2019.
- Carrithers, Michael. 2000. 'On polytropy: Or the natural condition of spiritual cosmopolitanism in India: The Digambar Jain case'. *Modern Asian Studies* 34 (4): 831-861.
- Dixit, Neha. 2018. 'In run-up to 2018, NSA is the latest weapon against Muslims in UP'. *The Wire*, 10 September, 2018. <https://thewire.in/rights/in-adityanaths-up-the-national-security-act-is-latest-weapon-against-muslims>, accessed 30 January 2019.
- Flueckiger, Joyce Burkhalter. 2006. *In Amma's Healing Room: Gender and Vernacular Islam in South India*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Frøystad, Kathinka. 2016. 'Alter-politics reconsidered: From different worlds to osmotic worlding'. In *Critical Anthropological Engagements in Human Alterity and Difference*, edited by Bjørn Enge Bertelsen and Synnøve Bendixsen, 229-252. Cham: Springer/Palgrave Macmillan.
- . 2020. 'Failing the third toilet test: Reflections on fieldwork, gender and Indian loos'. *Ethnography* 21 (2): 261-279.
- Fuller, C.J., and Haripriya Narasimhan. 2014. *Tamil Brahmins: The Making of a Middle-Class Caste*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Ghassem-Fachandi, Parvis. 2012. *Pogrom in Gujarat: Hindu Nationalism and Anti-Muslim Violence in India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Gottschalk, Peter. 2000. *Beyond Hindu and Muslim: Multiple Identity in Narratives from Village India*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Halbfass, Wilhelm. 1988. *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding*. New York: SUNY Press.
- HT Correspondent. 2014. 'Moharram: 80,000 devotees walk in procession marking 10th day'. *Hindustan Times*, 5 November, 2014. not online, accessed
- . 2017. 'Communal clashes erupt in Kanpur during Tazia procession, 30 injured'. *Hindustan Times*, 1 October, 2017. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/lucknow/communal-clashes-erupt-in-kanpur-during-tazia-procession/story-gNMNad4vO7wi4colU33T2L.html>, accessed 30 January 2019.
- Jha, Dharendra K. 2015. 'Why Muslims in 40 UP villages scrapped traditional Muharram processions this year'. *Scroll*, 26 October, 2015. 26 October, accessed 30 January 2019.

- Kumar, Mukesh. 2018. 'The art of resistance: The bards and minstrels' response to anti-syncretism/anti-liminality in North India'. *Journal of The Royal Asiatic Society* First fiew.
- . 2018. "The saints belong to everyone": Liminality, Belief and Practices in Rural North India. Doctoral dissertation, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Technology, Sydney, Sydney.
- Kumar, Nita. 1988. *The Artisans of Banaras: Popular Culture and Identity, 1880-1986*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kusenbach, Margarethe. 2003. 'Street phenomenology: The go-along as ethnographic research tool'. *Ethnography* 4 (3): 455-485.
- Lamb, Sarah. 2000. *White Saris and Sweet Mangoes: Aging, Gender, and Body in North India*. Berkeley: The University of California Press.
- Parry, Jonathan P. . 1994. *Death in Banaras*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- PTI. 2015. 'Uttar Pradesh: Clash in Kanpur over 'disrespect' to religious poster'. *DNA*, 24 October, 2015. <https://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-uttar-pradesh-clash-in-kanpur-over-disrespect-to-religious-poster-2138188>, accessed 30 October 2019.
- Rollier, Paul, Kathinka Frøystad, and Arild Engelsen Ruud. 2019. 'Introduction: Researching the rise of religious offence in South Asia'. In *Outrage: The Rise of Religious Offence in Contemporary South Asia*, edited by Paul Rollier, Kathinka Frøystad and Arild Engelsen Ruud, 1-47. London: UCL Press.
- Siddiqui, Faiz. 2018. 'Ths Hindu man keeps Muharran tradition alive'. *Times of India*, 21September, 2018. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kanpur/this-hindu-man-keeps-muharram-tradition-alive/articleshow/65894070.cms>, accessed 25 January 2019.
- Siddiqui, Faiz Rahman. 2015. 'BSF conducts flag march after violence leaves 1 dead in Kannauj'. *Times of india*, 25 October, 2015. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kanpur/BSF-conducts-flag-march-after-violence-leaves-1-dead-in-Kannauj/articleshow/49522712.cms>, accessed 30 January 2019.
- Siddiqui, Faiz Rahman, and Abhnav Malhotra. 2015. 'Riot rocks Kanpur over damaged religious poster'. *Times of India*, 25 October, 2015. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kanpur/Riot-rocks-Kanpur-over-damaged-religious-poster/articleshow/49522716.cms>, accessed 30 January 2019.
- Srivastava, Sanjay. 2014. *Entangled Urbanism: Slum, Gated Community and Shopping Mall in Delhi and Gurgaon*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Taneja, Anand Vivek. 2018. *Jinnealogy: Time, Islam and Ecological thought in the Medieval Ruins of Delhi*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- TNN. 2013. 'Alam, tazia processions taken out on Muharram eve'. *Times of India*, 15 November, 2013. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kanpur/Alam-Tazia-processions-taken-out-on-Muharram-eve/articleshow/25782492.cms>, accessed 30 January 2019.
- Waldrop, Anne. 2004. 'Gating and class relations: The case of a New Delhi "colony"'. *City & Society* 16 (2): 93-116.