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THE BOUNDARIES OF RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS are being actively contested in India today, though in practice their internal and external structures are fluid and open. Each religion takes a wide array of forms, reflecting the diversity of the communities and adherents who find relevance and meaning within it, and symbols and practices flow readily across what prove to be very permeable and overlapping boundaries between religious traditions. However, religion has been used by the powerful to assert and maintain dominance and in national and regional communal politics, at times fanning the flames of extreme violence. Fundamentalists and politicians today are engaged in ongoing attempts to drain away the fluidity of religious traditions and to build solid walls that both shut down diversity within a given religion and clearly separate and protect one from the other.

And yet religion can be a powerful dimension of the assertion of diverse group identities, particularly among low-caste communities in India who seek to claim an identity different from that imposed on them by the dominant society. Such groups take full advantage of the fluidity of religious traditions to assert creatively their own distinct identities and to critique existing religious and social values, whether through innovative transformation or conversion. Both internal religious diversity and open

religious borders are crucial to this process. For the wider multireligious society of India also, this fluidity allows both for an affirmation of difference that is not oppositionally defined and for shared perceptions, values, and dimensions of identity that cross religious boundaries.

Identity, both individual and communal, is negotiated, marked by commonality and difference and shaped through affirmation and rejection. It is not unidimensional, but rather highly contextual and multivalent. And it is established, negotiated, and changed largely through "drawing lines in water," creating a difference that must be maintained. If this assertion of identity is not actively maintained, then others may draw alternate lines and ascribe a permanence to their own lines, defining a given individual or community in their terms—a situation particularly detrimental for low-caste communities and often used to reinforce their inferior status and rationalize their subjugation.

Religion, however, is not merely a tool used by low-caste and oppressed communities to reshape their identities or by communalist politicians to rally support. Religion is a comprehensive expression of the identity of a people, carrying within it alternate views of the nature of the world and society, of individual and community relations, and of the meaning of life. Indeed, anthropologist Karen McCarthy Brown has argued that religion is perhaps best defined as "the most complete and condensed knowledge of a people."[1] This comprehensive aspect of religion can be drawn into the service of communal identity politics as leaders attempt to unify a diverse constituency by positing an overarching common religious identity. But in order to employ religion in this way, the given religion must be reified into a monolithic, unitary tradition, oppositionally defined against other traditions.

Such a fortress mentality goes against the very nature of religions as actually practiced, for as Sathianathan Clarke asserts, they are more like tents than forts: "[A]nalogous to tents, religions are unlikely to be utterly sealed off; the fluidity of their boundaries and substructures are inherent

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1. Karen McCarthy Brown, lecture in the course "Methods in Religious Studies," Univ. of California, Berkeley, 1990.

to their very existence. [They] yield themselves to be discretely and deliberately dismantled, relocated, and reassembled. Religions are not finished products; they constantly hand themselves over to their adherents. They are susceptible to continuously being crafted into meaning-giving and meaning-making symbolic dwelling places" (2003, 218). Religions are thus fundamentally multiform. Followers live in vastly different contexts and have diverse experiences and understandings of the world, though they may ostensibly belong to the same religious tradition. As a result, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism appear in many radically different and overlapping forms among different sets of adherents in various regions of India and the world.[2]

Low-caste adherents as much as any others engage in this dismantling and reassembling activity in a process that includes a transformation in worldview and an assertion of an alternate system of interrelationships and values. An examination of the ways low-caste people in India have shaped alternate religious identities may be helpful as we seek not only to understand more clearly religion's role in identity politics, but also to craft more positive approaches to interreligious relations—namely, approaches that are based neither on antagonism nor on simplistic commonalities, but that take into account the complexities of both identities and religions. Such alternate religious identities arise within the larger historical, social, and political context of interreligious relations and the fluidity and contestation of religious boundaries in India. Therefore, we begin here, focusing particularly on how these trends impact low-caste communities. We then turn to the wider significance of religion and caste relations in the politics of identity in contemporary India before examining the specific religious insights articulated by low-caste communities and the role religions play in their assertion of alternative identities.

For this discussion, I draw on a wide array of examples both within and crossing the boundaries of Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, and Christian traditions. These examples include interviews carried out in Gujarat and Delhi in 2004 and recordings made of devotional songs sung among

2. For an example of this diversity among Indian Christians, see Robinson 2003.

low-caste communities as well as interviews conducted in Rajasthan between 1993 and 2004. To fully understand religion's place requires that we look beyond the writings and speeches of the leaders and the literary production of the elite within these communities. A particularly rich source of the religious expressions of ordinary members may be found in the devotional songs composed and selected by members of these communities to be sung in religious gatherings held among themselves (particularly when members of dominant communities are not present).

When we do examine these latter forms of self-expression, we find that religion is a site for the articulation not only of a particular identity, but also of values and understandings of the nature of the world. Indeed, my work among low-caste Hindus and Muslims in western Rajasthan leads me to believe that low-caste articulations of religion in India may have more in common with each other than they do with the broader religion to which they belong, be it Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, or Islam (Martin 2002, 200–203, 213–14). That commonality is characterized, I would suggest, by (1) an affirmation of particularity and difference emerging out of a given community's lived experience, with religion serving as an essential means of self-expression and resistance, not marked by fixed oppositional definition, but by continual renegotiation with the dominant culture and religion(s); (2) an affirmation of human equality drawing on the universalist elements of the religious tradition or traditions to which they claim allegiance; and (3) a critique of oppression and dominance coupled with an affirmation of social justice, hope, and human dignity. These articulations provide overlapping visions of a world in which the fluid boundaries of religions facilitate the affirmation of distinction and difference but also allow for the sharing of universal principles of dignity, equality, and justice. In so doing, they offer a clear alternative to fundamentalist and communal formations of both religion and identity.

Contesting Religious Boundaries in India

When we turn our attention to religious boundaries that have been asserted particularly between Hindus and Muslims, a multitude of images and voices swirls around us. Some speak of fluid boundaries and shared

cultural and religious lives, but others describe violent conflict across those same boundaries, which are portrayed as utterly uncrossable chasms.

The study of devotional Hinduism and Islam in medieval India reveals a world in which the boundaries between Hindu and Muslim were very fluid, with saints such as Kabir and Ramdev having both Hindu and Muslim dimensions of their own identities as well as both Hindu and Muslim followers. Kabir, though identified as a Hindu, was from an untouchable caste of weavers, the Julahas, who had converted en masse to Islam. The Rajput Ramdev, recognized by his followers as an incarnation of Vishnu, was arguably a hidden practitioner of Ismaili Islam (Khan 1997). In this period, Hindus and Muslims alike honored both Hindu bhakti (devotional) saints and Muslim Sufi *pir*s, sang each other's songs of love for God, and visited each other's shrines and temples. In the poems of Kabir recorded in the *Bijak*, we hear him chastising both Hindu and Muslim leaders for arguing over whose religion is superior, telling them in no uncertain terms that they have missed the point entirely and should turn their attention to God (Hess and Singh [1983] 1986). His words suggest lively debate if not competition and conflict between some leaders of these traditions. For Kabir, such conflicts dissolved in the theological and experiential context of the love of God, recognized and affirmed by both Hindus and Muslims of the time. In this fluid milieu, communities and individuals might still maintain their identities as Hindu or Muslim, although their beliefs and practices as either Hindus or Muslims might be very diverse.

Members of low-caste communities today have not been entirely immune to wider, divisive forces that seek to drive a wedge between Hindu and Muslim. However, low-caste Hindu and Muslim musicians in western Rajasthan continue to include the songs of both Hindu and Muslim saints in their repertoires and to use a mixture of Hindu and Muslim imagery within individual songs. The religious milieu in which they live includes a rich weave of Vaishnava, Shaiva, and *nirgun* influences, with Ramanandis and Ramsnehis, Naths and Dasnamis, and followers of the Kabir-panth and the Dadupanth all present. Tantric practices and devotion to hero-deities such as Ramdev, local goddesses, *kuldevi*s, and *satimata*s also enter the mix, as do strands of Sunni, Sufi, Twelver Shiʻa,
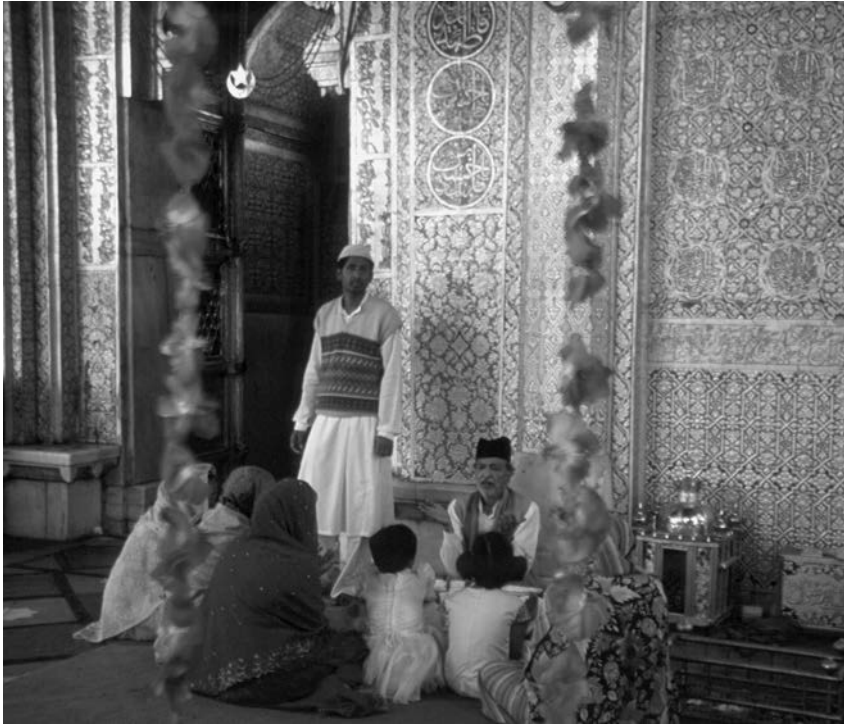
6. The Shrine of Sufi Saint Mu'inuddin Chishti in Ajmer, visited by Hindus and Muslims alike. © Nancy M. Martin and Joseph Runzo-Inada.

and Ismaili Islam. The content of the devotional songs being sung in this region by Muslim and Hindu singers, both those who are musicians by caste profession and those whose religious calling it is to perform, reflects this rich religious heritage.

These performers sing songs of Kabir but do not choose to sing those songs that confrontationally challenge opposing Hindu and Muslim leaders to give up their disagreements and focus on Ram (a general term of reference for God). Kabir songs recorded in the 1990s instead incorporate Hindu and Muslim images in a positive way (Martin 2000, 405). The saint-poet simultaneously praises Hindu bhaktas and Sufi saints (*pir*s) and speaks of the Lord as "God of all the gods" and "Pir of all the *pir*s." A song performed by a Hindu singer from the Meghwal community (a very low-caste group formerly identified as leatherworkers and weavers) lauds

the interior practice of religion, where "there is no Veda, books, shastras, or Gita," over book learning:

> The temple of the body is touched by ecstasy . . .
>> The God beyond form lives within
> In the heart, a Muslim teacher [*maulvi*] [resides]
> The mouth [is] a mosque [where]
>> Adam is saying his prayers [*namaz*].
> Know the body well—
>>> What is the inner *maulvi* saying?[3]

People within these communities have a clear identity as Hindu or Muslim and definitive opinions about which saints are Hindu and which Muslim, but how they define these categories remains very fluid, and they willingly cross over into each other's traditions in imagery, devotion, song, and celebration. The categories thus are not exclusionary or oppositional and belie any notion of antagonism between Hindu and Muslim.

The story of interreligious relations in India, however, is not simply one of harmony. Much is at stake, not only in India, but also for our global community. A particularly tragic culmination of the divisive use of religion occurred in Gujarat in 2002 when politically motivated riots rocked the city of Ahmedabad and environs, and Muslims were deliberately targeted in acts of extraordinarily brutal violence that left more than two thousand Muslims dead and tens of thousands displaced (Engineer 2003; Varadarajan 2002).

Two years after these riots, in January 2004, I went to Gujarat and Rajasthan to interview a number of people on the topic of interreligious harmony and conflict.[4] At a relocation camp in Ahmedabad, ironically called "Bombay Hotel" and located between the refuse dump and chemi-

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3. This song was sung by Padmaram, a gifted singer from the Meghwal caste, and recorded in 1993 in the studios of the Rajasthan Patrika in Jaipur, Rajasthan, by Padmashri Komal Kothari and myself, with copies housed in the archives of Rupayan Sansthan Folklore Institute in Jodhpur. Here and throughout the essay, all translations are mine.

4. These interviews were done in conjunction with a documentary film project entitled *Patterns for Peace: India as Model for Peace in a Multi-religious Society*, carried out under

cal factories, Muslim women pulled out photographs of their families' burned-out businesses and homes. Their children still had nowhere to go to school and worked instead in the surrounding factories to make possible their families' single meager meal each day—children with shining smiles despite having witnessed unspeakable violence. A woman wept, the tears running down her face as she spoke of her daughter who had been brutally murdered. But others also spoke of Hindu neighbors who had protected them and helped them to escape. Three years later many victims of the violence were still reportedly living in such makeshift communities (Mander 2006).

In Ahmedabad, I also met Cedric Prakash, an Indian Jesuit priest later inducted into the French Legion of Honor in 2006 for his work to advance communal harmony and human rights in India. A poem of the Hindu saint Mirabai adorns his ordination card. He and his Christian, Hindu, and Muslim colleagues at Prashant Centre for Human Rights, Justice, and Peace work tirelessly to counter violence and propaganda and to facilitate peaceful communal relations. He has been beaten terribly and continues to live under constant death threats, but he is adamant in the face of communal violence, working to document and bring atrocities to light and to help the victims, no matter who they are. In words that echo those of Kabir, he speaks of their common humanity in starkly physical terms— there is no one whose blood does not run red.

All too often those victims are members of low-caste communities, whether they are the perpetrators or the attacked (Namishray 2002). Communal riots are most often carried out in urban slums, although in the case of the riots in Ahmedabad Muslim homes and businesses in more wealthy areas were also carefully targeted, including even businesses with silent Muslim partners. Neighbors who have grown up, gone to school, and played together suddenly come to see each other as enemies when outside agitators enter these areas to foment anger and hatred in the name of religion and spread rumors to blame Muslims for alleged or

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the auspices of the Global Ethics and Religion Forum. The interviews were conducted by Nancy M. Martin and Christopher Baier in 2004, unless otherwise specified.

imagined outrages against Hindus and for the very real deprivations of low-caste communities. Yet it is primarily the families, homes, and livelihoods of both Hindu and Muslim slum dwellers that are destroyed in such riots. These same political forces can as easily turn their propaganda and violence against low-caste and tribal communities, particularly when members of these communities challenge the traditional hierarchies of dominance these forces advocate in the name of Hindu unity.

In Ahmedabad, the riots were used as a justification to drive a deeper wedge between Hindus and Muslims. In their aftermath, Muslims could no longer buy or own property on the west side of the Sabarmati River, the same river that flows past Gandhi's ashram. Subsequent research suggests that this process of ghettoization of Muslims and segregation of the city has continued to grow (Basu and Chaudhury 2007). The horrific violence of the riots was also intended to intimidate those who might dare to counter the vision of the Muslims and Hindus as enemies.

Father Prakash's coworkers, Rafi and Meera Malik, embody an alternate vision of Hindu–Muslim relations in their work and in their lives. This Muslim man and Hindu woman were drawn together by their activism on behalf of formerly untouchable Hindus (who refer to themselves as "Dalits"—"those who have suffered," "the oppressed") and Adivasis (members of tribal communities who fall outside the formal structures of the caste system). They decided to marry after the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya by Hindu nationalists in 1992. In the aftermath of the 2002 riots, they organized a livelihood-restoration project and youth camps to bring together Hindu (primarily Dalit) and Muslim youth from the riot-torn parts of the city in order to help them work through their experiences so that they might go back to their communities as emissaries for peace. Meera later began the youth society Hindus United with Muslims (its abbreviation HUM playing on the Hindi word for "we," *hum*) to reach out to the same young people who might be susceptible to joining violent fundamentalist movements and to train them instead to be a force for communal harmony.[5]

5. Rafi Malik, personal interview by Christopher Baier, August 2006.

Others outside of Ahmedabad also spoke in support of more fluid boundaries between religious communities and for intercommunal harmony. For example, inhabitants of the small Gujarati village of Jadar, a two-hour drive from the city, worked together when the riots began elsewhere to ensure that their community was not torn asunder by fear. They spoke directly of their common humanity and shared devotion to God, though some were Hindus and others Shi'a Muslims. In Rajasthan, too, Hindu and Muslim members of a village *panchayat*, governing council, reported that they jointly oversee the festivities at the Hindu Arneshwar Mahadev Shiva Temple, where more than one hundred thousand people come for festivals four times a year. When a Muslim is the head of the *panchayat*, then a Muslim is in charge of this Hindu festival. Hindus and Muslims alike also visit a local shrine of a Sufi saint to honor him and seek his blessings. Though the people of this area are concerned about communal tensions elsewhere, they have known each other for generations, and their lives are entwined through a complex set of social, economic, and personal interrelationships.[6]

Maharaja Gaj Singh of Jodhpur recounted to me his grandfather's words at the time of Partition when he encouraged Muslims to remain in his kingdom, saying that Hindus and Muslims were "like [his] two eyes." In Delhi, Maulana Wahiddudin Khan, an octogenarian scholar of the Qur'an who began his peace work after Gandhi's assassination, called not for a false sense of unity, but for the need to affirm and manage difference. And Dr. Mohini Giri, who has worked for years with widows and street children there, spoke of leading a peace pilgrimage of Hindu women to Lahore and of the overwhelming hospitality that pilgrims received from Pakistani Muslim women when they arrived.

At that time in 2004, there was also what was for me a new refrain coming from multiple sources—an insistence that those who would polarize Hindus and Muslims and foment hatred could only fully do so if they

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6. Interviews with members of the village *panchayat* were carried out in January 2004 with the assistance of Indian folklorist Komal Kothari and members of the staff of Rupayan Sansthan Folklore Institute of Jodhpur.

managed to create both a monolithic Hinduism and a monolithic Islam to serve as clear enemies of one another. They would succeed only if they could turn these religions into walled fortresses and convince people that these monolithic religions were the most important dimension of their respective identities. Those who spoke against this trend did so with both deep concern and hope, calling for reason in the face of fanaticism, for sanity in the face of frenzy, for humanity in the face of hatred.[7] Yet the power of hatred and fear should not be underestimated; amidst all these positive voices, there were other voices that I had also not heard previously. For example, a small group of Meghwal singers in Rajasthan reported that Muslims in their village reviled them and called them "Shetan" (Satan).

In the 1990s, strong voices were already speaking out for the need to resist attempts both to shut down religious and cultural diversity and to silence the voices of the people at the margins through the imposition of a monolithic Hinduism, a Hinduism that had no room for traditions considered "folk" or "syncretic." One of these voices of protest was that of the eminent folklorist Komal Kothari. Another was Ashis Nandy, who has observed that this ostensibly "Hindu" agenda of reforming Hinduism has much in common with earlier colonial critiques and nationalist reconstructions of Hinduism in its desire to erase those elements deemed "improper" and thus to "turn Hinduism into a 'proper' religion from an inchoate pagan faith" (2002, 131).

A parallel pressure has also been exerted to define Hindu and Muslim as mutually exclusive categories. The far-reaching nature of this pressure was reflected in the poignant words of Rajasthani professional caste musicians I interviewed in the mid-1990s, who spoke with nostalgia of a more inclusive past.[8] (Members of these castes are traditionally musicians by profession who are attached to other specific patron castes, or *jajman*s, and perform for them on all ritual occasions.) Arjun Singh was an elderly Muslim singer of the Dhadi caste. Though a Muslim, his name

7. Among those who voiced these concerns were activist Madhu Kishwar, scholar Dominique-Sila Khan, and Komal Kothari.

8. These interviews were carried out in 1996 in Jodhpur, Rajasthan.

was ostensibly Hindu, "Arjuna" being the famed hero of the Mahabharata whose battlefield conversation with his charioteer Krishna is recorded in the Bhagavad Gita. Arjun Singh reported that in his generation there were many Muslims like himself as well as Hindus with Muslim names. However, he had given his own son a Muslim name, and this practice had now become the norm. He also reported that although in the past both his Hindu and his Muslim patrons had asked for a mix of songs attributed to Hindu and Muslim saints, his audiences were now more often requesting songs of only the saints of their own religious tradition. Similarly, a Muslim singer of the Langa caste from western Rajasthan reported that a generation back Langas were including the songs of the Hindu saints Mirabai and Kabir in performances for their Sindhi Sepoy patrons, but now these Muslim patrons generally insist on only the songs of Muslim saints. Moreover, in his generation singers knew far fewer songs of Hindu bhakti saints than their forbears did (Martin 2000, 409). The Langas are not formally attached to Hindus as *jajman*s. Nevertheless, they do perform for some Hindu caste groups and thus still find an audience for the songs of Hindu saints. As a result, these songs have not yet been completely lost from their repertoires. But these changes are indicative of a sharpening of boundaries that has reached deep into the nation's social fabric.

Some of these Muslim singers also reported that in the mid-1990s outsiders were coming into their communities and telling them that they were not practicing Islam correctly because they did not, for example, pray five times a day. Pressure was clearly being exerted from the Muslim side to define a "correct" Islam, free from Hindu practices (even as there was pressure on Hindus to practice a "proper" Hinduism). By early 2004, much deeper concern was being articulated that such a move to shut down diversity within Islam, if achieved, would signal the complete victory of the Hindu fundamentalists and would drive such a deep wedge between the people of the two religions that it would make possible the complete demonization of Islam and all Muslims generally.

As it stands, Islam is as multiform in India as Hinduism, overlapping and interweaving with the latter in the lived reality of people's lives. Innumerable examples of these types of religious practices and beliefs, which

appear to be more the norm than the exception, can be cited. And even beyond this internal diversity within both Hinduism and Islam, some traditions do not fit easily into either designation. Speaking about India more broadly, Nandy observes:

> Kumar Suresh Singh's survey of Indian communities shows that hundreds of communities in India can be classified as having more than one "religion." (It is doubtful if these believers see themselves as having multiple religious identities; they define their Hinduism or Islam or Christianity in such a way that the symbols of sacredness of another faith acquire specific theological, cultural and familial status.) Thus there are 116 communities that are both Hindu and Christian; at least 35 communities that are both Hindu and Muslim. . . . In all these incidents [these multiple identities are not the result of] recent converts retaining traces of their older faiths [but rather] identities that appear to encompass more than one faith, culturally *and* theologically. (2002, 143–44, emphasis in original)

In Rajasthan, low-caste communities in particular have become affiliated with these types of syncretic religious traditions, which tend to be inclusive and to advocate an egalitarianism that also shuns the exclusivist and exclusionary claims of religious authorities and institutions. The Meghwals are often devotees of Ramdev, whose temple at Ramdevra reflects a clear blending of Hindu and Muslim elements. The Meos of Mewat in eastern Rajasthan also traditionally had highly syncretic, boundary-crossing religious beliefs and practices in which "aspects of heterodox Shaivism, Vaishnava Bhakti, and tantric belief and practice [were] entwined with those derived from Shia and Sunni Islam" (Mayaram 1997, 39). Yet as Dominique-Sila Khan (2003) has reported, efforts are ongoing to expunge Islamic elements and to more thoroughly Hinduize the worship of Ramdev, and Shail Mayaram's (1997) work among the Meos reveals a reverse but similar pressure on this community, who were identified by others and attacked as Muslims at the time of Partition and have felt compelled to embrace a distinctly Muslim identity in the decades since then.

7. Hero-deity Ramdev's *samadhi* (funerary monument, mausoleum), draped in a green cloth with clear Muslim symbols, in his temple at Ramdevra. © Nancy M. Martin and Joseph Runzo-Inada.

Religion and the Politics of Identity

Given this situation in India, how might we make sense of religion's key role in contemporary identity politics? We can readily identify those who might and do use communal violence for political and economic gain, but how are they able to use religion to do this so effectively despite the myriad examples of interreligious harmony and variation in India both in the past and today? And how might we understand the power and place of religion in assertions of identity generally and more specifically among low-caste communities?

Sudhir Kakar (1996) suggests a confluence of factors surrounding individual and communal identity that may illuminate both the specific situation in India and the situations in other contemporary societies. First, with the coming of self-rule in India, a renegotiation of power relations and hierarchy has ensued that heightened the awareness of differences

between communities. This awareness was more pronounced than it had been under the "tolerance"—or perhaps more properly "indifference"—of imperial powers, whether Muslim or British in India.

Second, Kakar suggests that elements of communal identity that are already deeply embedded in the construction of self-identity come to the surface of awareness under situations of "identity threat" that call into question sources of self-esteem and understandings of life as meaningful. He identifies the following as threats to identity currently operative in India and elsewhere: "modernization and globalization[,] . . . [f]eelings of loss and helplessness accompany[ing] dislocation and migration from rural areas to the shanty town of urban megalopolises, the disappearance of craft skills which underlay traditional work identities, and humiliation caused by the homogenizing and hegemonizing impact of the modern world which pronounces ancestral cultural ideas and values as outmoded and irrelevant" (1996, 187).

These threats lead to a retrenchment and assertion of group identities, Kakar suggests, as people turn to groups to counter "feelings of loss and helplessness, and to serve as vehicles for the redress of [perceived] injuries to self-esteem" (1996, 187). Under such situations of stress, personal identity becomes deeply entwined with group identity, and threats to group identity are perceived as personal threats. Because religion can add a transcendent or sacred dimension to life's meaning and purpose, threats to religious identity can be perceived as an even greater threat.

In this state of heightened awareness of difference owing to identity threats, self and other may be oppositionally defined. An essential aspect of this process is the projection of what one fears or dislikes in oneself onto another, to the point of demonizing the other and giving a transcendent dimension to one's own sense of group superiority and moral rectitude over the other. Nandy has observed that India's many gods and goddesses and the fluid boundary between the gods and the demons militate against such denial and projection of negative traits (with neither the demons being wholly evil nor the gods wholly good), but attempts to eliminate these aspects of Hinduism reopen the potential for more complete projection (2002, 148). Heightened awareness of group identity fuels the process of projection by highlighting one's relationship

to the dominant group or dominant minority group, which then becomes a ready target.

As Peter Gottschalk rightly points out, an underlying assumption in Kakar's analysis is that things were not always thus—that is, more complex identities existed earlier in which religious affiliation was only one dimension of identity, and this allowed for multiple allegiances that could cross the permeable membranes of religious traditions as well as for religious affiliations that did not fit into such mutually exclusive religious categories (2007, 207). This has certainly been the case for low-caste communities in the past, and they have benefitted greatly from this fluidity, though they, too, may be drawn into this mode of projection in the face of overwhelming contemporary identity threats, particularly in urban settings.

Kakar's analysis of the psychosocial dimensions of this process of communal identity formation provides insight into how polarization, hatred, and violence can seemingly be so readily kindled in the name of religion. The solution to this polarization and violence does not lie ultimately in identifying facile commonalities between people, though this is important to counter demonization. Rather, the solution lies in the recognition and maintenance of complex identities and affiliations and in the affirmation of difference, acknowledging not only the distinctiveness of Hindu and Muslim, but also multiple Hinduisms and multiple Islams. According to Kakar, "a multiculturalism, with majority and minority cultures, rather than the emergence of a composite culture" is needed (1996, 196). Muslim activist Maulana Wahiduddin Khan would concur, calling for the management rather than the elimination of difference. The ways low-caste communities have incorporated religious fluidity into their assertions of identity offer possible alternatives for managing such difference in the face of identity threats, ways that are quite different from the agenda advocated by communalist politicians.

Religion and the Assertion of Low-Caste Identity

Low-caste Hindu communities experience all the "identity threats" identified by Kakar and, particularly in urban settings, may follow the course outlined, including identifying Muslims as "other" and participating in communal violence. Yet they have also experienced very real oppression

by high-caste Hindus (and in some cases by Christians and Muslims who maintain caste distinctions) and have resisted group identities imposed on them by these dominant communities by asserting their own identities. At the same time, Hindu nationalists have institutionalized practices devaluing these communities and their religious practices. The ninth standard school texts in Gujarat approved in 2002 discuss the issue of minorities in India under the heading "Problems of the Country" and describe scheduled castes and tribes as ignorant, illiterate, and evincing blind faith (a characterization found also in earlier colonial and nationalist discourse, as is anti-Muslim sentiment). If these externally assigned identities are not to be passively accepted, low-caste Hindus must then assert an alternate identity.

These alternate identities are characterized in part by affirming alternate religious affiliations, as in the watershed conversion to Buddhism of members of the Mahar caste (a Dalit community in Maharasthra) under B. R. Ambedkar's leadership in 1956 or the mass conversions to Islam in Tamil Nadu in 1981, or by working creatively within an existing religious framework to transform that tradition, as in the development of new sects such as the Satnampanth. In many studies of such phenomena among low-caste communities, religion has been considered merely a means to increase material well-being and a mode of social advancement and protest. Particularly in the case of conversion from one religion to another, those who have embraced alternate religious positions have often been said to have had no spiritual motivation whatsoever in doing so.[9] Such analysis, however, does not do justice to the religious sensibilities and insights of the people in these communities or to the complexity of motivations and the potentially comprehensive nature of a change in religious worldview.

Not surprisingly, the Buddhism practiced by Ambedkar's followers is not an orthodox Theravada Buddhism, but rather a Buddhism that

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9. Sebastian C. H. Kim details examples of such arguments made in the debates around conversion in his book *In Search of Identity: Debates on Conversion in India* (2003), esp. 121–31.

incorporates a much larger measure of social justice into its quest for spiritual enlightenment. It is a Buddhism emphasizing individual ethical autonomy and equality that is marked by practices of *puja* (ritual worship) directed at both Siddartha Gautama and Ambedkar himself, the latter envisioned as a bodhisattva (an enlightened being who compassionately works for the liberation of all beings) with the capacity to respond to devotees' requests (Beltz 2005; Jondhale and Beltz 2004). As Nandy has observed, conversion, as much as other forms of alternate religiosity, is a form of renegotiation with the dominant tradition and not a mere rejection of it and can have multiple motivations and outcomes (2002, 142–43).

Ambedkar's crafting of a new religious identity for himself and his caste fellows occurred over an extended period of some thirty years, and the tradition has continued to evolve. He began by working to reform Hinduism but ultimately rejected it on the grounds that it was irrevocably hierarchical and offered no possibility of equality. His selection of Buddhism came after considerable negotiation rather than simple rejection; in the end, he chose a tradition that was continuous with elements of his identity as "Indian," including its origins and shared notions of karma, rebirth, and so on, but in so doing he also rejected the hierarchy embedded in the dharmic structure of caste. The Buddhism he espoused has distinct parallels with the "engaged Buddhist" movements that arose elsewhere in the decades that followed. The tradition as it has continued to develop also reflects multiple motivations and understandings of what it means to be Buddhist among its members and has integrated forms of religiosity that show both continuity and discontinuity with Buddhist and Hindu traditions. The Mahars have embraced a Buddhism fundamentally characterized by a recognition of the absolute equality of human beings and a call for social justice. And they have asserted an identity that is decidedly "Buddhist" and "not Hindu," but also distinctly "Mahar."

An alternate mode of renegotiation with dominant traditions can be undertaken from within the tradition. The establishment of the Satnampanth by the Chamars (a formerly untouchable caste of leatherworkers) of Chhattisgarh in the 1820s is an example of such renegotiation. This sect rejected the temple worship and rituals that Chamars had traditionally been prohibited from participating in. With time, interactions

between members of this sect and members of service castes that had formerly refused to serve Chamars were also forbidden on grounds of purity—the same grounds on which these same castes had formerly excluded the Chamars. By instituting a purification ritual, the Satnami community was effectively transformed into a society of the pure that then guarded itself against the impurity of outsiders. Its traditionally low-caste followers "seized upon the signs of subordination . . . and set them up as symbols of the self-reliance and the superiority of the sect [and in so doing t]hey formalized a clear alternative to the powerful network of relationships with service castes within the village" (Dube and Dube 2003, 232–33, 241). Though not strictly a Chamar sect, the Satnami community limited entry, refusing initiation to people from some castes they considered impure. Once a person was initiated, however, there was no hierarchy within the community, and the sect functioned effectively as its members' new *jati* or caste.

Many other examples of similar types of sectarian religious transformation can be cited, and it must be noted that these forms of subaltern religion, whether asserted through conversion or sectarian formation, also change with time. They, too, are "handed over to their adherents," as Clarke suggests; they are not fixed but undergo constant change as identities are reshaped, symbols and practices refined and retooled, and relationships with other communities renegotiated and developed. However, low-caste communities' active participation in the shaping of religious identities that challenge structures of oppression and move across the permeable boundaries of religious traditions is far more pervasive than the instances of outright conversion to alternative religions or the development of new sects might indicate. The practice of any religion by embodied human beings and by communities always entails interaction with other elements of adherents' identities and experiences. Different communities, including low-caste communities, develop their own understandings of the practice of their religion(s) and of their own identity within that practice. They may choose to assert not a new sectarian or religious identity through conversion, but rather a decidedly "Hindu" or "Muslim" or "Christian" identity, albeit one that they actively shape and create.

Clarke suggests that such subaltern religion is marked not by a simple top-down reception, but by a rejection of the symbolic system of the dominant religion(s) and a resymbolization so that religion making becomes a site of contestation, creativity, and self-assertion. This act of religion making involves heavy borrowing from the existing traditions; it is not a binary opposition to them but rather exists in a complex relationship in which elements of the existing traditions are reconfigured through the particular community's lived experience (1998, 125–30).

An example of this type of complex religion making can be seen among the members of the Paraiyar community in Tamil Nadu. A Dalit caste traditionally known as drummers, they have incorporated this key element of their identity into their own form of Christianity, introducing drumming into their religious practice and the drum symbolically into their understanding of Christ (Clarke 1998). This incorporation and resymbolization are problematic, however, because the drum had been a signifier of their degraded social status, as Corinne Dempsey (2004) points out, and Christian leaders in their community had forbidden its use for this reason. In the dominant Hindu system where death is a source of great impurity, the drum itself is made of cowhide, the production of which requires working with dead animals, and the Paraiyars' services as drummers were particularly associated with funeral services (Clarke 1998, 67–68). Thus, within both the dominant Hindu and received Christian traditions there would have been ample reason to leave this symbol behind. But the Paraiyars are the "people of the drum (*parai*)," and they chose not to discard this identity, but to transform it and to create a distinct Christian identity of their own.

This subaltern type of religion making is characterized by an improvisational and eclectic selection and rejection of elements from the dominant tradition(s) and other dimensions of experience that lead to a kind of "jigsaw-like religious configuration," as Clarke puts it, in which "comprehensiveness and unitary cohesion are sometimes not possible; instead fluidity, temporary relevance and partial enhancement of communal subjectivity are settled for" (1998, 128). He notes also a general lack of an "explicitly combative and radically oppositional" stance in such subaltern religion—for example, an absence of a direct confrontational challenge

to the caste system. He suggests instead that resistance takes more subtle and tacit forms, ensuring survival within the context of dominant forces that might react violently against more direct challenges (129). The Paraiyar Christians' redefinition of the religious place of the drum is such an act of resistance. In their reconfiguration, the drum is no longer a mark of impurity and inferiority but rather represents the presence of the divine in the world and becomes a symbol for Christ. In making this claim, they are also asserting a radically different status for their own community as "people of the drum."

Similar composite or syncretic traditions have incorporated Hindu and Muslim practices, symbols, and beliefs in ways that also allow for resistance to upper-caste dominance, including the traditions of the Meos and the Meghwal followers of Ramdev documented by Shail Mayaram (1997) and Dominique-Sila Khan (1997). As Mayaram points out, this internal religious fluidity and the lack of hard and fast boundaries between traditions allow both for constructing distinct identities and for finding common ground between diverse groups and forming alliances to resist upper-caste dominance (1997, 39). Khan and Mayaram have also documented the pressure exerted on these communities to choose oppositional Hindu or Muslim identities in post-Partition and postindependence India—pressure that is perhaps in part motivated by dominant groups' desire to shut down the potential for such alliances.

In addition to the free-wheeling selection and rejection of elements of dominant religious traditions and noncombative yet clear forms of resistance, other shared characteristics can be identified in these low-caste expressions of religion and identity, particularly as they emerge within a given religion. They tend to combine universalist claims to human equality and dignity, critiques of injustice and oppression on religious and human grounds, and the assertion of alternative value systems not based on birth, wealth, or power—all of which easily resonate across the fluid boundaries between religious traditions. These claims, critiques, and values can be expressed in religiously and culturally specific ways based on differing metaphysical assumptions, religious narratives and symbols, and the adherents' contexts and experiences, but in each case they have parallels in other traditions and militate against exclusionary

or denigrating behavior or the demonizing of others. Such critiques of oppression and calls for social justice emerge out of the lived experience of both oppression and deep religious practice and belief.

To offer but one example, the Meghwal communities with whom I have worked in Rajasthan express their understanding of devotional Hinduism in part through the songs they sing in the name of saints such as Mirabai and Kabir at their *jagran*s, the all-night singing sessions that are their principle mode of religious gathering.[10] Within these songs, we find a distinctive portrayal of the sixteenth-century Rajput saint Mirabai as a royal woman who renounces her life of privilege for the simple life that many of this community have no choice but to live and who, because of her low-caste Chamar guru Raidas, suffers the same caste oppression to which the Meghwals are subjected. The Kabir of their songs appears not as a critic of religious leaders, either Muslim or Hindu, but rather as a weaver of dignity and resistance (Martin 2000).

Indeed, the songs these Meghwals sing speak not of revolution, but of loving God in the midst of pain and struggle. Theirs is a theology of survival and of dignity and self-respect, which privileges the wisdom and religious authority that are particularly the province of the poor and disenfranchised. Herein we do find a critique of social and religious hierarchies, though expressed indirectly through renunciation and action. For example, in one song the royal Rajput saint Mirabai rejects her royal husband, the *rana* or ruler of Mewar, as well as all that he has to offer her by way of material goods. She embraces instead a life of simplicity and the nonmaterial treasure of devotion and true community. In one such song, she sings:

10. These songs are part of a composite tradition, with any songs that might have been composed by the historical saint inseparable from the songs that have been composed by others in the saint's name across the centuries. The analysis here is based primarily on the repertoire of the singer Padmaram recorded in 1993 but also draws on some songs from other Meghwal singers. For additional examples and analysis of low-caste traditions surrounding these saints, see my essay "Mirabai and Kabir in Rajasthani Folk Traditions: Meghwal and Manganiyar Repertoires" (2000) and Parita Mutka's *Upholding the Common Life: The Community of Mirabai* (1994).

In your country, Rana, there are no devotees.
The people living there are trash, Mewari Rana.
     I do not like your land.
Mine is a higher state—
     I do not like your country.
Though it may be full of goodness—
     I'll sacrifice it, O Ram.
Mine is the highest love—
     I do not like your land.
Kajal and *tika*—
     I abandon them all.
I'll give up braiding my hair,
     as a offering, O Ram.
. . . Mine is the highest love—
     I do not like your land.
Necklaces and ornaments, Rana—
     I abandon them all.
I'll give up wearing bangles,
     as an offering, O Ram.
Mine is a higher state—
     I do not like your country . . .
Bai Mira's lord is that gallant one
     who raised up the mountain.
She's your servant, Ram,
     you clever Mountain Bearer.
. . . Mine is the highest love—
     I do not like your land.
Meeting the true guru, all is fulfilled,
     in the sacrifice, O Ram.
Meeting my guru, I am complete;
     I do not like your country.[11]

11. This particular version of this song was recorded in 1975 and sung by Meghwal men
in the village of Borunda, halfway between Merta and Jodhpur in Marwar. The recording

Mira here refers to God by the generic and inclusive name "Ram" as well as the Krishna-specific appellation "Mountain Bearer," and she willingly gives up all ornamentation, material privilege, and status for the company of other devotees and her wise teacher or guru. For them, she readily sacrifices the lamp-black *kajal* to adorn her eyes and the *tika* for her forehead; she lets loose her braided hair in the manner of a renouncer and discards the bangles and jewelry that mark her status as a privileged married woman (some types of which were also forbidden for low-caste people to wear).

In another song, Mirabai tells the *rana* that she has no use for jewels but wears the beads of sacred basil (*tulsi*) used in prayer, and she rejects his rich food, preferring instead the dry scraps eaten by the poorest of the poor. What he offers are not the things that matter. In rejecting these things, she stands in solidarity with the oppressed and offers a different set of values that are not the purview of the rich and powerful.

If she does not want what the *rana* can give and instead takes refuge in God, then he ultimately has no control over her, though he may even try to kill her. He does try, according to the stories of her life, because she dishonors his family by taking a low-caste guru and not respecting the rules of decorum for a woman of her caste and royal status. But Mirabai does not die and instead dances and sings with ecstatic joy in the temples, alternately said to have bells on her ankles and to be playing a drum or *khartal*s (wooden instruments with jingles, like a tambourine). In a third song, the *rana* asks her to return to the palace, but she responds:

> I will not leave my hut of grass and reeds, Ranaji—
> I have already given up living in a palace.
> *My mind holds fast to songs of love.*

Nor will she accept the camels and brightly colored clothes and rice he offers. It is the love of God alone that is the measure of life's meaning and value.

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is from the Rupayan Sansthan Folklore Institute collection, recorded under the direction of Padmashri Komal Kothari. For a translation of a similar song, see Mukta 1994, 100–101.

In the Meghwal songs of Kabir, the equality of all before God is affirmed (Martin 2002, 204–12). The bodies of all are crafted by a master artisan and must be kept pure, though when need be God will come as a Dobhi to wash away all stain. In successive songs, God is likened not only to a washerman, but also to a weaver, a potter, and a spinning woman—all traditionally low-caste professions—and devotees are admonished not to waste their precious human birth, so easily frittered away in ceaseless toil and blind searching. Youth, wealth, the love of family and friends—none of these things can bring ultimate security and meaning. The truth is hidden and not in the possession of those who think they know, any more than the true treasure is in the hands of the rich and powerful. Rather, the knowledge people seek and the source of true fulfillment are already within every person's grasp:

> Everyone is calling out "Ruby! Ruby!"
> Yet each has a scarf [*palla*] filled with gems—
> No one unties the knot to see what's inside,
> And so they are like one who has nothing.
> Everyone is crying "Ruby! Ruby!"
> But no one bothers to look.
> Servant Kabir saw and transcended birth and death.[12]

The most valuable jewels are already in the possession of all by virtue of their humanity, and true religious authority is derived from lived experience; knowing and loving God grow within the radical living practice of religion.

Reflection in these songs focuses primarily on the struggle to affirm dignity and to (re)claim one's true identity as beloved of God and to know a loving God while living under inhuman conditions. These reflections are marked by a deep and nuanced sense of joy, hope, and faith—tested and tempered by the fire of suffering. Within this community, the boundaries

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12. This song was sung by Padmaram and recorded in 1993 in the studios of the Rajasthan Patrika in Jaipur by Padmashri Komal Kothari and myself, with copies housed in the archives of Rupayan Sansthan Folklore Institute in Jodhpur.

of religious identity as "Hindu" are firmly drawn, and yet there is an imprecision to that identity because members have no singular sectarian affiliation. In the world described in their songs, this "Hindu" identity is inclusive and affirmative rather than exclusionary, and, as noted earlier, diverse Hindu and Muslim imagery is used almost interchangeably. "Those who know" are not limited to one religious label or another, either sectarian or tradition specific.

Highly specific appropriations of the traditions of Mirabai and Kabir also affirm the distinctiveness of a particular low-caste identity, giving it a positive, even heroic valuation. An epic song tradition associated with Mirabai called the *Mira janma patri* (Mira's Birth Story or Mira's Horoscope) depicts her in one scene essentially as a Meghwal weaver woman (Martin 1999; Mukta 1994, 112–14, 233–34). When the *rana* demands that she leave his palace after he discovers that the Chamar Raidas is her guru, she asks to be allowed to live in a hut by the palace walls and to weave the *rana*'s *dhotis* (a man's garment wrapped around the waist). A low point in the story is then marked when he refuses. The tragedy of her situation at that moment resonates with the desperation of those who have suffered under caste oppression and the desolation of women cast out or abandoned. But the *rana*'s rejection is also immediately followed by Mirabai's defiant act of shattering her wedding bangles, and she leaves the palace to pursue an independent life and a higher purpose, offering inspiration and hope in the face of rejection and suffering.

Another Meghwal song describes the vulnerability to sexual exploitation to which low-caste women in particular are subject by retelling the story of Kabir's wife, Loi, who was threatened by a lustful businessman (Martin 2002, 212–13). The businessman agrees to give her the supplies she needs to fulfill Kabir's offer of hospitality to a group of holy men on the condition that she return to sleep with him. When Kabir learns of this bargain, he carries his wife on his shoulders to the merchant's home so that she will not get her feet muddy in the rain. When the merchant asks how she managed to arrive thus in the rain, she tells him. The merchant's lust drains away, and he turns to devotion to God. There is no divine intervention here; instead, Kabir and Loi's integrity and purity of heart change the dynamics of exploitation.

In both cases, these religious stories allow for the expression of suffering under caste and gender oppression, but also for the triumph of spirit. The saints are portrayed as members of the singers' own distinctive communities, sharing their experiences. Here religion serves as an essential and creative means of self-expression and resistance coupled with the affirmation of hope and dignity.

This strategy of low-caste assertion of an alternate religious identity within a given tradition, coupled with the strategies employed in conversion and sectarian formation, suggest that religious boundaries can be drawn without shutting down the internal fluidity of religious traditions or their external openness. They also affirm that religion can be a valuable resource as we seek to deal with the "identity threats" of modernization and globalization and as we seek a more just world in which the equality and dignity of all people is recognized and protected. It is essential that these two dimensions remain connected, and these low-caste religious assertions show us some ways this continued connection might be accomplished. As they make clear, it is precisely the fluidity of internal diversity and external boundaries of religions that provide us with "meaning-giving and meaning-making symbolic dwelling places" (as Clarke describes them), within which people can define themselves as individuals, as members of multiple communities, and as part of a larger humanity in ways that do not depend on demonizing or dominating another.

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