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RESEARCH ARTICLE (PEER REVIEWED)

# The Edgeways of Faith: The Space and Language of In-betweenness in New Delhi's Roadside Mazaars

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## Abstract

This article focuses on the vernacular spaces of roadside tombs—or mazaars—of anonymous saints (commonly referred to as 'Zinda Pir Baba') in the heart of the contemporary Indian capital, New Delhi. These mazaars are located along the megacity's main roads and constitute a shared space where Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs perform rituals in ways that do not classify or identify them as members of rival religious communities. The custodians of grave-shrines shape and reshape social and religious inclusiveness along vernacular and contemporary planes. Simultaneously, the makeshift environments of grave-shrines create a space of in-betweenness that ruptures gender roles, sidelines histories of power, and contests urban planning in India's capital city.

## Keywords

India; Delhi; Communalism; Grave-Shrines; Mazaar; Gender

## Introduction

We saw a grave-shrine by a roadside on a Thursday night in the winter of 2017, glowing with lighted lamps and covered with an embellished cloth, and it drove our curiosity. We heard visitors and caretakers recount their experiences there just after they had made their wishes,

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with contrasting supplicatory gestures that we associated with distinctive Islamic and Hindu faiths, and we were astonished. We listened to anecdotes about *Pir Babas* but never encountered the word ‘Sufi’ from the mouths of our storytellers. We glimpsed a fleeting motorcycle rider bow in the direction of the shrine, marking the moment before he moved on. And that is how we learned about the space and language of worship across religious divides at roadside grave-shrines in New Delhi and its nuances in the present (Snehi 2019b).

This article focuses on an arena of vernacular spaces comprising roadside *mazaars*—or shrines—of anonymous saints (commonly referred to as shrines of ‘*Zinda Pir*’ who is believed to inhabit the shrine)<sup>1</sup> in the heart of India’s capital New Delhi.<sup>2</sup> These *mazaars* are visited by large audiences on Thursday evenings (Urdu: *Jummah raat*), usually to make ritual offerings of flowers (mostly marigolds or rose petals), and votive objects such as candles/earthen lamps or *chaddars* (cloth coverings for the tombstone), while praying for boons pertaining to health, livelihoods or life’s other complications. Islamic symbols dominate the visual aspects of roadside *mazaars*, such as tiles printed with images of Mecca and Medina, the Islamic crescent and star, verses from the *Quran*, and the number ‘786’ (which is believed to be a shorthand for the *Quranic* expression *Bismillah ar-Rahman ar-Rahim*—‘In the name of God, the most gracious, the most merciful’). Yet these shrines also attract devotees attesting non-Islamic religious affiliations.



A roadside mazaar on Jummah Raat. Delhi 2017; © Ronie Parciack

1 Falasch [2016: 63] writes similarly of a grave-shrine in Uttar Pradesh: ‘Legends speak of perceptions of the saint virtually residing in his tomb ...’

2 The number of *Pir Baba* grave-shrines has increased in the city and there are now more of them than the 80 *dargahs* of venerated and well-known Sufis (Hifzur-Rahman 2011: xv). Although it is not possible for us to provide an accurate count, roadside grave-shrines (and other religious sites in public spaces, such as temples housing Hindu deities) are now a dominant feature of the city’s roadscape.

‘It’s hard to imagine that India’s political capital and power base Delhi was known through much of history not as the seat of kings and rulers but as a shrine of great saints,’ writes [Vikramjit Singh Ruprai \(2017: 1\)](#) at the beginning of his article ‘The Sufi Heart of Delhi.’ But that is how it still seemed to us as we explored the roadside shrines at the very core of New Delhi, dotted as it is with the graves of *Pir Babas*. In consonance with [Michel Boivin \(2016: 5\)](#), we began to wonder if there was ‘a specific kind of sainthood in the shrines,’ one that was anonymous, undocumented, and unsung except through the believers that show up on Thursday nights. These grave-shrines, which occupy roadsides and marginal spaces in the city, contrast with the majestic domed structures of the famous entombed *pirs*, often with attached hospices (*khanqahs*), mosques, madrasas (schools for Islamic learning), and bustling bazaars of the well-known *dargahs* elsewhere in Delhi ([Parveen 2014](#)).

While the *mazaars* we studied are located alongside the megacity’s central vista and major traffic arteries close to the Indian Parliament and adjoining government offices, these shrines foster a world that appears detachable from formal institutions, whether these be state organisations deciding upon urban design or gendered religious bodies. Far from the rigid categorization by religion that underpins contemporary India’s socio-political atmosphere and recent legislation—emphasizing the discourse of Hindu religious nationalism and citizenry<sup>3</sup>—participation at these shrines remains fluid and looks beyond the exacerbation of communal hostility after the Partition ([Ahmed 2002](#)) and the rise of the Hindu right.

Reports of atrocities against Muslims are commonly attested and evidenced in newspapers and law courts. Recent writings have highlighted the sharpening of religious boundaries, the communal turn, and the intimidation of Muslims in India ([Snehi 2019a](#); [Boivin 2019](#)). There is no doubt that these incidents are increasing. And yet, what we encountered at the roadside *mazaars* surprised us. These grave-shrines still attract people across faiths and speak of diverging practices within the preponderant Hindu tradition. The roadside *mazaars* foster a space and language of in-betweenness across religious divides and, through the intercession of *Zinda Pirs*, contest contemporary practices of power, gender and urban design in the Indian capital. Located in open spaces, roadside *mazaars* employ their accessibility in innovative ways, and in so doing promote a radical grammar of interreligious becomings in Delhi’s socio-religious context.

In this essay, we employ methods that draw upon qualitative cultural anthropology, comparative religion as well as gender and urban studies to explore the culture of roadside *mazaars*. We selected 14 roadside shrines for intensive study, most of which are located within a two-kilometre radius from the central vista known as Rajpath in New Delhi. We also contrast the environment of the larger and more institutionalized *dargah* compounds in central Delhi with the habitus of roadside *mazaars*. The latter shrines are accessible at all times, but the most significant period for worship at *Pir Baba* shrines is Thursday night (*Jumma Raat*), that is, the beginning of Friday, since the day in Islamic terms stretches from sunset to sunset. Devotees start arriving on Thursday evenings and some stay on for an hour or more and others might just make fleeting visits, but this was certainly the most informative period for our fieldwork. Singing, reciting Quranic verses, making offerings, seeking counselling services on Thursday nights and a *langar-bhandar* (community feast) on the *Pir Baba’s Urs* (annual death anniversary celebration) are events open to all. The only written material we were ever offered was the invitation to the *Urs*.

We present three axes along which the power of the *Zinda Pir* is regarded as a counter to the force exercised by the state and dominant religious orders: the communal divide along religious lines, the patriarchal, gendered order of established religious institutions, and the hyperlocal narratives that impact the urban design proposed by state institutions. In what follows, we start by analysing the spatial settings of

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) that was signed into law on December 2019, and the related legislation pertaining to the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the National Population Register (NPR) which differentiate Indian citizens on religious grounds and are designed to re-organise and homogenise Indian society by intensifying its exclusivist Hindu demography and character.

roadside *mazaars*; next, we explore the interreligious and gendered aspects of caretaking at the shrine and then bring to light incidents where the intercession by the *Zinda Pir* is seen to challenge the might of state officials in the city. 'If the shrine,' as [Michel Boivin \(2016\)](#) put it, 'was framed by the urban, in return the urban was also framed by the shrine,' in the contests that the shrines posed to state authority.

## Roadside *Mazaars* and the Grammar of Open Space

Roadside *mazaars*, as the term indicates, are located more often than not along pavements adjoining prime traffic arteries throughout central Delhi and, though less frequently, at traffic roundabouts. The *mazaars* we encountered vary in the degree and manner of their physical openness. We were struck by their location under the ample canopies of old, shade-bequeathing trees, sometimes bordered by low fences that could be easily climbed over or beneath. an asbestos roof that adjoined the grave to shelter devotees from the rain. Only very rarely did these structures morph into gated enclosures. The stretch of pavement around the grave is often overlaid with tiles and looks visibly different from the usual rough and grimy surface of the footpath. These environmental features of fences, roofs, tiles, trees, and other visible signs such as lamps and the *chaddars* that cover the tombstone are orchestrated to make the space visible, open, aesthetic and accessible. Their situatedness in open, public spaces comes to underpin and promote notions of openness and accessibility in spatial, social and religious ways.



A typical roadside mazaar, Lodhi Colony, Delhi 2022; © Ronie Parciack

This approachability develops along temporal lines as well since grave-shrines are characteristically open on all weekdays, come rain or shine, unlike mosques and temples that tend to have defined working hours. The infrastructure at the grave-shrines is remarkably robust and facilitates the performative aspects of rituals that are carried out conspicuously on Thursday evenings. A part of the floor adjoining the grave is demarcated for rituals, counselling, contemplation and prayers. Each shrine has arrangements for washing hands, a donation box, a clay pot for incense sticks, a place for leaving lighted oil lamps or candles, and a jar of consecrated food (*tabarruk*). Overall, the environment of roadside grave-shrines is fluid, shaped, and reshaped through the ongoing interactions between the grave-shrine caretakers, devotees, vendors and at times the state personnel in charge of inspecting encroachments in public spaces.

## Mazaar, Dargah, Pir Baba and Questions of Authority

We begin by considering the concepts of *mazaar*, *dargah* and *Pir Baba* to show how these are evidenced in local and colloquial usage. These concepts derive from Sufi-Islamic contexts and attain currency from the context of worship at grave-shrines. In the Hindu faith, cremation is the ordinary way of disposing of dead bodies. The word *mazaar*, which denotes a grave, is derived from the Arabic word *ziyarah* ('pious visitation'), and hints at the popular practice of pilgrimage to saints' graves, usually for the granting of personal wishes. *Dargah* (a term of Persian origin) means 'gateway,' thereby suggesting the liminal space where one can seek the *Pir's* intercession with the divine. The two words, *mazaar* and *dargah*, are both used in the city, often interchangeably, but the *dargah* comes to connote the graves of renowned Sufi saints that are surrounded by expansive compounds. The term *dargah* resonates with the notion of an elaborated architecture with claims to a higher formal status and the institutionalized system behind it. Such examples would include the *dargahs* of the illustrious *pirs* of Delhi, including the eminent Dargah of Hazrat Khwaja<sup>4</sup> Nizamuddin Auliya in the central neighbourhood of Nizamuddin, the Dargahs of Hazrat Turkman Bayabani, Dargah Hazrat Khwaja Muhammad Baqi Billah and Dargah Hazrat Shah Abu al-Khair near the Turkman Gate in Old Delhi, the Dargah of Qutbuddin Bakhtiar Kaki in Mehrauli and Dargah Hazrat Nasiruddin Mehmud in Chirag, South Delhi, to cite the well-known sites.

In contrast to the *dargahs* alluded to above, the term *mazaar* is often used to indicate graves of anonymous, often unknown holy men, or *faqees*, such as the *Pir Babas* or simply *Babas* as they were frequently abbreviated by caretakers and devotees alike. *Pir Baba* devotees combine the word *pir* (Sufi authority/teacher) with the word *baba* (faqeer/holy man) to refer to a range of holy men whose biographies, origins, religious affiliations, and identities are often unspecified by name. Although the terms *mazaar* and *Pir Baba* originally come from Sufi terminology, the roadside grave-shrine culture is usually detached from the institutionalized and hierarchical aspects of the word 'Sufi' and the Sufi world. In contrast to its image as the antithesis of the rigidness of Islamic orthodoxy (Knysh 2004: 5-9), Sufism has institutionalized traditions (*tareeqahs* or *silsilas*) that are concerned with issues of regulation, hierarchy, and formal authority.

Sufi brotherhoods are established by teachers (*pirs*, *mursheeds*), who transmit their authority to an heir, ideally, a son but sometimes a disciple (*mureed*), thereby forming transmission lineages consisting of authorized successors. The successors are termed *Sajjada-Nasbeen* (the one who holds the prayer rug and thereby represents the late founder of the *silsila*) or *Gaddi-Nasbeen* (the one who sits on the throne). Those who are formally acknowledged as successors, either through genealogical affinity or through official permission, are perceived as legitimate Sufi leaders) and come to form what Nile Green (2017: 159) terms a 'spiritualized aristocracy'. Simultaneously, an unequivocal dividing line is drawn between those who are formally endowed with authority and those who are not. In other words, Sufism can also exemplify a

4 Honorific Sufi terms. *Hazrat* denotes respectful presence and *Khwaja* refers to a Sufi authority.

regime of formal, institutionalized power, hierarchies and a rigid distinction between insiders and outsiders, legitimate and illegitimate authorities.<sup>5</sup>

Whereas the authorized disciples perpetuate the founder's roles of teaching by initiating other *mureeds* and transmitting the shrine's custodianship along lineage lines, the deceased founder is assigned a different role. The late *Pir's* demise is not interpreted as death but rather as his longed-for union or 'spiritual marriage' with Allah. He is believed to be *zinda* (alive), floating 'behind the curtain' or living in a subterranean mode at the grave-shrine. He is believed to be able to intercede with Allah on behalf of his supplicants, to impact their life events, and perform miracles (*karamat*). These beliefs make his grave a space of spiritual presence and a locus for pilgrimages. The graves may become elaborate compounds around which enlarged infrastructural and economic systems develop. A whole system of custodians evolves for physically maintaining the grave-shrine and managing the economic system around it, as well as overseeing the practices performed within the shrine.

Caretakers are usually referred to as *Khadim* (pl. *Khudam*), from the Arabic word *Khidmat* (service), or 'sacred activism' as defined by [Pio and Syed \(2014: 574\)](#). In contrast to the formal, prestigious lineages of authorized custodians in established *dargahs* whose role has been passed down from generation to generation (like the *Sajjada/Gaddi Nasheens*), and *Khudams* of renowned *dargahs* who are endowed with strong legitimacy, power and symbolic capital, the caretakers of roadside *mazaars*, who maintain and serve the *mazaar*, are rarely affiliated with any *silsila*. They are often known simply as *Khidmatgars* (caretakers) and rarely by the formal terms of *Sajjada* or *Gaddi-Nasheen*. Their role is to take charge of the grave-shrine, oversee maintenance and the conduct of rituals in this locally circumscribed space and partake of its offerings.

Despite their affinity with *dargah/Sufi* saint culture, most of the *mazaars* we encountered are separated from Sufi lineages, power hubs, and institutions. How do such *mazaars* detach themselves from formal, institutionalized dimensions? The anonymity and individual authority of the *Pir* actively support the distancing from established Sufi exemplars. Roadside *mazaars* often get along without a name but have an address, sometimes identified by a tree (as in 'The Neemwale *Baba*' or the '*Pir* under the Neem<sup>6</sup> Tree' on Red Cross Road). Other shrines too are located by reference to a tree which is a noticeable feature identifiable from afar. Rising above the grave, the shade-giving tree comes to be associated with the saint. Its age is taken to be synchronous with the *Pir Baba's* and indirectly (or naturally) testifies to the absence of the latter's biographical details.

Whereas Delhi's centuries-old Sufi luminaries have impressively documented hagiographies and histories (see, for instance, [Hifzur-Rahman 2011](#)), anonymous roadside *mazaars* are disconnected from the written history of religious authorities. The caretakers themselves tend to be poorly acquainted with the history or genealogies of these *Pir Babas*, if at all. When pressed for details, the 74-year-old caretaker of the shrine on Subramania Bharti Marg replied: 'He must have been somebody's *mureed*, but we don't know anymore.' The disconnection from accounts of formal history seems to function as a powerful impetus for multiple formulations of hyperlocal history, creating nuanced spaces of possibility that advance alternative notions of community, gender, and urban design in the city. This conception resonates with Deleuze's notion of a rhizomatic multiplicity which is without a determinable point of origin or end and is '... rather an organization belonging to the many as such which does not need unity whatsoever to form a system' ([Deleuze 1994: 182](#)).

<sup>5</sup> Colloquially, the unauthorized are sometimes addressed as 'fake Shaikhs' or 'fake Babas' (Syed Kashif Ali, personal communication, October 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Neem: *Azadirachta indica*.

## Spaces of Possibility: Challenging Communalism

Religious strife and riots between groups of Hindus and Muslims, which are often dubbed ‘communalism,’ are widely reported to have escalated in India during the last two decades. This period has been marked by the rise of ardent Hindu religious nationalism (‘ethno-nationalism,’ as termed by [Christophe Jaffrelot 2017](#): 52–63) and the landslide wins by the Hindu Right in the 2014 and 2019 general elections. Within this context, [Ishtiaq Ahmed’s \(2002\)](#) notion of ‘pathological politics’ elaborates the idea that communal dynamics in India comprise sharp demarcation, rejection, exclusion, subordination, social exclusion, violence, and hostility towards the large minority of Indian Muslims.<sup>7</sup>

During the second tenure of the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) in the central government from 2019 onwards, the Indian public sphere has seen the passing of legislative acts such as the superseding of Articles 370 and 35A of the Indian constitution (*Bharatiya Saavidhaana*) in August 2019 that ascribed special status to the Muslim-majority state of Jammu and Kashmir ([Constitution 1954](#)); the Supreme Court ruling on the Ayodhya dispute in November 2019 (Supreme Court 2019); and finally, the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) signed into law in December 2019. That the CAA can potentially deny groups of Indian Muslims their citizenship demonstrates the categorical manifestation of state power to intervene in communal relations.

These legislative acts join campaigns enacted during the BJP’s first tenure (2014–2019). The drives included campaigns such as: ‘*Ghar Vaapsi*’ (calling for massive conversions of non-Hindus ‘back’ to Hinduism as part of the effort to Hinduize the nation); ‘Love *Jihad*’ (accusing and at times attacking Muslim men for entering into relations with non-Muslim women with the alleged intention to convert them to Islam); promoting ‘*Gau Raksha*’ (‘Protection of the Cow’), a symbol that doubles for the protection of the Hindu motherland, which encouraged lynchings of Muslims suspected of possessing or consuming beef; and ‘Land *Jihad*’ (refusal to sell real estate to Muslims). Furthermore, even Islamic worship in public, it is feared, can inflame Hindu passions. In June 2019, the Muslims who were conducting their Friday prayers in the open in Gurgaon near Delhi were challenged by representatives of right-wing organizations shouting ‘*Jai Shree Ram*’ (‘Victory to Lord Ram’—a signifier for an ideal Hindu state) which led to self-imposed restrictions upon Islamic visibility ([Dey 2018](#)).

Given the charged context of Hindu-Muslim relations, the presence of Sufi/Islamic places of worship and visible symbols in the open, central spaces of roadside grave-shrines prompts questions regarding a syncretic counterculture in contemporary Delhi. While syncretistic sites can turn into sites of aggression ([Mayaram 2004](#): 1251–53; 2011), the recent history of these sites did not afford such evidence. We found that grave-shrines were still providing large platforms for the diversified manifestations of popular religion.

Roadside *mazaar* culture shares a convivial terrain with the culture of the larger and more well-known pilgrim sites, for instance, in Malerkotla ([Bigelow 2010](#)) and Ajmer. These sites attract devotees of all denominations and the caretakers never inquire after the religious identity of devotees ([Bigelow 2010](#); [Sanyal 2007](#)).<sup>8</sup> During our fieldwork (2017–2019 and ongoing) we witnessed Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs at the grave-shrines, supplicating in the manner that they deemed right. Often, distinctive practices were discernible among the devotees. Raising their hands with their palms facing upwards in the *dua* (supplication) gesture or reciting the *Fatiba* (the opening *Surah* of the *Quran*) indicated, by and large, a Muslim presence. The customary *namaste/namaskar* more or less correctly identified the Hindus for us. But on a few occasions, even such identification was belied. Along the roadside shrine at Zakir Hussain

7 Muslims constitute 14.23% of the Indian population and approximately 180 million citizens according to the 2011 census (Religious Census 2011).

8 In her analysis of the Ajmer Dargah, Usha Sanyal noted that Sufi shrines are generally frequented by pilgrims of all denominations ([Sanyal 2007](#): 183).

Marg near Bapa Nagar we came across a Hindu devotee, an engineer specializing in accident control, who identified himself as a Rajput but adopted the gestures typical of a devout Muslim, which he thought was the appropriate practice at this site. Nor was the adherence to religious identity strict and dogmatic—a Hindu lawyer who works in an office near Bapa Nagar told us, ‘I follow interfaith.’ At another shrine, a twenty-year-old declared: ‘God is to be seen everywhere.’ He said, ‘My religion is to follow every god. Also, Durga Mata (a form of the mother-goddess).’ When asked about *Hindutva*, he uttered: ‘I know that God is one, and each person has his own thoughts ... [regarding divinity] ... sometimes progress happens slowly, slowly.’

We also came across non-Muslim caretakers at the grave-shrines which surprised us but widened the net of social inclusion in evidence at *Pir Baba* shrines (Boivin 2019). The *mazaar* off Pandit Pant Marg is ensconced in the middle of a garden at an intersection bounded by a residential enclave of high-ranking politicians and civil servants. Initially, we identified its caretaker as a Muslim since he was wearing a skull cap. He told us that he is a Guru-Baba (*Guru* is a Hindu/Sikh term for a spiritual teacher) and that after his retirement from a government job in 2015 serving devotees has become his full-time vocation. We could see that a corner of the shrine complex was set aside for his counselling services and there were devotees at the shrine seeking out his advice. When we asked him whether he could recount any *Pir Baba* miracles for us, he declared: ‘The biggest miracle of all is that the caretaker you are talking to is a Hindu.’<sup>9</sup> We had no reason to doubt his claim but began investigating the matter closely at the other shrines as well. Visitors and caretakers of roadside *mazaars* do not belong to a single religious denomination. Sanjay, the caretaker of a *mazaar* on Atul Grove Road, we discovered, is also a self-declared Hindu.

Looking into the temporal dimension of worship at Delhi’s *mazaars*, we discerned that *mazaar* practices fit into the city’s interreligious weekly calendar as well. We were told that ‘Thursdays are sacred to *Pir Baba*, just as Tuesdays are dedicated to *Hanuman* [the Hindu monkey-god], Fridays are sacred to *Santoshi Maa* [a recent incarnation of a goddess in the Hindu pantheon] and Saturdays are consecrated to *Shiva* [one of the pivotal gods of the Hindu pantheon].’ At a shrine on Zakir Husain Marg, we encountered a photograph of the Sufi saint Baba Farid (whose verses are also included in the sacred book of the Sikhs, the *Guru Granth Sahib*). Again, at a roadside shrine on Red Cross Road, we noticed another photograph of Baba Farid that we were told was brought there by a devotee and was subsequently placed on the wall of the *dargah* by the caretaker. At a grave-shrine on Atul Grove Road, we saw a framed picture of Shirdi Sai Baba (an ascetic revered by Muslims and Hindus though his figure has undergone a certain ‘Hinduization’ in recent decades). *Bhajans* (Hindu spiritual songs) relating to Sai Baba, as well as (Islamic) *Qawwalis*, were played alternately on a cassette player at this shrine.

Another significant dimension in the creation of shared spaces at roadside *mazaars* relates to linguistic accommodation. The word ‘*Allah*’ or ‘*Ya Allah*’ was inscribed in Arabic and/or Devanagari (Hindi) scripts. Our discussions with people at the *Pir Baba* shrines further revealed verbal pairings and analogies intended to communicate across vocabularies, languages, and religious traditions. A caretaker at a shrine on Parliament Street who was educated at a Muslim *madrasa* (Islamic religious school) put it this way:

These *Pir Babas* are *Sufi-saints* (ascetic holy men); they practice *piri-mureedi* [spiritual guide-disciple relationship] like your [i.e. Hindu/Sikh] *guru-shishya relationship* (teacher-student relationship). Our *ibadat* is like your *prarthana* [Islamic and Hindu terms respectively for devout worship and prayer] ... *tabarruk* is like your *prasad* [Islamic and Hindu terms for a consecrated food offering].

Other caretakers added to these usages: ‘*Allah* is like your *Bhagwan*’ (a Hindu term denoting the universal God); ‘*Ibadat* is like *Bhakti*’ (these terms broadly signify worship in the Islamic and Hindu traditions).

<sup>9</sup> We gathered that caretakers of other *Pir Baba* shrines, both in Delhi (Wazirpur) and elsewhere (Maharashtra, Assam), are occasionally Hindus (see also Singh 2010).

Although these words have distinct resonances within scriptural traditions, analogies enabled delimited and contextual equivalences that departed from fixed meanings. These word pairings and analogies stem from the attempt to mark out, comprehend, and communicate the sense of one set of distinctive religious concepts in terms of the language and concepts generated within another religious system that suffice for the limited local context. (Brara 2017: 208, 217). At the level of the Indic civilization, the culture of Sufi and Bhakti religiosity is often paired because of their shared capacity to override all sorts of divisions. Our attempt here is to draw attention to the pairings that crystallize in a local context and furnish the details which may accord with or differ from the broad canvas that the civilization lays out.

The linguistic devices alluded to above compose the fabric of everyday practices that are subsumed in the conception of ‘interreligious hermeneutics.’ Cornille and Conway coined the felicitous expression, ‘interreligious hermeneutics’ to highlight the significance of dialogue invested in the appropriation and the reinterpretation of the other in terms of one’s own religious tradition (2010: xvii). Along the same lines, Patton shows how interreligious hermeneutics grows out of ‘pragmatic pluralism’ in contexts of mutual dependence and a shared civic life (2010: 248). Maraldo emphasizes the importance of ritual and bodily actions oriented to the here-and-now of interreligious communication, which is removed from the relatively distant and textual emphasis of hermeneutics (2010: 96). Further, Moyaert brings in Ricoeur’s notion of ‘linguistic hospitality’ to translate the untranslatable as a dimension of ‘interreligious hermeneutics’ (2010: 82–86). While this literature resonates with what we encountered at *Pir Baba* shrines in the city, below we illustrate how a combination of linguistic and non-linguistic signs emblazoned on ritual cloth coverings (*chaddar*) offered at *Pir Baba* shrines, fabricated a material and interreligious space, and the entrepreneurial striving to communicate it.

A popular *chaddar* has an array of signs including a crescent moon and star, the number 786 (which are Islamic symbols) and the phrase *Jai Pir Baba Di* (‘Hail *Pir Baba*!’), deploying the Hindi term ‘*jai*’ (hail!) that is imprinted as well. The script is Hindi/Devanagari, but the syntax of the sentence (and the last word) is Punjabi and is intended to attract the city’s Punjabi residents as well. The salutation of *Jai Pir Baba Di* also resonates with the greeting *Jai Mata Di* (‘Hail the Mother!’) to the Hindu goddess. Interestingly, this significance of the *chaddar* was explained to us by a devotee we met at a *mazaar* near Gurdwara Rakab Gunge. Continuing this interreligious conversation, the caretaker drew attention to the *chaddar* as being akin to the red veil (*chunari*) that is offered to the *devi* (goddess) by Hindus. This add-on was contributed by a woman caretaker—which constitutes another unique and women-oriented dimension of roadside *mazaar* culture that we delve into next.

## Offsetting the Gendered Order: Women Caretakers at *Pir Baba* Shrines

Although women have long been mystics, scholars, and poets in Sufism’s history,<sup>10</sup> the well-known and formally structured Sufi shrines are hierarchically organized, dominated by men, and entail prescribed rules for transmitting custodianship along patrilineal lines. Authoritative roles are assigned exclusively to male members. This milieu continues to be unchanged today though *dargahs* honouring women are active in New Delhi—to cite some prominent examples: the Dargah of Bibi Fatima Sam in Kaka Nagar; the grave of Bibi Zulekha Mai Saheba, the mother of Nizamuddin Auliya on Sri Aurobindo Marg; and the grave of Jahanara Begum, the daughter of Shah Jahan in the compound of Nizamuddin Dargah. Further, while a large number of the devotees at *dargahs* and *mazaars* are women, they are excluded and denied entry to the *sanctum sanctorum* of the most famous Sufi *dargah* compounds such as at Nizamuddin, Mehrauli, Baqi

10 For details, see Burney Abbas 2002; Helminski 2003; Burkhalter Flueckiger 2008; Pemberton 2004, 2010; Birchok, 2016.

Billah, and Abu al-Khair shrines.<sup>11</sup> However, women are employed at the larger and more established grave-shrines as cleaners and sweepers on monthly wages and constitute the majority of weekly flower-sellers there as well.

By contrast to the limited presence of women as stakeholders in established *dargahs* and mosques, some of the roadside *mazaars* we visited are maintained and run by women. Women turned out to be the caretakers at four of the 14 roadside shrines we studied and some of them had inherited their positions matrilineally. This feature drew attention to the possibilities for women to assume positions of authority in relation to roadside shrines in contradistinction to their absence inside the patrilineal forms of social order associated with major and mainstream *mazaar/dargah* cultures. Nonetheless, and simultaneously, it demonstrates the social contexts of subalternity, marginality, and blurred boundaries that frame roadside *mazaar* culture. Below we present four instances of female authority over *Pir Baba mazaars*.

## Female caretakers: Between Power and Resistance

When she was widowed at the age of 26, Meena's husband's family evicted her from the family home. Her Muslim husband had been an occasional caretaker at an anonymous shrine in Bapa Nagar, Zakir Husain Marg, ever since her marriage in 1985. After his death, she continued to return and care for it even after she had shifted back with her natal Hindu family. She opined that gradually, with *Pir Baba's* blessings, the donations by devotees at the grave grew and she could arrange to tile the coarse surface of the grave and a section of the surrounding pavement. Thirty-five years later, Meena still comes here on Thursday nights, when most devotees turn up, and she continues to have the de facto right to the cash offerings that are made at the shrine. Often, she is accompanied by her daughter and grandchildren who are now being acquainted with the conduct of arrangements for devotees at the shrine.

Mumtaz, who managed the *Pir Baba* shrine on Subramania Bharti Marg, is now 74 years old. She was widowed very early and her aunt, who was then the caretaker at a larger shrine in Kaka Nagar across the road, suggested that she could tend two *mazaars* that had no caretakers in the 1950s. She was told that it would give her some peace of mind and enable her to augment her livelihood from offerings at the shrine. Since Mumtaz is now too old to carry out her responsibilities at the shrine, she has entrusted its care to her daughter and son-in-law. The latter two are well-to-do but fulfil this responsibility earnestly.

Farhana, a 50-year-old woman caretaker, has been serving at a shrine adjoining a taxi-stand at the corner of Humayun Road for about 25 years. How did she get to working here? She explains that it was a call from *Baba* that took the form of a woman caretaker letting her know that there was a 'vacancy' at the shrine. Farhana, who was unhappy working as a domestic help, jumped at the opportunity and for her there has been no looking back.

Mariam looks after a shrine in the Mandi House area, that has a name ('Nanhe Miyan Chishti') and the year of its establishment (1966) legibly indicated as signage on the road in a manner atypical of the smaller shrines managed by women. She took over responsibilities for the grave after her husband passed away about a decade ago. Now, one of her sons has become an established caretaker at the shrine but Mariam continues to come here every Thursday and has assumed the new role of selling flowers.<sup>12</sup>

11 In December 2018 law students filed a public interest suit at Delhi's high court demanding to make the Dargah accessible for women. Denying women's entry to shrines is customary in different Sufi orders, whether the relatively flexible Chishti-Nizami or the more orthodox and rigid Naqshbandiyya. See [Singh, P. P. & Lakhani, S: 2018](#).

12 In Dargah Shaikh Kalimullah, near Kabutar Market in Old Delhi, too, a widowed woman is fully in charge of the compound; however, the official position of *Sajjada-Nasheen* is ascribed to her son, who inherited it from his late father but works at another job to support the family.



Meena at her roadside mazaar by Jumma Raat. Delhi, 2017; © Ronie Parciack

All four women are grateful to their respective *Pir Babas* for their blessings and the donations made at their shrines. They continue to contribute through their *khidmat* (maintenance, selling ritual items) which translates into both material and symbolic capital. Their stories speak of interreligious marriages (Meena), widowhood (Meena, Mumtaz, Mariam) and family rejection (Meena) but, located betwixt and between religions and families, they have been able to claim—often through the intercession of other women—the no-man’s land of anonymous *mazaars*. In line with the detachment from institutionalized Sufism, three of the four shrines run by women are not associated with any formal Sufi order. These women caretakers were unfamiliar with the history of the shrines that they tended but rejected their respective *Pir Baba’s* affinity and their own to a site other than the grave-shrine. When Mumtaz was asked about a possible relationship to the adjacent Kamal Masjid, she said, ‘The shrine is closer to the taxi stand than the *masjid* (mosque).’ When asked about an equation with established *dargahs*, such as Nizamuddin, her answer was: ‘It is a big *dargah*, what do I know? It is [under] their rule.’ Likewise, the other women indicated their distance from formal *dargahs*.

The distinction between custodians and caretakers, with the latter status being claimed on the basis of an old and continuous relationship with a venerable *Pir*, seemed to be emerging at roadside *mazaars* too now. Some of the male caretakers at the larger *mazaars* were intent upon stressing their filiation with Sufi orders, thereby canonizing their pirs and grave-shrines. While *khidmatgar* implies one who performs sacred



Mumtaz at her roadside mazaar; Delhi 2022. © Ronie Parciack

service, the category seemed to be splitting into those who would speak of inheriting their status from a distinguished and named *Pir*, those who thought of their statuses as recently inherited going back two or three generations, and women who were now having to deal with the heritability of their statuses.

For instance, the *khidmatgar* at the Bureh Shah Dargah opposite the Oberoi Hotel styled himself as a custodian when he pointed to the shrine's gateway which has the following words emblazoned: 'This leads straight to Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya Dargah.' Similarly, the custodian of the Hazrat Sheikh Imadduddin Ismail Firdausi Qadri Dargah in the same area also linked that shrine to the *dargah* at Nizamuddin declaring: 'This grave-shrine is 800 years old, that is to say, it is as old as the Nizamuddin Dargah.' Hajj Abdul Rasheed, the *Khadim* of Bibi Fatima Dargah in Kaka Nagar, again, laboured to connect the narratives of the *dargah* to the grand narrative of Islam:

Bibi Fatima [Muhammed's daughter and the most venerated woman in orthodox Islam] came to Delhi about 900 years ago, together with Ghareeb Nawaaz [the founder of the Chishti Silsila in India]. The place used to be a forest, and this is why they stayed here ... she is considered to be the sister of all *Pirs*. They stayed here for 100 years.

While custodians at the larger dargahs pointed to the affiliations of their *Pirs* to the Great Traditions of Islam, the male caretakers of the roadside *mazaars* highlighted their present traditional and patrilineal transmission in the attempt to raise their status. The genealogies that they spoke of were, however, relatively very shallow. For instance, Masood, 30, the caretaker of the Neem Wale Baba (the Baba of the Neem Tree) on Red Cross Road, underscored the transmission within the patrilineage at this *mazaar*: 'The caretaking role at this shrine,' he said, 'goes from brother-to-brother and generation-to-generation now, like the

practice in the long-established *dargahs* of north India.<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, Masood inherited his position from his mother. His grandfather was a Hindu who converted to Islam upon marrying his grandmother. The features of blurred religious boundaries and gender roles are evidenced in his story as well, even as he seeks to ascend the ladder to custodianship and was the one who circulated the printed invitation for the *Urs* to enhance his status.

However, the fact that women serve as caretakers at roadside *mazaars* is either not widely known or not widely acknowledged. When we asked their male counterparts, the response was either denial ('I haven't seen any women *khidmatgars*') or we were told that 'this whole area was a graveyard once and many women were in charge but then some left.' In one instance, the reaction we encountered was almost hostile. A male custodian was indeed aware of this fact, but his voice rose as he questioned the possibility of female authority. At first, he tried to undervalue the practices at these locations, 'People there are looking for *karaamat*' (miracles). This was an aspersion suggesting that they go there for instrumental purposes and not spiritual elevation/worship. He went on to undermine the value ascribed to a woman's role by interpreting their *khidmat* (sacred care) as menial female work which entailed just the cleaning of the shrine: 'There's no need for a woman to do anything more, only this job ... if they do the job, then this is good.' Unsurprisingly then, the roadside *mazaar* culture of women caretakers attempts to remain overtly detached from institutionalized and patriarchal constructs but the heritability of the right is an emerging concern.

## Contending with State Authorities: The *Pir Baba* Shrine and the City

The tension between the formal institution of the state and the authority vested in *Pir Babas* by their faithful caretakers and followers runs into conflict in the context of the state's attempt to plan the city's public spaces and infrastructure. The shrines discussed here are located in central Delhi, in main thoroughfares and prime locations that are claimed by the government which exercises its power through appointed officials. Graves, which now register as roadside grave-shrines in public spaces, often pre-existed the construction of roads and buildings in New Delhi. The arc we explored, the vast expanse of land to the south of India Gate, off Rajpath, was formerly a vast cemetery, indeed a land of graves and grave-shrines, constructed upon by the British rulers and later by the Indian state.

When state authorities decided to make roads and construct buildings on this land, most of the graves in this area were flattened ([Taneja 2013](#): 147–48). The few that remained manifested the enormous power of their *Pirs* in successfully resisting sovereign state power, we were told. The threat to grave-shrines could only be counteracted by the power of the '*Zinda Pirs*.' The clash between the force of religion and the force of law continued in the years following Independence in 1947 and it persists. Only exceptional *Pir Babas* are still able to thwart state-imposed plans on the plane of immanence, that is to say in the here-and-now, in the view of caretakers and believers alike. And these *Pir Babas* share their following's concerns with life's stumbling blocks ([Green 2017](#)).

While religious structures built on public spaces such as pavements and road junctions are considered illegal, minor elaborations that include tiling the grave, its headstone, or the floor at the site or cordoning off an area for seating devotees, for instance, are often overlooked. In 2009, the Supreme Court first ordered that all 'encroachments' of religious structures on public space should be demolished. In 2016, again, the Supreme Court stipulated that: 'Everyone has the right to walk. God never intended to obstruct the path meant for the people.' The ruling reiterated that its orders appeared to have been put 'in cold storage' and that these illegal structures constituted 'an insult to God' ([Bhadra 2016](#)).

Yet, tales of miraculous subversion of state-mandated plans by anonymous *Pir Babas* are frequently attested at the minor roadside shrines that we studied. Each story of a surviving grave-shrine, in the

13 See Tanvir Anjum (2009) for details on problems of hereditary succession posed to Sufi *pirs*.

view of the caretaker and often the devotees as well, testifies to the *Pir Baba's* presence. A contemporary hagiographic tale narrates his miraculous powers, highlighting his present resistance to state-mandated changes that could have affected the shrine adversely. These storied events, what Ricciardi felicitously describes as 'immanent miracles,' are circulated by the *mazaar's* caretakers and custodians. In her view, these miraculations 'only emerge from a contingent and immanent perspective' (2007: 1157).

At the grave-shrine on Ashoka Road, right outside the gate of the Election Commission's imposing office building, we were informed that the very presence of the shrine at that spot was nothing short of a miracle. In the caretaker's words: 'In this closely guarded area, not even a loose brick is allowed.' He went on to relate an extraordinary and recent event at the shrine which is translated below:

Additional construction inside the Election Commission's building complex entailed bringing in a massive earth-moving machine [JCB] into the premises which would have involved cutting off the branches of the *neem* tree that towers above the grave-shrine. My protests fell on deaf ears. Instead, a sermon on how superstition should have no quarter in today's era of science and technology was delivered to one and all present by the official in charge. However, as the machine was being driven through the gate, all of a sudden the vehicle's brakes jammed just before it got to the tree and none of the engineer's staff could get the machine going again.

The next day, we were told, the official relented and the driver managed to make his way with a smaller machine without so much as grazing a leaf of the tree.

In a more recent story, akin to the above, the caretaker of a shrine located along the footpath adjoining a flyover on Zakir Hussain Marg told us how the chief engineer had planned on demolishing the site to make way for new construction:

This shrine is well over a hundred years old. Our pleas to save it were ignored. But the chief engineer fell seriously ill just before the work to pull down the grave-shrine was scheduled to start. The people around him asked the Chief Engineer to apologize to *Pir Baba*. He did so and he recovered. Along with his son, he still frequents the shrine for our *Pir Baba's* blessings.

The layout of this shrine today, with a long front alongside the flyover, without an edge or pavement between the shrine and the road, lends credibility to the caretaker's account that the plans were indeed altered.

The *Pir Baba's* grave-shrine at the Mandi House crossing is located on a plot of land abutting an intersection that is flanked by two trees. Here, too, we heard a state-vs-*mazaar* story:

This shrine, as you can see, is situated in a very prominent spot. The government's civil engineer decided that this site would therefore be an ideal location for a fountain, and no one could dissuade him. But then, out of the blue, he had a vision of *Pir Baba* which made him change his plans. He dropped the idea of building a fountain there and, based on his new insight, donated bags of cement for the reinforcement of the shrine instead.

Variants of these stories can be found at shrines across the city. The dominant representations of city planners are redolent with designs for new buildings, easy mobility, and the beautification of the city. These plans, which encroach on space set aside as religious, can only be counteracted by local miracles which challenge the state and confirm the belief that public space cannot ride roughshod over demarcated sacred space. These extraordinary stories become anchored as revelatory moments in the local consciousness. Quoting a former caretaker, Taneja writes: 'This is his greatest miracle, Anwar Sabri said, not to be reduced to dust when so many other *mazaars* have been' (2013: 150). From their position in public space, *Pir Babas* and deities confront state power in the here-and-now, highlighting the view that 'public spaces can be public and sacred at the same time' (Shivam 2016: 58).

Other accounts speak of the protection from accidents that *Pir Babas* confer on drivers, pedestrians and even pilots who happen to be in the vicinity of their shrines. Some pilots, it is reported, pray before taking off at a *Pir Baba* shrine close to the airport's runway in Delhi, regardless of religious affiliation, because of a story narrated at the airport. Accidents at the airport that occurred on two Thursdays were believed to have been caused because a *Pir Baba* shrine in its vicinity had been shifted from its earlier location. After the shrine was reinstated, it is claimed that there have been no further accidents. This belief was reinforced by the fact that techno-scientific investigations into the accidents turned out to be inconclusive. In a city (and a country) marked by a high rate of accidents, the intercession of *Pir Babas* is considered invaluable.

At the Mandi House grave-shrine again, we were told that traffic accidents had never occurred near the shrine even though it is situated at the intersection of seven radiating roads. The custodian of the *Pir Baba* shrine on Atul Grove Road, which is sited at a sharp blind turn in the road, too, proudly disclosed:

Despite the treacherous location, I have never witnessed a traffic accident in the thirty years that I have tended the shrine though it is located at a hazardous intersection. It is undoubtedly and miraculously shielded.

Unexpected and unintentional events in the life of urban residents can take the shape of vehicular accidents that then seem to have much in common with the force of suddenness and arbitrariness which drives state action. In such situations, faith in *Pir Babas* across the divides of religion affords a means of navigating contemporary times and bad faith. It is a quest for meaning sought in conjunction with the supernatural powers of *Pir Babas* whose grave-shrines come alive as repositories of interreligious creativity in troubled milieus.

## Concluding Remarks

The vast canvas of roadside grave-shrines in New Delhi is crisscrossed by varying sacred, spiritual, gendered, and entrepreneurial orientations alongside the expression of public, social, and individual religiosities that are not immediately visible. Caretakers reveal diverse filiations of bi-religiosity and gender as well as the intertwining of material and sacred concerns. Devotees attracted to the grave-shrines engage in diverging supplicatory gestures and performative rituals that belie the notion of monolithic or absolutist religious regimes. It is a counterculture that has not fallen by the wayside but continues to shine a light on the walkways despite the rightist and communal darkness in the polity.

Given the heightened polarization of Muslims and Hindus in the political sphere, it is salutary to note that inclusive currents are still alive and well at *Pir Baba* shrines in the city. From the city's diverse religious and sectarian traditions, demographics, sacred symbols, and state-led urbanizing practices, the figure of the *Pir Baba* emerges as a lodestone in the present context of urbanization and communalization. When fractured religious and urban contexts call for renewed spiritual possibilities, believers look upon roadside *Pir Babas* and their many shrines like they appear on Thursday nights, as indeed lighting the way.

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