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RESEARCH ARTICLE (PEER REVIEWED)

## Through the Looking Glass: The Involuntary Cosmopolitanism of Black Magic and Possession in Modi's New India

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### Abstract

In spite of Modi's promise of good days (*acche din*) in 2014, many Indians still struggle with unemployment, low income, poor health and other difficulties. Though some problems eventually find solutions and middle-class metropolitans increasingly seek help from gurus and psychologists, long-term misfortune and disturbances are still frequently attributed to black magic or possession. Drawing on anthropological fieldwork in Kanpur and Bareilly, this article examines the unintended cosmopolitan effects of such practices, which occasionally unfold in ways that traverse and unsettle official religious boundaries, even in polarized times. Heuristically contrasting Modi to Alice in Wonderland, the article spells out the double bind of many low-income Hindus who seek supernatural assistance in times of crisis: should they follow the logic of inexpensive efficacy, even if necessitating engagement with unfamiliar ritual worlds in heterotopic spaces associated with the religious other? Or should they rather follow the emergent Hindu nationalist logic of Hindu exclusivism, according to which ritual remedies beyond a Hindu ritual repertoire would be inappropriate? The persisting prevalence of the former logic under Modi is illustrated with three cases, two of which are interrelated. Firstly, we meet a female professional seeking help against suspected black magic from a rustic Sufi-Muslim healer. Secondly, we meet a Kali devotee seeking help against spirits that disturbed his career and marriage in a renowned Sufi-Muslim dargah. The final case shows how familial neglect, economic hardship and an interreligious marriage conducted two generations earlier came together in a case of possession. The cosmopolitan effects of such instances, the article argues, lie in their tendency to form an anti-structural, heterotopic counterweight to aggressive Hindu nationalism.

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## Keywords

**Exclusivism; Kanpur; Affliction; Dargahs; Black Magic; Hindu Nationalism**

People who experience long-term misfortune frequently state that ‘someone must have done something,’ as the social anthropologist Veena Das notes in her insightful book *Affliction* (2015: 56, 93). Health problems, financial distress, familial disagreements, property disputes, mental ‘tension’ or other hardships that persist despite wholehearted efforts to resolve them, often trigger suspicions that a jealous human being or malevolent spirit has ‘done something’ to cause them. Just like in the Azande witchcraft famously discussed by [E. E. Evans-Pritchard \(1937\)](#), attributing misfortune to occult forces enhances the sense of causality: in addition to explaining *how* misfortune happens, it also explains *why* and at the behest of whom/what. Yet, while the Azande of the 1930s relied on a singular divination system in which chicken and friction oracles were used to identify and disarm the root cause, Indian Hindus, who live in a complex multi-faith society, have long traditions for crossing religious boundaries for diagnosis and curative practices. This religious ‘promiscuity’ does however not sit easily with the Hindu nationalist project of making India more Hindu, which became an undeclared state policy with the spectacular ascent to power of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2014.

Given the apparent friction between these cultural logics—one driving religious crossings, the other discouraging them—this article considers how suspicions of malevolent forces played out during Modi’s efforts to build a New India during his first period as prime minister (2014–2019). Based on longitudinal anthropological fieldwork in Kanpur,<sup>1</sup> it makes a two-pronged argument. Firstly, to cross official religious boundaries in pursuit of a reliable diagnosis and effective cure remained surprisingly common in spite of the growing entrenchment of Hindu nationalism—indeed, in some ways even *because* of it. Secondly, such crossings served as an involuntary religious cosmopolitanism that formed a subtle counterpoint to the Hindu nationalist project. In certain ways, the effort to make India more Hinduized, prosperous, gender-equal and technologically sophisticated thus worked against itself. This expression is neither meant to invoke a model of politics as directly self-destructive (as in [Baruah 1999](#)), nor to rehearse the common argument that the Hindu tradition is fraught with internal contradictions (see [Hesterman 1985](#); [Inden 1986](#): 763). What I suggest is that the push for a New Hindu India generated anxiety-ridden gaps between the dizzyingly imaginable, the affordable and the socially appropriate that were occasionally handled in ways that involved superhuman powers or practitioners of the ‘wrong’ kind, even if increasingly done discretely. The first part of the article elaborates on the two contrasting logics and the unfulfilled expectations of the first Modi government; the second part exemplifies how religious boundaries were crossed when the going got tough.

## What To Do When the Going Gets Tough?

The contrast between the logics that respectively drive and discourage religious crossings may be heuristically illustrated by contrasting Modi to Alice, the fictional girl from Lewis Carroll’s children’s books. The two could hardly be more different. Narendra Modi is a septuagenarian man of flesh and blood with spectacles, white beard and a purported 56-inch chest who in 2014 became the Prime Minister of the second most populous country in the world. Alice, in contrast, is an imaginary nineteenth-century English girl, originally depicted as a child of 8–10 years with long wavy hair, frock and apron. My reason for contrasting them is, however, not their physical differences but their opposing orientations to ontological

<sup>1</sup> The fieldwork—funded by the Research Council of Norway—was conducted in a low-income neighbourhood in the periphery of Kanpur by means of annual field visits from 2013 to 2019 and regular social media contact in-between and afterwards. As explained elsewhere ([Frøystad 2016, 2021](#)), the fieldwork made its point of departure in a Kali temple and used a person-centred method to follow its main protagonists across social and ritual contexts.

alterity. While Modi personifies what I analyse as an emergent ‘logic of Hindu exclusivism,’ Alice personifies the openness inherent in what I term ‘the logic of inexpensive efficacy.’

### THE LOGIC OF INEXPENSIVE EFFICACY

Alice is an ontological explorer who constantly finds herself in situations that upend much of what she has come to take for granted. In *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (Carroll 1865) she falls into a rabbit hole and enters Wonderland, where animals talk, Alice grows and shrinks depending on what she eats and drinks, pebbles turn into cakes and playing cards work in the queen’s garden. In *Through the Looking Glass* (Carroll 1871), Alice walks through the mirror on the mantelpiece, where flowers talk, poems make sense despite being pure gibberish and time goes backwards and forwards simultaneously. Granted, Alice’s adventures had nothing to do with problem-solving. Her fall into Wonderland was accidental and her sojourn through the mirror was prompted by a wish to escape boredom. Yet her willingness to enter alternative realities and learn enough about how they work to navigate in them, resonates strongly with the openness towards unfamiliar, if not transgressive, ritual spaces and procedures that characterize Hindus who suffer from longstanding misfortune. Entering the unfamiliar is rarely the first choice but has long been a last resort if nothing else works or is affordable.

For most of the Hindus I have come to know or read about over the years, their problem solution proceeded approximately as follows. Whenever a problem arose, their first impulse was to solve it by practical means. They visited a doctor, talked sweetly to their creditors, sought help from their extended kin and network of connections, visited local political leaders (*netas*) to ‘get their work done,’ initiated court proceedings or, on the other side of the law, forged papers or paid money under the table. If their problems persisted despite repeated attempts, their second impulse was to seek divine assistance. They began with the god(dess) with whom their family identified, trying to please him or her by an elaborate sacrifice (a coconut, goat or whatever else s/he appreciates), rigorous fasting, a devotional singing session (*kirtan*), food distribution (*bhandara*), voluntary temple service (*seva*), karma-enhancing philanthropy, a vow or the like. If this deity proved unable to help, they approached others, each Hindu god having its specializations. In so doing some maximized their chances by visiting Sikh temples and Sufi Muslim grave shrines (*dargahs*) in addition to Hindu temples for protective blessings. If not even that helped, surprisingly many pious Hindus then began to suspect the involvement of supernatural forces such as the evil eye (*nazar*), possession or black magic, in which case some found it necessary to cross religious boundaries in search for a renowned Muslim Specialist—living or dead—for diagnosis and cure.

Scholars who have studied such cases up close, describe a number of reasons why Hindus occasionally cross religious boundaries for divine assistance, even if as a last resort. One is the widespread reputation of dargahs as sites of wish-fulfilment, especially in cases of childlessness and unemployment. As noted by Heitmeyer (2011), both deceased and living saints (*pirs*) are believed to have substantial power to intervene in such matters, perhaps—as suggested by Gold (2013)—because their closeness to this world makes them better positioned to interfere in human affairs than the increasingly abstract pan-Indian Hindu deities. Another is the shared belief in *jinn*s, which given their Muslim origin must be pacified by Islamic experts if they trouble humans by possessing them or otherwise (Gottschalk 2000), though there are also Hindu exorcists who claim to know the Islamic incantations required to make them leave humans alone (Frøystad 2021). A third is the perception of dargahs and certain other Islamic spaces as representing alternative sovereignties to which perceived injustices can be addressed, almost like in legal courts, a point made particularly forcefully by Taneja (2018) but also emphasised by Bellamy (2011: 92). A fourth, also discussed by Taneja, is their reputation as spaces in which socially inappropriate desires can be articulated more safely than in one’s own religious spaces. A fifth is the importance allotted to what Mittelmayer (2011) terms ‘visitatorial dreams,’ such as when troubled Hindus dream about a Muslim saint that orders them to seek his help (Taneja 2018: 74-5) or have disturbing dreams that Sufi-Muslim mystics are best placed to help

them interpret (Frøystad 2016). A sixth is the relative anonymity offered by ritual spaces in which the risk of bumping into relatives and other representatives of patriarchal orthodoxy is low, as emphasized by Bellamy (2011, 2013). Anonymity, she continues, is increasingly afforded by the availability of inexpensive transport and women's growing freedom of movement and is vital for the formation of the alternative communities that facilitate healing. For Hindus in search of black magic (*kala ilm*) practitioners, a seventh is the conviction that Muslim practitioners are better at inflicting harm than their Hindu counterparts, whether because transgressive behaviour is more easily ascribed to the religious Other or even because Muslim healers are believed to have a 'reservoir of hate against Hindus' that can be activated (Das 2015: 55). To consult individual specialists can, however, be expensive whatever their religious denomination, so working-class Hindus generally make do with bringing their knottiest problems to a dargah. Whatever the specifics that motivate distressed Hindus to cross official religious boundaries in pursuit of divine intervention, they share Alice's inclination to enter a part unfathomable world that their social circle is likely to consider unfitting.

What, if anything, could be cosmopolitan about crossing religious boundaries to overcome misfortune? As we just saw, the motivations are driven by entirely different concerns and may even be rooted in deep anti-Muslim prejudice. Yet they still have certain cosmopolitan effects. True, sharing religious sites and practices has not succeeded in curbing polarization (see Ghassem-Fachandi 2011; Heitmeyer 2011). Moreover, several shared religious spaces are contested and have thus provoked considerable interreligious friction in their own right (Hayden 2002; Sila-Khan 2004; Sikand 2004; Hayden 2016). Nevertheless, scholars who have done long-term fieldwork within shared religious spaces document how suffering clients of different denominations rub shoulders in ways that foreground common problems, say, as struggling breadwinners, drug addicts, abandoned wives or mothers of sickly children. For Flueckiger (2006), for instance, the Sufi-Muslim healing room she studied served as a 'crossroads' (*caurasta*) that bracketed religious boundaries, which resonates with Bellamy's point (2011) about alternative community-formation. Repeated visits and longer stays will moreover make the initially unfathomable increasingly familiar. If resulting in perceptible improvement, it will also become more difficult to dismiss its ontological foundations and ritual repertoire. Phrased in more general anthropological terms, one could thus say that one cosmopolitan dimension is the sense of 'anti-structure' and 'communitas' afforded by such spaces, concepts that Turner (1969) once launched to bring attention to the fleeting sense of togetherness that occasionally arises during rituals, demonstrations and so on. Another cosmopolitan dimension is alluded to by Samuel and Rozario (2012), who analyse Sufi-Muslim shrines as Foucauldian heterotopia due to their attraction for people in crisis and their suspension of ordinary causality. If we combine these perspectives, ritual spaces and practices emerge as what we might call 'heterotopias of suspended difference.' In this way, the cosmopolitan effect of dargahs thus surpasses that of Anderson's 'cosmopolitan canopies' (Anderson, 2011), which denote spaces in which people mix, rub shoulders and experience one another's commonplaceness before returning to mono-ethnic localities and activities again. Dargahs are also spaces in which ontologies may be expanded and changed. Though even Alice eventually returned from Wonderland and the reverse side of the mirror, her extraordinary experiences clearly expanded her mind. Those who have made such sojourns will inevitably internalize a fragment of 'the other' and frequently gain confidence in some of the very stuff that generates religious alterity. This confidence is however contingent: as we will see later, it can flip if the problem aggravates.

### THE EMERGENT LOGIC OF HINDU EXCLUSIVISM

Unlike Alice, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi is not the kind of person who would visit a heterotopic religious space except to ostentatiously pay homage in pursuit of non-Hindu votes. In fact, he hardly even does that: his annual offering of a sacrificial cloth (*chadar*) to the famous dargah of Moinuddin Chishti in Ajmer is usually done by sending someone else with the chadar after a photo-op. The political ideology

he represents, Hindu nationalism, considers Hindus as the rightful heirs of India and treats Muslims and Christians as lesser Indians at best. The founder of the organization that groomed Modi as a political leader, the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS), held that Indians who have their 'holyland' abroad, should not have the same rights as Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists and Jains ([Savarkar 1989](#) [1923]: 113). Though the present RSS leader's stance is more inclusive ([Pandey 2019](#)), Hindu nationalists frequently vilify Muslims and, to a lesser extent, Christians, constantly worrying that each of these religious minorities endangers Hinduism by conspiring to take over India, and constantly generating anxiety about how soon this will happen unless the political power is safeguarded by Modi's BJP ([Anand 2011](#); Frøystad forthcoming). Though few Hindu nationalists argue explicitly against India's present religious freedom, they clearly value some religious spaces and practices over others. The religious traditions they promote are all Hindu; as is the religious architecture they heritagise, restore and promote as 'Indian.' The rest are either treated with indifference or made subject to Hindu claims of ownership. Even Indo-Islamic architecture protected by UNESCO and the Archaeological Survey of India increasingly has been targeted by claims that a Hindu deity was born, or once had a temple, on the exact spot where a mosque, grave shrine or another Indo-Islamic building now stands.<sup>2</sup> As noted by [Gandhi \(2020\)](#), Modi's Hindu nationalist government thus constructs an imagined Hindu past on India's modern ruins, and though the Babar mosque in Ayodhya is the only major building to be demolished so far, the 2019 Supreme Court judgement that gave Hindu beliefs precedence over formal Muslim land ownership leaves little doubt that they—at least under Modi—have secured sufficient influence over the judiciary to win through. To some observers, it is only a question of time before Savarkar's vision of unequal citizenship is enshrined in law. The passing of the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act in December 2019 could certainly be seen as a first formal step in that direction.

In order to unite purported Hindu autochthones to push back the imagined Muslim and Christian takeover—supposedly occurring through interreligious marriage, proselytization, illegal immigration, unrestrained fertility and financial support from abroad—Hindu nationalists have also found it crucial to strive toward greater homogeneity among the many communities classified as 'Hindu.' Linguistic and cultural differences aside, Hinduism comprises a plethora of doctrines and practices that matured over thousands of years and which threaten the political unity among Hindus. The promotion of some Hindu doctrines and practices as more treasured than others extends back to the religious reform movements of the nineteenth century ([Jones 1990](#)) and has later been spearheaded by the RSS and BJP when in power. The tenets they promote include Vedic Hinduism, Sanskritic traditions, Vedanta, worship of pan-Hindu gods, cow veneration and, more recently, guru movements. Those they ignore include low-caste practices such as possession, village deity worship, non-*sattvik* offerings of meat and alcohol and, not least, so-called 'left-hand' practices such as the Aghori tradition. Whether promotion occurs by means of sponsoring temples and festivals, textbook revision, assimilationist education for marginalized children, popular culture or reliance on religious leaders as 'grey eminences' ([Jaffrelot 2012](#)), the outcome is a normative Hinduism that hierarchizes and reduces the 'diversity within.' For Basu, drawing on Schmitt, this is due to a tacit monotheistic imperative: 'For there to be a Hindu nation and a Hindu state, there had to be a Hindu monotheism' that simplified, compacted and absorbed regional eccentricities ([Basu 2020](#): 3-4). Basu's use of the monotheism term is not meant to downplay the continued prevalence of polytheism and multicentricity in normative Hinduism as much as to indicate a vector. This vector, I suggest, also involves a gradual shift from inclusivism to exclusivism, that is, a declining propensity to accept external religious elements as true and incorporate them into one's own practice ([Halbfass 1988](#); [Laine 2014](#): 6). It began with a declining Hindu attendance of public Muslim rituals from the late nineteenth century onwards, proceeded with a declining Hindu turnout at Sufi-Muslim grave shrines and continues with a growing Hindu reluctance

2 Such claims have been made about the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya (which was demolished by Hindu nationalist activists in 1992), the Gyanvapi mosque in Varanasi, the Shahi Eidgah mosque in Mathura, the Taj Mahal in Agra and the Qutub Minar in South Delhi, among others.



to consult Muslim practitioners openly to alleviate crisis. The emergent exclusivism is moreover more prevalent among Brahmans and other upper castes than among lower castes. Yet as Michelutti notes, even young Yadavs in Uttar Pradesh, a state once renowned for its composite culture, began to turn away from dargahs in the late 1990s, claiming that they had no need for ‘Muslim gods’ (Michelutti 2008: 57). These youngsters, who would have reached their mid-thirties when Modi came to power, hint at the double bind that increasingly affects people looking for ways out of their hardship: the path they believe might work without emptying their coffers would not necessarily be acceptable to their consociates. Taking the cue from Sax (1998), we can however identify a possible double movement: as Hinduism undergoes a slow monotheization, it will probably become increasingly necessary to step across the boundary to other religions—the more ‘other’ the better—for practices that are sufficiently transgressive to gain a reputation as efficient.

## Unfulfilled Aspirations

To understand the continued prevalence of distress in the Modi era, we must also briefly consider the growing gap between expectations and real-life experiences on the economic front. Modi’s main election promise in the spring of 2014 had been to usher in ‘good days’ (*acche din*) for everyone (Kaur 2015). This would be done by expanding the so-called Gujarat model of ensuring basic infrastructure, efficient governance and inexpensive land to the corporate sector (Schöttli & Pauli 2016), which he claimed would eventually enhance economic security for everyone. Government efficiency would be improved by a combination of hard work and eradication of corruption. As Modi famously stated, he would neither ‘eat’ bribes himself, nor let anyone else in his government do so (in Hindi: *Na khaunga, na khane dunga*; Sukhtankar & Vaishnav 2015). He also advocated gender equality. During the run-up to the 2014 elections, he tweeted that ‘Women empowerment is crucial to India’s growth. Days of seeing women as “home makers” have gone; we have to see women as nation builders’ (Modi 2014). And finally, so was communications technology, which Modi famously promoted by conducting part of his election campaign by appearing as a hologram (Warrier 2014). Modi, in short, conjured up a New India cleansed of poverty, dust and quick fixes of the kind Hindi speakers refer to as *jugad* (Jeffrey & Young 2014), an India that would become a Hindu counterpart to Singapore and Japan. Many voters found these promises hugely appealing, and aided by solid backing from BJP’s shrewd election strategizing and social media campaign, BJP came to power with what many scholars then described as ‘the biggest win by any party in 40 years’ (see Baig 2019).<sup>3</sup>

A few years into Modi’s prime ministership, reality began to strike. To be sure, he worked hard to meet his ambitions and many of his voters literally deified him. Yet his promises were not easy to fulfil. Firstly, it became increasingly clear that the Gujarat model failed to make incomes trickle down, that corruption was difficult to eradicate, that many girls and women remained subjugated, that the electrification and clean-up campaigns had serious shortcomings, and that communications technology was a double-edged sword, to summarize some of the critiques raised against the Modi government during its first years in power. Secondly, in November 2016, the Modi government suddenly invalidated all the 500- and 1000-rupee notes, asking people to deposit them in the bank or exchange them with new currency notes by the end of the year, though not enough new notes had been printed. In this way, Modi hoped to strike down on black money and counterfeit currency while digitalizing and formalizing the economy (Lahiri 2020). However, the Modi government had also introduced a Goods and Services Tax (GST) a few months earlier, and the combination of these steps proved disastrous (Lahiri 2020: 68–72). In the formal economy, the unemployment rate rose to a 45-year high of 6.1 in 2017–18 (Business Today 2019). This pushed millions

3 The BJP made an even better performance in the subsequent election in 2019.

of white-collar workers and highly educated people into the informal economy, which in turn pushed a lot of others out of it. Moreover, many employers in the informal economy now lacked the cash required to pay their workers. And thirdly, the appealing changes Modi had envisioned in his election campaign did not necessarily put an end to the deep-rooted moral obligations that many people felt constrained by. As a result, the gap between aspirations, responsibilities and real-life experiences widened more than ever before.

As noted by anthropologists working in Melanesian and African societies, accusations of supernatural involvement frequently arise in such gaps. For [Rio \(2019\)](#), the ‘witchcraft crisis’ reported in international news media following the turn of the millennium, was rooted in the tendency to blame the dissonance generated by profound social change on destructive supernatural forces, while [Moore and Sanders \(2001\)](#) go as far as claiming that witchcraft is a way of engaging with the modern moment. Let me now exemplify how comparable processes played out on the ground in some of the many low-income pockets of Uttar Pradesh. I present three cases, two of which are interrelated, to bring out how unfulfilled aspirations and conflicting obligations triggered suspicions of supernatural involvement that somehow provided a reluctant counterweight to Modi’s effort to craft a more exclusivist New Hindu India.

## Kamini and the Cardamoms

‘Kamini’ was a 35-year-old woman who had grown up in the low-income Kanpur locality in which I did fieldwork, but who had long since moved away for marriage and work.<sup>4</sup> Having completed her education as a Chartered Accountant, her parents had married her off to a man from the same mercantile caste (Baniya), after which she moved into his family’s apartment in Noida, east of Delhi proper. Kamini’s transition to Noida was not merely a geographical relocation but also an upward leap of class. Even when revisiting her hometown, Kamini dressed like a big-city woman, and with her trousers, blouse and long loose hair, she stood out amidst the local Hindu housewives in saris and hair buns and the Sikh ones in salwar-kurtas and braids.

Kamini’s career would have made Modi proud. Even after becoming a mother, she had retained her work in a bank. Local whispers claimed that she earned as much as 100,000 Rupees a month, more than double of any of my male acquaintances in Kanpur. Though I did not find it appropriate to try to verify these rumours, it soon became evident that her salary was at the root of her trouble.

Some years into their marriage, Kamini’s husband had lost his job and began to kill time by hanging out with friends. He often returned drunk late at night. Eventually he became an alcoholic who frequently beat her in frustration over his misery. Their 8-year-old daughter often bore witness to their fights. A few generations ago, most Indian women would have had to endure such behaviour in silence. Consider the episode described by the feminist philosopher Uma Narayan: as a child in the 1960s she overheard how one of her aunts ‘cried and cried in the kitchen’ over the beatings and humiliations she had to endure in her in-laws’ home, cries that were muffled to avoid the ‘cultural “shame” of exposing such “private” matters’ ([Narayan 1997](#): 10–11). Today Indian women are increasingly reluctant to put up with such treatment (see [Sen 2007](#) for a poignant example from a Mumbai slum), particularly if they have Kamini’s education and self-confidence. All Kamini wanted to do now was to move out with her daughter and seek a divorce. Since she was economically independent, this would be easily realisable. Or so Kamini thought until she began to cough up cardamoms and develop insomnia.

Cardamoms are common in Indian cooking but also have ritual potency. In Kamini’s natal town I had occasionally seen women placing green cardamoms alongside the rice grains, red *roli* powder and wristbands (*rakhi*) with which they blessed their brothers on the day of Raksha Bandhan. A Tantrik ritual acquaintance of mine had also described how he made female clients of exorcism seal their bodies by stuffing a black

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4 All given names are pseudonyms, which explains the quotation marks.

cardamom into their vagina to prevent the spirit from re-entering. So when Kamini began to cough up cardamoms without having tasted this spice in her food, she immediately suspected that ‘someone had done something.’ When she began to cough up cloves as well, she became practically certain. This is when she decided to seek help once she reached her mother’s house in Kanpur for the Chaitra Navaratri holiday.

Kamini’s first step was to approach the aforementioned Hindu Tantrik, which is how I came to meet her. Should he be unable to help, she was told, he could put her in touch with someone with deeper expertise on the problem at hand. Since the Tantrik kept his hands off black magic, he brought Kamini to a Muslim ritual healer known as Pul Baba. *Pul* is the Hindi word for bridge, and his nickname derived from his headquarters’ location under a flyover where trucks thunder past all day. Only five metres away from Pul Baba’s outdoor ‘office’ there were railway tracks, which makes his location eerily modern-yet-traditional: Sufi Muslim practitioners often settle where rivers meet and different worlds converge. It was by these railway tracks where Kamini sat down in front of Pul Baba and tearfully began to describe her ordeal.

Since her salary was crucial for making the household in Noida go around, her brothers- and sisters-in-law did everything they could to talk her out of divorcing her husband. For Kamini, the cardamoms and cloves she had begun to cough up convinced her that they used some kind of black magic to terrorize her into changing her mind. ‘Could “someone” have infused them with ritualized evil power and concealed them in her food?’ she asked. A psychologist might have said that she objectified the conflicting pressures of protecting herself and her daughter from further misery and saving her affinal joint family from breakup and loss of face, but the person she consulted was a Muslim ritual healer, not a psychologist.

Tears streamed down her face as she talked. Pul Baba listened empathetically while preparing the remedies he prescribed to dispel the black magic he agreed was harming her. These included photocopied paper scraps with Islamic writings rolled around incense sticks that were to be burned. He also asked for her passport photo, the full names of her parents and grandparents, and the home villages of each, and instructed her to tell her mother to bring her a bucket of water with which she could cleanse herself before re-entering her natal home.

What interests me is the complete surrender with which Kamini, a successful upper-caste Hindu professional, poured her troubles out to a rustic Sufi Muslim practitioner, hoping that his ritual powers would exceed those of her Hindu in-laws. Since Pul Baba’s powers relied on an in-depth knowledge about how to take help from the jinns, Kamini would need to acknowledge the existence and supreme efficacy of such beings in order to make her consultation worthwhile. Therein lies the ontological deviation from her Prime Minister’s non-stop promotion of Hinduism as a source of all knowledge and Truth. Even Hindus agree that jinns are of a distinctly Islamic origin, and those who experience improvement after consulting practitioners such as Pul Baba are unlikely to ever forget that they once were assisted by jinns and an experienced ritual specialist able to ask favours from them. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic made it impossible to follow Kamini’s case beyond her visit to Pul Baba.

## Santosh’s Double Trouble

‘Santosh’ was man in his thirties whom I came to know in the Kali temple in which I began my fieldwork. Hailing from a low-income OBC family, he had worked since the age of 12, initially as a restaurant helper and later as a domestic servant. When I first met him in 2013, he had spent seven years as a cook for a local big shot and lived in his employer’s servant quarters with his wife and 3-year-old daughter. In his breaks, he frequently came running to the temple to polish the brass lion that guarded the inner shrine as a service (*seva*) to the goddess. Though Santosh initially appeared content and he frequently praised his employer, he was unhappy over being disrespectfully addressed as Chotu (the small one) wherever he went, including in the temple.



His first plan was to change profession by becoming a Kali medium. To this end, he entered an apprenticeship with an experienced medium. Yet Santosh proved unable to control his possessions. Not only did they resemble spastic movements more than a goddess who spoke to and blessed her devotees; the timings were also inappropriate. Soon the temple regulars whose admiration he craved began to laugh at him, and since he frequently fell over in spasms when he was supposed to make lunch, he eventually lost his job as well.

His next employment was at a wealthy household some five kilometres away, and his family now relocated to the empty factory building that his new employers used as servant quarters. Here his wife began to change and one day she disappeared: having emptied Santosh's bank account, she had run off to another man and his mother. Though Santosh eventually managed to bring her back by convincing her that she had been bewitched by the man's mother, he never recovered his savings. Having returned to the factory building, his wife began to have scary visions of naked old women whom she identified as *churail* (demonesses or witches). Santosh then resigned. This time he became the housecleaner for a wealthy jeweller, but since the jeweller's servant room barely had space for one, his wife and daughter had to live elsewhere. Solitude aggravated his wife's condition further, and when their daughter—now around 7—began to refuse to go to school, her mother was too preoccupied with her own problems to talk her around.

When I first met Santosh, his main ambition had been to give his children a more secure future than what he had had himself. He had been a warm supporter of Modi's *beti bachao, beti padhao* (save daughters, educate daughters) campaign, which aimed to reduce India's gender gap ([Verma, Dhaka & Agrawal 2018](#)). Santosh worked extremely hard to this end. But when the unemployment rate began to grow in 2016–17, his life took another turn for the worse. Servants were now sacked for the smallest reason since they were so easy to replace. And Modi's demonetization made the informal economy, in which Santosh worked, so short of cash that not even the wealthy jeweller had enough bank notes to pay his domestics.

Santosh then brought his family to his ancestral village near Bareilly, where he had inherited a small piece of land from his father. Here he constructed a small brick house, hoping that the stable sociality of the village would do his wife good. From here the city would only be a 45-minute bicycle ride away, but employment proved difficult to find and easy to lose. In the following years, he worked from hand to mouth, helping his brother prepare lunch packs for white-collar customers, painting houses, frying *jalebi* (a sugary snack), working in a college canteen, trying his luck in additional upper-class households, and so on. In-between there was neither money nor much food. Though his daughter was content in the village, his wife detested its *pardah* custom, which not only forced her to start wearing saris for the first time of her life, but also to cover her face and serve tea as soon as an elder male relative of her husband entered their courtyard. After some months they decided that she would be better off working and before long she left for a servant position in Delhi while Santosh stayed back, a solution that forced them to send their daughter away to her paternal aunt in another village.

What did Santosh do to improve his fate besides working hard and continuing his daily worship of Goddess Kali? Initially he began to suspect that his uncontrollable possessions could be of a *brahma raksha* (spirit of a fallen Brahman) instead of Mother Kali and began to look for someone who could help him tame or dispel it. The only specialist he found was a Hindu Baniya engineer reputed for having acquired supernatural powers after becoming possessed by a Muslim spirit as a young boy. However, the engineer lived in another city, and repeated consultations would require more payment, travel costs and days off than Santosh could afford. His only practicable solution was thus to seek divine assistance closer to home and, like many others in Bareilly, he ended up at the Hazrat Shahdana Wali Dargah.

This Sufi-Muslim shrine is renowned for its power to heal unwanted possession. Though healing is slow, the grave's protective *barkat* is believed to normalize things little by little. One can also make offerings, as Santosh claimed to have done with his wife in hope that the deceased Sufi mystic could direct some jinns

or angels (*farishtas*) to dispel both her *churails* and his possible *brahma rakshas*. So far, I have accompanied Santosh here twice. Being a woman, I was not allowed to follow him into the inner shrine. Yet sitting down with other sufferers gave me a fair impression about the clientele: most were Muslim, underprivileged and soft spoken except when they got fits in which their inner spirits made them howl, curse, become violent, tear off their clothes or inflict harm on themselves.<sup>5</sup> On our second visit, Santosh and I were accompanied by two ethnographic filmmakers who, being men, could join him in the shrine with their camera. Watching their footage, I see Santosh crying bitterly inside, as if placing all his agony and misery at the feet of the long-deceased Sufi mystic.

Sadly, Santosh is yet to overcome his problems. By 2022 his wife had run off to the other man again and stayed, Santosh had relocated to first Agra and then back to Kanpur, and their daughter remains with her aunt and is still virtually illiterate at 11. Judging from his social media activities, Santosh has moved from being a budding Hindu nationalist in 2013 to promoting interreligious understanding in 2016–18 (which is when he visited this Bareilly dargah most actively) until the intense social media campaign to ensure Modi's re-election in 2019 made him Hindu nationalist again, this time fiercely so. Though the dargah certainly provided experiences of protection, hope and a common fate with some of the other clients, his case also underlines how fragile the cosmopolitan effects of heterotopic ritual spaces can be: unless life improves, they evaporate.

## Shabnam and Rani

The final case I will present pertains to Santosh and his wife's adopted daughter Shabnam while adding some intriguing complexities about Santosh's family history. Shabnam, who lived with Santosh's mother near Rampur, had entered the family as a toddler around 2004. According to Santosh, he and his mother had been at the railway station in Bareilly when they heard a train approaching and suddenly noticed a little girl and a goat on the tracks. Her biological parents may well have left her there on purpose. Santosh (then around 25) promptly jumped down, grabbed the girl and threw her into the arms of a tea seller on the platform. The Railway Police initiated a search for the biological parents, but the search was in vain, and one month later, Santosh and his mother were informed that the girl would be sent to an orphanage unless they took her in. They took her in and began the paperwork required for adoption, registering Santosh as her legal father. Yet since Santosh was still unmarried and worked as a domestic servant in Delhi, Shabnam remained with his mother, a setup that continued after Santosh married and his wife gave birth to the daughter I mentioned in the previous section.

The first time Santosh handed me his worn-out mobile phone to show me a photo of Shabnam, I was surprised to see that she was veiled though I already knew why: Santosh's mother originally hailed from a Muslim family. Some years following the demise of her husband, she relocated to her native town of Rampur and in so doing felt it safer to reassume her Muslim identity, which she in turn passed on to her adopted granddaughter. In the 1970s, marrying across religious divides had been less controversial than it came to be under Modi ([Gupta 2018](#), [Frøystad 2021](#)). None of the families were pious, Santosh's mother was never made to officially convert, and since they lived in the city, where they both worked (he in a factory, she as a nursemaid in a hospital), nobody interfered. Santosh had fond memories of sitting in his grandfather's lap to learn to read Urdu in addition to the Devnagari and Latin alphabets he learned at school, which indicates loving family relations in spite of the common Muslim reluctance to marry daughters 'out' of the faith.

<sup>5</sup> See [Bellamy \(2011\)](#) for an insightful discussion about the transition from hidden (*gum*) possession, which results in unwellness, misfortune and alienation, to open (*khuli*) possession, in which the spirit takes control over the body, reveals his/her identity and occasionally specifies the conditions for leaving it.

Interestingly, however, Santosh's paternal grandparents had never told their extended kin that their daughter-in-law hailed from a Muslim family. Consequently, Santosh's relatives in the village he relocated to in 2017 were unaware that the skinny old lady and shy-looking granddaughter (now teenaged) who occasionally came to visit them, had left Rampur as Muslims, unveiled somewhere along the two-hour bus journey, and arrived as Hindus. The complexities of abandonment, secrecy and intra-familial religious boundaries had now begun to affect Shabnam just at the time she began to realize that her future aspirations of becoming a doctor were hopelessly unrealistic.

The second time I visited Santosh in his ancestral village near Bareilly, I was—as mentioned earlier—accompanied by two ethnographic filmmakers. It was November 2017, and for this occasion Santosh had invited his mother and Shabnam over from Rampur. This was the first time I met them in person though I had spoken with both on the phone on several occasions. His mother, now a thin and wrinkled woman, currently earned her living by cleaning utensils for others, whereas Shabnam, now a curvy ninth-class student, loved school and particularly maths but had been ill for the past six months and was now falling dramatically behind. Santosh explained that she had a 'psychological' condition (using English) that affected her mind (*dimag nabin chalta*) and made her feel faint, for which she had been prescribed a medicine that caused swelling. Shabnam's dwindling dream of becoming a doctor was thus aggravated by her illness. As we sat outside talking softly, Shabnam's condition suddenly deteriorated, and Santosh carried her indoors. One of the filmmakers followed them and recorded a 20-minute scene in which Shabnam's body came under the control of a female Hindu spirit named Rani.<sup>6</sup>

The first minutes show Shabnam clutching her throat and gasping for breath, after which she faints. Once a folding bed is brought inside, Santosh lies her down, strokes her hair and tickles her naked feet to rule out that she is acting. No reaction. When she wakes up, the voice that speaks belongs to Rani and, when prompted by Santosh, she explains that she was a young girl who died of yellow fever because her parents, both farmers, could not afford medical treatment. Rani then notices Shabnam's smart phone in her pocket and tries to operate it but cannot. Santosh asks her why she keeps troubling Shabnam and what she requires to leave for good. Rani then states that she wants a *havan* (Vedic fire sacrifice) to be conducted in the name of Lord Krishna where the Kosi bridge crosses the Ganga.<sup>7</sup> Santosh promises to do what she requires, gives Rani some Ganga water and instructs her to leave. After some minutes, Shabnam clutches her throat and gasps, falls unconscious for half a minute and wakes up again as herself.

Following this incident, her family members admitted that it was Rani who had troubled Shabnam for the past six months, and since no medicines had helped, Santosh now vowed to follow her instructions. If we apply a psychological optic, we would probably bring out how Shabnam's possessions were prompted by an unspeakable desire for a more prominent place in Santosh's nuclear family combined with a growing realization that none of her caretakers would ever have the economic means to support her through higher education. For the purpose of this article, however, the question is how her possessions articulated with her familial religious complexity. For Shabnam, seeking a Vedic-inspired cure against spirit affliction had precious little to do with getting to know heterogeneous others. Nor was it reducible to ontological expansion. By placing herself at the centre of her father's concern and ritual activities, she not only rejected the straitjacket that forced her to divide her life between being a Muslim girl in Rampur and a Hindu girl in her father's village. By logical extension she also rejected the increasingly dominant either/or model in favour of a both/and model that enabled her to move around more seamlessly. Taking the cue from [Taneja \(2018\)](#), we can also ask how Shabnam's possession challenges conventional linear temporality. Whereas

<sup>6</sup> I thank Dipesh Kharel for sharing his footage with me.

<sup>7</sup> Conducting Vedic sacrifice in the name of a post-Vedic Hindu deity such as Krishna would probably not make much sense to Brahman priests or scholars of classic Hinduism. The Kosi bridge, west of Rampur, is named after the Kosi river, which joins the Ganga further downstream.

Taneja's case material shows how contemporary sufferers appeal for justice from spirit 'courts' that represent long gone sovereignties, Shabnam's case illuminates rather different chronological mashups. Granted, Rani seemed to be perceived as having passed on relatively recently given her familiarity with modern bridges, medical diagnoses and smartphones (the latter of which she was nevertheless incapable of operating). Even so, Shabnam's affliction exemplifies how a period in which India's religious plurality was less conflict-ridden than under Modi can erupt into and unsettle the increasingly exclusionary and polarized present, just like [Das \(2012: 142\)](#) shows how troubled times such as Partition can give rise to spirit possessions that destabilize families and their religious identities several generations later. By folding temporalities into one another, spirit possession runs counter to historical periodization, which entails that, just as the Modi era includes surprising traces of its predecessors, its own traces will outlive Modi himself by far.

## Concluding Remarks

The long-term development is probably undeniable: the Hindu nationalist movement promotes a modality of Hinduism that emulates the exclusivism of the monotheist religions. This development is driven by the need for a sufficient Hindu homogeneity and unity to realize the ambition of Hindu statehood as much as by the common tendency to unwittingly emulate that which one opposes, in this case Islam and Christianity. Yet what many scholars of political history fail to take into account is the countermovement: as long as India's residents struggle with uneven development, chronic illnesses, shattered aspirations and unfulfillable desires, some will continue to seek relief in ways that cross religious boundaries. And as the diversity within Hinduism shrinks, people will increasingly have to cross official religious boundaries for transgressive intervention, thus making Hindu nationalism work against itself. For each Modi, there will be many small Alices. If future BJP governments were to prevent this development, they would not only have to do far more to prevent hardship and expand low-cost but high-quality medical and psychological services. They would also have to use their leverage to encourage more innovation within Hindu-style ritual healing, including transgressive ritual forms, rather than putting all their energy into revitalizing an imagined Hindu Golden Age. This will be no less important following the devastating COVID-19 pandemic that raged across India in 2020–21, causing enormous economic hardship as well as an unprecedented number of 'bad deaths' such as Shabnam's Rani.

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