



*Journal of Advances and
Scholarly Researches in
Allied Education*

*Vol. IX, Issue No. XVIII,
April-2015, ISSN 2230-7540*

**RURAL RELIGION IN URBAN MILIEU: CASE
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DISTRICT OF DELHI**

AN
INTERNATIONALLY
INDEXED PEER
REVIEWED &
REFEREED JOURNAL

Rural Religion in Urban Milieu: Case Study of the Villages 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 some villages in the north-west Delhi. It discusses the macro-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 villages 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 villages are 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.

Physiographically, the area situated to the north of the capital city is composed of two contrasting zones-the old alluvium, popularly known as 'Bangar' and the new alluvium or 'Khadar'. The low Khadar lands lie near the Jumna River and the higher Bangar lands removed from the influence of the floods of the Jumna. The soil of the Bangar is composed of loam, clay and aeolian sandy soils. The majority of land of these villages belongs 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.

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ALIPUR

(a) **Guga:** In the Shri Ram Sarovar Shiv mandir of the village, under a 'Peepal' tree there is the idol of 'Guga riding a horse. Guga is a deity who is worshipped by the all castes of the village. Every year, Guga is worshipped on the next day of Krishna Janamastami which is known as Guga Navmi, by taking offerings, usually of porridge, and a charri [stick] covered with the peacock feathers. The stick is usually tied on the branches of the tree and clothes and leftover food are distributed among the lower castes of the village. Though there are several stories associated with Guga, one common aspect among all of them is that he is a deity who cures snake bites. H.A.Rose quoted various versions of Guga and pointed out that "Guga originally was a hindu and his proper name is Guga bir or Guga, the hero. But Musalmans also flock to his shrine, and his name has been altered to Guga Pir or saint Guga, while he himself has become a Muhammadan in the opinion of the people. He is adored by Hindus and the Muhammadans alike and by all castes, by Rajputs and Jats as well as by Chamars and Chuhras. Even the Brahmins look at him with respect. His grave is in Bikaner, near Dadrewa.



Fig 1: Guga in Shiva temple

The cult of this hero eventually got mixed with snake worship. The snake is said to be Guga's brother and the two are worshipped together during the festival" (Rose-(1883) 1990:171-192)[fig 1].

Ped ki pooja

The villagers also worship a *Kadamb* tree which recently got uprooted and lies in the vicinity of the Nehru Yuva Kendra, outside the village. It is believed that the martyrs of the 1857 mutiny who were the inhabitants of Alipur were hanged till death on this tree. Their descendants visit it on auspicious occasions, light the *diyas* in their memory and also offer sweets. It was asserted that the families use the wood of this tree in the ceremonies performed during marriages.

Sayyad

Right in the premises of the Shiva temple of the village there is a grave of Sayyad, a muslim deity but has Hindu followers. 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]. He is worshipped on Thursdays when followers place a green *chadar* on the grave.

BAWANA

(a) **Gangatoli:** The temple of Gangatoli is located around seven kilometres west of the Grand Trunk Road in North Delhi, precisely where the boundaries of the three villages-Bawana, Pooth Khurd and Khera Khurd meet. The temple is devoted to a sage named Ganga who initially served as a soldier in the mughal infantry. Later, after realizing his misdemeanor, he performed penance and burnt himself to ashes in his hermitage where now, a small empty room exists. Every year the fair is held on 25th day of month of *Phalgun* {february- march} within the premises of the temple. Though the temple is dedicated to sage Ganga, the fair is held in the memory of Neki Ram, his disciple.

KURAINI

(a) **Grave of Kalu Shah:** Immediately to the south west of the village is the grave of Kalu Shah. He is known as “Nau Gaza Pir” [the saint whose grave is nine yards long] It is, however, a general characteristic of old graves that they were larger than those of the later period and on this ground it can be assumed that this grave may be of an early period of the Muhammadan rule in India. Many graves of similar dimensions are found in different parts of Punjab. Though this grave is not inscribed or dated but great antiquity is assigned to them in local tradition. This deity is also worshipped on Thursdays by followers from all sections of the society.

NARELA

(a) **Mansa Devi:** Narela has significance for neighbouring villages because a fair is biannually organized there, on the sixth and seventh day of Navratras [usually in the month of April and October] in the honour of Goddess *Mansa* [who fulfils the desires] who is widely accepted as a manifestation of Goddess *Durga*. A huge temple is attributed to the goddess in the village. The ceremony begins on the morning of sixth day of Navratra when the villagers assemble outside a small temple constructed at the core of the village where the idol of the goddess is kept. After that, a member of the Jat community, one who has taken the charge of managing the entire event, carries the idol in a procession to the temple located outside the village. There is absolutely no facilitation by the Brahmins in the entire procedure as even the prayers and ceremonies are performed by the Jats.

(b) **Sati Mai:** The shrine of Sati Mai is constructed in the middle of the *Khets* under a tree and is believed to be the exact spot where Sati died. *Sati* is worshipped as a female deity who is revered because she set herself ablaze in the funeral pyre following her husband's death.



Fig 2: Shrine of *Sati mata*

People worship Sati Mai on all auspicious occasions such as marriage, birth of a son and also at times when children suffer from specific diseases. Crook observed “The Sati is regarded as having secured the honour of deification by her sacrifice, and is able to protect her worshippers and gratify their desires” [Crooke 1894:119][Fig 2].

(c) **Khet ki Puja:** Among the peasant communities the purpose behind the worship of *Khets* is usually for better harvest. In this case, however, the ritual is performed after the marriage of the son takes place. Perhaps it has to do with the belief that the way the land bears crops, similarly, the couple should be able to produce progeny. To give it an iconic representation, two big brick made, white-washed structures are constructed on the land. The newly married couple visits the place and circumambulates it, while playing with sticks.

POOTH KALAN

(a) **Dada Kakrali:** *Kakrali* is a benevolent and generous snake god who is revered for his capability to cure snake bites and for the general welfare of cattle. His shrine was initially a burrow in the fields where later, a small structure was fabricated considering the frequent appearances of the snakes while cultivating the agricultural tracts. Crook had this to say about the worship of snakes- "There were various harmless snakes which came to be identified with the ancestral ghosts as the protectors of house and goods. We have thus three aspects under which the serpent is worshipped by many savage races- as a dreaded enemy, as the protector of home and treasure, as the accompaniment and attribute of wisdom" [Crook 1894:262].

In the case of Dada Kakrali, the deity is venerated for his magnanimity. It is claimed that Kakrali is an aged snake, hundreds of years old and can be seen only by those who seek him wholeheartedly. Milk is offered to this deity on every *amavasya* besides the first milk of buffalo.

(b) **Dada Chaudah Rana:** A separate chamber of Chaudah Rana or the fourteen warriors is located in a newly constructed temple of the village. The orally transmitted tale of fourteen brothers who were fighters and propagators of the 'Hindu Faith' is a persuasive legend sufficient enough to deify them.



Fig 3: The chamber of *Chaudah Rana* in temple Jaunti

It was informed that these martyrs were from the Rajput community residing in Rithala, a village next to Pooth and they sacrificed their lives in the battle against Muslim conquerors. The saga is similar to the narrative of Sayyads that has been passed from generations about them, being the martyrs of faith who lost their lives in the early struggles between Islam and idolatry.

The similarity between the Ranas and the Sayyads is not only confined to their chronicles but also in the memorials that are devoted to them. The shrine of Sayyads is usually in the shape of a grave. Likewise, the structure attributed to Chaudah Rana is strikingly similar to the Sayyad's tomb, just being slightly broader giving the impression of a bed. The memorial of *Chaudah Rana* has been accommodated in the biggest chamber of the temple. The information provided by the people revealed that the shrine of *Chaudah Rana* was once the grave of a *Sayyad* and the story of fourteen warriors was perhaps woven into it later. The shrine of *Chaudah Rana* is an enthralling example of the transformation of a Muslim saint into a Hindu deity [Fig 3].

(a) **Panch Pirs:** Outside the village, near a pond is the *pucca* shrine of *Panch Pirs* who are revered by the villagers as Hindu Deities. Crook mentioned the *Panch Pir* worship as -"The *Panch Pirs*, or five original great saints of Islam are the most noted saints of Islam. They were the Prophet Muhammad, Ali- his adopted son, Fatima his daughter and wife of Ali, and their sons Hasan and Hussain. Among the Indian Musalmans the name *Panch Pir* is usually applied to five leading saints. In North-Western Provinces that the worship has reached its most degraded form. The worship of the so-called five saints prevails largely among the lower Hindu castes. But it is almost impossible to get any consistent account of these worthies, and the whole cult has become imbedded in a mass of the wildest legend and mythology. In Punjab, the title has been applied to five Rajput heroes- Ramdeo, Pabu, Harbu, Mallinath and Guga" (Crooke-1894:129-131).

LAADPUR

(a) **Dada Pau barah:** The name *Dada Pau barah* is not ascribed to any sage, nor to ancestors and neither to any particular deity. Outside the residential area of the village, there a huge temple dedicated to *Pau barah* which is spread over sixteen acres of land donated by the *Gram Sabha*. It is a temple with several structures dispersed at diverse places within the complex assigned to different Hindu Gods and Goddesses. Within the premises of it is a pond and it is this reservoir which is venerated by the villagers as *Dada Pau barah*.

Pau barah is a Hindi word which literally means to be crowned with success or to have extremely good luck. As mentioned by the villagers *Pau* as a separate word stands for a place where water is provided for passengers and the meaning seems to be more appropriate, as in this case *Pau Barah* is a pond. This pond has a compelling customary story associated with it which has epic links. The story as told by the caretaker of the temple is as follows- In Kaliyuga there was a paramount king known as Janmajeya

who was the son of Parikshit and grandson of Abhimanyu, the legendary hero of Mahabharata. Once, the king during his expedition trip caught a rare skin disease which could not be cured by even the most proficient physician of his kingdom. The condition of the king became severe as the days passed, till one day a minister of his cited him the curing abilities that the water of this pond possessed. Janmajeya along with his family and troops arrived at this spot and immersed himself in the water. He bathed in the pond for three consecutive days and the process rectified the disease. Since then, as it was stated further, it is believed that any person who is suffering from even the rarest skin disease can recover by just taking dip in the water.

CONCLUSION

Divergent forms of beliefs and practices in a part of north-west Delhi have been observed above. 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. The worship of saints holds prominence in sacred landscape, who are venerated as the *Grama Devta*. Usually, the followers did not know much about the majority of the saints, but these saints won the reverence of the people because of their virtues. There are no written texts to provide them the authenticity or recognition and nor Brahmins are given the privilege of converting these imaginary men into gods or even of conferring honorary degrees and titles of distinction. This is certainly still among the most dominant form of worship.

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