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**RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM IN RURAL  
DEMOGRAPHY: CASE STUDY OF A VILLAGE OF  
NORTH –WEST DISTRICT OF DELHI**

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# Religious Syncretism in Rural Demography: Case Study of a Village Of North –West District of Delhi

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**Abstract –** *The present paper is primarily an attempt to understand the patterns of religious worship in the village Khera Khurd of north-west Delhi. It discusses the micro level perspective of the issues with reference to the current beliefs and practices that are a significant part of the sacred lives of the peasant communities. There are several ways to study religion among which texts often have been given a fundamental place. Textual prescriptions and proscriptions, however, can have a marginal role in the world of folk worship. Therefore, in this case, diverse forms of customs and traditions of the various communities which coexist and which can be observed are studied from the perspective of archaeology. The aim of the work is to analyze 'rural religion' with special reference to archaeological evidence from select the village in order to understand the interconnected aspects of the sacred geography of the area as a whole. The reason to choose the area to study these aspects is that the village is in close proximity to the urban parts of the city where 'Brahmanic religious traditions' hold prominence, however, it will be argued that though the religious lives of the villages are not untouched by city culture, in the sacred universe of the peasant communities, local deities are more significance.*

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## KHERA-KHURD,- A MICRO-STUDY

Khera Khurd, is a village located in north-west district of Delhi, around five kilometers west to the Grand Trunk road. The track of the Northern Railway line demarcates the boundaries of two villages i.e. Khera Kalan, generally known as *Bada Khera* [the bigger mound] and Khera Khurd or *Chhota Khera* [the smaller one]. The mound of Khera Kalan appears to have been a moderately large settlement in the past. Apparently, its antiquity goes back to the 1st millennium B.C. since bits of Painted Grey Ware and pottery of early historic times can still be easily picked up from here (Thakran 2006:41-49). The majority of the land of these villages belong to the Jats, who are the *Zamindars* or the landowning class. The agricultural population of Delhi consists chiefly of Jats, who own nearly the half the area of the district.

## SACRED SHRINES OF THE VILLAGE

In observing the nature and variety of sacred shrines in Khera Khurd, the predominant impression that one is left with is that it has very little in common with Classical Hinduism. Looking at the microcosm of the religious phenomena, it was observed that the village itself is an independent unit where the local Gods and Goddesses hold more significance than the Hindu deities who represent "dominant urban traditions". The

small shrines located within the vicinity of the village come, in a manner of speaking, alive on the days when the ceremonies take place. Beginning with the Guardian Deity of the village, the ceremonies of each folk deity will be dealt separately.

### *Bhumiya Ji*

Two places of worship of the village Bhumiya [traditionally known as Bhaiya Ji which is a corrupt version of Bhumiya] are located precisely at the centre of the village, close to each other amidst the houses of the Jats and Brahmins. The *Bhumiya* is not represented in the form of an icon. This deity is revered by people of all communities as the first settler of the village and was deified for that reason. Some villagers also believe that he was the first old man who died in the village and thus is the common ancestor to all castes of the village. There is a traditional worship of this tutelary deity who resides really nearer to the centre of the village.

*Bhumiya Ji* is perceived as the guardian of the entire village, a benevolent godling of the land or soil [*Bhumi*]. He is worshipped after the harvests, at marriages, and on the birth of a male child, and Brahmins are commonly fed on his name. Women often take their children to the shrine on Sundays,

and the first milk of a cow or buffalo is always offered there.



Fig 2: Shrine of *Bhaiyya Ji*

### Mother Goddesses Worship

The mother goddesses in the village are known for their dual qualifications of benevolence and malevolence. These goddesses are usually believed to be seven in number but the villagers could rarely name them all. The names most recurrently mentioned were of *Sili Sat*, *Kanthi Mata*, *Chaurahe Wali Mata*, *Khelni Melni Mata* and *Budho Mata*. On the margin of the habitation area of the village, a small piece of land was provided for these goddesses where two extremely small shrines were built.

**Sili Sat:** In the village, the festival of Sili Sat has been identified as *Basora* or the stale bread festival and Sili Satan or the Cold Seventh and its ceremony takes place every year on the seventh day in the month of *Chait* [March- April]. This day traditionally marks the arrival of the hot season and the end of the cold weather and from this day, stale food is no longer eaten which is otherwise a common practice among the peasant communities. Sili Sat is for the worship of the one of the goddess of diseases and more precisely for the goddess of small pox who is popularly identified as *Shitala*, the one who loves the cool.

The worship of Sili Sat is widespread in almost all villages, even where Arya Samaj teachings have a strong hold. In all villages which are situated on Western Jumna Canal, there is a goddess associated with peculiar disease, perhaps because these villages are more prone to illness.

In terms of village geography, the shrine of the goddess is located in the south- west corner of the village precisely on the boundary of the village that demarcates the habitation area and the agricultural fields. Perhaps it has to do with the belief that the goddess will protect the village from every external threat. While worshipping, the women poured water from their pitchers and offered food from their trays. The balls of porridge and dough are placed in seven discrete and *diyas* are kept over the shrine but were not burnt, as the purpose of the ritual is to cool the

goddess and to pacify her. The offerings are later taken by a person belonging to the sweeper caste [Fig 3].



Fig 3: The Shrine of *Sili Sat*

The other ritual that is observed on *Sili Sat* is that of having a man of the sweeper caste holding a cock or a chicken over the head of the child in front of the shrine for his good health. The belief behind it was that illness, pain or bad luck would be transferred to the animal. After the completion of ceremony at *Sili Sat*, women moved to the shrine of *Chaurahe Wali Mata* or the mother at the cross roads. The aim behind the worship of the goddess is that the mother will protect the villagers from outsiders with bad motives and also from the spirits of the dead and magic.

### Dada Shyamji

The ceremony of *Dada Shyamji* is observed every year on the twelfth day [*Dwadashi*] of the month of March [*Phalgun*]. Among the Jats, it is a common tradition to refer to these ancestors as *Dada*. This day is attributed to the worship of *Dada Shyamji*, an immensely popular deity in Rajasthan. A magnificent temple is devoted to this lord, located in the Sikkar district (Rajasthan). In Rajasthan, the deity is worshipped by the name *Khatu Shyam Ji* and celebrations relating to him are on the eleventh and twelfth day of month of *Phalgun*. The temple of Khatu Shyam is devoted to the lord who is apparently acknowledged in the epic of Mahabharata as 'Barbareek'

In village Khera Khurd there is a very small shrine dedicated to Khatu Shyamji, located in the agricultural fields of the Jats of *Tulsana pana*, and is exclusively worshipped by them.



**Fig 5: Shrine of Dada Shyamji in the Village**

Facing the east, the shrine is basically a white semicircular shaped structure and is built near a pond under a Peepal tree and a neem tree[fig 5]. It was informed that since in early times it was an extremely arduous task for the people of the village to travel all the way to temple in Rajasthan. Therefore, the forefathers brought some bricks and mud from the village *Dhoolsiras* [another village in Delhi] who earlier brought it from the pond near the main temple of Khatu Shyam.

#### **Sayyad Worship**

Like Bhumiya Ji, there are two Sayyads in the village, but both places of worship are disparate in terms of appearance, location and following. Crook more than a hundred years ago observed that -“Sayyad, an arabic word, meaning “lord” or “Prince”, is probably in many cases a corruption of Shahid, “a martyr of the faith”, because many of these worthies owe their reputation to the fact of having lost their lives in the early struggles between Islam and Idolatry [Crook 1894:127-8].

One memorial of Sayyad is in the agricultural fields of the Brahmins and the other within the community of the lower castes. The one which is located in the middle of the houses of the lower castes is a grave with four steps. It was said that before the partition of India, there were some Muslim families who resided in the village and it was their ancestors who constructed the grave of the Sayyad, which over a period of time became an integral arena of village worship. It was also emphasized that even though there was bloodshed during the partition in the village where several Muslims were killed, the shrine stands intact and since then has been worshipped by everyone irrespective of religion and caste[Fig. 6].



**Fig 6: Sayyad amidst the community of Lower Classes**

#### **Baba Nanhe Ki Kuttiya**

Nanhe Nath, a sage, was a native of the village Bhor, near Rohtak. During the Quit India Movement (1942) he was imprisoned along with Lal Bahadur Shastri. In 1950, after the first election, Shastri became the Railway minister. For the sake of convenience of the villagers Nanhe Nath requested him to build a railway station in Khera Kalan, and the appeal was immediately accepted. This act of merit gave him a legitimate religious sanction to be deified. In Khera Khurd, next to his hermitage, a statue of Baba Nanhe Nath was recently erected.

#### **CATHOLIC CHURCH**

The Catholic Mission at Khera Khurd among the *Dalits* was opened on 1<sup>st</sup> of December 1916 by Fr.Hilary Darezzo. The first girl to be baptized was a girl of about 12-13 years of age with palsy disease, whose name was Bariya and was given the name Cecilia. [after the name of the first woman saint to be baptized]. In 1917, she died and was buried in a Christian manner. In her memory, as the first Christian, the Mission at Khera Khurd was put under the care of Saint Cecilia. On 26<sup>th</sup> May 1917, two hundred and seven people who were dalits were baptized from the neighbouring villages.

#### **ARYA SAMAJ GURUKUL**

Most of the Jats of the district claim to be followers of Arya Samaj and it is evident from the fact there is also an *Arya Samaj Gurukul* in the village known as ‘Shrimad Dayanand Arya Gurukul’. It was built in the year 1945 on twelve *bigha* land which was donated by a Jat *Zamindar* who was a resident of the village. At present there are one hundred and twenty five students between the age of eight to eighteen, and ten teachers living in the *Gurukul*. Clinging only to the traditions of Arya Samaj, the followers do not follow any brahmanic religious practice i.e. idol worship or

any intricate rituals and believe only in Vedic studies and performing Yagya.

## CONCLUSION

It was noticed that the religion that is practiced by the villagers is a combination of all those views and practices of religion that exist among them alongside the institutional forms of 'urban' Brahmanical religion. It is the religion which they traced from their past; share, experience and invent in the present and will pass on to their generations in future through the medium of words and performances. It connotes a faith that encompasses all those beliefs that exist within the perimeter of a village whether it is Hindu Gods and Goddess worship, or Sayyad, Gram Devtas, Saints, Arya Samaj followers and even Muslims and Christians.

These local deities are nodal points of communal harmony as people from all communities come to worship them. No particular community has any sort of propriety over these local gods. They belong to all people in general and therefore are crucial for bringing villagers together, more so in times of distress such as drought and famines in case of agricultural communities. Lastly the influence of Arya Samaj also needs to be discussed since it has strong influence in the area dominated by the Jats. Nevertheless, the work shows that the influence of Arya Samaj was limited to the social sphere only and it was not able to completely change the religious life of the people. The Arya Samaj's practices of Yagya and reading of Vedas was incorporated by the Jats but at the same time their own age-old practices continued. Arya Samaj was not able to wipe out idol-worship, saint worship, visiting the graves of pirs etc, which continue till today.

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