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CONTENTIOUS GLOBALIZATION
PERFORMANCE, CONFLICT, AND MORALITY IN A POPULAR RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT

By

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

CONTENTIOUS GLOBALIZATION: RELIGION, PERFORMANCE, AND MORALITY IN A MASS

RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT

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This dissertation is about a popular religious movement in north India – the Kanwar, an annual phenomenon that has grown explosively over the last two decades and now involves more than 12 million people every year. Participants carry water from the river Ganga for libations in *Śiva* temples in the vicinity of their homes. A majority are young adult males and teenagers of poor and lower middle-class backgrounds, who walk over a hundred miles carrying the sacred water, following varying degrees of ritual obligations, exhibiting their pain, suffering, and fortitude. What brings these millions of young poor men to such a demanding religious practice year after year? Notwithstanding the differences, a wide, cross-disciplinary scholarly consensus regards religious movements as reactionary expressions of collective solidarity in the time of globalization. Scholars reason that globalization causes social anomie, pushing people to embrace traditional affinities such as ethnicity, nationality, or religion.

Instead of a “fundamentalist reaction” to social and economic changes, however, my research shows that these practices afford participants opportunities to *perform*, *practice*, and *prepare for* a new configuration of social and economic obligations. They

evidence anxious social and psychological preparation for the norms, scarcity, and unpredictable outcomes of poor, informal economic conditions at the critical point of transition into adulthood. These were young adults and teenagers preparing to deliver on their social expectations and obligations to loved ones in social conditions that were often as precarious as they were hierarchical and humiliating. In conditions where the overwhelming majority of workers are informally employed, have few employment, social, and health safeguards, and very limited prospects for stable and respectable employment or life course, these often first steps into adulthood are daunting. At the margins of the economy, the religious phenomenon provided an open and freely accessible, yet challenging, stage – a definite and alternate field – for participants to practice and prove their talents, resolve, and moral sincerity. At the same time, it is also a means to contest the symbolic violence and social inequities of a hierarchical society now dominated by a neo-liberal social ethic, which is both imposing and exclusive.

ABSTRACT.....	ii
INTRODUCTION: WORKING THROUGH RELIGION.....	1
CHAPTER ONE RELIGION AND THE PERFORMING SUBJECT	12
Of This-Worldly Performances.....	16
A Steady Performance.....	24
Śiva and the Hierarchical Society.....	28
Concerns Worldly, Other-worldly	32
At Stake.....	35
The Quintessential Kānwariā	43
Recognizing work.....	49
CHAPTER TWO EVERYTHING IS A GIFT.....	57
Before the deity: Taking a vow	60
The Gift in the Vow.....	64
Anxiety, Responsibility, and the Pilgrim's Self.....	69
CHAPTER THREE POWER, VIOLENCE AND THE SECULAR.....	84
Hardwar and its paradoxes.....	86
Trespassing the Religious Terrain	90
Time, Death, and Apathy.....	95
Secularism, Power, and Transgressions of the Sacred	103
Of Two Sides of Religion	110
CHAPTER FOUR SIGNS, DREAD, and DETERMINATION.....	123
Dread and Mortification	127
Visitation	131
Desire and the Dreadful God.....	133
The Greater Suffering and the Case for Renunciation.....	141
Agency, Between Pain and Dread.....	147
Resolve, Signs, and Delusions	152
The Missing Dread.....	158
CHAPTER FIVE SUBVERSIVE AESTHETICS OF INFORMALITY	165

The Culpable Pilgrim.....	168
The Carnival—Enjoyment and Disgust.....	172
Contested Traditions	188
Neo-liberalism and the Stigmas of Neo-casteism.....	193
CHAPTER SIX THE RESISTANCES OF RELIGION.....	205
Re-thinking “Resistance”	212
Absolute Resistance: Symptom, Śiva, and the Resistance to Discourse	216
The “Hidden Transcripts” of the Ethical Subject	224
CONCLUSION.....	233
Departing the Religious Way	241

Figure 1.1: The hysteric's discourse	31
Figure 2.1 Making kanwars.....	47
Figure 5.2 Kanwars with temple like models on both ends.....	173
Figure 5.3 An actor performing as Siva.....	176

INTRODUCTION: WORKING THROUGH RELIGION

This monograph is about a popular religious movement in north India – the Kanwar, an annual phenomenon that has grown explosively over the last two decades and now involves more than 12 million people every year. Participants carry water from the river Ganga for libations in Śiva temples in the vicinity of their homes. A majority are young adult males and teenagers of poor and lower middle-class socio-economic backgrounds, who walk over a hundred miles carrying the sacred water, following varying degrees of ritual obligations, exhibiting their pain, suffering, and fortitude. Drawing on protracted field work and situated in a hermeneutic grounded in existential phenomenology and critical theory, this work describes the interplay of economy, sexuality, morals, and aesthetics in these performances, and the motivations and social paradoxes of the actors. Local and ethnographic on one plane, on another this dissertation is a multi-disciplinary theoretical engagement into the relationship among religion, globalization, morality, aesthetics, sexuality, social status, and politics in contemporary popular cultural and religious practice.

What brings these millions of young poor men to such a demanding religious practice year after year? From a contemporary scholarly perspective, widely shared by most scholars of religion and South Asia, the Kanwar is a reactive assertion of ethnic, religious, or national (postcolonial) identity in a modernizing social context. It may be conceived as part of a “worldwide resurgence of religion,” a phenomenon antithetical to classical sociology’s vaunted secularization thesis. At pains to explain this unexpected turn, scholars have probed and argued in different directions. Some galvanize new

defenses for a stronger thesis of secularization, while others substantively qualify the thesis, and still others argue that secularization has provoked de-secularization.

Notwithstanding the apparent differences, the consensus reflects the dominant contours of a normative sociological model. Peter Berger, previously an eloquent voice of secularization, thus summarizes:

[This is] one of the most important topics for a contemporary sociology of religion, but far too large to consider here. I can only drop a hint. Modernity, for fully understandable reasons, undermines all the old certainties; uncertainty is a condition that many people find very hard to bear, therefore, *any* movement (not only a religious one) that promises to provide or to renew certainty has a ready market.¹

The explanation appears hurried; it is nevertheless widely shared, and brings alive a wide body of literature that can as easily claim the structuralist corpus of Saussure, Levi-Strauss, and Durkheim as it articulates itself through contemporary theories of identity and Anthony Giddens' neo-functionalism. Globalization, this explanation goes, causes social anomie, which pushes people into seeking the security of traditional groups, such as ethnicity, nationality, or religion. Scholars of South Asia likewise explain such renewed attraction of religion with reference to the anxieties of Hindu identity and nationality in a modernizing social context. This explanation often complexly weaves together historical specificities, such as post-colonial anxieties, Muslim-Hindu relations, and issues of Hindu identity. However, the core focus on the reactionary character of such interest in religion persists, representing an unwillingness to change, surmount past affects and prejudices, and face up to new social realities and progressive horizons.

Religious movements, then, are reactionary expressions of collective solidarity at a time when long held beliefs, worldviews, and practices are confronted by the

prodigious circulations of our epoch; they reflect “reactions” to “globalization” and “modernity.” To the trained sociologist – and indeed the social scientist, insofar as a methodological consensus binds the social sciences – this explanation comes *naturally*. The strong thrust of such inferences, however, is ridden with many perils. An unusually felicitous combination of common-sense and scholarly deliberation, the perspective is deceptive. Abstracting globally and authoritatively, at a distance – on the fly, as it were – such cognitive reasoning fails to reckon with the participants’ finite lives and their lived circumstances. It is a perception circumscribed, perpetuated, and patrolled by disciplinary mandate and interests that leads into a one-dimensional understanding.

This ethnography of the Kanwar sets to readjust this narrative, and challenge the conceptions of scholarly as much as journalistic and activist readings. Presenting ethnographic observations, respondents’ narratives, and the discursive and practical compositions of Kanwar rituals in an interdisciplinary hermeneutic, this project will demonstrate that these perceptions are consequences of a discomfiting but pervasive epistemology that manifests structuralist and functionalist assumptions, usually in a mode of denial or misrecognition. These preconceptions systematically divert attention from the lived dilemmas of participants embedded in concrete social and material conditions offering rather vague conceptions of self-contained object-hood. The dominant analytic is bound by a teleological morality of “progress” referencing putatively “universal” social collectives existing in abstract, endless time. This is a pervasive tendency in modern epistemology.²

The following analysis calls attention to the lived dilemmas and social conditions of participants dynamically embedded in social relations and obligations, navigating concrete material realities. It proposes an analytic grounded in the finite character of human life; that is, one which reckons with anxieties and obligations rooted in the finitude of actual human existence and the immediacy of social circumstances and expectations. It calls for a move from the universal to the particular, or the personal.

Listening to my respondents, closely considering their life accounts, the compositions of the rituals, and participating in the journey, I found none of the chimeras of religious fundamentalism or dogmatic opposition to social change and “modernity.” Instead of a “fundamentalist reaction” to social and economic changes, I witnessed practices that enable participants to *perform, practice, and prepare for* a new configuration of social and economic obligations. They reflect anxious social and psychological preparation for the norms, scarcity, and unpredictable outcomes of poor, informal economic conditions at a critical point of transition into adulthood.

These were young adults and teenagers anxiously preparing to deliver on their social expectations and obligations to loved ones in social conditions that were often as precarious as they were hierarchical and humiliating. In conditions where the overwhelming majority of workers are informally employed, with few employment, social, and health safeguards, and the prospects of stable and respectable employment or life course are for most faint and illusive, often first daunting steps into adulthood. At the margins of the economy, the religious phenomenon provided an open and freely accessible, yet challenging, stage – a definite and alternate field – for participants to

practice and prove their talents, resolve, and moral sincerity. Yet, as I show, to practice and prepare, is only a part of their repetitive striving to master. It is also a means to contest the symbolic violence and social inequities of a traditionally highly hierarchical society now dominated by a neo-liberal social ethic, which is as imposing as it is exclusive.

This work thus touches upon the paradoxes of performance and recognition in an informal economy; questions of ethics and the violence of everyday life in emergent neo-liberal conditions; issues of gender and sexual anxieties; aesthetic conflicts that invite re-thinking “caste”; in addition to relations between everyday social anxieties, globalization, and the politics of “religion” and “nation.” Many of these findings are made possible by my deviation from a conventional sociological method and adoption instead of a hermeneutic informed by phenomenology, psychoanalytic theory, Indian metaphysics, and, of course, critical social theory. While contemporary sociological explanations of religion frequently limit analysis to a single signifier, “religious identity”, this approach shows continuities of religion, morality, economy, social status, and politics.

Thus, for example, even for a religious phenomenon it was important not to lose sight of the actual impact of economic pressures, sufferings, and struggles on everyday social relationships and concerns. Economic marginalization goes hand-in-hand with discursive or symbolic domination. In the context of the symbolic and structural violence of a hegemonic but exclusive neo-liberal market economy –where 90% of the workforce is informally employed, with few social, employment, or health safeguards – the religious field offers the possibility of an alternative sociality, as well as an opportunity for performative existence, and for social recognition. It enables an “actual” identity that

subverts the stigmatizing labels of “failure,” “unemployed,” and “outcaste” by a dominant social order. It provides another textual medium, imagery (or mirror) for self-recognition to resist a dominant, appropriating ideology. This is the subject of **Chapter One**.

As opposed to rational choice assumptions that rely on assumptions of a Cartesian individuality, this research shows that the performed subjectivities of the pilgrimage indeed seem to emerge in difference with these assumptions. In **Chapter Two**, I work towards an alternative, relational understanding of subjectivity in dialogue with psychoanalytic and phenomenological theories,. Among other figures, the narrative focuses on the religious “vow,” its subjective significance in relation to material conditions, and on forms of giving and their departure from “exchange” and “instrumentality” highlighted by dominant lines of scholarship. This shows how deeply subjects are immersed in a customary ethic which gets suppressed by commonplace conceptions of “individual” and “self.” Figures of “gift” and “sacrifice”, I argue, thus continue to more effectively relate to the significance of contemporary religious performances than the notion of “exchange,” which has become axiomatic in recent social scientific studies of religion.

My study of the Kanwar also warrants fresh consideration of the debates on religion, secularism, and ethnic violence. Although the Kanwar mobilizes millions of participants every year who walk across several hundred miles, through Hindu and Muslim habitations alike, it has not caused any major incident of the notorious Hindu-Muslim conflicts that have been a defining feature of India’s late colonial and post-

colonial history. Yet, one can feel a palpable tension as the pilgrimage procession passes through Muslim neighborhoods. **Chapter Three** analyzes this tension in reference to the ubiquity of violence and state apathy, specific incidents of Hindu-Muslim violence in recent decades, and the exceptionally violent history of the region from a *longue durée* perspective. I argue that the conflict over religion is almost inevitably provoked by interests of power and politics. Differences in faith seem to take the form of actual violence only when stoked by statist actors seeking power. While notions such as “religious nationalism” or “fundamentalism” may direct attention to legitimate fears, based on real historical events and possibilities, they misrecognize the social complexity of contemporary religion and systematically divert attention away from lived political and economic conditions.

Chapter Four shows that these performances in a different, radical temporality generate hope and community— and therefore *work*—in an otherwise disillusioning and alienating, if not punitive, social order, which holds scarce promise. Through extensive ethnographic detail, I show how the deities and religious practices here mediate among the subjects and their temporal horizons; making the foci of a community among otherwise divided subjects. In conversations with psychoanalytic theory and critical phenomenology, the chapter demonstrates that there is a gaping lack of representation of some of the most overwhelming experiences, fears, and desires of social and psychic life in a dominant consciousness shaped by discourses of the nation, economy, work, daily bread, or the media. Since the mainstream world, seems to have little time or means of accommodation for these concrete realities of life on the social margins, they

are deferred, displaced to, and played out in religious practice. Narrative focus on personal historicity, the profound lived time of the subject, as opposed to historical Time with its focus on collectivities – both as events and factors – makes psychoanalytic themes such as the parallels with dream work, the simple economy of the pleasure principle, and repetition compulsion central. These emerge as powerful themes with a gestalt-like effect that makes coherent and legible the otherwise complexly coded and dissimulated effects and compositions of social and religious practices.

The cognitive dissonances, and the religious overcomings, as **Chapter Five** shows, also express deep set social hierarchies re-articulating themselves in the contemporary contexts of hegemonic nationalist and neo-liberal ideologies. While the Kanwar obviously has a wide following, it is also frowned upon, and indeed reviled by a large section of the society. Such disgust is most common in the English language new media and the urban middle classes. While the phenomenon is itself, I argue, a performative expression of the fears, desires, and aspirations of a majority living in India's challenging social conditions, resentment is provoked by its aesthetic transgressions. The indiscriminate, carnivalesque performances along with the low brow culture, offends middle-class ideals. To these sections of the populace, this is a poor, botched, illegitimate version of religion that lacks the composure of "adult" religiosity. Such aversion is partly an effect of postcolonial anxieties. In the context of a project of national redemption conceived in reference to the projections, real or imaginary, of a violated, traumatic national history, there is a compulsion to project more or less good and beautiful images of an idealized, pure self to the world. Such a seemingly gross representation of religion therefore comes across as

offensive and uncanny. National self-consciousness itself transfers the anxiety of self-recognition and social recognition in the liberal capitalist context of a highly unequal, poor, and hierarchical society.

I argue that this aesthetic divide is an expression of India's vast economic inequalities, reflected in differences in habitus and cultural capital. While a liberal middle-class ideology and aesthetics dominates the society, the habitus and cultural performances of the vast majority get marked as gross and distasteful. The Kanwar then, I argue, enacts a conflict over habitus. Here, these sedimented hierarchies are overturned. The stigmatized popular habitus occupies the highways for several days, and publicly performs itself as religious and sublime, under the canopy of *Śiva's* bacchanal figure. The dialectical constitution of the pilgrimage is thus an enactment of political conflict. I also show how these conflicts are accentuated by and expressive of the contemporary legacies of India's caste heritage.

Notwithstanding the complex social conflicts apparent here, such religious practices are rarely treated in sociological scholarship as forms of "resistance." Even in the subaltern studies literature, where such phenomena are prolific, they are usually seen as substitutions for other, explicit social and political causes and interests. In **Chapter Six**, I show that this is because the notion of "resistance" in the social sciences is normatively framed by embedded ideas of individual freedom and historical progression; religious actions then are more likely to be characterized as "fundamentalist" than seen as instances of social resistance. Anchored in an exegesis of rituals and enunciations in the Kanwar, I advance an alternate understanding of 'resistance' situated in a

hermeneutic that interweaves the phenomenological critiques of Hegelian philosophy, Kantian ethics, and Lacanian psychoanalysis. I argue for a heremenutical conception of resistance considerate of the temporality of being-in-the-world instead of an abstract teleological universal Good. Bringing psychoanalytic practice together with my critical ethnography, I argue that such a notion of resistance is indispensable for a radical epistemology that can encounter the new, global infrastructures of repressive power and violence.

This work draws on a year of fieldwork spread over three Kanwar occasions in 2009, 2010, and 2011, and multiple visits in between. The fieldwork included 60 in-depth interviews, extensive interactions with participants in pockets of a town, and an adjacent village, both about a hundred miles away from Hardwar, and ethnographic observations in Hardwar, while visiting shrines in the vicinity, and at transit camps. I also did content analyses of religious hymns, popular religious stories, devotional songs, news reports, pamphlets, and commercial videos. In 2011, I participated in the journey, walking a distance of about a hundred miles between Hardwar and Pura Mahadeva, the site of an important Śiva temple in the state of Uttar Pradesh. I was accompanied by a distant cousin, a 19—20-year-old male I will call K in this narrative. We took turns carrying a single *kānwaṛ*, and joined other groups at various points. The following narrative veers between interview accounts and ethnographic observations interspersed with discussion of scholarly debates, theoretical reflections, and literary references.

¹ Berger, P (1999) *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, p.7. Emphasis added.

² Heidegger wonders on the subject: "But what does this "reifying" signify? Where does it arise? ... Why does this reifying always keep coming back to exercise its dominion?" See Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and Time*. Trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper, p. 487.

CHAPTER ONE

RELIGION AND THE PERFORMING SUBJECT

It was surprising how fast the glorious mountains with their great magnitude had receded in the horizons. The festive town of Hardwar with its baffling mix of the evocative aura of a divine space at once ancient and timeless with a noisy, *caveat emptor* commercial culture receded from the mind as we matched paces on the unpaved street several miles out of the town. Part of a dense procession of participants in various shades of ochre carrying *kānwars*, with branches of the procession extending to hundreds of miles in every direction, our thoughts frequently centered on the goal and the journey ahead. K, several years younger to me, yet a veteran who had made the journey many times, had shown his solicitude guiding, often warning me about the choice of footwear, luggage, and clothing. The journey would be formidable, and the most trivial looking choices were critical. I must submit that I was perhaps in denial of the physical challenges – since, of course, millions were accomplishing it, and I also sought confidence in the expected preparation from running a few miles every day. Nonetheless, a premonition from losing marked contests in the past committed me to explicit determination. We walked with resolve outpacing the flow of the procession advancing towards a group of three ahead, among the fastest and most boisterous on the trail, who were continuously hailing slogans that were answered by the chorus of fellow travelers. “We must join them,” K had said, “this will keep our spirits high, and make the journey much easier.”

In view of my research considerations, and to provide for contingencies (especially since I was still convalescing after a prolonged fever) we had embarked on the

expected four day journey, a day in advance, targeting the libations on the 14th of the month of Śrāvaṇa, that is, on Śivaratri, the day of the new moon (*Amavasya*). Our destination was Pura Mahadev, about 95 miles away, a renowned Śiva temple on the banks of the Hindon river in Meerut. It was critical that we complete the journey and reach the shrine in time for the libations while ensuring that the sacredness of the *kānwaṛ* was not breached in any manner. The journey would disintegrate, lose all merit, if the *kānwaṛ* was breached – say if the containers were desecrated, fell down, the water spilled, or if we failed to make it to the destination in time for the libations. Moreover, to ensure the integrity of the practice, we had to abide by a variety of prescriptions regarding how the *kānwaṛ* was held, carried, rested, and worshipped.

For K, who had the experience of many such journeys, “completing” it wasn’t as much of a cause for concern, as accomplishing it with verve and precision. In some moments, it would appear to me that it was almost a sport to demonstrate his character and qualities in a more or less competitive sociality. At other times, however, he had expressed grave concerns and obligations regarding his disintegrated family, which I will mention in due course. This was not unusual. Although many would be making the journey bound by explicit vows, which had either been fulfilled or which they sought, the action devoted to Śiva was also simultaneously both a sport, a recreative activity, and an engaged enactment of serious commitments, obligations, and overwhelming anguish. Lacking any formal education, K lived an almost nomadic life – a truck helper at times, living with family/relatives at other times – with scarcely a source of income. In the sociality of the Kanwar, however, as normal conventions are disrupted, and where the

high of the *bhānga* (a cannabis derivative) and the arch renouncer Śiva (who although the fierce Master of the world lives in the wild, in the greatest destitution) were valorized, K held sway. “He is a quintessential Kānwariā,” one of our young female relatives had described K to me. Although much younger, K would mentor and assist me selflessly during the journey, going through it with exemplary certitude and affability.

If the pilgrimage was a chosen and familiar field for K, for me it was a novel area. I was anxious about its protocols; what began as “objective” research took the form of a critical, in some sense inaugural religious performance as it materialized through many conversations, rituals, and the expectations of my relatives. This added to my resolve as I matched paces with K, and we soon caught up with the group.

Ramlal, a member of the group, was doing the slogans, demonstrating an extraordinary aptitude for doing so continuously and inventively. Mostly he would sincerely hail Śiva as Bholā (the Innocent One) –the Kanwar participants identify with Śiva, and are only addressed as “bholā” –His wife Pārvati, Ganesh their child, the Ganges, Hardwar. At other times, he would get more inventive and mischievously played on the sexual innuendos of the conjugal relations between Pārvati and Śiva. We kept replying to his calls, and marched ahead at a brisk pace on the banks of the Upper Ganges Canal. Carrying the Kanwar, we spoke of nothing else, maintaining an attitude of devotion, and immersion in the sacred. Only during a break after several miles of walking, about a couple of hours later, as we had some juice and the rest (sparing me) smoked *bhānga*, would we briefly acquaint ourselves with secular concerns. They seemed to know each other well, and one was teased for already needing a muscle pain reliving spray on his

knees and ankles, even as Ramlal was praised for his energy despite suffering from stomach aches and loose bowels because of suspected food poisoning in Hardwar. In their early twenties, all three were casually employed as construction laborers, and Ramlal, who had been coming for the pilgrimage for the last 7-8 years had almost decided to forego this year's pilgrimage for the lack of money. He had told his peers to go without him, but his wife could take his gloom no more. "I was sitting at home dejected, as everyone was leaving, when suddenly my wife brought a loan of 2000 rupees (about \$40) and asked me to get ready immediately, since the others were waiting outside."

This was an expression that I heard very often. Almost every other respondent had a tale to tell of leaving for the journey at the last minute after having lost all hope, against all intent and plans. It was usually because of the objective lack of finances, or pragmatic consideration of the costs it would involve. Yet, a last moment swell would send one on the journey, an impulse that would break out of normative concerns – financial restraints, calm reasoning, the many expenditures of the adventure. Suddenly, in the manner of the immediacy of a call, desire proved irresistible; although of course in correspondence with the desires of so many others, as one saw a multitude, and many in one's circle, embark on the journey. The outcome is usually interpreted as a sign of the deity's will –unless He invites, the journey cannot materialize, by any means; but if He calls, it will take place despite any number of obstacles.

"No one can go just like that, whatever offering you may announce, but when He calls," as Amma, one of my respondents forcefully emphasized, "you go automatically. . . Only then can you raise a step." The "invitation" has the added resonance of its

specificity, of being God's elect, the recipient of divine grace and therefore felicitous, blessed – "Everything is fine, God has been generous." The call has to be followed, literally, by a visit. And, almost every visit expresses the desire to come yet again – if the deity wishes, and times are propitious!

This refrain, echoed by almost every participant, and even by those who have never been able to make the journey, succinctly expresses the peculiar dialogical character of the Kanwar. More than the obvious financial constraints, this demonstrates tensions of desire and responsibility, of faith and guilt, of religion and recreation, and of a shared temporality of *uncertainty* that bonds the actor with loved ones –here, the wife. This expression of a last minute decision, a fortuitous event read as a sign of divine will, enacts and demonstrates many of the paradoxes of the participants' religious act and their social conditions.

Of This-Worldly Performances

The Kanwar pilgrimage to Hardwar is today India's largest annual religious gathering, with an estimated 12 million participants in 2010 and 2011.¹ At its most basic, Kanwar refers to a genre of religious performances where participants ritually carry water from a holy source in containers suspended on either side of a pole. The pilgrimage derives its name from the contraption, called *kānwaṛ*, and the water is usually carried to distant temples for libations at *śivalingas*.² The source of the water is often the Ganga or rivers considered its local equivalents, and the offering is dedicated to Śiva, often addressed as Bholā (Simple One) or Bhole Baba (Simple Grandfather/Father).³ The pilgrim, accordingly, is a *bholā*, and in the vocative, *bhole*! Although there is little mention of the Kanwar as an

organized festival in canonical texts, the phenomenon surely existed as early as the 17th and 18th century when the Jesuits and English travelers report seeing Kanwar pilgrims at many points during their journeys in the north Indian plains.⁴

This manuscript focuses on a specific Kanwar phenomenon, in which Ganga water is collected from Hardwar, the renowned religious city at the site of the river's emergence from the Himalayas. In a fraction of cases the water is sourced from the glacial origins of the river at Gaumukh or Gangotri.⁵ Although participants carry the sacred water to locations across north-western India, a central site has historically been a renowned Śiva temple at Pura Mahadev in the Meerut district of Uttar Pradesh. Colonial records from the late 19th century report two annual religious fairs at Pura each involving several thousand participants. One of these was in February, on the occasion of Śivarātri, and the other in July/August during the lunar month of Śrāvaṇa.⁶ The numbers remained in the thousands or thereabout till about three decades ago. There is very little mention of the Kanwar in official records till the 1970s; according to my informants, only a few went for the pilgrimage following on specific vows. Sometime in the late 1980s or early 1990s, however, the pilgrimage to Hardwar in Śrāvaṇa started to grow geometrically. During his 1990 fieldwork in Hardwar, Lochtefeld reports estimates of a quarter million pilgrims, a number that had tripled by his second visit in 1996.⁷ In 2002, the number of pilgrims was estimated at four million, growing to six million in 2004, seven in 2009, and above twelve million in 2010 and 2011.⁸

Young adult or adolescent males of a poor or lower middle-class background, from both rural and urban parts of the contiguous states of Delhi, Uttar Pradesh,

Haryana, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Punjab, make up the majority of the participants. Participants often walk upward of a hundred miles—in some cases, several hundred miles—following extensive ritual codes. Most make the journey either in flip-flops or barefoot; and many aggravate their travail by various types of ritual rigors. For example, one version called the Khaṛi (Standing) Kanwar is defined by the commitment that the *kānwaṛ* will remain shoulder-borne throughout the journey. In another, the Daṇḍavata (Prostrate) Kanwar, participants advance by repeatedly stretching themselves on the ground, for a pre-determined part of the journey. Some find the journey easier than others, but most people either take recourse to pain-reducing medicines or *bhāṅga*. In addition to the pilgrims on foot, the phenomenon includes tableaux that illustrate mythic episodes in various art forms, such as sculpture, paintings, and live performances. Regular *kānwaṛs* are also often decorated with red polyester or georgette strips, garlands, pictures of deities, streamers, tridents, and replicas of snakes, parrots et cetera.

In their 1983 book, *The Invention of Tradition*, Hobsbawm and Ranger called attention to the novelty, the modern and recent roots, of many a social phenomenon presented in the halo of “tradition,” and invoked as a sacred sign of enduring national and ethnic integrity, a legacy of antiquity more or less essential and timeless.⁹ The old and timeless, these scholars showed, was often but a projection motivated by social and political imperatives of the present. Although the sacred characterization of the Ganga and pilgrimages to it are as old as the Mahabharata and the custom of carrying its water over long distances possibly quite old as well, to appreciate the character, novelty, meanings of the contemporary Kanwar, one must see it as a radical break from

“invariance” and causes past, as Hobsbawm and Ranger argued. While the customary text may be old, the track beaten, the social conditions and consequences of the Kanwar pilgrimages that have proliferated across northern India since the late 1980s, and today involve millions of participants every year, are thoroughly contemporary, re-enacted anew in the present. In its ritual, demographic, interactional, and contextual affects, the Kanwar may be read as a dramatized presentation, a performance that intricately narrates the pulse of social conditions in contemporary India. The past here is no demiurge but only another character or figure in a drama conjured in the immediacy of the present, the *hic et nunc*.

Few in the social sciences today would dispute this apparent shift of emphasis from “tradition” to “social construction.” In understanding contemporary “religion,” and its putative “worldwide resurgence,” scholars have time and again brought attention to the political, social, and economic changes of the 20th century as the “modern” form of social relations became ever more pervasive and increasingly penetrated every recess of social existence across the globe. According to a wide consensus, the movement toward cultural and religious solidarity springs from reaction against social change and moral confusion, or anomie.¹⁰ These prove to be ripe conditions for the politicization of religion and, consequently, for inter-group violence. From political science and sociology to anthropology and social psychology, there is a broad agreement that the growing popularity of religious practices around the globe implies an assertion of collective identity in the face of inevitable, rapid, changes of globalization. In many accounts, this is characterized as “religious fundamentalism,” and as a dogged if futile obstruction of the

wheels of History, the inevitable progress of modernization. Zygmunt Bauman, with apparent irony (and a characteristically subtle if misguided play on modern values of emancipation and choice) notes thus: religion promises to “emancipate” from the “agonies of choice . . . those who find the burden of individual freedom excessive and unbearable.”¹¹

To the trained sociologist this explanation comes *naturally*. Religious movements, according to this narrative, are reactionary expressions of collective solidarity at a time when long held beliefs, worldviews, and practices are confronted by the relentless flows of this epoch. While there is some truth to this narrative that at once weaves the progressive, emancipatory epistemology of the World Spirit with a structuralist conception of identity and difference and the classical sociological figure of the “collective consciousness,” it must be regarded as a serious case of ecological fallacy.¹² Focused on the “collective,” the “abstract,” the “Historical,” conceiving at levels global and from a distance, this perspective glosses over the actual, lived, finite existence of ordinary social actors. As we will see over the course of this monograph, this is clearly not a sociological problem alone but one inherited from Western philosophy and epistemology in general. It is surely an ethical issue, more importantly, however, it pushes under the carpet – and thereby socially annuls – a whole world of lived existence, obligations, and issues, and an epistemology that could relate them.

Listening to my respondents, closely considering their life accounts, the compositions of the rituals, and in my observations and participation in the Kanwar, then, I found none of the chimeras of religious fundamentalism or dogmatic opposition to

social change and “modernity.” Instead of a “fundamentalist resistance” to social and economic changes, I saw that these practices perform, practice, and prepare for a new configuration of social and economic obligations. They reflect anxious social and psychological preparation for the norms, scarcity, and unpredictable outcomes of poor, informal economic conditions at the critical point of transition into adulthood. Quite clearly, these were young adults and teenagers anxiously preparing to deliver on their social expectations and obligations to loved ones in social conditions that were as precarious as they were hierarchical. In conditions where the overwhelming majority of workers are informally employed, with few employment, social, and health safeguards, and the prospects of stable and respectable employment or life course are for most faint and illusive, these are, by all means, daunting steps. At the margins of the economy, the religious phenomenon seemed to provide an open and freely accessible, yet challenging, stage, a definite and alternate field, for participants to practice and prove their talents, resolve, and moral sincerity. It was also a means to contest the symbolic violence and social inequities of a hierarchical society dominated by a neo-liberal social ethic.

Instead of closeting these practices into a sub-disciplinary enclosure such as “pilgrimage studies,” or “sociology of religion” –that is, an institutionally recognized “social fact” – I assume the continuities of religion, morality, economy, social status, and politics, as witnessed, for example, in Weber’s classical sociology.¹³ As opposed to the ideologically charged harangue of institutional leaders representing “high” Hinduism, there is a strong performative rationality to popular religious practice in the Kanwar. This practice mediates the complex play of economic, political, moral, and sexual relations.

Conveying the seamless connections between these different dimensions are the terms “performance,” and “recognition.”¹⁴

To properly understand the Kanwar, we must attend to the ambivalence, play, and existential resonances of “performance.” More specifically, the participants’ are self-conscious of their actions, and existence, as a game, a drama, *līlā* (play). This is conditioned by the extraordinary status of this notion in Indian texts and popular culture. Thus, for example, one participant accompanying us to Nilkantha, a temple complex at the top of a mountain close to Hardwar, remarks wondrously on the ritual austerities of hordes of fellow pilgrims: “All this is *māyā* of the Ganga!” The notion of “*māyā*” is at once phenomena, play, effect, creation, gift, wonder, illusion figures very commonly in everyday discourse in India.¹⁵ This highly ambivalent notion conceptualizes existence as play, where boundaries separating the real and illusory, truth and falsehood, are continuously shifting and altogether permeable. This understanding of life and social obligations as transitory, “a game, a dream, a sport, a drama,” commonly mediates encounters with everyday social reality.¹⁶ Thus the great Vedantic philosopher, Śaṅkara, reasons in his commentary on the *Māndukya Upaniṣad*: “For, evolution in any sense (other than illusion) is not known to us, and is superfluous even if demonstrated.”¹⁷ At the same time, however, one must not regard Indian popular culture as exceptional or different. Performance, and therefore its apperception, is a trans-historical and trans-cultural fact of human life and consciousness.

The idiom of “performance” expresses participants’ existential relationship with the transience and arbitrariness of their life and social circumstances. “Performance,” in

an existential and materialist sense signifies the struggle, and lived anxiety of being-in-the-world. It is linked to “recognition,” again in the finite temporality of being-in-the-world, of concerned human existence alongside others.¹⁸ Instead of conceiving time as infinite in the form of History, this perspective emphasizes the finite life of human beings who witness death all around and are conscious that one’s time and the other’s time – insofar as the two may be distinguishable — is always at risk.¹⁹ It is this phenomenology of being-in-the-world and being with and responding to one another and to social expectations that the terms “performance” and “recognition” should evoke in the following narrative.

Of course, “performance” as a figure of achievement and ability, deserving of appropriate rewards and recognition, is a dominant theme in competitive economic life. In recent decades, this liberal capitalist ideology has been indeed imposing itself and increasingly setting the terms for social relations in India, much as it has been doing across the globe.²⁰ The dis-embedded market economy increasingly clothed in neo-liberal ideological constructs of human capital, and the finality of market-based discursive constructs today asserts itself as the dominant power and idiom governing social relations and our economic, cultural, and political futures. The market economy imposes itself with near absolute power over the whole gamut of social relations, even as *exclusivity* is the primary mechanism of incorporation. Yet, the structure of the economy remains primarily informal, with widespread poverty and more than 90% of workers employed informally.²¹ In India’s deeply hierarchical and oppressive society, such

experience of economic and thereby social exclusion one cannot fail to register, and yet as thoroughly deny insofar as one must keep working with it (for there is no exit).

This motivates an exploration of alternate fields, to express one's desires, talents, and obligations, to perform social existence, and be recognized as a self. In the achievements of the Kanwar, despite the pain and hardships, in the common competitive banter and wagers, in the anxious expressions of self-worth, the ethnographer finds a repetition of messages exchanged with a dominant neo-liberal ethos. It is a repetition of the subject of the economy, its expectations and directives, in an alternate and definite field. For adolescent and young adult subjects set to encounter the full might and overbearing structure of the "real field" of the exclusive economy, these are obviously anxious steps that call for compulsive practice, or as "working through."²² Religious practice, a special arena with conducive conditions for repeating, performing, and expressing the concerns, associations, and anxieties repressed by the dominant collective conscience.²³

A Steady Performance

It is the morning of the third day of our journey. We spent the night on the median of a highway, the *kānwaṛ* hanging by a signboard next to us. I had kept waking to ensure the *kānwaṛ* was safe; I also knew K went to sleep very late. But I thought K had been uncharacteristically lethargic this morning. By the time we started it was already past 10 am. At this time, most Kanwar participants would have covered a significant leg of their journey for the day, and would be preparing to rest before it was too hot. I realized that K had been consciously procrastinating so that a group of his friends, several miles behind,

could catch up with us. I acquiesced to waiting; however, after two hours, when I realized they were making a stopover much before they reached us, I could see the whole day vanishing and reasoned with K that we leave especially since they were to head on a separate route from the very junction where we waited. K had been adamant, an attitude I found surprising at that time. Only later would it occur to me that those seasoned pilgrims were well-equipped with *bhāṅga*, which K had been starved for in my company. Submitting to my perseverance, however, K lifted the *kānwaṛ* and waggered in displeasure, “Let us see brother, how much you will walk!” That afternoon I was relieved to be back on track.

With his brisk pace, K soon disappeared with the *kānwaṛ* as I trudged in the background carrying our belongings. Coming out of the town of Mujaffarnagar, the route merged into the wide national highway, which had been cleared for the pilgrims, save some local traffic one side of the median. Although a sizeable portion of pilgrims had separated from Mujaffarnagar, we were on the main stream headed toward Delhi. Giant blisters covered the sole of my left foot—watery pockets had developed between the skin and the flesh covering my heel and toe. Besides, my ankles were swollen, and knees almost locked, with intermittent shooting pain. Thriving on ibuprofen, however, I went steadily at a reasonable pace keeping an eye out for K and our *kānwaṛ*. The afternoon sun was at its worst, burning as much through the sky as off the tarred surface beneath. Few pilgrims remained on the road; most had found shelter, whether in the many make-shift roadside restaurants, the transit camps, or under the trees. “*Bhole*, where will you be doing the libations?” I asked a group of young men as I passed by them. “In Delhi,”

they replied. Walking on, I joined a middle-aged man, a skilled construction worker (*mistri*) by profession. I enquired how long he had been on the road. “I left Hardwar on the afternoon of the 24th”, he replied (the same day we did). As the conversation continued:

There were several younger people with me, they left the day after. They were curious why I was leaving so early? I told them “You will all be on *bhāng* ... you will take long breaks, and then you will gallop like horses. I don’t do *bhāng*; I prefer going at a steady pace.” These people bring the *kānwar* and then they limp around for weeks in all kinds of gait. I am back to work the next day, without a sign. Then they are shocked at my endurance. I walk at a steady pace—neither too slow, nor fast.

Responding to another of my queries about his wishes for the pilgrimage, he said, “No, I didn’t ask for anything ... except for peace and happiness in the family.” He reminded me of another man of the same age group I had known last year—also a skilled construction worker (*mistri*). I had hired him from the bus-stand in the town for a renovation job at my parents’ house. The bus-stand was a central place where workers gathered every morning. Small construction work generally involves a *mistri* and 1-2 unskilled or semi-skilled assistants (*beldār* or shoveller); the going rate for the *mistri* was \$4-5/day, for the *beldār*, \$2-3/day. A client proceeding to their station would inevitably be surrounded, hustled by workers speaking over one another, offering their services. Exhorting and occasionally pulling the person in their direction, they point to one or the other of the *mistris* sitting on a roadside prop—a bicycle and a small tool-bag beside him—to supervise the work. The *mistri*, usually an elder person, may accost the client but, more often, protective of his status, he looks with hope but waits patiently to be approached. The crowd usually thins out before noon, and unable to find a job begin to

return home disappointed, hoping for better luck the next day. A desperate few linger around in the afternoon hoping for a stray opportunity.

An amiable, even-tempered man, and able and trustworthy worker, the *mistri* worked with us for several days before informing us one evening that he would be leaving for the Kanwar. “I will stop by after the Kanwar (in a week’s time),” he told me, “I will complete the job, if you should still need me.” We had about a fortnight’s work left, but he was aware that since I was rapidly running out of vacation time, I could not wait for his return. If there was any minor loss of opportunity here, he seemed unaffected by it; like all the previous years he had been bringing the *kānwar*, this was a pre-ordained choice. Although without the opportunity of an extended interview I knew little of the personal histories of either worker, the Kanwar here offered a mandatory departure from the chores, struggles, banality, temptations, and the humiliations of everyday life. It was a sovereign time in the unmediated proximity of the Absolute. One of my older respondents expressed this imperative explicitly. A frail but sprightly man in his 60s, he was part of a large, joint family (that included his children and grandchildren), and worked as a security guard at a hostel in a nearby town (about 6 miles from his residence), to and from which he cycled under perilous highway traffic conditions every day. “I tell them in no uncertain words,” he said, referring to his family, “I will bring you every penny from 11 months of earnings, but one month, ah!, will always belong to Bhole Nāth.”

In the above cases, the pilgrimage may be seen partly as a time—a place, occasion, and medium—to delimit, and to rejuvenate from, an existentially

overwhelming, distressing, almost inhuman (or, perhaps, all too human) life of labor and suffering. For these men of a mature age, it helped reaffirm faith in long-held values and, in the context of a phenomenal surfeit of commodities, images, and expectations, in the goodness of a temperate life. Traces of the paradoxical social significance of the pilgrimage of these veterans may be found in its resonances, at an earlier life stage, in the religiosity of Kamarpal — where the contradictions are less reconciled, or, are more animated.

Śiva and the Hierarchical Society

We met Kamarpal late in the journey at our final overnight stopover, a few miles from Pura Mahadeva. Next day, the 13th of the lunar month of Śrāvaṇa, would be the first day of libations, when the water would be ceremonially poured over the śivalinga — a cylindrical rock as phallic symbol, emblematic of Śiva. We had decided to do the libations in Pura on the 13th, since we were already close. Besides, the prospect of libations in the Pura temple on the 14th was daunting. There would be enormous crowds with multiple queues extending over a mile, and stampede-like situations had been frequent in the past, despite hundreds of police officers engaged in crowd control and organization. Following a common practice, we would do the libations of the 14th at a neighborhood temple in our town.

For the overnight layover, we laid our plastic sheets in the open inside the compound of a local power station, which was relatively secluded from the turmoil and the loud music on the street. In addition to the block of electricity pillars and the office building, the compound included dozens of deserted houses with parched, cracked roofs

and shrubs sprouting out of their splintered walls. This was a fate that these houses made for government employees shared with many public housing projects throughout the countryside. Although the small inhabited pocket of the compound had been cleaned, the wild growth in the vast deserted stretch seemed to have proliferated in the monsoons. As we eased on the ground frogs started to leap over us. K did not like the sign; “Next, it will be a snake,” he said. He climbed one of the broken houses to check the terrace, but did not find it encouraging. Instead, we decided to eventually move to a couple of raised concrete platforms nearby. I was still lying on the ground when a group of pilgrims spread their plastic sheets next to us. “These people call me their guru,” Kamarpal, a medium-built, personable man in his early 30s introduced himself.

There were four or five other men in the group, all much younger than Kamarpal. “If I am to be the guru, I tell them,” he said, “there will be no *bhānga* on the way. . . . We will do the libations at Pura on the 13th, followed by the village temple on the 14th.” As the conversation continued, Kamarpal would tell me, “I have always been a devotee of Bhole Nath. I am a mistri . . . married, have two children—a girl and a boy. God has gifted my hands with a skill; with these hands I can support my family,” he said, trying to communicate an element of worker’s pride. Kamarpal’s account showed an effort at self-motivation, and a desire to maintain moral courage and personal integrity amid unfavorable conditions. “One of my brothers is a police inspector, another is an insurance officer. My father was also a government servant. I am the youngest— the only black sheep in the family!” he said, with a smile in expectation of my solidarity. “I tried everywhere, but have not been able to find a proper job. I will get one though; my guruji

says, ‘you will have success eventually; only, it will be late coming —there is a lot of struggle to your life.’” Kamarpal’s guru is a retired bank manager in Delhi who was recommended to him several years ago.

I had told the referee, the guru must be a devotee of Bhole Nath. Initially, I was wary, since guruji worshipped Gorakhnath. But he pacified my doubts by informing that Gorakhnath was Śiva’s avatar. He is a very accomplished man; he has made a temple in Delhi . . . and has supernatural powers. It was only last year that my brother was hospitalized for a long time because of a serious issue. . . . We were all very worried. I went to guruji in Delhi to seek his help. He said, “Don’t worry! He will be well by tomorrow.” Indeed, my brother recovered miraculously over the next few days.

Kamarpal’s family members do not take kindly to his faith. “My brothers and father are inimical to my faith in Bhole Baba. They rebuke me for it regularly; “So, the “Baba” will deliver you?” they say [derisively].” Conscious of the paradoxes here, Kamarpal continued, with an ironic smile, “Even this time, when I was leaving for the Kanwar, my father stepped up to me, ready to hit— he hurled the choicest invectives. He abused Bhole Baba too.”

Kamarpal’s story demonstrates the struggles of existence in a poor, deeply hierarchical society. On one side is a hegemonic social order defined by an accumulative, “this-worldly” rationality, evident in the dominant bureaucratic or capitalist ethic in the secular sphere as well as in the nineteenth century Hindu reformist movement, the Arya Samaj. Aimed at a revival of a “rational” and “authentic” ancient Vedic Hinduism in light of the colonial encounters with European monotheism, this movement has left a particularly strong impression in this region.²⁴ Although I did not find an opportunity to verify it with Kamarpal, it was quite likely that his family was influenced by Arya Samaj.²⁵ On the other side is the case of a person injured by this dominant ethic, and his recourse

to Bhole Baba, the generous One, and the pilgrimage, to seek assistance in the dominant order and to find a different, absolute imaginary order as well as a social niche. Even as he struggles against the symbolic violence of a dominant social ethic, Kamarpal continues to perform and aspire for roles in the dominant

order. Here, he seems to be in line with a precept

commonly reiterated in north India, “You must not

relinquish your own responsibility; God will only help

those who are willing to help themselves.”

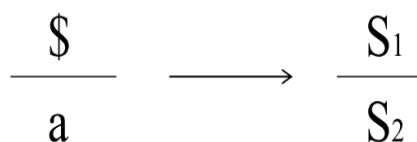


FIGURE 1.1: THE HYSTERIC'S DISCOURSE

Kamarpal's predicament exemplifies Lacan's brilliant figuration of the manner in which the symbolic, the imaginary, and the Real constitute, and are involved in, one another—like a Borromean Knot! “The trinity. . . — one and three in a single stroke.”²⁶ If the symbolic here is the dominant order (a rationality represented through the father, the brothers, and the market), and the imaginary is the character and mythology of Śiva as well as the ego-ideal, the guru (the bank manager, a person accomplished both in the symbolic and the imaginary order; an aspect which also translates into Kamarpal's own ideal ego as a guru to others), the Real then is the traumatic, perhaps continuous encounter of these forces in Kamarpal's particular historicity, which has been motivating the more than dozen pilgrimages he has made as well as the everyday experience of living. In the Lacanian schema, the moments of the pilgrimage, the investment in Bhole Baba and the pilgrimage rituals, has a partly hysterical structure.²⁷ It is the split, barred subject (\$) impelled by a traumatic core, the *objet a* approaching the subject's signifier (S1) in the symbolic system, by trying to expel the dominant symbolic order (S2)—as far

as possible, for a brief yet compulsive period of time. Say, for the time of the pilgrimage or, equally, the time when he looked at his skilled hands with apparent pride (see Fig. 1.1).²⁸

Concerns Worldly, Other-worldly

While Weberian ideal types have habituated many of us to think in categorical terms, specially where it concerns the putative “flight from the world” character of Eastern religions – Hinduism being often cited – it would be a misperception to think of the Kanwar pilgrim’s departure in such a manner. This is not a flight from the world; rather, it addresses the world. It engages the world, gets a purchase on it, precisely by transcending it. *The pilgrimage is a social intervention*. It is an alternate medium of existence, a possibility or search for sovereign subsistence.²⁹ It operated as another field for enacting one’s being human, being alive, or being someone in the context of an alienating, dehumanizing symbolic order. The pilgrimage, I found, intervenes in the social order through the very figures and moments of transcendence. It provides a field for the participants to address their desires and immediate social responsibilities and rise to the unique challenges of an economically destitute yet very hierarchical society, increasingly dominated by a liberal capitalist social logic. This is an open field, one without any gated entries or institutional constraints, and yet, a challenging and productive site to practice and prove one’s resolve, gifts, and good faith.

In his study of Protestantism, Weber found that the Protestant religious ethic and practice conditioned the subjective orientation to work. It was in work and through evaluating each other in terms of capital accumulation and behavioral propriety that the

Protestants morally and socially engaged themselves in the world. Today, the ethic and accumulation of capital is, of course, the only game in town. In a global social order increasingly governed by neo-liberal ideology, capitalist economic institutions have become the only regular, legitimate option for “work,” and practically the only socially legible text to demonstrate one’s ability and moral sincerity. As Bourdieu pointed out in a compelling analogy with the imposing power of the psychiatric discourse in the mental asylum, the neoliberal discourse has all the features of Goffman’s “strong discourse.”³⁰ This is “a type [of discourse] which is almost impossible to combat and whose “realism” is difficult to question because . . . it represents the co-ordinated actions of all the forces which count, all forces which combine in giving reality the shape it has.”³¹ Despite its imposing presence and authority, however, this remains an exclusive game, with only a selected, disciplined few allowed in. If in the above interaction with Kamarpal, one witnesses a relatively tense relationship between the field of the pilgrimage and the social order, in other cases — despite the differences — this interaction may be far more complementary.

“It was more than twenty years ago, still a teenager, that I first went for the pilgrimage. Ever since, I eagerly wait for this time of the year. . . . I anyway like walking. I walk a lot. . . . That is how I spend my time. I can walk the whole day.” Shyam thus narrated his fondness for the Kanwar. “I had been worshipping Bhole Baba since childhood and then happened to go for the Kanwar. . . . I entered the game early,” he concluded with a flourish. After all these years of Kanwars from Hardwar, the previous year he found a companion to go up to Gaumukh, the glacial source of the river 160

miles upstream from Hardwar, at the roof of the Himalayas. “The harder you work, the more you have to gain. . . . I can’t think of a pilgrimage merely from Hardwar anymore, it has to be Gaumukh.” Repetitively and delightfully describing the astonishing experience of an avalanche that almost wiped them off at the river source, he continued:

“The revered Ganga showed us her terrific form. . . . Huge boulders and massive snow surged out of nowhere at an unimaginable speed. The river took away one of our bags, we barely escaped. . . . When we told others of this near death experience, they would say, “But you went there to see the Ganga’s true form, didn’t you? That’s what She showed you then.” . . . They were right!”

Shyam has a job that pays for his labor, a paltry \$100 a month. Coming from a Brahmin family—the priestly caste—for Shyam, religious practice is a normative activity. Although members of his family insist that he limit his religious observances to home, the pilgrimage is far too much of an attraction for him to follow their advice. In the labor and rewards of the pilgrimage, the phenomenal excesses of this journey, its repetitions and the terrific aspects alike of Śiva and the Ganga, Shyam seems to find his *jouissance*. It is as much a negation of the flatness of everyday life as it is a continuation, accentuation of the symptom, the walking, which is his peculiar way of traversing the world. What remains a symptom yearlong transforms into the central performance during the pilgrimage.

If for Shyam, however, part of the power and effect of the Kanwar has been its recurring quality, for his partner in this audacious journey involving 260 miles of walking, a majority of it in the mountains, it was a first pilgrimage. Yaspal had been a volunteer caretaker of the small village temple for many years before he quit after “some resentful villagers” cast aspersions on his integrity. The responsibility of receiving returning

pilgrims at the temple and attending to their ritual and commensal requirements had prevented Yaspal from going on the pilgrimage all these years. On this inaugural journey, he collaborated with Shyam—a veteran, earnest pilgrim—on a demanding encounter with the great goddess at the source. “The Ganga has always held a special attraction for me; after all, in our lands, She is the only manifest One.” But there was a pensive touch to Yaspal’s description of his religious attitude:

The temple duties meant a lot to me. I was not pleased with this loss of responsibility. That was how I contemplated spending my life. . .in the service of the temple and its deities. I had refused marriage and family life as well; however, when my married, younger brother died a few years ago, my parents coerced me into marriage.

Only in passing would Yaspal mention the avalanche in Gaumukh, although he had lost his bag and money to it. Instead, the protracted time with the goddess, and its mighty phenomenal presence were an avenue for solace after the long association with the small, peaceable village temple. A person with a conspicuously contemplative aspect, Yaspal told me several stories of his experiences tending to the temple idols and the visitations of the deities in his dreams. “Only the saints,” he continued, “can experience the spirituality of the world, the true phenomenal effect of existence, in their daily living; most of us only get glimpses of it in our sleep.”³²

At Stake

Not all participants, however, subsist in the modesty we find in the above cases. In other instances, the correspondence between the normative attitudes of the pilgrimage and the dominant social order can be much more abrupt, and their differences, even when they supplement one another, much more explicit. A majority of Kanwar pilgrims are

young men taking their first steps into adulthood. In highly challenging and uncertain economic conditions, amid a mad rush of likewise vying numbers, where the prospects of stable and respectable employment or life course are faint and illusive, these are daunting steps by all means. This anxiety-laden experience is further intensified by expectations and desires provoked by the continuous spectral presence of a global array of aspirations and commodities, which are expertly coded to tantalize and provoke.³³

For many then, the demands and the joys of the pilgrimage provide a voluntary and accessible field of performance. This is an open field, a field without any gated entries or institutional embargoes, and yet, a demanding and arduous field in which to practice and prove one's resolve and gifts. At the same time, it is the field of the Absolute, and, although families like Kamarpal's are not uncommon, the pilgrims are usually assured that their labor and good faith will be recognized by their dear ones. Here, recognition from the family is particularly crucial, since it is from the claims and expectations of the family that the most emotionally swaying and insistent—at times, nagging—demands emerge.

A couple of miles before the power station, we decided to take a break at a tube-well in the middle of sugarcane and paddy fields. Taking my blistered, swollen feet out of my ill-fitting shoes and saggy socks, I limped into the water pool. After a day of drudgery in muggy weather, the pleasure of sinking in a copious stream of refreshing water rivaled, and multiplied, the relief of being close to the end of the journey. I had been relishing the water for a while, with K taking time off in the sugarcane fields, when a group of slender young men—the oldest of them perhaps no more than 18 or 19 years of age—arrived at

our station. Drinking off the water spout, they wished to enter the pool. The eldest got into a brief conversation with me, as another group of adult men took rest on a prop by the adjacent room. He continued the conversation, telling me how today they had walked from the highway junction, about 25 miles away, with barely a break. In the flow of this moment of pride he could not resist a wager: “No offence to the Baba’s grace, bhole, but I am ready to bet that none in this procession of pilgrims could beat us. I believe we could outpace anyone to the temple.” Not hesitant to acknowledge my own battered condition—which may have partly provoked the hubris—I nevertheless enjoyed persisting with the game. “But,” I said, “my brother might be willing to take a dare.” As he inquired of his whereabouts, I pointed to K, who was just coming out of the sugarcane fields and must have appeared a worthy rival.

When he drew close, I informed K of the wager. “What is at stake?” K asked him with a straight face. Now dismissive of the challenge, he replied, “Nothing, bhole . . . only, may whoever makes it first also offer their libations first.” K was unimpressed. The situation turned normal; after a brief lapse into mirth, the solemnness of the occasion dawned. One of the pilgrims who had joined later had overheard the claim. Nursing two large blisters on one of his toes, he remarked to his colleagues, “The bholās there claim none can beat them to the temple.” The others nodded somewhat unapprovingly but seemed to take it in good humor. “This is my third pilgrimage,” he continued, “I always get these blisters. . . . They are always at the same spot.” Later, K would boast to me privately regarding the wager, “I’d have turned him into a whirling gig, but what is the point of damaging one’s body.”

Referring to their own behavioral lapses, two brothers I interviewed— young men working in the liquor business—would say, “Sometimes, you have a dream or an event which reminds you of an oversight, of a misconduct. . . . You fold your hands and ask for Bhole’s forgiveness, and try to be careful thereafter.” However, the competitive pulse and an anxiety of social performance in the middle of uncertain and arbitrary conditions registered in their religious experiences. With an uncle, whom they idolized as a brilliant and astute person, who had successfully negotiated the challenges of liquor retail although he was educated only up to primary school, the two brothers had become part of a real estate and liquor retail enterprise. Both were very religious; they had both made the pilgrimage multiple times and were ardent devotees of Sai Baba. This renowned mystic of the nineteenth century with his shrine in Shirdi (Maharashtra) has an extensive following throughout the country. The two brothers thus described their faith in Śiva and Sai Baba and their religious experiences:

The pilgrimage is a lot of joy. It is much fun and pleasure. . . . One gets immersed in the flavor of Bhole. We never had *bhānga* ourselves, though some of our friends did. . . . No alcohol, of course, but *bhānga* is Bhole’s ritual gift. [One recites: *bhānga* and *dhatūra* on his body; his neck adorned with snakes; day in and day out; Bholā drinks cups of *bhānga*] . . . Bhole Baba has always granted us everything we asked. . . . If you ask with true faith, Baba will certainly grant it. . . . Of course, God will not come to you to claim that He fulfilled your desire. It is for man to understand that.

For much of our conversation, the brothers spoke in tandem, in a rapid, agitated tempo projecting on the deities an often impetuous, transferential relationship. On one occasion, for example, the younger one had a dream:

It was about 8 p.m. in the evening, and I had slipped into slumber, when I had a dream. . . . I saw Sai Baba standing there, he as if shook my legs to wake me up. “You had promised to visit Shirdi, after the contract was announced, . . . but you

did not come.” [Now speaking over one another] We had promised to visit Shirdi, after the contract, . . . once we were free. The very next day, immediately, we took the train to Shirdi. . . . No seats were available, . . . but we sat on the floor, and later paid the ticket collector five times the fare to get seats.

Sai Baba is well known for the miraculous assistance he provides to his devotees. For the brothers craving after success in social conditions where much is left to chance and at an age with a lot at stake, where the gap between success and failure is as yawning as it is fickle and arbitrary and where everything depends on a little luck, a little help, a hardly recognizable divine hand was a kind of anxious resort to supernatural assistance. And although the brothers appeared to be workaholics, single-mindedly pursuing success under anomic circumstances, they seemed to transfer their anxieties to the deities.

During the pilgrimage, in general, I found that a competitive banter was common when the pilgrims rested, after suspending their *kānwaṛs* aside, a conversation I could not conceive taking place when they were carrying the the *kānwaṛ* on the shoulders. Thus, on the first day when a pilgrim we met *en route* said he would be doing the libations 200 miles away in Vrindavan, my colleagues—who were proud of their strides—later privately expressed their incredulity, questioning how he could possibly make it with his “sluggish pace.”¹⁹ In fact, many of my respondents portrayed a sense of achievement in their ability to make the journey in a short time. Amma, an elderly woman I interviewed, a veteran who had mentored several younger women on the pilgrimage, took pride in her claims of making the journey in a short time but for the encumbrance of the novices. She rarely shied of boasting of her leadership skills, for example, in breaking through police cordons to facilitate shorter and preferred routes for pilgrims – who followed her cheering – or her ascetic faith and endurance in avoiding any indulgence

during the pilgrimage and living merely on chai and homemade sweets she would carry. But Amma too had her rivals.

“That woman had a rough time this year; she was bedridden for almost two weeks,” Shamli told us dismissively. Shamli was a young and vivacious married woman who lived close to the one-bedroom worker’s quarter in which Amma lived with her son’s family.²⁰ Shamli herself lived with her family in a tiny shack, badly flooded by rain water this monsoon, in a slum called the Harijan Basti, where most residents belonged to the “untouchable” community, traditionally and rhetorically identified with sanitation work.²¹ Shamli’s family, as she told us, was a Brahmin family. She worked as a full-time maid at a middle-class house, while her husband—an alcoholic whom she had finally been able to persuade into abstinence after many years of effort —usually scoured for casual, unskilled work. Shamli had been going for the pilgrimage for 8 or 9 years with her friends; this year, however, she brought the Khari Kanwar. The Khari (Standing) Kanwar is a demanding version of the pilgrimage, defined by the rule that the *kānwaṛ* will not rest; the person carrying the *kānwaṛ*: must remain upright through the length of the journey. Thus, the brief relief the pilgrim could obtain would be from companions willing to stand with the *kānwaṛ*, while she rested.

Several years ago, my daughter’s leg was struck by polio. She had a prolonged fever, and she came out of it with one of her legs become thin as a twig. I kept her in the private hospital for 15 days, but to no advantage. The doctors were helpless. I beseeched Baba to heal my daughter . . . promising she will bring him a Khari Kanwar. We made the journey this year; this is the first time I was confident she would be able to pull it off. . . . She is, of course, very young, so I carried the *kānwaṛ*: most of the way. Her brother helped me a lot; he would stand with the *kānwaṛ*: for hours, allowing me a nap. The father, however, did not; . . . he never missed his sleep. He had tried hard to dissuade me, saying it would be too strenuous, but I remained firm and told him, “I will do it, why are you bothered?”

I was back to work the day after the pilgrimage. I will be doing another pilgrimage next year to make a pair.

In addition to the annual Kanwar pilgrimages, Shamli regularly visits a famous temple of Baba Mohan Ram in Bhiwadi (Rajasthan), about 75 miles from her town. She lights an oil lamp there on the second day of every lunar month as part of the rituals. (“The journey is inexpensive; to and fro, it only costs \$2 by train”). One of the major references of Shamli’s religious practice — one she shares with several of her friends and perhaps a certain social class in general — is a delinquent, alcoholic partner. This situation not only leaves the burden of family maintenance completely on the woman but also suppresses any hope of a better future. And yet, amid the pain and drudgery of life, the promise of the future is the primary (perhaps the only) viable source of inspiration. “I have been praying to Mohan Baba for a better house, and requesting that the kids’ father abstain from alcohol, and be more responsible. He used to be an alcoholic . . . but is now reformed.” The future here is the solace of the present.

The priority of the future in this experience of time is in concert with existentialist phenomenology, where temporality is figured in the unity of a future that constitutes the present in reference to a having-been.³⁴ As the becoming of the future, the present is the active shaping of the world in the form of work. A temporality that renounces this anticipatory character, this care for the future, usually has little patience with work. “My husband was a complete alcoholic; he would rarely work, and give us any money — now, however, he has quit drinking, and he turns every penny in.” “Yes, every penny,” rhymed the kids, laughing. “I give him the pocket money from my own hands. . . . He went to

Mohan Baba twice with me, and took an oath not to drink again. . . . He cannot drink anymore. . . . If he does, he throws up,” she said.

The deity here mediates among the subjects and their temporal horizons; the work of the deity articulates the foci of a community among otherwise divided subjects. One may think of the “throwing up” either as possession by the deity, as Shamli seems to imply, or as a sign of alienation from the ethical subject of the word addressed to the deity and to the cherished dreams and hopes of one’s loved ones. Shamli’s paradoxes echo in her description of her friend who lives close by and works in a factory in another town:

We have been going together for the pilgrimage all these years. The poor fellow leaves at six in the morning after preparing meals for everyone, and returns at eight in the evening to more drudgery. Her husband is an alcoholic . . . but he has quit now. “We will not take you for the pilgrimage with us, if you drink,” we have warned him.

These performances belonging to a different temporality generate hope and community— and therefore work—in an otherwise disillusioning and alienating, punitive, social order that holds scarce promise. “Their father rested for a day, but when I have no rest myself, how could I allow him to rest any longer,” Shamli continued, underlining her motivation to improve her situation. Beyond the push on the family, her excellence during the pilgrimage was, of course, for Shamli, an evidence or assertion of her own performance. It was a means of self-encouragement; excellence here was an indication, a continuation of her excellence in daily life—which likewise echoed from the unusual fortitude of her friend.

Although women feature in the pilgrimage, a majority of the participants are young men, and many of the common motifs reflect this social characteristic. Pilgrimages often begin at a very young age, and are, for many, the first steps into maturity, on the road away from home, and these expectations seem to carry over the solicitude of the family, particularly of doting parents. They vindicate the proof of a home, and the promise of security. If the pilgrimage is where one sets out to perform — and, short of many alternate avenues, will continue to perform both the drive and dejection for years to come — proving one's sincerity, good faith, and apparent competence in meeting one's promise and the family's expectations, such expected sacrifices may be seen as demands or demonstrations of recognition. In the field of the pilgrimage, in this chosen and open site of action, the pilgrim will likewise showcase and be recognized for many of her niche talents.

The Quintessential Kānwariā

On the last several days before we picked our Kanwar, the ghats had been jam-packed as participants timed their departure from Hardwar to reach the destination by the appointed occasion of Śivaratri. The buzz and clamor was daunting — it was a crowded place, much of it occupied with sacred objects and activity, which one inadvertent step could potentially defile and lead into disaster. Crossing over to the central ghat one of those days, I felt so overawed I kept standing on the bridge for a long time. I had been indisposed from fever some of those days, which seemed to have affected my nerves; but that takes nothing out of the deterring quality of a geography marked by such concentration of extreme moral and emotional investment of this vast a body of people.

Once I was actually on the ghat though, the surroundings seemed much more friendly, familiar and personal, the place navigable.

Two days before the journey, K led our shopping trip in the crowded streets of Hardwar. “We will carry pitchers,” he said to me, “Wait, you will marvel at how I decorate our *kānwaṛ*!” We purchased a solid cane, two steel pitchers with a capacity of about 1.5 liter each along with cord nets to hold them, and smaller items including a few ribbons, and a pair each of spoons, and little bells and trishuls. K then worked diligently for several hours, only occasionally taking my assistance. After skillfully wrapping the cane in ribbon, he tied a pair of knots each on both sides. The outer knots were tied around spoons to be used as vessels for the incense lighted at the time of prayers, while the trishuls and the bells were tied at the inner knots; the space carved between the two knots was used to secure the cords holding the pitchers. K was emphatic that the firmness of the structure was vital; in this long and critical journey, any structural flaws in the *kānwaṛ* would be unpardonable. K had a flair for precision in his craftsmanship, and this stylistic preference reflected the pride he took in his own lean and muscular – that is, efficient – physical shape.³⁵ “He is a quintessential Kānwariā,” one of our young female relatives had described K to me.

The ghats were much less crowded the previous week. Although there was still much activity, particularly morning and evening, and one could see Kānwariās everywhere in their distinct ochre, bathing, decorating, and lifting their *kānwaṛs*, the numbers were fewer. Many of the pilgrims at this time were from distant locations in Punjab, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, or eastern Uttar Pradesh, a good number of them,

in fact, on their way back from Gangotri or Gaumukha, the glacial source of the river in the upper Himalayas, 170 miles upstream. Among them were pilgrims carrying large amounts of water, up to 10-15 gallons, often in the form of multiple pitchers on either side. With their belongings, and the padded carrying pole, the weight could easily be more than a hundred pounds. In view of the heavier burden, these pilgrims began earlier. The onerousness of this exercise impressed me terribly; I often looked at them and their ware closely, amazed by their willpower and devotion. I think I shared this feeling of wonder with most others around; as one of these pilgrims would prepare to lift their *kānwar*s, or happened to pass by, he would often be greeted by a buzz among captive onlookers impressed by such formidable labor/devotion.

On one such occasion, K and I joined some other curious passersby watching a pilgrim perform the preparatory rituals before lifting the Kanwar. Karam was a wiry man, unusually adorned for the occasion – below a white t-shirt was a shining, silken *dhoti* tied with a waistband of the same material. Wearing little earrings, and around his neck the common *gamcha*, a thin cotton towel in ochre most Kānwariās carry, he appeared a stranger (perhaps a Bengali) since men from this part of the country rarely cared to dress as ceremonially as in eastern India, where Goddess worship is more common. The *kānwar* had three pitchers of water on either side, the two at the base were large, probably with about three gallons of water each, and the others must have contained at least two gallons each. A paid skilled worker had finished weaving a net of ropes around the pitchers to hold them firmly. A perfect, professionally done net was vital to the journey; and despite all the chances Hardwar presented of deceit, no laxity could be

expected on this front. As a shopkeeper assured us definitively in response to my concerns days later when we bargained for the same service for our *kānwaṛ*, “Bhole! this is serious matter, and there can be no latitude here.”

The pilgrim was bound for Delhi, and had already made the pilgrimage more than a dozen times, although this was only the fourth time he was taking the *jal*, as the *kānwaṛ* with the bare water was called. With Śivaratri still two weeks away, he was allowing sufficient lead time to cover the 130 miles distance unhurried. “How heavy is this, bhole?” I had asked him reluctantly. “I don’t know, bhole!” he replied with a smile, discounting the materiality of the burden, “there it is, for you to see.” Yet, I could not help but express my wonder, “It must be a heavy task, bhole (carrying the weight over such a long distance)?” Looking at the heavens, and then around at the others seeking their affirmation, he waved his hands to indicate the indeterminacy of the issue, and to disperse my query. “Where is the burden, *bhole*? It is not mine to bear; Baba is the one who will be carrying.” The people around nodded in approval.

Such denial of the pilgrim’s agency is a universal facet of the Kanwar. Almost every pilgrim will deny one’s own role in carrying the *kānwaṛ*; there is an unequivocal deference of agency to the great Lord who is the gravitational center of the pilgrimage. This implies a dissipation of the ego, a renouncing of the self, of one’s individuality in resigning oneself to the deity – a reverential disintegration of the subject, and the submergence of her act in favor of the absolute Act, *Māyā*, of the Universal Master. If the subject implies a libidinal centripetality – from a linguistic perspective, she who can say “I,” in an inter-subjective field – it is precisely a denial of the subject in this aversion to



FIGURE 2.1 MAKING KANWARS

saying “I”.³⁶ Such denial of the ego is perfectly consistent with the transformation of every individual, every interlocutor into a “*bholā*.” Thus, it is indeed Bhole Baba who has the responsibility for the burden. The Baba’s responsibility for the burden, even as the pilgrim is its medium, corresponds with the transfer of one’s personal worries and concerns on Bhole Baba; trust them to the final, omniscient Will of the Innocent One – *Aśutoṣa*, He who is easily pleased, and is kind and generous.

Watching on the *ghats* (river banks) of Hardwar scores of pilgrims diligently decorate their *kānwars* during the festival is a captivating sight. In a majority of cases, the participants purchase a partly decorated or bare frame from the market—this includes two small baskets attached to a bamboo stick with an arch made of split bamboo at the top. Then they decorate the frame with ribbons, streamers, garlands, and pictures and insignia of deities. At times, plastic replicas of snakes and parrots—the former a sign of

Śiva, the latter regarded a pleasant creature, also a sign of felicity—are tied to the ends of the stick. Although one may be critical of the cheap, even tasteless quality of some of the generic decorative items—“Yes, one has to put on all this trivia!” one remarked—pilgrims prepare their *kānwaṛs* with delicate care. The baskets are laid with kusha grass [halfa grass] in which the Gangajal (Ganga water) is kept, either in many tiny bottles or a couple of bottles, containing about a quart of water each, on either side.

Those more certain of their skills go to great lengths to craft special *kānwaṛs*; many such veterans lead groups of pilgrims as mentors or gurus. They often bring the basic frame of the *kānwaṛ* with them, prepared at home, leaving all decoration to the time of the pilgrimage. A particularly popular structure this year was of a śivalinga seated on a large platform, with a snake’s hood shading over it, and surrounded by pillars—all made with colorful, embroidered silky cloths stretched around frames. Usually, pictures of Śiva, Pārvati, or Ganeśa would be mounted in front, with a vessel for lighting incense, and the whole structure would rest in the middle of two solid poles, which required four to carry. In some cases, a small pump and battery would be hidden below the structure to artfully provide a continuous trickle of Gangajal [Ganga water] on the śivalinga and to illuminate the *kānwaṛ*: with string lights at night. I could not find an opportunity to interview a guru making the decorations—it would have been imprudent, and impossible, to interrupt their intense absorption in the work. But I watched closely on several occasions as one of these veterans brought up a fine piece of work out of a bare structure minutely attending to every detail, their pride in their work resonating in the pride and admiration of other group members attending on the master’s craft and

helping as apprentices. More than once, we were informed by an apprentice, “The guru is a master at his work; he has been doing this for more than a decade—he likes to do every bit of it with his own hands.” Although conscious of the strangers’ attention, the guru would keep attending to his craft.

Recognizing work

Today, once established, capitalism is able to recruit the workers it needs relatively easily in all industrialized countries, and in every industrial region within individual countries. In the past, it was an extremely difficult problem in each single case. And even today, it cannot always achieve its aim without powerful resistance....³⁷

In Weber’s insightful observation, the dialectic of the desire to not work and of being forced to work is surely as old as life itself.³⁸ As Weber demonstrated in his analysis of the Protestant ethic and its transformation into modern capitalism, this normative structure simultaneously implicates moral and theological estimation, economic condition, and social worth.

This becomes particularly unequivocal in conditions of global neo-liberalism in which the market logic becomes a universal grid of intelligibility for any kind of social practice, from individual action and motives, to the family, and to the state executive. In this paradigm, which has been a powerful force across the globe since the 1970s, there is no division of rationalities, no reason that the human be pulled in different directions – everyone is (assumed to be) a calculating actor placed in a consistent and determinate field. There is no room for any alternate horizons of morality, existence, or history; the world is unipolar.

The dialectic of such social construction of the subject is well represented by Jock Young's formulation of the "exclusive society."³⁹ As Young showed, this is a society that first appropriates the subject through an unprecedented commodity culture programed to inject market indicators into social relations, and seduce as consumers, while rejecting an ever larger number of people as workers. It is thus an economy and social structure that produces "rejects," of course, an operation possible only after it has first appropriated them in practice and as knowledge objects.

The religious setting was an alternate field for participants to prepare and to work, to be socially recognized and to effect and recognize themselves as subjects with social and moral worth. Thus, for example, Kamarpal's case clearly demonstrates that religious symbolism, ethic, and belonging provides an alternate horizon in the context of an alienating and stigmatizing social order. The religious practice provides an "actual" identity out of terms with ascriptions of "failure," "unemployed," and "outcaste" by a dominant social order. It provides another textual medium, imagery (or mirror) for self-recognition to resist a dominant, appropriating ideology. At the same time, it is important to note that (much in the manner of Lacan's illustration of the intricate ties between the symbolic, the real, and the imaginary) this alternative field is not "other worldly," rather it is a time and space engaged in the world.

These performances demonstrate simultaneously the features of social existence that find wide expression in the contemporary economy and others it barely acknowledges. For example, the competitive banter, Amma's self-praise of her leadership, the exchanges by the tube-well, the frequent wagers, the careerist

motivations of the brothers in the liquor business, all these show the competitive dimension of social relations. At some level, these performances reiterate the economy and its expectations. They often do so in anxious anticipation, or preparation since many of the participants are at the threshold of adulthood, a life stage where “serious” performance must soon be delivered. Conscious of the heavy odds stacked against a predictable career in the organized economy, this sociality is practice for the unpredictable expectations, the scarcity, and life consequences of the informal economy.⁴⁰

Not everyone, however, is young or male, nor is competitiveness the primary attitude. The labor, the pain, the resolve, and the moral fortitude demonstrated here is also a performance of the suffering of everyday life, a demonstration of one’s unrecognized excellence and of the will to persist and deliver on responsibilities to one’s loved ones. While the economy is obviously a dominant force in participants’ lives and, consequently, has been a recurring figure in the above narrative, by no means does it exhaust one’s life orientations. The artistic works, the labors of the journey, the identification with Śiva, the phenomenal appeal of the river goddess, the many opportunities for showing one’s tastes, talents, and predilections, and the communitarian sociality address timeless concerns of human existence. The iron cage has scarcely any patience or place for such desires and imperatives.

The religious performances simultaneously prepare for, challenge, and cavort with this totalizing social and economic order. Contemporary scholars are surprisingly unanimous in seeing the contemporary global popularity of religion as a reactionary

assertion of cultural identity in the face of social change and modernization. Such a proposition advances a normative, uncritical understanding of capitalism, putting the focus on cultural issues without attending properly to social and existential suffering. It implicitly assumes liberal capitalism as a final, universal, and, in the end, justified game. In the Kanwar, however, it is hard to miss the deep significance of religious practices in allowing ordinary subjects to face and to live meaningful social lives amid an imposing global capitalist order. It also asks for renewed attention to the many literary and metaphysical connotations of the terms “performance” and “recognition.” As Śaṃkara in his *Bhāṣya* on Gauḍapaḍa’s *Kārikā* (3.18) notes:

It may be urged in this connection, that when choice has to be made between the metaphorical and actual sense of words, the latter ought to prevail. We say — no.⁴¹

¹ See *Hindustan Times*. 2011a. “Dak Kanwar in Progress, Pilgrim Count in Hardwar tops One Crore.” July 27; *Hindustan Times*. 2011b. “High Security at Kanwar Mela for Shivratri.” July 28. I use the Anglicized word, “Kanwar,” to conform to popular usage. However, while the capitalized, “Kanwar,” is used for the pilgrimage, the appropriate transliteration, “*kānwar*,” is used to indicate the contraption used by the pilgrims to carry the sacred water.

² *Śivalinga* is the iconic representation of Śiva in the phallic form.

³ Across India, many rivers are often identified as variants of the Ganga, often with subterranean connections to this great north Indian river (see Feldhaus, 2003).

⁴ Heber, Reginald. 1828. *Narrative of a Journey through the Upper Provinces of India: From Calcutta to Bombay, 1824-1825*. London, UK: J. Murray; Taylor, Bayard. 1855. *A visit to India, China, and Japan, in the Year 1853*. New York, NY: G. P. Putnam and Co; Parks, F. (1850). *Wanderings of a pilgrim, in search of the picturesque, during four-and-twenty years in the East; with revelations of life in the Zenāna: Illustr. with Sketches from nature. In 2 vols.* London: Richardson, pp.260; Lockman, J., & Jesuits. (1762). *Travels of the Jesuits, into various parts of the world: Particularly China and the East-Indies*. London: T. Piety, pp.274.

⁵⁵ “Kanwar” in this monograph henceforth refers only to this particular pilgrimage.

⁶ Atkinson, Edwin Felix T. (ed.). 1876. *Statistical, Descriptive and Historical Account of the North-western Provinces of India*. Allahabad, India: North-western Provinces' Government Press, pp. 310.

⁷ Lochtefeld, James G. 2010. *God's Gateway: Identity and Meaning in a Hindu Pilgrimage Place*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, pp. 193.

⁸ See *Hindustan Times*. 2006. "Kanwar Mela Begins." July 14; *Hindustan Times*. 2011a. "Dak Kanwar in Progress, Pilgrim Count in Hardwar tops One Crore," July 27; *Hindustan Times*. 2011b. "High Security at Kanwar Mela for Shivratri." July 28; and Tripathi, Purnima S. 2004. "The Long Walk for Worship." *Frontline* 21 (17), Aug 14-17.

⁹ Hobsbawm, E. J., & Ranger, T. O. (eds.)(1983). *The Invention of tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁰ See, for example, Appleby, Scott and Martin Marty, 2004, *Fundamentalisms Comprehended*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press; Beyer, Peter, 2006, *Religion in a Global Society* Oxford, UK: Routledge; Kinnvall, Catarina, 2006, *Globalization and Religious Nationalism in India: The Search for Ontological Security*, London, UK: Routledge; and Robertson, Roland, and JoAnn Chirico, 1985, "Humanity, Globalization, and Worldwide Religious Resurgence: A Theoretical Exploration," *Sociology of Religion* 46(3): 219-242.

¹¹ The ecological fallacy is perhaps as germane to the sociological method as it is regarded as a lurking threat, a recurring caveat in sociological training. Bauman, Zygmunt. 1998. 'Postmodern Religion?' in Paul Heelas (ed.), *Religion, Modernity, and Postmodernity*: pp. 55-78. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, p.11.

¹² See Van Poppel, Frans, and Lincoln H. Day. "A Test of Durkheim's Theory of Suicide-- Without Committing the " Ecological Fallacy"." *American Sociological Review* (1996): 500-507; Alker, Hayward R. 1969. "A Typology of Eco-logical Fallacies." Pp. 69-86 in *Quantitative Ecological Analysis in the Social Sciences*, ed-ited by M. Dogan and S. Rokkan. Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press. Atkinson; and Robinson, William S. "Ecological correlations and the behavior of individuals." *International journal of epidemiology* 38.2 (2009): 337-341.

¹³ Though of course there are issues with Weber's paradigm. As we know, Weber not only sees Hinduism as an "otherworldly" religion that encourages a "flight from the world," but for him mass religiosity anywhere could only be irrational and magically oriented. In this perspective, only virtuoso religion can offer a rational ethic of social life. My findings are to the contrary. Weber, Max. 1946, *From Max Weber*, H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (ed. & trans.). New York, NY: Oxford University Press, pp. 289.

¹⁴ The dramaturgical vocabulary has served as a primary resource for the symbolic interactionist tradition. Thus, Goffman's many excellent studies of the staged quality of social interaction, preceded by the foundational studies on the social constitution of the self by Cooley, Mead, and Blumer, have had a defining influence on the evolution of sociology. Judith Butler's celebrated characterization of gender as a stylized repetition of bodily gestures and actions gave this formulation yet another critical edge. On other shores, anthropologists such as Turner and Geertz were attracted to the symbolic significance of rituals and the dramatic manner in which they played out structural facets of non-Western societies, their cultural beliefs, and social divisions. This scholarship is clearly informed by enduring literary, cultural, and metaphysical traditions. If anything, it

has systematized dramaturgical vocabulary and observations to produce formal tools for social scientific analysis. See Blumer, Herbert. 1969, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press; Cerulo, Karen A. 1997, "Identity Construction: New Issues, New Directions," *Annual Review of Sociology* 23: 385-409; Cooley, Charles H. 1909, *Social Organization: A study of the Larger Mind*. New York, NY: Schocken Books; Goffman, Erving, 1959, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday; Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York, NY: Basic Books; Turner, Victor W. 1974. *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press; Butler, Judith. 1989. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York, NY: Routledge.

¹⁵ O'flaherty, Wendy D. 1986. *Dreams, Illusion, and Other Realities*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, pp.117-119; Schechner, Richard. 2002. *Performance Studies: An introduction*. New York, NY: Routledge, p.114.

¹⁶ Schechner 2002: 113–114

¹⁷ Śankara. n.d. [1894]. *The Mandukyopanishad with Gaudāpada's Kārikās and the Bhāshya of S'ankara*. Trans. M. N. Dwivedi. Bombay, India: Bombay Theosophical Publication Fund, p.76.

¹⁸ On this point, it is important to pay attention to some of the philosophical issues here. The term "recognition" has appropriately been so central to modern philosophy. Thus, in Hegel's seminal illustrations in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, it is the dynamics of the encounter with the other, the battle for recognition, which leads to the development of self-consciousness. This dialectic of recognition simultaneously shapes consciousness and constructs the human as a working and therefore historical being. However, if in the Hegelian project, recognition is conceived in the idiom of mastery — whether over the object or the other consciousness — and work recognized only for its historical value in a kind of universal, endless temporality, we must pay attention to a different temporality that Heidegger illustrated. Heidegger, M. 1962 [1927]. *Being and Time*. Trans. John. Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York, NY: Harper and Row.

¹⁹ Says Heidegger "As soon as . . . [one] comes to life . . . [one] is at once old enough to die." Heidegger's radical intervention, which relied as much on "Eastern" philosophies as on ancient Greek society, foregrounded the lived paradoxes of ordinary human existence, perhaps a rare occasion in Western philosophy. Self-consciousness here is social and existential; being-in-the-world is also being-with-one-another. Sociological theory and anthropological studies have, of course, further demonstrated the many dimensions of social recognition. Such a phenomenological orientation also integrates Weber's primary interest in *verstehen*, participants' own perception of the significance of their actions; after all, in Nietzsche, a great factor connects Weber with Heidegger. Even more importantly, Weber's illustration of the dynamic play between religion and economy is instructive. Formal economic institutions obviously provide a hegemonic field for social performance.

²⁰ See also Young, Jock. 1999. *The Exclusive Society: Social Exclusion, Crime and Difference in Late Modernity*. London: Sage.

²¹ “those working in unorganized enterprises or households, excluding regular workers with social security benefits, and the workers in the formal sector without any employment/ social security benefits provided by employers” (2008: 3). According to the data based on the 2004-05 National Sample Survey (NSS), out of a total working population of 457.5 million, 422.6 million, that is, 92.4 per cent is informally employed (p.4).

²² As Freud meticulously describes in his “Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through” the best manner of negotiating the repressed impulses was to repeat them in the “definite field” of the analytical setting, “a playground in which... [they are] allowed to expand in almost complete freedom.” See Freud, S. (1950) [1914] *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 12 and Vol. 18 London, Hogarth Press, p.154.

²³ Performance in the religious field then was “a piece of real experience, but one which has been made possible by especially favorable conditions.” Freud (1950), p. 154.

²⁴ See Bayly, Christopher A. 2012. *Recovering Liberties: Indian Thought in the age of Liberalism and Empire*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

²⁵ I remember vividly from about two decades ago, how my maternal grandfather—an Arya Samaji from a village close to Kamarpal’s—had sharply, and very unexpectedly, reprimanded a young relative who had ventured to enthusiastically describe his maiden Kanwar journey (a rather rare act in those days) to the old man, hoping for a pat on the back.

²⁶ Lacan, Jacques. 1999. *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972-1973*. Trans. Bruce Fink. New York, NY: Norton, pp. 123.

²⁷ Lacan, Jacques. 2007. *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*. Trans. Russell Grigg. New York, NY: Norton.

²⁸ Also see Lacan 2007: 31–38.

²⁹ Bataille, Georges. *The accursed share: an essay on general economy*. New York: Zone Books.

³⁰ See Bourdieu, Pierre. 1998. “The Essence Of Neoliberalism: What Is Neoliberalism? A Programme for Destroying Collective Structures Which May Impede the Pure Market Logic.” *Le Monde Diplomatique*. Retrieved December 10, 2012 (<http://mondediplo.com/1998/12/08bourdieu>). See also Goffman, Erving. 1961. *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. London, UK: Penguin.

³¹ Bourdieu, 1998: 28.

³² Yaspal used the English word, “spirituality.”

³³ See Singh, Vikash. 2012. “Religion and Neoliberalism: TV Serial Rāmāyaṇa and the Becoming of an Ideology, 1980-1990,” *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 6(2): 1-17.

³⁴ Heidegger, 1972: 378.

³⁵ This was also evident in K's interest in pets –dogs, horses, calves – which had to be lean and pretty, as well as his fantasies of love interests.

³⁶ See Emile Benveniste, "subjectivity in language," in *Problems in General Linguistics*, Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, pp. 223-230.

³⁷ Weber, 2002, Weber, M. (2001). *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*. Los Angeles, Calif: Roxbury Pub. Co.

³⁸ "Work," whether under the gaze of an apparent master or the very conditions of existence prescribed by the greater Master – be God, Nature, or Death. In the Hegelian dialectic one clearly witnesses how it is in an experience of trembling and fear under the threat of annulment, and in the presence of an other who must eventually come to recognize, that the human consciousness is shaped simultaneously as work and as knowledge. Whether knowledge abstracting as "science" can ever represent in good faith, in the form of absolute knowledge instituted in the state as Hegel would have it, the know-how and the suffering of the working is questionable. Nevertheless, this combination of work or *techne*, and the knowledge assumed to be fully representing it and the essence of the working being (morally assured as a common condition shared by the master and slave alike) more or less saturates the dominant idioms of the social field in which the actor must exist.

³⁹ Young, Jock (1999).

⁴⁰ On informality, see Böröcz, Jozsef. 2000. "Informality Rules," *East European Politics & Societies* 14(2): 348-380; and Polanyi, Karl. 1957. "The *Economy as Instituted Process*," in Mark Granovetter and Richard Swedberg (ed.), *The Sociology of Economic Life*: pp. 29–51. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

⁴¹ Sankara (n.d.) [1894].

CHAPTER TWO

EVERYTHING IS A GIFT

We followed Karam, the man carrying the heavy burden introduced in the last chapter, for some distance from the ghats. By the first stop less than a mile away, I prepared myself for the indiscretion to ask whether his pilgrimage was motivated by a wish. “Everything is a wish, bhole! Everything is a gift from Him!” he replied. Wishes are an important facet of Hardwar’s religious life as much as of the Kanwar. Situated atop a hill immediately West of Har-ki-Pauri is the extremely popular temple of Mansa Devi, the Goddess of Wishes –where almost every visitor to Hardwar pays obeisance. In the temple compound is a Ficus tree around which pilgrims tie an ochre thread muttering their wish. Once the wish is fulfilled, they would make another visit to the temple to untie a thread; the trunk and branches of the tree are inundated by a mass of threads, although the temple administration must clear the tree from time to time. Even though Mansa Devi is the premier site of this practice, such wish-fulfilling threads and trees are quite common in other temples as well, including the important Śiva temple at Nilkantha above Rishikesh. The vow, usually centered on a wish, is often the organizing force behind the Kanwar.

There is a secretive, at some level, sacred dimension to wishes. Engaging the subject’s most pressing needs, desires, or worries – such as that which would send one on a laborious divinely oriented project such as the Kanwar – they belong to a subjective order of temporality radically different from the dominant. To discuss the objects of such

anxious concerns – a sacred field – with the platitudes of normal conversation, and expose them to trivial social judgments is to jinx them. “Whatever you ask for, never tell anyone!” Amma, one of my elderly female respondents had strictly advised me. The secretiveness, of course, can also serve pragmatic considerations of avoiding domestic conflicts. Since desires can indeed be scandalous, one person’s dearest wish can be an abomination to another. Thus, when this participant on his onerous mission evaded my query, it was a polite response to an intimate demand, unbecoming of a stranger.

And yet his response was quite authentic. Since a wish is only relatively discrete, it usually emanates from a broader field of concerns and obligations and involves, minimally, a note of thankfulness and a prayer for the continued well-being of one’s loved ones – as well as for a more general peace and goodwill. Having expressed their disinterest in material gain from devotional activity, or at times after describing specific wishes, my respondents would usually add, almost as an aside, either a supplement to more specific wishes or self-evident fact: “A request for the safety and well-being of your near ones of course goes without saying.”

Some would explicitly acknowledge an exchange dimension, but generally not without a second thought. Thus: “...not for wishes...[after a moment]...yes... we are confident of Bhole Baba’s generosity;¹ after all, you may ask as much as you want of god, more you ask, the less.” The elder brother sitting next to him nods in agreement: “Yes, Bhole Baba! He is very generous. Actually, my younger brother had a chronic ear ailment in his childhood. And mother had prayed to Bhole Baba, saying that her son would bring Baba’s *Kanwar* once his ear heals.” Others are more circumspect, anxiously dissociating

from connotations of profit to their pilgrimage. Of the seven times he has been on the pilgrimage, Shailesh avers he has never asked Bholenath for a reward. “But for one exception,” he adds, “I sought Bhole’s blessings for passing class X exams, promising that I will bring his *Kanwar* the following year. [...] I was going through a very hard time; I would work night shifts in the factory and take exams in the morning, without any sleep. But I passed the exam, it was Baba’s miracle.” Another participant denies any motives to his pilgrimage: “No, I never went for the pilgrimage in pursuit of a wish.” Yet, others may quite matter-of-factly, and in the assurance of custom attribute their pilgrimage to a wish: “I brought Kanwars imploring Bhole Baba, first, to help me find a job and, later, since we had three daughters and no son, to gift us a son.”

On the whole while an expectation of restitution seems an important aspect of the offering, there is a reluctance, a denial in identifying, or being identified with exchange rationality. A certain register of forgetting is involved, a distaste for “exchange with the deity.”² Such hesitation needs to be considered in reference to the hegemonic insistence of market rationality, its over-determined quality, the free hermeneutic license it enjoys in our time. The element of remuneration in the pilgrim’s act—whether a silent expectation, a demurral or (rather ironically) even an assertive demand—guards against appropriation by the widespread order of economic reason. It recoils against such an allusion, insists on a difference, one that outside of the references of a particular, and in some ways closed, reserved discourse (custom, *śraddhā*, *dharma* and so on), it has difficulty finding words for, precisely, one may say, because of the power, the pervasiveness of market rationality.

Instead, it is possible to hear echoes of a similar insistence on difference in the departure from the laws of market exchange that Mauss described through the notion of the gift.³ The gift, Mauss found, much like the items of exchange, circulates often as an obligation, an imperative—though not counter-signed by positive law—but never without an excess, an exaggeration, immoderation, a certain operation of time that keeps it incommensurate with the economic system of measured exchange.⁴ Moreno-Arcas notes, “[...] the immediate repayment of a debt to the god is equally considered to be distasteful and ungrateful. A suitable period of time must pass [...]”.⁵ And Mauss: the gift “by definition [...] cannot be reciprocated immediately. *Time* is needed to perform any counter-service”.⁶ And what is Time here but nothing, a pure difference, a departure that inserts into the form of this circulation a decisive indeterminacy, a foreign element that confounds this circle of exchange even if, as Mauss finds, it were the very reason, the originary force driving exchange.⁷ Before venturing into what the pilgrim “takes,” what he wants, however, we have to recollect what he has to “give,” since his desire to give is significant. After all, the frequent refrain, “Bhole Baba, I will bring your *Kanwar*,” addresses the deity’s desire. This complexity is perhaps best illustrated in the composition of the religious vow.

Before the deity: Taking a vow

Like most pilgrimages, a primary facet of the Kanwar is the vow, a solemn statement performed either as the promise of an anticipated offering of the Kanwar after a wish is granted, or simply as the declaration of an offering. The vow is the inaugural act, often performed well in advance, even years ahead, of the actual pilgrimage. The vow: a

discursive event at the threshold of intention, simultaneously partaking of the world and transcending it, encapsulating both the moment of desire and its sublimation; so much so that it is metonymically extended to a vast body of Hindu Household rituals, the *vratas* or votive rites.⁸ Not surprisingly, the noted linguist Emile Benveniste finds in the “oath,” the principle of subjectivity itself: “[. . .] the instance of discourse that contains the verb [“swear”, “promise” etc.] establishes the act at the same time that it sets up the subject.”⁹

From passing an exam to the health of a child, the wish for an offspring, a daughter’s marriage or for a job, the content of the vows in the Kanwar is as varied as are human desires and concerns. Commonly and minimally, the pilgrimage involves a note of thankfulness and a prayer for continued well-being of one’s loved ones. Implicit here is faith or, as the pilgrims’ frequently aver, *śraddhā* in the deity (Śiva) and his power. This term “*śraddhā*” is ubiquitous in the pilgrims’ narratives. It means one’s unwavering faith in (or regard for) the deity, the practice such that this quality of the performative act becomes almost synonymous with the person. It is the pilgrim’s drive, the talisman necessary for a successful pilgrimage. Thus, as my respondents declared at different points: “those unable to walk a mile, in *śraddhā* they do a hundred”; “our *śraddhā* in Bhole Baba”; “without *śraddhā*, the pilgrimage is destined to be abortive”; “these days only a fraction truly goes out of *śraddhā*, the rest are there only to have a good time”; “how does one explain pilgrims going a hundred miles on a wheelchair, if not for their *śraddhā*”; and such.

Etymologically a Sanskrit word, *śraddhā*, is closely connected to the “vow.”

According to Monier-Williams, *śraddhā* is “faith, trust, confidence, belief in”, depending on the context, it can also be “desire, longing, wish.”¹⁰ The correspondences of this word in the Indo-European group of languages have provoked abundant linguistic attention. One certainty is its relation to the Latin, *crēdō*. As Benveniste notes: “the exact formal correspondence between Lat. *crēdō* and Sanskrit *śraddhā* is a guarantee of ancient heritage.”¹¹ In the Vedic sacrifice, *śrad* frequently appears in relation to Indra, the heroic, warrior god. The context is often of Indra’s exploits and the patron’s (of the sacrifice) bestowal of faith or trust in Indra’s victory. As in this instance:

*śrāddhitam te mahatā indriyāya
ādhā manye srāt te asm ā adhāyi
vśā codasva mahatē dhānāya*

“We have trust in your great Indrian might, and it is for this reason that I have thought (many): trust has been put in you, rush forward like a bull to win the great prize of combat.”¹² The *śrad*, trust, was an offering granted to the deity based on his proven record, premised on the understanding that the deity would return the favor in the sacrificer’s own earthly struggles. The confidence placed in the deity includes the assurance of being restituted, faith itself insures the return. It amounts to making an obligation. To cite Benveniste once more, “the act of faith always implies the certainty of remuneration [. . .] there is some sort of *do ut des* (“I give that you may give”) between men and gods.”¹³ Likewise, articulating the logic of the “Brahminical sacrifice,” the philosopher Jean Luc-Nancy quips, “Here is the butter? Where are the gifts?”¹⁴

The assumptions of reward may be as important to the contemporary idea of *śraddhā* as they perhaps were for the ancients. Thus, several scholars have emphasized an instrumentality to the vow, a *quid pro quo* frequently using language equivalent to a financial transaction, debt and repayment, where some of the more pragmatic ones may “pay only for divine services rendered, and after they are rendered.”¹⁵ Furthermore, these observations may appear discursively consistent with the axioms of exchange and compensation in the rational choice tradition of the contemporary sociology of religion.¹⁶

And yet, such a conclusion will remain hasty; much of this reasoning is quite questionable. Although these readings make tangible observations, their import is overdetermined by the predominance of the market idiom in our times. This also shows the limitations of a text-centric approach to analyzing social relations – the general tendency to identify “antiquity” with “origin,” the risk of essentializing the past, and canonizing yesterday’s possibly contested and socially discriminating rituals and interpretations as universal truths. An economistic abstraction completely skirts the subjective anxieties that support the performance, and may amount to a cavalier neglect of the social relations and obligations among which such promises operate. The vow is a complex, and highly ambivalent performance. If this fundamentally asymmetric practice, which is outside the circuits of knowledge and exchange is equivalent to an exchange transaction with the gods, it is by the same measure a denial and refusal of such equivalence.

The Gift in the Vow

The pilgrimage offers to the *śivalinga*, water *par excellence* brought in labor and hardship from the Ganges, from a particularly sacred spot in the river. This is an offering to Śiva's liking; after all it was Śiva who in his matted hair had received the celestial Ganges on earth. The pilgrimage repeats, commemorates this act of divine union, this instance that manifests the pinnacle of Śiva's glory. It pleases Śiva, for "without the Ganges, Śiva would remain the scorching brilliant *linga* of fire."¹⁷ Thus, it is a ritual fact: the *śivalinga* requires oblations of milk or water, preferably Ganges water. In some of the great temples of Banaras, Śiva's renowned abode, thus, the pouring of Ganges water "goes on from dawn to dusk." Hordes of men "hoisting huge brass pots of Ganges water on their shoulders [...] mount the steps, shouting Śiva's name –*Hara Hara Mahadeva* and entering the sanctuary to pour their lavish offerings on the *linga*."¹⁸

The water of the Ganges is essentially sacred; nevertheless, through the laborious transportation of the water in the *Kanwar*, according to a series of injunctions that accentuate and maintain its sanctity, the pilgrim reconstructs this sacredness, and enacts a formidable testimony to its value. Albeit the offering of Ganges water is a generic ritual, the pilgrim makes it an exceptional act, a sacrifice, performatively recollecting its sacredness. The sacrifice is in the renunciation, in the performed intensity of this giving. This is an abundant giving, not simply for the exertion of the pilgrim, the pain the pilgrim goes through, the water that is heartily poured over the *śivalinga* but also, and as importantly, by the effervescence of the collective, the excesses of the festival: the

feasts, art performances, commotion, intoxicated bodies, pain and suffering, and vigorous participation of the spectators.

The lavish offering correlates with another figure of giving –giving one’s word! As noted above, the vow involving the promise of a *Kanwar* offering inaugurates the pilgrimage. There is a symbolic connection between the vow and the libation, the act of pouring liquid offerings to the deity. In the every-day ritual practice of *linga* worship one enunciates the wish while pouring milk or water over the *śivalinga*. Linguistic connections between these figures extend into the archaic, where the archaic is not necessarily only a figure of historical time but perhaps also of what Kristeva has called, following Freud and Heidegger, the “timeless atemporality” of the unconscious.¹⁹

The vow that accompanies or anticipates the offering is commitment of the greatest rigor. It is binding. It demands absolute integrity, consciousness and responsibility from the subject –in this instance, subjectivity itself as though becomes lucid.²⁰ In the *Kanwar*, the inviolability of this pact goes without saying.²¹ Intricately woven as the vow is with the subject’s desires, concerns, and sense of ethics, it can be safely assumed that one will be only too eager to conform.²² Such assured proclamation by the subject invites and anticipates a fitting response from the deity. The vow thus is its own guarantee. The specific enactment of guarantee or reassurance in the form of the offering is transposed to the event itself as an affirmation of, or desire for, a more generic sense of security.

Having mentioned his disinterest in material gain from the pilgrimage, Shailesh added: “a request for the safety and well-being of your near ones of course goes without

saying, everyone makes it”. In my observations on the pilgrimage, I found a palpable anxiety regarding familial well-being and security inevitably mentioned as an aside, either as a supplement to more specific wishes or self-evident fact dismissed even as it is pronounced, to be a common denominator. If people disengage from connotations of profit from the deity, the desire for familial well-being is deemed too minimal or fundamental to qualify as commerce – it is a non-demand that does not fall into the circuit of measured exchanges. To appreciate such anxiety, it is important to take a close look at the pilgrims’ existential circumstances.

As I will describe in greater detail in Chapter Four, in northern India, everyday life continuously wades through stark impressions of injury, disease, and death, “a vast sea of poverty and the visible added evidence of human degradation”²³: public spaces and hospitals crowded with poorly attended ailing bodies; chaotic traffic with an accident frequency more than 10 times in the West where every second step could possibly be a near miss; and the frightening incidence of violent crimes such as murder and kidnapping for ransom. Shailesh was scarcely in his teens when his father’s mutilated corpse was recovered from a railway track; a cousin who mentored him for his first Kanwar was crushed by a truck; a brother-in-law died in an accident with a tractor; and Shailesh himself survived a serious head injury in another traffic accident. For the past several years, he and his wife spent a major part of their earnings on expensive allopathic treatment for her blocked fallopian tubes, after having tried every other medical alternative, from community healers to ayurveda and homeopathy. Omkar, a regular bholā, lost his eye in an accident a few years ago but refused to abstain from the

pilgrimage that year: “I have lost an eye and the medical expenses have turned me bankrupt, but I can’t miss the pilgrimage; if not for Bholebaba the accident would have been fatal. My body was ruined, but his blessings have helped me recover.” Disease and impaired body parts were equally integral to other respondents’ narratives.

Ramsharan walked his first Kanwar in high fever; Rajesh’s pilgrimage was in fulfilment of a parent’s vow for healing his ear; Munna went on the pilgrimage imploring Bhole Baba to heal his son’s congenitally infirm leg. Likewise, polio-afflicted Sudhir continues to look for an able-bodied friend to help him bring his Kanwar on a wheelchair. The extreme precariousness of health, life, and livelihood means, a continuous and high stakes financial struggle – whether it is Bhimkumar and his brother who were tenuously employed at a retail shop to carry small cargo in cycle rickshaws, Shailesh who recounts an endless struggle of making ends meet and marrying off his sisters ever since his father died, Munna who runs a petty grocery store, Ishwar who grew up in a family of agricultural laborers and desperately wanted a job, or Kapil, who left his destitute family and lives virtually on the street shifting from one form of casual employment to another.

Dreadful uncertainty hovers over everyday life, from the health of loved ones to the family’s livelihood, to the ability to meet compulsory social obligations. The registering of these concerns is signaled by an expression common not only in the Kanwar but also in religious visits across north India: “Baba has called (or invited).” If the deity is the goddess, “Mother has called” or “There is an invitation from the mother”. The call here is a sign of parental love, of being the object of the deity’s desire. Where the figure of “love” is present, the relationship is unique, unmediated. The deity’s concern

here is with the singular subject, in the particularity of the subject's condition; as it factors into or contributes to the subject's symptoms. ("Bhole Baba understands your concerns deeper than you can yourself"). The expectation of the invitation, deemed as the paramount condition for the materialization of the pilgrimage, is also the hope that the circumstances will remain auspicious. In a milieu where hardly a day goes by without a word of a death, a major accident, a surgical mistake, or without a close encounter with debilitating deprivation, it invites the assurance that no misfortune will obstruct the anticipated pilgrimage.

There is a wish there that the subject would be able to satisfactorily negotiate expected obstacles, which are formidable yet routine. "Every time I had no clue where the money would come from, but Bhole Baba took care of everything in the end", says another of my respondents. The miracle here is reminiscent of one of his experiences of the pilgrimage itself: "My foot was badly injured, with about 10 stitches, but I requested Bhole Baba to help me complete the pilgrimage. I then walked for three days and was able to pull off the yātrā without any hindrance, though I was bedridden for several days thereafter." The Baba inexplicably helps navigate these insurmountable and routine odds; what happens to be objectively formidable and uncertain becomes subjectively negotiable. As though it were a temporal arc anxiously anchored in the future, the vow beckons propitious circumstances to warrant another pilgrimage or another journey to a religious shrine.²⁴

Under such precariousness of life and livelihood, the constant threat of, and exposure to, accidents, disease, and debilitating poverty – in a word, suffering – that

marks social life for an overwhelming majority of people, it is hard to imagine a desire more significant and pervasive than the well-being of one's dear ones.²⁵ Therefore, McGee can note that "... many rites observed for the good health of a child are not performed when a child is sick, but rather are observed on a punctual and regular basis for the purpose of maintaining good health."²⁶ The absolute pact and desire of the vow correlates with, re-enacts, as Lacan observes included the Sadean fantasy, suffering as the "indestructible support" of the "play of pain."²⁷ The resolute pain the Kanwar pilgrim demonstrates, whether by playing up or otherwise, may be seen as an account of the faith and suffering that supports it. Thus, a reassurance of security comes across as a return, a gift in return of the sacrifice, of faith, *śraddhā*, which have been our concerns in this chapter –reassurance, a surety, a re-sponse as it were to the resolve and anxiety that invokes the *spondé*, the sacrifice from the subject.²⁸

Anxiety, Responsibility, and the Pilgrim's Self

In a recent book *Globalization and Religious Nationalism in India*, Kinnvall (2006) extensively treats these issues of anxiety, security, and religion in relation to globalization in contemporary India. Following the formulations of the sociologist Anthony Giddens, Kinnvall argues that by "challenging simple definitions of who we are and where we come from," globalization invokes feelings of insecurity and existential anxiety that make individuals seek security through alternative affirmations of self-identity. The author then reasons, in what appears to be a familiar structuralist vein, that potential sources of security are arbitrary – "any collective identity that can provide such security is a potential pole of attraction."²⁹ In this discourse, religion's compelling appeal lies in its

firmness as an “identity-signifier.” How does the construct of “identity” that social scientific studies seem so often to stress on, capture the performed concerns of the pilgrims here: concerns about the well-being of their loved ones, the lived reality of harsh material circumstances, the agonies of fulfilling social and customary obligations?³⁰

A closer look at the psychological assumptions of theories of identity indicates several key problems. To explore these, I suggest a short detour into Giddens’ understanding of “identity”, since the psychological aspects are explicitly addressed there. Moreover, Giddens formulates a theory of identity in tandem with the notions of “anxiety” and “insecurity” that, as I have described above, are significantly at play in the Kanwar performances. That these motifs of Giddens’ theory have been recently mobilized to explain contemporary religion in north India gives us more reason to reflect on his formulations.³¹

It is interesting that Giddens upholds conventional liberal assumptions about the self, relying on psychoanalytic and phenomenological traditions, which, actually offer radically social and relational and constructions of the self. Giddens’ account of “identity” builds on the child psychology of Erikson, whom Lawrence Friedman aptly called “identity-architect.”³² Briefly, Erikson has reasoned that healthy childhood experiences that demonstrate the reliability and trustworthiness of the caretaker help the child develop a sense of self-identity and a feeling of basic trust in the external world. Giddens extrapolates this logic to argue that basic trust so developed gives the child a sense of identity or self which, over time, is transformed into the adult’s trust in routine practices and into a consistent narrative of self-identity.³³

But in instances where such basic trust does not develop, the sense of identity remains deficient, which results in an eruption of existential anxiety. This is manifested in neurotic behavior and the inability to lead a “normal” life.³⁴ Thus, the formation of self-identity depends on trust in given social practices. Anxiety, on the contrary, is explained as a consequence of unhealthy parenting, lack of confidence in the caretaker’s return. Notable here is the emphasis on consistency between the self’s identity narrative and given social practices; that is, on the cultivation of an ego which would be at home in prevalent social practices.³⁵ A glaring problem with such formulation of the ego is its uncritical stance on reality.

The upshot of Giddens’ theory is that the affective must submit to the cognitively deciphered rationality underlying social practices.³⁶ The subject must conform to the given reality; the ideal is a disciplinary equilibrium. Disequilibrium is tantamount to failure of the project of self, a “false self,” an inability to be “normal.”³⁷

Scholars have shown that such constructions are premised on the reified idea of a Cartesian self, which seeks its “own” preservation and interests. This construct of the individual is not only unacceptable to Freudian or Lacanian psychoanalysis, which dwell on the multiple, inconsistent agencies in the subject, but as I have shown earlier it has also been persistently questioned in philosophy at least since Nietzsche and Heidegger, and in the complex understanding of subjectivity in poststructuralist and postmodern theory. Heidegger, in particular, extensively questions the Cartesian notion of the individual as an entity relating to the world as extended substance (*res extensa*) outside

itself to show that *Dasein* is always already Being-in-the-world and exists phenomenally in relations of care and concern.

In stark contrast to the negative appraisal of anxiety in the above formulations, in Heidegger (along with other insightful commentators on the human condition, such as Kierkegaard and Sartre), anxiety is a fundamental mode of being human. Social practices may be reassuring, but they are no less alienating, by the privation, the nullity that peeps deep out of them. This manner of everyday Being-in-the-world, *Dasein* fleeing in the face of the uncanniness of its potentiality-of-Being, is “not only tempting and tranquilizing; it is at the same time alienating.”³⁸ Anxiety interrupts this mode of being thus putting *Dasein* in the face of the fundamental nothingness of the world. Thus, whereas “for Heidegger, anxiety is constitutive in its uncanny (*unheimlich*) influence, such that homelessness (*unheimlichkeit*) is our primary condition; for Giddens the self-representation of anxiety is a secondary phenomenon, in so far as we are first of all “at home” (*zu Hause*) in the world.”³⁹ Instead of being part of a logic of individual self-survival, anxiety here is an existential effect – a concerned openness in temporality – that puts the human into a primordial attitude of care and responsibility. This relational quality of the self is altogether missed in identity-focused explanations of contemporary religion.⁴⁰

In the Kanwar, its exorbitant gifts and desires, amid figures of self-denial and the spectacular celebration of the deities, in these excessive performances that implicate custom, family, gods and social circumstances altogether, it is hard to imagine the economy of a “self” barely hanging on to routine practices and living in minimal trust

ever being haunted by risk. The concern about familial wellbeing in the pilgrims' narratives as well as a consideration of the pilgrimage rituals show the relevance of the figure of "anxiety" in the pilgrims' performances. However, such anxiety and insecurity, an inevitable effect of lived material conditions, of the continuous foreboding exposure to poverty, disease, and death is hardly explicable as a cognitive phenomenon. The existential immediacy of these circumstances is clearly a world apart from the figures of "risk" and cognitive "uncertainty" in contemporary sociology. Whether in relation to general circumstances or a more specific concern – a child's health, a sister's marriage, a desired job – such anxiety is almost always articulated in relation to others.

After their father's murder, Bhimkumar's mother left their home in a village several hundreds miles away and moved to a town near Delhi. Over the years, along with her two sons who worked as rickshaw pullers, they saved money and dreamed of returning to their village. When as cousins schemed to confiscate their small land holding, the mother moved back to the village to reclaim their land and the two brothers' families took turns staying with her. Bhimkumar vows that he gives all of his savings to his mother, so that they may together rebuild their lost world. A similar imperative of responsibility haunts Munna who is worried about his child's leg: "every parent worries about his child's health and future".

"Bhole Shankar," he continues, "is very simple and kind. He is able to deeply comprehend and care for your problems." Perhaps the same trait of comprehending through kindness or empathy for the particular pulls Shailesh to Bhole Baba. Working since he was 13 in a factory as replacement for his murdered father, Shailesh has been

the only wage earner in a family that included his mother, three unmarried sisters, and an infant brother. He worked fulltime during the day, preparing for the exam only at night. “My life has been an endless struggle but thanks to Bhole Baba, we have been able to keep up.” He recounted several tales of adversity, particularly of the ordeals he and his mother went through arranging dowries for the sisters’ marriages, yet taking pride in how they had come off with heads high. To Shailesh, who still broods about his father’s violent murder, the laborious ritual walks seemed to have the significance of a rite of passage, one more circumstantial than prescriptive. They were tests of his resolve and fortitude, repetitions of a traversal of adversity in its intense physicality on that most responsible of grounds, faith or *śraddhā*.⁴¹ Ishwar’s request for a job is likewise inseparable from the financial conditions of a landless rural family; his desire for a male-child, driven partly by familial expectations and the intense dynamics of a network of social relations. Manoj’s pilgrimage in fulfilment of his parents’ vow and Kapil who, as we will see, cannot resist wallowing in his family’s misfortunes are no less relational.

The pervasive anxiety about familial well-being is similarly structured. Much as a necessary difference of time – form, occasion, and such – intervenes between the gift and its return, so in the Kanwar there is an irreducible difference of identity between the pilgrim or the vower and the subject of the wish. It is difference that insists even where the self is seemingly at the center, whether through an imaginary of one’s dues, a symbolic responsibility, or a deferral of the desire to another.⁴² The request from the deity thus operates in the register of a gift; the subject finds itself obligated to ask for a gift but only insofar as it is a gift to someone else. The exorbitance of the *sponsio* or the

libations gifted to the gods anticipates a similar exorbitance of the gift in return, *re-sponsio*. The conviction of this demand is assured by the fact that the expected gift is not as such for the “self,” it is meant to *re-sponde*. It is a responsibility, to a *sponde* from someone else, to all those, indeed a sociality and all that may be called transcendental, one is obligated to for the countless gifts, the giving beyond measure that has given one one’s being.⁴³

We have seen that the vows and the painstaking rituals of the Kanwar reflect the subjects’ deep concerns about the well-being of their loved ones. This customary ethic, however, is not discrete. Performatively articulated, the responsibility for the family here implicates the subjects’ desires, and a sense of responsibility to tradition itself, which, after all, is the support of the deities. The following case illustrates how a customary ethic is involved in the responsibility to family or indeed the notion of family itself. Now 19 years old, Kapil has gone on the pilgrimage regularly for the last seven years. Most recently (in 2010), as he was living penniless in a new place, he found it difficult to go on the pilgrimage. Fortuitously, however, at the eleventh hour a friend approached him for company on a motorcycle ride to Hardwar.

Though rather unconventionally, Kapil was able to present Bhole his Kanwar. Pleased, he reverts to the common refrain: “if Bhole Baba wants you to come, he will find you a way around all obstacles.” Kapil was particularly preoccupied with an account from his childhood days:

We used to have cows. My mother took great care of them. She had a reputation of being very kind, she would never refuse anyone milk. Then there was a fire in our barn one night. I was very young. The three cows there turned to ash. People

say they howled to their death. Our house was at a distance, but none of the neighbors helped or came to tell us. Our family has since been on a curse.

Kapil's interpretation may not be far off the mark. Soon after the incident, finally breaking under the torture of domestic violence, Kapil's mother left the family to stay with a man from a rival community. In the closely knit Jat community of rural north India where even formal divorces are rare, this became the subject of great opprobrium and dealt a strong blow to the lives of the family members. Kapil was forced into accepting his mother was dead and, to this day, continues to talk of her as dead.⁴⁴ His elder brother grew up to become a pathological alcoholic, Kapil himself never went to school, became addicted to chewing tobacco and smoking before he was ten, and early in his teens began to work as a helper on trucks. "I do not like going to my village," he says, "I don't like meeting my brother, or father. My brother is a scoundrel; my father however is too simple a man." He adds, "our family is living a curse because of those poor cows. I have been unfailingly bringing Baba's Kanwar, only begging that we should be relieved of this curse."

The subject here is implicated in the fate of the family. Much as Kapil tries to sunder a relationship that seems to have brought him only misfortune by denying it, and by moving away (or moving endlessly if the trucking is a sign), he finds himself obligated to it. Wherever he may be, Kapil says that he returns to his village at the time of the pilgrimage. The force of this obligation is customarily articulated by reference to the tragic fate of the cows, these beings much loved and revered in this partly pastoral community. In a rational frame, Kapil can hardly be blamed for either the cows or the fate of his family, but such a calculation would be foreign to the register of this responsibility.

It is hard to find a more lucid illustration of such customary responsibility than the instance of Antigone who forsakes the promising prospects of her youthful life, going against the law to perform the death rites for her brother, and thereby to fatally plunge into, share in, her family's *ate* or misfortune (insofar as it does not absolve the subject of responsibility).⁴⁵ Antigone's responsibility is beyond the law, it is an unwritten responsibility, yet, it is a product of language and therefore of the law.⁴⁶ "Involved is an horizon determined by a structural relation; it only exists on the basis of language of words, but it reveals their unsurpassable consequence [. . .] for from my point of view my brother is my brother."⁴⁷ And whereas Antigone's tragic situation is exceptional, such acceptance of something in the register of a family's misfortune, with a temporality that "began to be articulated in previous generations" is, and Lacan's word is quite instructive here, the base relative to which in transference the subject counts the analyst's vote.⁴⁸

The self that participates in the gifting ritual is always an ambivalent, dispersed self. This should not surprise us, since the notion of the individualized self itself has historically been the corollary of the advent of a certain kind of economy.⁴⁹ Insofar as the gift exceeds this particular economic idiom, it also indicates and constructs a self that is not a derivative of this order. But is the mode of giving that subtends these performances restricted to the "family"? What defines the limits of love and responsibility? I have argued that the notion of the individual is insufficient, if not counterproductive, in understanding the subject of contemporary religious performances. Instead, I have tried to show how religion here is performed by subjects embedded in their relations and in a customary idiom of ethics. The "family" in this context may only be defined as a

customarily demarcated intimate circle of relations and responsibilities that radically involve the subject. Its members may frequently involve parents, kin, spouse, and children but any such demarcation may be referred as much to the charters of the Enlightenment that restrain love – a “feeling, that is to say, the ethical in the form of the natural,” this “most tremendous contradiction” – as to the privacy of the family, to thereby make it disappear in the exteriority of civil society and the state, as it may have a history outside or in contravention to it.⁵⁰ Likewise, one may as easily allude to this institution a certain orthodoxy or treat it as a potent ethical reserve, as for instance Chatterjee (1990) does in his exhortation that Hegel’s eloquence on the family be re-imagined in the context of the community or for that matter in Meyer’s recent proposition that the care received in families may be a “useful metaphor or narrative” for an imaginative construction of ethics.⁵¹

Engaging with these concerns requires a reconsideration of the notion of the “subject” in contemporary sociological understanding. Drawing from Cartesian metaphysics, this liberal conception of the subject gives primacy to a utilitarian cognitive interest in the world – the thing, the other, or indeed the self – and is predicated on a certain economy whether of thinking, of volition, or of goods formulated in the idiom of mastery.⁵² In the above accounts, we see that the radically relational and ethical performances evidenced in the pilgrimage are incommensurate with this liberal idea of the subject, and that the performed subjectivities of the pilgrimage emerge in difference from these assumptions.

¹ Bhole Baba (guileless grandfather, or guileless old man), Bholenath (guileless lord), Bhola (the guileless One) are epithets for Śiva, who is the primary deity of the pilgrimage. As Bhola's devotee, during the course of the pilgrimage, the pilgrim is inevitably hailed as *bhola*!

² See also McGee (1991), and Pearson (1996).

³ Mauss, Marcel. 2002 [1954]. *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Trans. W.D. Halls. Routledge.

⁴ Derrida, Jacques. 1992. *Given time. I. counterfeit money*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁵ (Harman 2006, 33)

⁶ (emphasis added 2002, 45)

⁷ Derrida (1992) provides an incisive exegetical meditation on time, gift, and Being and on Mauss's text.

⁸ On "sublimation," see Freud (1961), Lacan (1992). On votive rites, see McGee, Mary (1991). Desired fruits: Motive and intention in the votive rites of Hindu women. In *Roles and rituals for Hindu women*, ed. Julia Leslie. Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, p. 71.

⁹ Benveniste, E. 1971. Problems in general linguistics. Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, pp. 230–31.

¹⁰ Monier-Williams, Monier. 2002. *Sanskrit-English dictionary*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, p.1095

¹¹ Benveniste, Emile. (1973). *Indo-European language and society*. Coral Gables, Fla: University of Miami Press, p. 138.

¹² Benveniste (1973), p. 141.

¹³ Ibid. p.143

¹⁴ Having made the remark, Jean Luc-Nancy acknowledges the problems of such a decisive interpretation. "When someone says to his gods: 'Here is the butter. Where are the gifts?' it may be that we do not know what he is saying, since we know nothing of the community in which he lives with his gods" (26). Nancy, Jean-Luc, "The Unsacrificeable." *Yale French Studies*. 1991.79 (1991): 20-38.

¹⁵ Cited in Harman, William. 2006. "Negotiating relationships with the Goddess." In *Dealing with deities: The ritual vow in South Asia*, eds. Selva J. Raj and William P. Harman. Albany: State University of New York Press, p. 32

¹⁶ See, for example, Stark and Bainbridge (1996); and Iannaccone, Laurence (1998), Introduction to the Economics of Religion. *Journal of Economic Literature*, 36, 3.

¹⁷ Eck, Diana. 1996. The Goddess Ganga in Hindu sacred geography. In *Devī: Goddesses of India*, ed. John Hawley and Donna Wulff. Berkeley: University of California Press, p.148.

¹⁸ Eck, Diana. 1999. *Banaras: City of light*. New York: Columbia University Press, p.139.

¹⁹ Kristeva, Julia. 2002. *The portable Kristeva*, ed. Kelly Oliver. New York: Columbia University Press, p.429. Also see Kristeva for a description of performance as a play of the disjuncture between the time of ordinary social life and the atemporality of the unconscious; performance analogous to the fantasy, "torn between the atemporality of

the unconscious and the forward-moving flight of the story" (p. 449). While tracing the linguistic relation between "libation" and "security" in Indo-European language and society, Benveniste observes that whereas the Greek *spéndō* is "to make a liquid offering", its nominal derivative *spondē* or "liquid offering", is also in the plural "agreement, truce, armistice." Following the genealogy to ancient Greece, he finds that ceremonial liquid offerings were made to the gods while seeking security, a guarantee of safety. By the time of the Attic orators, the term had developed a distinct political dimension, referring to a pact or pledge of mutual security between contracting parties. In the Latin, *spondeo*, thereafter, the offering as the mediating factor was obliterated, "though its function remained"; the term retained only the juridical meaning of a surety or pledge, a guarantee or "insurance against risk." A promise, *spondeo*, from one party is followed by *re-spondeo* from the other. Thus:

This dialogue is constructed on a legal formula: a *sponsio* by one party and a *re-sponsio* by the other, forms of a guarantee which is henceforward mutual [...]. "*Respondeo, responsum* are used with reference to interpreters of the gods, priests, specially the haruspices, when in return for the offering a promise is given and security in return for a gift; this is the "response" of an oracle and a priest. [...] We may adduce a parallel expression from Germanic: OE [Old English] *andswaru* "answer" with which we may compare Gothic *swaran* "to swear, pronounce a solemn formula"; the Old English (and modern English) word is almost literally *re-spondere*.

Notwithstanding the extensive lexical correspondence in the Indo-European group of languages this genealogical event may be at a remove from the ritual composition of the *Kanwar*. Nevertheless, it reaffirms the dimension of surety and confidence to the offering. See Benveniste (1973), pp. 470-5 and Benveniste (1971), p. 229.

20

²¹ Likewise, Harman observes in the context of vows to a south Indian goddess, 'to take a vow to the goddess and to fail in its performance is to place yourself in great jeopardy' (200:31).

²² Yet at the same time, if there are contingencies that make the pilgrimage in a particular year particularly inconvenient, it is not uncommon for a votary to beseech the deity for forgiveness with a promise of doing the pilgrimage on another occasion.

²³ Kakar, S. 1991. Shamans, mystics, and doctors: A psychological inquiry into India and its healing traditions. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, p. 44

²⁴ I would like to credit Elin diamond for making the "arc" analogy during a discussion on the essay.

²⁵ In feminist literature on votive rites, such centrality of the other, generally a loved one, is an important figure. See Pearson, A.M. 1996. 'Because it gives me peace of mind': Ritual fasts in the religious lives of Hindu women. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press; Pintchman, T. 2007. Women's lives, women's rituals in the Hindu tradition. Oxford: Oxford University Press; and Sered, S.S. 1996. Women as ritual experts: The religious lives of elderly Jewish women in Jerusalem. New York [u.a.]: Oxford University Press. Speaking in a context of Jewish women, for example, Sered notes, 'In numerous

rituals – spontaneous, formal, private, and communal – they guard over the living, dead, and unborn people [. . .] the health, happiness, and security of particular people with whom they are linked in relationships of caring and interdependence’ (p. 10). See also Mahmood, S. 2005. *Politics of piety: The Islamic revival and the feminist subject*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

²⁶ McGee (1991), 83.

²⁷ Lacan (2006), p.261.

²⁸ See fn 19 above

²⁹ Kinnvall, 2006, pp. 4-5.

³⁰ On the centrality of the notion of “identity” in contemporary scholarly understanding of religion, see for example Robertson and Chirico 1985; Giddens 1990, 1991; Robertson 1992; Berger 1999; Dawson 2006; Kinnvall 2006; Beyer 2006; and Nesbitt-Larking 2009.

³¹ See Kinnvall, 2006.

³² See Bendle, M.F. 2002. The crisis of ‘identity’ in high modernity. *British Journal of Sociology*, 53: 1–18.

³³ See Giddens, 1990, 1991.

³⁴ Giddens, 1991: 61.

³⁵ This particular account of the ego as an agency capable of disengaging from the turmoil of the id and rationally adapting to the social environment is a legacy of the ego-psychology tradition mostly developed in the United States under the influence of Anna Freud, Heinz Hartman, and Erik Erikson. The perception of the therapeutic goal of attaining a healthy, well-developed, well-adapted ego so pervasive in contemporary cultural practices is itself largely a correlate of this model. See Bendle, 2002.

³⁶ See Groarke, S 2002 *Psychoanalysis and structuration theory: The social logic of identity*. *Sociology* 36: 559–76, for the primacy of cognition in Giddens’ theories despite Giddens’ own occasional statements to the contrary. Also see Craib, I 1998 *Experiencing identity*. London: Sage Publications.

³⁷ Giddens (1991), pp. 58-61. As Bendle (2002) points out in a compelling critique, the stress in ego-psychology “on the ego’s adaptive function overlooks the ego’s own state of alienation and also relies on the assumption that reality itself is an unproblematic realm to which adaptation can be made” (p.13). These presuppositions disregard such long and established traditions contesting “reality” as feminism, Marxism, and postmodernism along with other traditions in psychoanalysis itself. In Lacan, for example, whom Giddens happens to dismiss rather hurriedly, reality is conceived as substantively an effect of the symbolic order where the ego finds itself implicated by virtue of its misrecognitions. There is no given substrate that may be defined as “reality” which the subject may securely adapt to. If at all we are to confront the notion of “reality” as problematic, it is impossible to dispute Lacan when, in a stark rebuttal of Erikson’s theory of ego development, he says:

If this point of view [Erikson’s] is true, we will have to abandon the notion I tell you to be the essence of the Freudian discovery, the decentring of the subject in relation to the ego, and to return to the notion that everything centres on the

standard development of the ego. That is an alternative without mediation – if that is true, everything I say is false. Except, if what I say is false, it becomes extremely difficult to read the slightest of Freud's texts and understand anything in it. Lacan (2010), p.148.

³⁸ Heidegger, 1962: 222.

³⁹ Groarke, 2002, p. 569. For Heidegger, the primary nothingness of the world perceived in the mode of anxiety is precisely what constitutes the human in relation with the world, with fellow beings, in care and concern. To describe the radically ethical constitution of the self, Butler likewise resorts to the distinction between "fear" and "anxiety", Levinas finds in commentaries on the Genesis. Jacob "troubled by the news that his brother Esau – enemy or friend – is marching to meet him "at the head of four hundred men . . . was greatly afraid and anxious"". Jacob, we learn from a series of interpreters, was "frightened of his own death but was anxious he might have to kill."

⁴⁰ Also see Butler, J. 1997. *The psychic life of power: Theories in subjection*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press for a critique of identity, and a distinction between identity and identification. Citing Jacqueline Rose, Butler argues, "the unconscious constantly reveals the failure of identity . . . there is a resistance to identity at the very heart of psychic life" (p. 97). Lévinas, Emmanuel. 1999. *Alterity and transcendence*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 135. See also Butler, Judith. 2004. *Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence*. London: Verso, p. 136.

⁴¹ On responsibility and faith, see Kierkegaard, S. 1983. *Fear and trembling; Repetition*. Ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

⁴² So Lacan: 'Man's desire is the desire of the other' (1988, 177)

⁴³ "[...] how there is, It gives Being and how there is, It gives time. In this giving, it becomes apparent how that giving is to be determined which, as a relation, first holds the two toward each other and brings them into being." See Heidegger, M. 2002 [1972]. *On time and Being*. Trans. Joan Stambaugh. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. To illustrate further, the translator, Stambaugh, quotes Heidegger's comments on the 'It gives' from his *Letter on Humanism*: 'The 'it' which here 'gives' is Being itself. The 'gives,' however, indicates the giving nature of Being granting its truth.' (fn, 5).

⁴⁴ Kapil told me his mother was dead. I have the details from other sources, including of at least one instance when years later he went with a cousin to secretly meet the mother who lives in a neighbouring village. Later, both were mercilessly beaten by family members.

⁴⁵ See Lacan (1992). Griffiths says, "Atè is a rich and evocative term, especially in tragedy, suggesting both *outcome* (delusion, ruin, misery) and *cause* (often a mixture of human folly and supernatural sabotage)...[an] inescapable complex of delusion, error, crime, and ruin." See Gibbons, R., and C. Segal. 2003. *Antigone*. New York: Oxford University Press, p.41.

⁴⁶ In a translation from Heidegger's German: 'Not just now, nor since yesterday, but ever steadfast this prevails. And no one knows from whence it first appeared' (1996, 116).

⁴⁷ Laca (1992), p. 278.

⁴⁸ Lacan (1992), p. 300.

⁴⁹ See Derrida (1992); also see Polanyi (1957)

⁵⁰ Hegel, G.W.F. 2008 [1821]. *Philosophy of right*. Trans. S.W. Dyde. London: G. Bell and Sons, p. 82.

⁵¹ See Chatterjee, P. 1990. A response to Taylor's 'modes of civil society'. *Public Culture* 3: 119–32. See also Meyer, G. 2009. Taking risks for others: Social courage as a moral virtue. In *On behalf of others: The psychology of care in a global world*, ed. Sarah Scuzzarello, Catarina Kinnvall, and Kristen R. Monroe, 52–105. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.137.

⁵² The elevation of religious "compensation" to the level of principle as we see in Stark and Bainbridge's (1996) widely cited "new paradigm" may, to an extent, be seen as the explicit formulation of the metaphysical assumptions of most sociological theories of religion.

CHAPTER THREE

POWER, VIOLENCE AND THE SECULAR

Going toward the *ghats* of the Ganga in Hardwar, one usually passes through a maze of narrow streets lined with small shops, dealing in religious fare, and situated so densely, that they appear to run into one another. With awnings and raised floors extending halfway into the middle of already narrow streets, the shops playing devotional songs and music glitter with the golden hues of necklaces, bracelets, and other ornamentations, and pictures and statues of deities, along with *rudraksa* beads, sandalwood slabs, religious apparel, and sacred threads. Some also sell *prasād*, food offerings to the deities, usually including rice puffs, sugar balls, and a hint of dry fruits, along with fresh *bel* leaves, flowers, and incense.¹ Passing through this threshold, one gets glimpses of the waters of the great river goddess, whose timeless legends, miracles, and felicity are etched in the memory of the visitor who rushes incredulously through this fare longing for a sight (*darśana*) of the manifest. As a *bhakta* solemnly said to me, “In our lands, the honorable Ganga is the only one manifest” (*Sirf Gangaji hi pratyakśa hai*).

Coming out of the bazaar, the visitor finds herself in the presence of the Ganga with temples stepping into the river, the gurgling waters divided into multiple streams, crisscrossed by several bridges. On the *ghats*, pilgrims dip into the river, folding their hands in prayer and singing her praises, amid a steady flow of devotional chants and the clanging of bells from the temples. Hawkers go around selling ritual objects such as flowers, candles, and packets of *prasād*, and conveniences such as plastic mats, and drinking water. And many, old, forsaken, or physically handicapped make a living from

seeking alms, singing the praise of god and soliciting divine beneficence for the addressee and her loved ones. Despite its tremendous asymmetry, this intimate communication evokes the radical equality before god –where all are but desperate recipients, and begging is no disgrace. *Snān-dān*, to bathe and donate, that is, to divest oneself of personal impurities and belongings alike, pithily describes the substance of the *tīrtha yātrā*. Willing recipient of the *dān*, the ubiquitous alms-seeker epitomizes the existential drama of giving which organizes the whole sociality of the pilgrimage center, and of the Kanwar as a pilgrimage.

The ebbs and flows of a transient clientele give Hardwar a seasonal pattern characteristic of many religious centers in India. It is a town pulsating with religious and economic activity during certain times of the year, particularly on marked religious occasions. At other times, however, Hardwar can have the appearance of an elaborately equipped stage scene, where the main performers are yet to enter. Although the density at Hardwar's *ghats* waxes at the time of the Ganga *ārati* every morning and evening, in general the "season" spans from April to October when the upper Himalayan shrines are accessible, and heat in the plains pushes those that can afford to do so to seek the respite of the Himalayas. Hardwar then becomes either a religiously significant stopover or, along with the adjacent town of Rishikesh, a primary destination. Yet, it is the major pilgrimage occasions that truly provide Hardwar its exceptional quality – from the pre-set annual pilgrimages of Baisākhi (April), Makarsankranti (January), MāhāŚivaratri (Jan-Feb), Ganga Dasahara (May-June), and Kārtika pūrnimā (Oct/Nov), to the indefinite occasions of a solar or lunar eclipse or a Somavati Amāvasya, and of course the great Kumbha

festivals that come every 12 years (a smaller version, the ardha-kumbha, takes place every six years).² During the frenzied activity on these occasions, the town partly takes the character of each of these festivals –some of which are specific to particular social groups and geographical areas –and their ritual and material requirements. It is also during these times that the paradoxes of an economy centered on religious activity come starkly to the fore. The pilgrims' pious ideals and needs seem to become grist for the economic interests and the practical reason which dominates the orientation of the local providers of religious and market services highly reliant on these occasions of high traffic. This strange external duality, as this chapter hopes to make clearer, repeats the duality internal to the pilgrim's performance.

Hardwar and its paradoxes

In Hardwar's festive calendar, the whole lunar month of Śravana, devoted to Lord Śiva, is considered particularly auspicious. The great lord with his seat in Kailasa, at the roof of the Himalayas, who is believed to have received the celestial Ganges on earth in his matted hair, is the predominant deity of Hardwar, or the gateway to Śiva. And it is precisely this unique association between Śiva and the Ganga that the Kanwar enacts, as pilgrims carry Ganga water for libations on śivalingas across a large part of northern India. In the past, it is likely that the greater Kanwar celebrations took place at the time of MahaŚivaratri in the month of Phalgun (January and February) with a smaller version in Śravana.³ Speaking of the Pura Mahadev temple, an important site for libations today, Atkinson (1876) notes,

Fairs are held here in Phalgun (February-March) and Sawan (July-August). The great fair is the one held in Phalgun called Shib Chandra or Shib Ratri, when the

temple is sprinkled with water freshly brought from Hardwar and about 20,000 people assemble.⁴

Today, however, the scales have been tipped; although the Phalguni Kanwar continues to be practiced, the festival in Śravana is by far the bigger phenomenon. While only a few thousand participate in the former festivity, the latter draws anywhere from five to twelve million Kānwariās. During the Śravana festival, Hardwar and the adjacent shrines of Mansa Devi, Chandi Devi, and Neelkanth, as well as the town of Rishikesh, bustle with pilgrims; on certain days as Śivaratri draws near, one has to shove and jostle to find room at the ghats of Hardwar. While the pilgrims are occupied with bathing or saying prayers at the Ganges, visiting various shrines and temples, or gazing at the religious fare in the streets or collecting souvenirs, in numerous makeshift locations on terraces and in the backyards, in small open spaces and at street corners, one can see workers in hectic activity, busy constructing *kānwaṛ* structures at a pace racing against time. While some are engaged in making bare *kānwaṛ* structures –which usually includes an arch made of split bamboo attached to a pole, suspended on either side of the pole with bamboo strips are two wicker baskets –others decorate the *kānwaṛs* with red polyester or georgette strips, garlands, pictures of deities, replicas of snakes, parrots et cetera. A significant fraction of the *kānwaṛs* is more elaborate, with temple-like structures appended to either side of the pole; also, some *kānwaṛs* can be enormous, where several people would carry a structure often shaped like a temple with a *śivalinga* inside while others carry the water. Nevertheless, most pilgrims will further decorate their *kānwaṛs*, and some build their *kānwaṛs* personally with meticulous attention. Shopkeepers and hawkers are likewise busy selling water containers, canes, fabrics, flowers, ritual materials, and

pictures and small statues of deities; and behind the counter in several shops, craftspeople weave nets of sturdy ropes for another important variety of *kānwars*, where the pilgrim carries two or more large pots of water suspended on either side of a beam.

At this time, every inch of space in Hardwar jostles with religious or economic activity – religious to one, economic to another; an act of giving and sacrifice at one end, or profit at the other. Hardwar’s eminence as a religious center and the bountiful religious merit it promises is rivaled only by its reputation for fraud and swindling. This reputation is as valid for facilities such as restaurants, lodges, tourist services, and shops which harbor few qualms about making a quick profit at the expense of a transient clientele (where repeat business is not a consideration) as it is for the *pandās* – local Brahmin officiants of ritual service – who have been known to fleece their unwary and often desperate clients to the last penny. The *pandās* may often be as determined to make the most out of the indeterminate quality of religious goods and merit, and the obligatory nature of ritual service, as market agents are of taking advantage of their speculative proficiency and the services they provide. Likewise, in the *caveat emptor* ethic of the religious center, one may as easily be duped by the merchant as by the ascetic, whose affinity with the criminal is legendary. Folktales and rumors abound of criminals running from the law hiding under the ascetic’s garb; the ascetic’s wandering lifestyle, shabby persona, and religious airs not only provide safe cover, but his iconoclastic behavior and repudiation of social norms may often be indistinguishable from the criminal’s willful violation of social ethos. In the confounding impressions the religious center leaves on people then, little separates the cynicism of the members of

the 19th century British ruling class from the contemporary Hindu pilgrim who, keenly aware of this social dynamic, unequivocally characterizes the place as an unrivalled conning hub.

These interactions are often defined by the paradoxical quality of faith, as in the following exchange at a flower shop, at the climactic moment when pilgrims were doing the mandatory prayers and decorating their *kānwaṛs* before beginning the journey. The shop had been set up in the central ghat (on which no shops are otherwise allowed) to meet the high, immediate demand on this occasion, and was selling flowers at twice their price outside the ghat. It was early in the morning, and in the dark and drizzle, set to begin the pilgrimage, K and I were preparing our Kanwar – praying, decorating, and taking ritual baths. In need of some flowers, I went to the shop but lingered a bit, in two minds about paying the steep price. Just then, a customer turned back with the flowers he had purchased to complain that they were wilted. Shoving a replacement into his hands, the shopkeeper retorted harshly, “Calling the prayer flowers dry, are you! With that kind of faith, how do you expect your prayers to realize?” The person returned silently, almost contritely, I thought. Repulsed by this haughty, expert’s quip, which transposed his own unscrupulousness into the other’s bad faith, I moved away from the shop ... only to return a while later to purchase a bowl of flowers shying away from any observation on their quality or price.

Such flaws, however, can hardly tarnish the city’s holiness. For all these aspersions, the place loses none of its power; indeed, in popular perception such concentration of vices may itself appear as an effect of the magnetic force of the place,

much like hornets hover about sweets –the holy place attracts goodness and vice alike, and the two may become indistinguishable. The popular *māhātmya* genre of Pauranic literature extolls places (as well as shrines and texts/mantras) for their powers, and the consequent efficacy in ensuring salvation, as well as for meeting the subjects’ this-worldly desires. A number of such hyperbolic praise-texts –drawn particularly on the established Hardwar *Māhātmya* and *Māyāpuri Māhātmya* – extolling the miraculous powers of Hardwar in liberating devotees from their sins, and meeting their desires, are in constant circulation in the form of books, pamphlets, as well as by word of mouth. In effect, the powers of the place are far too deeply embedded in the cultural imaginary to be disturbed by such observations. Overwhelmed by the encounter of the divine Ganga and the legendary holiness of the city of Hardwar, as much as focused on her deeper existential and social concerns and obligations which may have brought her to seek the blessings or the promise of the great pantheon of Hardwar, for most pilgrims, these aspects are epiphenomenal. They are as inexorable as they are familiar and expected – intensifying the factual order, such phenomenal surfeit may only enhance the pilgrim’s cathexis on her primary concerns. The journey from Hardwar teemed as much with this paradoxical co-presence of conflict and piety, devotion and resentment, as the city itself.

Trespassing the Religious Terrain

As I was carrying the *kānwar* this morning, K held the bag with our spartan belongings. We were entering the city of Mujaffarnagar when suddenly the procession found itself blocked against a rope held by policemen. The momentum had been held, we were stepping on one another’s toes. It was a railway crossing, where the usual barrier had

failed to operate, and the police were filling in. As the crowd built up, it was hard to keep balance. One had to ensure that the *kānwaṛs* did not get entangled, or pass over or under anyone else's *kānwaṛ* or body part, or touch someone. Not trusting my ability to be able to pull off this feat in the burgeoning crowd, K asked me to pass it over to him. But I resisted, K I felt had been treating me with too much indulgence. A while later, the *Shatabdi Express*, India's fastest train, thundered past us. We had been walking on a narrow street, but now we seemed to have entered a main lane of the city, a wide street with a median dividing it.

Soon, we were closing in on Śiva chowk at the heart of the city. After circumambulating this circle around a small Śiva temple, located at an important intersection in the city, the pilgrims would spread into different directions. But Śiva chowk was still about a mile or so when suddenly I felt a new burst of energy in the procession. There were a series of loud exhortations and calls hailing Bhole Baba... *Bam Bhole! Bhole teri Bam!* I suspected something.

The procession had been very lively and cheerful, very vocal, the first day of our journey. Frequently, an enthusiastic pilgrim would raise a cry hailing the pilgrimage or Bhole Baba, exhorting the pilgrims to move on, to which everyone would hail back in response. Along the way, as described in Chapter One, K and I had tagged along a group of three pilgrims who were moving on a very fast pace, with one of them exhibiting unusual endurance and innovation in raising slogans. We walked with this group for much of the first day when K and I had to back down, since my body could not sustain the tempo. That burst on the first day, I thought retrospectively, had been unwise; it took a

toll on my body. In the procession at large, the vivacity of the first leg of the journey was hardly there the next day. Although large mobile tableaux equipped with music systems and live performances formed part of the procession in stretches, most of the regular pilgrims on foot were not vociferous. After the initial enthusiasm, a practical attitude of making it to the destination was more conspicuous; the attitude was nevertheless supplemented by the weed (cannabis) many were rubbing with their hands on street sides.

This morning, however, as we had crossed into the city from a bylane specially earmarked for the pilgrimage, the mood had been very sober. One could hear the sounds of the pilgrims' flip-flops, the anklets some were wearing, the occasional swishes of the *kānwaṛs*, rustling leaves, some small talk among the pilgrims, and once in a while a call of *Bam Bhole*, or *Bhole teri Bam* (to the glory of *Bhole*!). Not much seemed to have changed since about a century and half ago, when John Matheson, an Englishman traveling from Calcutta to Delhi recorded:

For each individual was not only attired but laden alike carrying over the shoulder a pole balanced by a covered *lota* or water jug hung at each end and ornamented with tiny flags and little tinkling bells whose sweet liquid tones appropriately announced the fact that holy water was being borne through the plains. The universal burden as we learned by enquiry... was indeed holy water from Hurdwar (that celebrated Gate of the Ganges where the sacred river is supposed to possess prime virtue ere it begins its course through the fields of Hindostan...). ⁵

Bayard Taylor and Reginald Heber who travelled through central Uttar Pradesh likewise observed groups of pilgrims carrying water from the *Triveni* at Allahabad, and from Hardwar respectively in 1853 and 1825.

The road was thronged with pilgrims returning from the Festival and the most of them women as well as men carried large earthen jars of Ganges water

suspended to the ends of a pole which rested on their shoulders. In spite of the toils of the journey and the privations they must have undergone they all had a composed, contented look as if the great object of their lives had been accomplished.... During the afternoon I passed many thousands who appeared to be of the lowest and poorest castes of the Hindoos. They all carried earthen jars filled with the sacred water of the Junction of the Ganges and Jumna which they were taking to pour upon the shrine of Benares or Byznath.... [After traveling 130 miles from Banaras] The road still swarmed with Hindoo pilgrims returning from Benares and Allahabad almost every one carrying his two jars of Ganges water. ⁶

During the last week we have almost every day fallen in with large parties of pilgrims going to or returning from the Ganges as well as considerable numbers of men bringing water from Hurdwar. The greatest proportion of the pilgrims are women who sing in a very pleasing, cheerful manner in passing near a village or any large assembly of people. Once as they passed my tents their slender figures, long white garments, water pots, and minstrelsy combined with the noble laurel like shade of the mango trees reminded me forcibly of the scene so well represented in Milman's *Martyr of Antioch*, where the damsels are going to the wood in the cool of the day singing their hymns to Apollo. The male pilgrims and those who carry water call out in a deep tone Mahadev Bol! Bol! Bol! in which I observed my Hindoo servants and bearers never failed to join them. ⁷

In the middle of the sober walk then when suddenly the slogans became frequent, louder, even somewhat strident, I raised my head out of my agony and looked around. My suspicions proved true; we were passing through a Muslim neighborhood. Yesterday evening also I had noticed that when we entered a town with a predominant Muslim population, a few mosques conspicuous on the roadside, their minarets extending into the sky, the pilgrims' calls had become more shrill and loud. However, although the town extended over the street for a distance, the calls subsided soon and the pilgrims walked peacefully through a large part of the town. Today, it seemed to have been a small Muslim neighborhood, and soon the procession was back to its placid self, till we reached Śiva Chowk where a swirl of pilgrims boisterously circumambulated the temple, roaring slogans acclaiming lord Śiva, and many trying to get as close as possible to the temple.

This time, K was decisive. He took the *kānwaṛ* from me while we went around the temple on the outer fringes of the crowd. “It would be crazy to try getting close,” said K, with a veteran’s sagacity, “it could breach (desecrate) our *kānwaṛ*.” I nodded in affirmation and followed K during the circumambulation, carrying the bag.

Despite such occasions where the simmering tensions between the two religious communities could surface, there were no immediate reports of any untoward incidents. The pilgrimage, it seemed, had, like every other year, passed more or less peacefully, at least in this respect. Some usual conflicts between the police and the pilgrims were reported. Many times, the reason would be the pilgrims’ resistance to police attempts to divert them to alternate routes, so that the disruption of everyday commerce could be minimized.⁸ Reasonable as such persuasions are, for the pilgrim who is keenly aware of the long distance one has to cover, any detour is an extra charge on the body’s finite abilities and rubs against one’s anxiety of making it to the destination in time, without breaking down. I resented this enforcement when right at the beginning of our journey at Hardwar, we were sent snaking around the city, thus making us walk almost an additional one-third of the distance to the city limits. Thereafter, we were directed onto the canal road, which further increased the distance to Roorkee, the next major station, by about two miles. Although the actual difference was minor, many of my fellow pilgrims resented this, and believed the canal route to be much longer; it meant more strain on the pilgrims.

Personally, however, I had always preferred this avenue stretching along the famous Upper Ganga canal. Lined with trees for the most part, the passage was serene

and quiet, as opposed to the congested main route which passed through dense habitations. As a frequent visitor to Hardwar I also realized that it wasn't significantly longer than the other route. And even as we walked rapidly, exclaiming continuously to the glory of Bhole Baba and his followers, I often kept watching the impressive, swift waters of the canal.

Time, Death, and Apathy

I had been looking at two children swimming after a *kānwaṛ* flowing in the canal. A pilgrim would have offered the *kānwaṛ* into the river at Hardwar, to ritually conclude a series of pilgrimages. It was rare for such an offering to make it this far, since usually they are chased down, for the minor commercial value of the stick and possibly the baskets, within the town itself. The boys swam adroitly after the structure. No sooner had they coursed to the bank after a successful chase, that there went a corpse, floating in the middle of the stream. The sight was shocking; it was the body of a middle-aged man of a relatively heavy build, the torso was bare, and he seemed to be wearing dark trousers and a belt. I looked around aghast, others had also come to watch; people speculated on the age, the dress, the circumstances of the death, and so on. The drift of the conversations was that he had probably been murdered and thrown into the canal. Another one had gone down a while ago, some said. The corpse was still in sight when I saw a policeman on the bank. He was looking the other side, when I tried to draw his attention to the corpse. Without turning his head, he gestured with his hands to suggest, "let it go on!" In the distance, the canal water whirled rapidly into an aqueduct carrying the corpse along. Meanwhile, K and the others had outdistanced me by a margin. I

walked quickly to catch up on them, and was closing up when, yet immersed in that shock, I saw another policeman having *chai* at a roadside stall. I accosted him to tell how a corpse had just gone down the canal. Sipping on the *chai*, he said, they would take it out downstream. As I left, I saw in the distance K looking askance at me. “Are you out of your mind, brother?” he asked in dismay, “are they fools to take note of this in their beat?” Perhaps, K felt embarrassed for my callowness in front of the other members of the group.

The doab, this vast, fertile plain between the two great north Indian rivers – the Ganga and the Yamuna –one may say, is numb to violence. In mythical time, it provided the setting of the legendary war described in the ancient epic, the Mahabharata.⁹ Historically, home to the capital city of Delhi, attacked by waves of marauding central Asian armies as well as by other subcontinental centers of power in addition to the British, the region has seen all the devastation, plunder, and bloodshed one has come to associate with the major seats of power, and their often tyrannical regimes; and more. Everything, however, pales in comparison to the indescribable carnage by the central Asian plunderer, Timur, at the turn of the 14th century. After ordering the slaughter of 100,000 people his forces had enslaved enroute to Delhi, Timur’s men engaged in a complete massacre of Delhi that went on for several days –although Timur claims to have spared some of the Muslim communities. “After the departure of Timur,” wrote the historian Al-Badouni, “such a famine and pestilence fell upon the capital that the city was utterly ruined and those of the inhabitants who were left died, while for two whole months not a bird moved a wing in Delhi.”¹⁰ “Having put to death,” as the plunderer

notes in his autobiography, “some *lacs*¹¹ of infidels, and idolaters,” his army marched in separate wings along the Ganga and the Yamuna, taking “every fort and town and village,” slaying every man they could, and making slaves of women and children. Timur goes on to give gory, self-congratulating accounts of this endless, religiously carried out carnage. And in this series, Timur would recall the massacre at Hardwar where “Hindu infidels... once every year come on pilgrimage,” and where “a large number of infidels... had collected with their wives and children.” Here, he added, “so many of them were killed that their blood ran down the mountains and the plain, and thus (nearly) all were sent to hell.”¹²

Although anaestheticized and repressed in most narratives of national history, such traces of the past are by no means forgotten in collective memory. In the optimistic futurism of the state, there can be no time for mourning, for a memory that cannot be put immediately into positive use. Perhaps this is the divisive side of religion, where a state invested in a new future of unity and prosperity for its citizens, is only trying to somehow bury the hatchet. And yet, this is also another side of the modern state’s refusal or failure to register suffering; the denial of suffering, as it broadcasts its rosy visions amidst radiant images of the present? Is this treatment of the past not a consequence of the same programmatic conception of time, where genocides and extreme social and economic destitution may all be condoned, and denied in favor of grand visions of military might and economic prosperity? But there is no dearth of agencies – if any was required – to keep these memories alive, to enliven, stoke, and direct the flames of animosity they would effortlessly kindle centuries later. Thus, the

excesses of Timur, along with other Muslim rulers or conquerors, serve as primary pedagogical material for right wing groups. Almost all of the RSS's (Rashtriya SvamSevak Sangh) present politics," remarks Tanika Sarkar "uses images of the past as both referent and justification: that is, most recommendations for present-day activity are projected as responses, reactions to the past... There seems to be, thus, an unbroken, living dialogue with the past."¹³ If the RSS has been able to sustain a divisive politics by dwelling excessively on a past it more or less constructs, part of the blame, must be shared by secularist scholars who have tried to wish away, bury this past far too hurriedly.

And yet, how different is Timur's use of a religious ideology in cultivating political legitimacy for his plunderous campaigns, the support of his subjects and loyalty of his soldiers, from contemporary power politics? Even today, as we will see, so called conflicts over religion, their momentum and expansion, the manner in which they are stoked, organized, and spread inevitably implicates interests of power and politics.

"Religio," in its earliest meanings, shows Emile Benveniste, refers to scruples, hesitation, a misgiving that holds back... in relation particularly to the divine, out of an apprehension of offending the holy, the whole, that which is wholly Other. *It is a subjective attitude that prevents as opposed to a sentiment which would impel to action.*¹⁴ In the history of religions, rejection or renunciation of the order of social reality or power, a world-rejecting, contemplative attitude has been a fundamental, constitutive component. "An especially important fraction of all cases of prophetic and redemptory religions," says Weber, "have lived not only in an acute but in a permanent state of tension with the world and its orders"¹⁵ Likewise, Bellah in his impressive comparative

study of the Western, Japanese, and Chinese societies, shows that a world-rejecting, contemplative attitude has been a fundamental, constitutive component in the history of all religions.¹⁶ Nonetheless, power would leave no opportunity for harnessing, systematically engineering, imposing on every possibility, every means to further itself.

And insofar as it is the moral force called “religion” that humans find most inspirational, it is precisely religion that this power, whether of the politician or the plunderer, learns to most powerfully master – mastery, with terror and death always at hand! Thus, on the plunderer’s command, to be executed on pain of death even “Maulana Nasiruddin Umar a counselor and man of learning [a religious man, should we say?] who in all his life had never killed a sparrow... slew with his sword fifteen idolatrous Hindus who were his captives.”¹⁷ But although religion, in reference to such events, will be banished by whole political traditions and most academicians for its bigotry, statist power will continue to seduce scholars and politicians alike. In the “secular, independent state” of Uzbekistan, Timur would be recognized as a national hero; and quite befitting this farce, in central Tashkent his monument now stands in the place where once Marx’s statue stood. On the other side, there would be the imperative of a responsibility to the past, to remember the sufferings of those who died a long time back, a felt duty to avenge the wronged against an oppressor, and on behalf of an oppressed, who would now only be assigned, recognized, reached (politically, geographically) in the sign of religion.

In any case, whether in a realpolitik that insists on capitalizing on this difference or a politico-academic imperative of secularization, it is religion that will be marked,

targeted – a person’s religion, or being religious *as such*. In the global politics of our time, this marking will often be as “radical evil,” insofar as it always bears a reference to civilization, to a primordiality, a lack of morality to be defined by pure practical reason – that is, insofar as this religion is not the Christian religion.¹⁸ And, to the extent that in this socio-political context, any move at reconciliation, unification, identification – say, in the name of a certain project, future of the nation state – is itself defined by the hurry and hubris of a restricted economy of this-worldly interests, there can be little possibility here for an attitude, a space, a time of forgiveness.¹⁹

Later, we came across news reports saying that six corpses had been floating in the canal, downstream in Sardhana.²⁰ Four of these had been recovered by the police. First, a half decayed body draped in white came floating. It was followed by a child’s and a woman’s body. Immediately after, there followed a beheaded corpse. Residents reported having seen two others in the morning, but those could not be found. In the same area, a day later, residents also reported seeing two Kānwariās from Rajasthan who, pitched in a nasty fight, had dragged themselves into the river and drowned. The police seized two *kānwars* they found at the site, though found no trace of the Kānwariās or their identities, only marks of slippage on the shrubs lining the canal.

Such incidents were not unexpected. With its deep and swift waters, the Ganga canal, although the lifeline of this region – the *doab*, one of the country’s most fertile agricultural belts – was also notorious as a means of disposing bodies after homicide. In my own village, located close to the banks of the canal, downstream, although a canal side street was the primary access to the village, it was a hazard in off-peak hours.

Incidents of robbery and murder, and sightings of groups of criminals were frequent. It had been like that, as long as anyone could remember. Moreover, the waters were known to be turbulent, so only skilled swimmers would venture inside. Unadvised, the Kānwariās would take to swimming in the canal; more than swimming, however, they would resort to the canal often for the meticulous ablutions the pilgrimage required every time one had a meal, or relieved oneself. Thus, there were several reports of pilgrims drowning, as well as of pilgrims saved by police rescue teams.²¹

In any case, there were no reports of inter-communal conflicts by the time the pilgrimage was over, or so one thought. Despite record participation with estimates varying from 10-12 million pilgrims, the pilgrimage so often chastised for its intolerance had culminated, yet again, without any major incident of the notorious Hindu-Muslim conflicts that have been a defining feature of the nation's late colonial and post-colonial history. No communal conflict coinciding with the pilgrimage had been reported till last year, a confrontation in Faridpur when a Kanwar procession passed through a predominantly Muslim village. Although dozens of people sustained injuries and several shops were gutted, there was no reported loss of life.²² In view of the palpable tensions when passing through Muslim neighborhoods, where I thought a minor indiscretion could potentially set ablaze the thin cloth of peace, the sustenance of inter-communal peace over the decades was a surprising feat of "tolerance."

The pilgrims I interviewed rarely brought up issues of Hindu-Muslim conflicts when narrating their pilgrimage, although cynicism over the politics of religion was common. One person remembered that the year after the infamous Babri masjid riots of

1992, “rumors had been going around that we had to be careful when crossing a particular Muslim village... warning us not to pass through it in the night... and, in fact, some corpses of Kānwariās were later found in the fields next to this village.” The village was on a rural track, passing through several villages and about 40 miles long; this diversion off the main route was used by scores of pilgrims bound for Śiva’s renowned temple at Pura Mahadev—including K and me. On the other hand, instances of inner-communal harmony during the pilgrimage are also quite common. Many, if not the majority, of the *kānwars* are made by Muslim craftspersons in Hardwar, Jwalapur, Meerut, and in the case of the pilgrimage in Bihar, in Sultanganj. And although the considerations may be commercial, the craftspersons, mostly street vendors and laborers who shift into a somewhat more predictable and lucrative occupation for a few weeks, readily admit their own devotion during the activity—even as the Kanwar coincides with holy month of fasting, Ramadan. As Tahir Hussain, a 50 year old artisan from the Gudri Bazaar area of Meerut said, “... we don’t make Kanwars only for generating money. We do it more to help our Hindu friends, who undertake the arduous foot journey to express their devotion to the Almighty.”²³ And another: “it is a labor of love.... We are proud of making *kānwars* and much more than the money we earn, it fetches us love and respect.”²⁴ Likewise, a Kānwariā, in appreciation said, “It is most comfortable to use the *kānwar* made by Kalam [a Muslim].” And another noted, “Kanwars made by Muslim artisans are more attractive and of good quality. I simply go for their *kānwar*.” Had peace prevailed during the pilgrimage, it would be just another of those times when a history of affiliation, toleration and accommodation—mutual but, by definition, uneven, imbalanced

—would have prevailed. After the Mahaśivratri libations the day of the new moon, 29th July, the massive festival concluded, or so we thought.

More than a week later 7th August, TV channels came alive with reports of inter-community conflicts in Moradabad. A conflict had erupted between members of the two communities when a group of Kānwariās allegedly insisted on passing through a Muslim dominated locality that the police had barricaded. In the Moradabad region, the Kanwar libatory rites were to be performed the next day, on the tenth day of the waxing moon. This was also the month of Ramadan, a period of pious fasting; in the evening, Muslims would be saying their prayers and breaking bread. In the conflict that evening, there was stone pelting from both sides, some people sustained injuries, and a motorcycle was torched. Despite reports of politically motivated provocations and the alleged complicity of key administrative officials, the police acted expeditiously to bring the situation under control.²⁵

The pilgrimage finally concluded the next day with ritual libations in Śiva temples across the town. Yet again, the great festive celebrations had passed in relative peace. The pious rituals, at least of one group, were over. Now, the normal political order could come to its own.

Secularism, Power, and Transgressions of the Sacred

With assembly elections due in a few months, political interests were unwilling to relinquish (the labor of) such an opportunity; the very next day they would lead into a much larger conflagration. Although laws controlling public assembly were in effect, a politicized administration permitted a large public assembly by the Sarvadaliya Hindu

Mahasabha, a coalition of Hind right wing groups, the Siva Sena, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Vishwa Hindu Parishad, and the Rashtriya Svam Sevak Sangh (RSS).²⁶ Several thousand people were assembled by a temple, and leaders from the different political parties made incendiary speeches. Once the riot began with people occupying a nearby railway track and beginning to smash things around, the leaders, noted a commentator, quickly took to their cars and left. And, “as Muslims broke their Ramadan fast and began to gather for *namaaz*, a swirl of rumors hit the community, among them that a mosque had been set afire. Muslims led by community hotheads poured into the streets. The Hindu mobs followed.”²⁷ Although a curfew had been clamped, the two sides are said to have fought pitched battles through the night, leaving behind a trail of destruction – houses and burned property, a police camp destroyed, and over a dozen seriously injured people. Moradabad remained at the edge of a major outbreak of violence for several days, before the curfew on the city could finally be lifted more than ten days later.

On the Muslim side, a reporter, thoughtfully observed after talking to various sections of the Muslim community, “Every riot has its genesis in the last riot... the residue of the last clashes serves as a spark.” Only a month earlier, the Muslim community in a neighboring village on the outskirts of the town had had a violent conflict with the police whom they blamed for desecrating the Koran when pursuing a criminal. Irrespective of its actuality (possibly a mere foil by an individual to escape criminal culpability),²⁸ the minimal of evidence (the community went by the word of a 12 year old child, we are told), a wrong had been done the sacred, the holy Other – that which should have

remained unscathed had been breached, violated. It was a wrong that belonged to a pattern, a history, a demonic return of the same.

Twenty-two years ago, in the infamous Moradabad riots of 1980, the circumstances had been similar: a pig had strayed into the Idgah at the time of Id prayers. When a police officer on duty refused to chase it away, a war of words had ensued. Both sides, the police and the assembled Muslims, began to hurl stones at one another. And then, the police opened fire on a congregation of about 50,000 unarmed Muslims, including children, in the Idgah. People died of bullets and the ensuing stampede, and as they dispersed they ravaged the adjacent habitation of the “Untouchables,” from which the pig had apparently strayed in. The violence spread to the nearby villages, and soon attained the complexion of a major Hindu-Muslim conflict. More than two hundred are said to have died in this conflict, which initiated a sinister series of riots, which would go on for a decade and continue to reverberate to this day.²⁹ Of course, the 1980 riot had its own precursors.

Whether in actuality or in rumor, by a mistake or inconsideration, malice or mischief, by an act lacking in faith, so to speak, at some point in the conflagration, the sacred had been violated. That which is holy, whole, unscathed had been defiled – the Koran had been desecrated, a masjid burnt, an impure animal had entered the Idgah. This warranted revenge, punishment, a loss, pain to the guilty; even if at the cost of a sacrifice of the guardians themselves, the faithful who had allowed this to occur. But this responsibility cannot be simply reduced into a commonplace notion of time, nor an immediate provocation, for there is always an accretion of previous incidents, episodes,

other times irrespective of how distant they may seem. Times, when justice could not be done, scores that remain to be settled; a responsibility to the holy Other, and also to the others who had suffered, died in the act. Thus, Hindus and Muslims, accusations and counter accusations, since it is not a question of one event, one episode, the numbers are beyond count, one could go back a thousand years or just yesterday in memories that are as fresh as they are recollections made possible by the advances of technology, as much archaeological as socio-political.

In a recent study, Ghassem-Fachandi argues provocatively that political machinations explain only half the story behind the persecution of Muslims in contemporary India.³⁰ In reference specifically to the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom in Ahmedabad, Ghassem-Fachandi argues that the other half of the story behind this violence –the willingness of residents to be so persuaded – is inscribed in the culture, geography, the psychological material that has defined the texture of Hindu-Muslim relations in the city. In fact, in the refrain of political motives orchestrated by respondents on either side, Ghassem-Fachandi sees an element of palliative rationalization that suppresses the more disturbing, intimate aspects of such violence for fear of “summoning a past that still lurks vividly in the present.”³¹ Today’s anti-Muslim violence in India, according to this perspective, is driven by the desire for a homogenous, pure nation through the excision of all that may appear foreign to this nation’s body, its spirit. “The Muslim” has a particularly important place in the temporality of this national imaginary – it is the externality blamed for the primordial wound (figured mostly in terms of past “Muslim” excesses) in memory of, and in responsibility to which the (“Hindu”)

majority unites in “its” nation. The annihilation of this intruder and persecutor, who lives alongside, would be the means as well as the end, the uniting force and the historical consummation, of the majority’s nation. From the Muslim side, one story is of the resistance of a persecuted minority, and the conflicts in relating to a nation identified with, and violently active on behalf of an often despotic majority.³²

Alternately, as Sudhir Kakar insightfully argues, it is possible to explain mob rage psychoanalytically, in terms of group narcissism, which involves the regression of the ego into a collectivity – that may be traced to an earlier lack of distinction, during childhood, between the self and the world.³³ These conflicts evidence weakening of the reality effect during mass gatherings, whether pious or violent. Such instances can easily be the occasion for violence against another group, on which group members unconsciously project aspects of the self that are disavowed, and which they seek to expel.³⁴

Despite the importance of this explanation, which focuses on “primary” associations, communal conflict in India today has less to do with mob rage, rather, I would argue with Nandy that “the planners, instigators, and legitimizers of religious and ethnic violence” are secular users of religious forces and passions.³⁵ Such violence may be located in the uncanny presence of what appears as another demonology, “the left-handed, magical technology” of modern statecraft. These conflicts are a consequence of the persistent “violence flowing from objectification, scientization, and bureaucratic rationality”; they are a product of a technology of “statecraft and political management,” of modern elites’ projects of nation-building and state formation, of which the

exploitation and effective disenfranchisement of a majority of the populace is but a counterpart.³⁶

These characteristics of an “internal colonialism” in India’s contemporary social situation, validates, as Nandy correctly argues, the sense in “philosophers, such as Hannah Arendt and Herbert Marcuse, that the most extreme forms of violence in our times come not from faulty passions or human irrationality but from faulty ideologies and unrestrained instrumental rationality.”³⁷ The neutrality of the government in the face of conflicts between religious groups, the necessity of maintaining an even hand in instances of religious differences, has been framed in Indian politics and in social theory in general via the notion of “secularism,” a term added to the preamble to the Indian constitution by the 42nd amendment in 1976. But this is a term, a technique, with a very distinct European, and more broadly, Western provenance.³⁸ Thus, as Madan shows, the notion of secularization may be traced right up to the Old Testament, to “a God who stands *outside* of the cosmos, which is his creation, but which he confronts and does not permeate.”³⁹ This distinction between God and the sphere of human activity, where in St Paul’s words, “all is permitted,” was however “contained” in Catholicism where earthly government was subordinated to the city of God.⁴⁰ The term “secularization” first appeared in political discourse during negotiations for the peace of Westphalia in 1648 after the wars of religion, and referred to the transfer of land and property from the ecclesiastical authorities to the princes.⁴¹ However, “secularization,” here could not be understood as religious tolerance; indeed, this time “coincided with the reign of Louis XIV

in France: a more cruel prosecutor of religious minorities would be hard to find in the annals of Europe.”⁴²

Aligned with the major theological re-orientations brought about by the protestant reformation,⁴³ this political decision of transfer of worldly power and property into the hands of an autonomous secular authority would gradually evolve into a normative ideal in the French revolution. Religion would then be explicitly characterized as a private matter in political discourse, as indeed it had already been tacitly in the paradoxical form of protestant engagement in the world, lucidly described by Max Weber. Modern secularization theory then which basically involves the premise that this worldly political and economic engagement would be – indeed “should be” –increasingly liberated from any trace of other worldly responsibilities or recognition is a truism that translates modern western history into universal fact and destiny. This much should be common parlance today.

Beyond questions of historical prejudices, however, the epistemological criticism of secularization, as a notion and *eo ipso* as historical project, centers on the assumption here of a scientific, technological order, of state power and market rationality as the final legitimate horizon of human existence, and of social relations. This betrays a conceptualization, and consequently a historical resolution, exorcization of religion drawn on a Cartesian rationality.⁴⁴ Not surprisingly, this sweeping *explanation* of religion shot through with a will-to-know, to analyze religion in the form of a discrete object, can only predict the final triumph of Cartesian rationality, of industry, the commerce between objects where religion itself if it does not subside completely will remain only

another commodity in the market place. The facticity of the rational order will replace any other claim to order human experiences. The assurance of the market place, the form of the commodity, the truth of its power can leave little doubt as to the eventual universal ascendance of this proven social form. This totalizing economism as state policy and world ideal/future, a necessary corollary of the notion, and project, of secularization, which is but far removed from the reality of India's society and its diverse cultures is the primary facet behind the strong resistance, "secularization" has evoked in some of India's leading social thinkers. Ashis Nandy, perhaps the most vocal of these critics, declares decisively: "[I] am no secularist. In fact, I can be called an anti-secularist."⁴⁵ A critical assessment of the connotations of "religion" is vital to properly appreciate the reasons for this discontent.

Of Two Sides of Religion

In his excellent study of *Indo-European Language and Society*, Emile Benveniste discussing the etymology of "religion," reports the curious history of the concept. "One fact can be established immediately: there is no term of common Indo-European for 'religion'."⁴⁶ Benveniste reasons that this is because "in the civilizations that we are studying," – which, one must hasten to add, includes the vast expanse of habitation stretching from the Scandinavian Peninsula to the Gangetic valley – everything has been "imbued with religion, everything is a sign of, a factor in, or the reflection of, divine forces."⁴⁷ Thus, there was no need for a separate term to designate the group of rites, scruples, beliefs, or values that concerned the divine.

Only two ancient terms come any close to the modern concept of religion – the Greek, *thrēskeia* and the Latin, *religio*. *Thrēskeia* may refer to observances, practices identified with foreign groups or cults; however, in other instances it designates all cults. Thus, Herodotus reporting on the rules of physical purity observed by Egyptian priests adds, “They observe a thousand other *threskēias*.” This sense of observances, preparations, hesitations that *Threskēia* conveys is also, for Benveniste, the primary and “original” sense of the much more controversial –and, as far as we are concentrating on the politics of the present, consequential –etymological history of *religio*. For “originally *religio* did not mean “religion”; that at least is sure.” The debate nevertheless is extensive, and has been going on since the ancient period.

Since the ancients, Benveniste tells us, two alternatives have been presented. One represented by Cicero (supported by Otto, Hoffman, and Benveniste himself) which associates *religio* to *legere*, “to gather, collect,” and the other represented by Lactantius (followed by Kobbert) who locates *religio* to *ligare*, “to bind”. In the first group of meanings *re-legere* the sense is of collecting once more, gathering again. Here, as Benveniste shows at length, *religio* refers to scruples, hesitation, a misgiving that holds back, particularly in relation to the divine, out of an apprehension of offending the gods. It is a subjective attitude that prevents as opposed to a sentiment which would impel to action. Says Cicero, “... the most meticulous care for the rites, according to the vows of our ancestors.” The connection to *ligare*, on the other hand, makes for a very different sense, of being bound to god by a bond of piety. Unlike the pagan religions of old Rome,

according to Benveniste, *religio* in this case is remodeled to fit the Christian idea of the bond of piety that links man to God. Hence the modern term, “religion.”

In view of its historically specific nature, it is important to not lose sight of the Christian content of “religion,” when using it as an interpretive heuristic for phenomena considered kindred. A minimal skepticism is required on observations on “religion” in different parts of the world, across different cultures, insofar as these observations are inevitably bound with the world dominance of Christianity, or Latin, particularly so when one speaks of the secular, of the separation of “religion” from everyday practices. These are questions of hegemony, of interpretative dominance, of existential paradoxes, of moral existence, of an ideology that determines how the affairs of the world – from the most particular household activity in the most neglected part of the world to issues of global governance and state policy – are (an “are” which is obviously always an ethic, a “should be”) managed, or how obeisances should be paid, social relations valorized.⁴⁸

Two things stand out when we speak of religion, the French philosopher Jacques Derrida suggests, in characteristically discerning fashion.⁴⁹ First, a holding back, hesitation, scruples, misgivings in reference to an Other, which is sacred, holy, unscathed, pure. A thousand rituals, observances, preparations, scruples, “the most meticulous care,” rites of bodily purification, of the purification of thought, the sacred chantings when approaching this Other which must remain pure, *pavitra* (Sanskrit pure, sacred), holy, whole, which is not to be violated, defiled, soiled, polluted (base *luere* mud, dirt). There is a wall of sanctions (*sanctus*) to protect the field and integrity of the *sacer*.⁵⁰ We have observed the importance of purifying rituals in Hindu religious practice; likewise,

Choksy illustrates that notions of purity and holiness have been critical in the demarcation of ritual space among the Zoroastrians since the ancient period.⁵¹

Secondly, Derrida insists on separating, distinguishing from the sacred – this holy (whole, in good health, intact, unscathed, German *heilig*, Gothic *hails*, Old English *hael*) Other, indemnified by extensive injunctions, which seem to multiply of themselves through an automated repetitiveness as it were – another element, a bond of faith between the faithful and the sacred. The bond of religion – whose separation, as *re-ligare*, Benveniste traces to a Christian provenance – that links the faithful with that which is wholly Other is simultaneously the basis of the faith in one another, that is, the foundation of a social bond. Nothing without trust, without faith, a promise – the ubiquity of an “I swear,” “I promise,” implicit or otherwise – on which rests a whole order of justice, from the constitution of a society or nation, a global community, to the smallest social exchange. Nothing without a testimony, a declaration, a profession that refers back to a witnessing wholly Other where the difference between the interior and the exterior is radicalized, to an originary performativity.⁵²

Of course no sociality without faith, and yet as far as modern global society goes, today one must first speak of the Christian faith. Christianity, of which Kant says, “of all the public religions which have ever existed, the Christian alone is moral.”⁵³ In the schema of the great thinker, Christianity alone in its universal message, the project of bringing God’s kingdom on earth, and in the internal change it requires of its subjects such that each may become worthy of the love of God can become a universal religion of reason. The Christian ecclesiastical faith alone seeks not favors from or an appeasement

of the divine through gift, pilgrimage, or penance, or pious performances, nor simply an external following of God's commandments, but a moral "change of heart," a shift in intellectual disposition, out of all empirical or sensuous contingencies, towards the continuous betterment of the individual whose previous guilt, or debt, on account of the radical perversion of the human heart would have been paid off by the unique sacrifice of the "son of God". And while as a historical faith, for Kant, Christianity is not without its failings, it provides the only historical possibility for the evolution of a moral religion, that is, the religion of pure practical reason, according to which "*whatever, over and above good life-conduct, man fancies that he can do to become well-pleasing to God is mere religious illusion and pseudo-service of God.*"⁵⁴ (158). Here, the principle: "It is not essential, and hence not necessary, for everyone to know what God does or has done for his salvation."⁵⁵

This philosophical exposition of good faith is an insightful commentary on Christianity and on the religious foundations of a certain "good life-conduct." At the same time, however, does not this moral religion defined by pure reason, by philosophy beyond all tenets of virtue, tradition, and contingent existence also provide an exemplary illustration of the death of God? We see another illustration of this apotheosis of the manifest present in the Hegelian notion, where Christianity is but the last leap in the actualization of the Spirit as Absolute Knowledge. That is, out of the deepest kinesis, the diremption as much of God or the Absolute Spirit as of self-consciousness, rises the actualized identity of self-consciousness and the spirit where consciousness comes to realize, concretely and existentially, the spirit to be itself.⁵⁶ Whether or not one agrees

with this macabre figure of the death of God, of all the Indo-European religions, Christian morality most clearly exhibits the revulsion of Cartesian rationality against “superstition,” miracles, pious ceremonies, in favor of a this-worldly ethic which we know has been the support of capitalism with its all too this-worldly logic, and for which perhaps the best apology remains Hegel’s philosophical, onto-theological presentation of the historical unfolding of the World Spirit.

More than its dubious ideological horizons, however, criticism of secularization in India, and of a state policy directed by this abstraction, is usually driven by its actual, historical failure in addressing, negotiating conflicts between religious communities in postcolonial India. Indeed, as Nandy argues, secular market rationality is a primary cause of these conflicts.

Thanks to a few secretly taken photographs of some of the participants in the violence, one image that has persisted in my mind from the days of the anti-Sikh pogrom at Delhi in 1984 is that of a scion of a prominent family that owns one of Delhi’s most exclusive boutiques directing with his golf club a gang of ill-clad arsonists. I suspect that the image has the potential to serve as the metaphor for the new forms of social violence in modern India.⁵⁷

As Nandy argues, Hindu religious fundamentalism, fanaticism, or revivalism in India today is basically the doings of a psychologically uprooted urban middle class, trying to beat the West at its game; a “pathetically comic” mimicking through twin processes of a) decontaminating Hinduism of all its folk attributes through semitization in the form of return to a putatively pure Vedantic Hinduism and b) a zealous nationalist pursuit of modern statecraft and technological teeth. In some astute psychological analyses of the Hindutva (Hindu-ness) movement, its discourses and its primary ideologue V.D. Savarkar, Nandy has shown here a zeal driven by the fetish of a masculinist nation, so that “the

Hindus can take on and ultimately defeat all their external and internal enemies, if necessary by liquidating all forms of ethnic plurality within Hinduism and India, to equal the Western man as a new *Übermensch*” (335).⁵⁸ The inference then is that religious violence in India has been increasing, most of it happens in urban localities or in surrounding industrial areas, and it has “something to do with the urban-industrial vision of life and with the political processes the vision lets lose.”⁵⁹

Nandy’s understanding of religion in India, I believe, is original and far-reaching, both from a historical and theoretical perspective. In accordance with the autonomy of practical reason –where we know from as far back as Kant, it is an ethic that reigns supreme –this perspective steers clear of abstract modernization theories and the teleology of an instrumental rationality, while registering subjective concerns that are as ontological and ethical as they are historical and socio-political. It should be noted that this perspective indeed recognizes the actual historical contributions of secularism in shaping possibilities of religious toleration, as well as of technological rationality, while yet refusing a social determinism driven by their logical extremes.⁶⁰

One may refer here to the unconcealment, the disclosedness, *alēithia* of Being that Heidegger invokes in discussing the temporality of Dasein – Dasein, “an entity which, in its very being, comports itself understandingly towards that Being.”⁶¹ As we know, this implies, with Heidegger, a radical questioning of the history of Western Thought, its mode of unconcealing (indeed, obscuring) Being as the *Idea* and through calculations of entities as present-at-hand through a forgetting of the temporality of Dasein (the human) as Being-in-the-world – that is, the one who primordially approaches Being – who finitely

exists alongside and with others. It is not from a systemic perspective but from such recollection of the finitude of the human, a recollection of a human's existence in and of itself, that the religious attitude is being considered in this perspective.

Thereby, one finds that the conflict over religion, so to speak, its momentum and expansion, in the manner in which it is stoked, organized, spread, almost inevitably implicates interests of power, politics; it is somehow also the consequence of an administration which refuses to defuse the situation, withdraws, takes sides, and at worst, is itself the assaulter. "Initially the reaction," we often learn, "was not violent," the situation was returning to normal, when vested political interests, "started mobilizing people, visiting door to door and distributing pamphlets."⁶² And if as a wide range of research shows, a fear of persecution by the other group has a role to play in inciting such violence, such anxiety is itself often the consequence of a lack of faith in worldly power, in a politicized, partisan administration which cannot be trusted; or alternately, is always ready at hand, and would not fail to capitalize off every opportunity.⁶³ "Every time there was some communal tension, the administration acted in a very partisan manner which led to a very strong sense of resentment against it."⁶⁴ In a state where a politics of religion and identity has been systematically engineered, cultivated through extensive organization, by discursively mobilizing every possibility, incidence of difference, where power happens to produce itself democratically, ritually in election after election with every party trying to outwit the others in the diligent capitalization of differences, the communal riots are, at least in their frequency and the scale of violence, the product of a

politics that is all too secular, lacking in faith, in “the fear of God,” as a believer may say.⁶⁵

It is to such fear of God that we now turn.

¹ Once consecrated by offering to the gods, the *prasād* is carried back for distribution in the family and neighborhood.

² See also Lochtefeld (2010).

³ Western travelers such as, John Matheson (1870), Bayard Taylor (1853), and Reginald Heber (1825) report seeing kanwarrias during the Winter, about Jan/Feb, which must have been at the occasion of Mahasivratri in Phalgun. A mention of the Sravana festival is hard to find, although, this may be attributed to the obvious disinclination to travel during the horrid summer, with the inconveniences compounded by the Monsoon rains. Accounts of the kanwar practice in different parts of northern India are also found in William Hodges (1780-83), Wright (1851)³, Hamilton (1828)³, Francis Buchanan (1800), and Parlby (1850).

⁴ Atkinson, 1876, Vol. 1 p. 109.

⁵ John Matheson, *A narrative of Indian travel*, 1870, p. 332

⁶ Taylor, 1855, p. 117.

⁷ Heber, Reginald. *Narrative of a Journey Through the Upper Provinces of India: From Calcutta to Bombay, 1824-1825, (with Notes Upon Ceylon,) an Account of a Journey to Madras and the Southern Provinces, 1826, and Letters Written in India*. London: J. Murray, 1828.

⁸ Dainik Jagran Dehradun/Hardwar, 29 July 2011, p.5

⁹ The capitals of both the warring parties, Hastinapur and Indraprastha, are part of the doab, although the actual site of battle, Kurukshetra is about 20 miles West of the Yamuna river.

¹⁰ Zakaria, Rafiq. *The Widening Divide: An Insight into Hindu-Muslim Relations*. New Delhi: New York, N.Y, 1995. P.5

¹¹ A lac or lakh equals 100,000

¹² Timur. 1867. Malfuzat-I Timuri or Tuzak-I Timuri: The Autobiography of Timur in Elliot, H. M., and John Dowson eds. *The history of India, as told by its own historians. The Muhammadan period*. London: Trübner and Co., p. 455-9.

¹³ Sarkar, T. "Historical Pedagogy of the Sangh Parivar." *Seminar New Delhi*. (2003): 51-56

¹⁴ See Benveniste, 1973.

¹⁵ Weber, 1946, p. 328.

¹⁶ See Bellah (2006).

¹⁷ Timur, 1867, p. 436.

¹⁸ Kant, Immanuel. 1960. *Religion within the limits of reason alone*. La Salle, Ill: Open Court Pub. Co.

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- ¹⁹ See Jacques Derrida, "On forgiveness," in *On Cosmopolitanism and forgiveness*, trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (New York: Routledge, 2001).
- ²⁰ Ghaziabad: Amar Ujala, 23 July 2011. P.7
- ²¹ Amar Ujala, Meerut, 8 Aug 2010, p. 2; Dainik Jagran, New Delhi, 7 Aug 2010, p.21; Hindustan, Dehradun 25 July 2011, p.7
- ²² CNBC, August 17, 2010; Jagran, Bareilly, Dec 18, 2010. There had been another incident in Bareilly town a few months earlier over the change in the route of a Muslim procession, Julūs-e-muhammadi (Jagran, Bareilly, Mar 2, 2010).
- ²³ Guwahati: Sentinel, 8 August 2011.
- ²⁴ Indo-Asian News Service, 8 August 2011, "Religious brotherhood: Muslims make 'kanwars' for Hindu pilgrims.
- ²⁵ Letter from IBN correspondent Fareed Samsi to the Association of Electronic Media Journalists, dated 10.08.2011, twocircles.net See appendix 1.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ The Hindu, "After last week's riots, Moradabad a tinderbox," Vidya Subramaniam, August 14, 2011.
- ²⁸ "It was all made up by that person who was accused in the case of sexual assault in order to distract the attention of the people. You will be surprised to know that the community believed the version of a 12 years old girl, who alleged that she had seen the police showing disrespect to the holy Quran," said Fareed Shamsi, a local journalist. Md. Ali, "Moradabad: A city of communal riots," twocircles.net
- ²⁹ Sahai, Shashi B. *South Asia: From Freedom to Terrorism*. New Delhi, India: Gyan Pub. House, 1998
- ³⁰ Ghassem-Fachandi, P. (2012). *Pogrom in Gujarat: Hindu nationalism and anti-Muslim violence in India*. Princeton University Press.
- ³¹ Ibid., p.2
- ³² See Pandey, Gyanendra. 2006. *The construction of communalism in colonial North India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- ³³ See Kakar, "Some unconscious aspects of ethnic violence in India," in Das, Veena Ed., *Mirrors of Violence* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 135-145
- ³⁴ Insofar as the sacrificial violence against this other happens under the overhang of the sacred, it shows that "in the object of our desires we try to find evidence for the presence of the desire of" an Other, which Lacan calls, "*the dark God*." Lacan, Jacques. *Four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis* (London: Norton & Co, 1981), p. 275
- ³⁵ Nandy, Ashis. 1990. In Das, Veena. *Mirrors of violence: communities, riots, and survivors in South Asia*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 87.
- ³⁶ Ibid.
- ³⁷ Nandy, Ashis. 2002. *Time warps: silent and evasive pasts in Indian politics and religion*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press., p.85.
- ³⁸ See, for example, various essays in Bhargava, Rajeev. 1998. *Secularism and its critics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

³⁹ Madan, T. N. 1998. *Modern myths, locked minds: secularism and fundamentalism in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p.6.

⁴⁰ Madan, 2009, p.9. A celebrated elucidation of the early Christian conception of this dichotomy is by St. Augustine at the beginning of the 5th century: “two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of the self.”⁴⁰ Without going into greater historical details, let us note that in western Europe of the middle ages, the papacy dominated secular authority but gradually “by the early fourteenth century, towns and secular governments, which had meanwhile grown in size and scope, first found their voice.”

⁴¹ See e.g, Berger *The sacred Canopy*, p. 106 and Madan (1998), p. 12

⁴² Ibid, p.13.

⁴³ Thus, as Madan says citing Peter Berger, “‘Protestantism cut the umbilical cord between heaven and earth,’ and presented secularization as a gift to humankind...’the Protestant reformation, however, may... be understood as a powerful re-emergence of precisely those secularizing forces that had been “contained” by Catholicism,, not only by replicating the Old Testament in this, but going directly beyond it” (p.12).

⁴⁴ For example, in the *Sacred Canopy*, Berger proposes that as an empirical discipline, sociology can only view religion as a human projection. Humans construct, project a world outside them, a world of “mysterious and awesome power” so as to give order to their emotions and experiences. Whereas the observation seems self-evident at first sight, one needs to revisit here the epistemological work done by terms such as “order,” “projection,” which inevitably assume a stable reference, a human being, a world, which may be thought outside this “sacred cosmos” – in terms of a Cartesian rational construction. Thus, the “function,” the place, of the sacred cosmos would be derived on the basis of the self-evident truth of a metaphysical, logical conception of the human and the social.

⁴⁵ Nandy (2002), p.67.

⁴⁶ Benveniste, 1973, p.516

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ We will come to these differences soon, and keep returning, for it is in the return to these differences that we may harbor any hope of relating to the pilgrims who keep returning to what we might continue to provisionally call “religion,” not only through their return every year for the pilgrimage but also in the differential texture of everyday life in which there is always a small space, a time, a nook, a table, a marked space in the house, or a little scruple, a ritual particularly reserved for the divine, for the holy Other. And yet beyond these differences, which usually function under the cover, imperative, design of power and political economy – and in which one should always be conscious of the risk, the temptation of extrapolating, essentializing, of a type of cultural relativism to which, I argue presently, several anthropologists and “Indologists” happen to succumb – it is important to not neglect (*neg-legere*, disregard, slight) what appears common and integral to the diverse rituals, phenomena, “subjective attitude,” described as “religion.”

⁴⁹ Derrida, J. 2002. Faith and knowledge. In Acts of religion, trans. and ed. Gil Anidjar. New York: Routledge.

⁵⁰ In fact, although comparative history of Indo-European languages shows across these languages subtle variations in the conception of the sacred and no common word, this aspect of the separation of what is holy and integral, and has to be approached with the greatest punctiliousness is widely shared among the languages – Greek *hierós*, German *heilig*, the Latin *sacer*, and the Iranian *spānta*. Equally importantly, comparative history of language suggests a common structure whereby the notion of the sacred “nearly everywhere” seems to require not one but two terms. “A notion with a double aspect: positive “what is charged with divine presence”,” as seen in the above terms, “and negative,” to designate prohibitions on human access, for example, *yaoždata* (Avestan), *sanctus* (Latin), *hágios* (Greek). See Benveniste (1973).

⁵¹ Choksy, J. K. (2003). To cut off, purify, and make whole: Historiographical and ecclesiastical conceptions of ritual space. *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 123(1), 21-41.

⁵² Should we call it a paradox that today “faith,” a fiduciary bond, is probably nowhere as critical as when we speak of belief in science, technology, not only in the manner in which a certain know-how – which one trusts without any claim to knowledge, say as to how microchips function, telecommunication works, the subways operate, or through what labor practices a piece of fabric one dons was made in another part of the world – defines the texture if not the possibility of our lives, but also the possibility of revolutions (or choice of revolutions) in medical technology, genetic technology, or indeed mass destruction? And thus the risk of this belief, the risk of a violation of the bond (and what bond, how many bonds?) against which there is in the end no indemnity. There is no belief without risk; and what risks will people not take for belief. We live in a time – and the question remains whether there has ever been a time very different in this regard – when the sacrifices people will make for belief are all too alive for us, in so many different forms, at so many places.

⁵³ Kant, 1960, 47.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p.158

⁵⁵ Ibid., p.47.

⁵⁶ Can we not hear in the madman’s diatribe proclaiming the death of God in Nietzsche’s *Gay Science* the echoes of Hegel’s depiction of how religious art works of the past fare in contemporary understanding, where “in place of the inner elements composing the reality of the ethical life, a reality that environed, created and inspired these works, we erect in prolix detail the scaffolding of the dead elements of their outward existence”? Hegel, 2009 [1807], p. 340.

⁵⁷ Nandy (2002), p.85.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 78.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.80.

⁶⁰ Moreover, this is not a Habermasian analysis that emphasizes the abstract distinction between the socio-cultural life-world and functionalist systemic logic which though

derived from the former, threatens to colonize it. This would imply a cognitive understanding of religion as an institutionalized system of faith and belief outside the political and economic battlefields, outside people's lived conditions, responsibilities, and sufferings.

⁶¹ Heidegger, 1962, p.78.

⁶² Md. Ali, "Moradabad: A city of communal riots," twocircles.net, citing the shahar qazi, the chief clerical authority of the city and a local journalist.

⁶³ See Kakar, *The Time of Kali: Violence between Religious Groups in India*

⁶⁴ Md. Ali, "Moradabad: A city of communal riots," twocircles.net

⁶⁵ See Wilkinson, *Votes and violence: electoral competition and ethnic riots in India*

CHAPTER FOUR

SIGNS, DREAD, and DETERMINATION

It was a small brick house with a courtyard in the front, which also housed a tiny kitchen; inside, there were two rooms, one after the other. The *devatās* (divinities) were lined against the kitchen wall, six little concrete, house-like structures with tapering roofs set on walls about a foot high. *Devatās* are usually made in the fields, so we were surprised to see them inside the house. “We have our *devatās* here, by us. Our village is far from here”, the woman explained. “They chose the place, wanted to be here.” “That’s fine”, I said. “You should be happy They would appear in my dreams.” The *devatās* were her children who had died either in infancy (two boys and a girl) or did not see light. They were good spirits, dear to the family, the mother, who remained with the family in their afterlife.

Usually the *devatās* are *pitrs*, ancestral spirits. During hard times, when things are frequently going wrong – the crops have been failing, marriages cancelled at the last minute, someone had an accident, too many people are falling sick – the affiliated Brahmin family would be consulted to organize a *havana*, a ritual offering of purified butter and other ingredients at a fire altar. The officiating pandit (priest) may divine that a particular ancestor is unappeased, and recommend that the spirit be set up as a *devatā*. The *devatā* would then be made and ceremonially installed at an auspicious time, attended by another *havana*, which would include, after food offerings to the *devatā*, a religious feast for Brahmins, and the distribution of small gifts.

Here, it did not need a Brahmin to divine. The mother herself dreamed frequently of her little loved ones whom she had failed to protect, and direly missed. The love and responsibility, the memory, the company could be sustained by having them beside her as part of her daily life. As *devatās*, they continued to live and participate in the family's life not only by their regular presence before the eyes – they stayed close – but also through veneration on festive occasions. At such times, a *divā* (a wicker in clarified butter) would be lit to them, and they would be the first to be served food. At other times, special occasions and feasts would be arranged for their worship. And after the nominal serving, the food would be served to Brahmins. Intermediary to the spiritual world, the Brahmin is held in high esteem; this regard, however, is no less based on their own supreme giving status – as receivers of the gift, of consecrated left-overs.

The love is not without dread of these spirits, who, untimely deprived of life, were entitled to, and quite likely harbored their grudges. It was important to appease and be kind to them, as much in love as out of fear. Keeping them alive in one's memories, and life, was important to have them benevolently disposed. Such benevolence of the spirits would be propitious. In addition to appeasing the spirits, the bereaved mother, when pregnant again, also secretly asked for the blessings of Śiva, the generous Lord of the world of spirits: "Bhole Nāth, I will bring your Kanwar . . . May my child be born healthy and survive!" Her husband, who had been bringing *kānwars* for some years, did not know that when she announced she would be accompanying him this year. She had had two children since, the elder now about 12 years old. "But you never told me," he had said. "What is the point of telling till things have actually turned right?", she responded. The

traumatized mother was wary of revealing her secret – lest she jinx its fortuitous effect – till she was certain that things had actually, and rather unbelievably, turned out right. The possibility of something going awfully wrong, of tragic accidents, she both dreaded and knew too well, was never remote.

In recent years, thanks to the ethnographic work of scholars such as Scheper-Hughes, Auyero, and Wacquant, among others, there is a growing sociological discourse on the phenomenal excess of violence in the everyday life of marginalized subjects.¹ These ethnographies show subjects trapped in the double bind of neo-liberal structures that simultaneously overwhelm the collective with their undisputed, final, *winning* ideological representations, and exclude a growing proportion of the people as economically and culturally incompetent and dangerous outcasts. “*Even the dead*,” Benjamin (1968: 255) would say, “will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.”² This chapter speaks of the representations of the phenomenal dread of everyday life in religious practice in contemporary India. I argue that the dread of everyday existence, which is as salient in a biographical temporality as it pervades the phenomenal environment, connects and transfers between religious practices and everyday life in India for the marginalized masses. For such dread, dominant liberal discourses, such as of the nation, economy, or ego-centric performance, have neither the time nor the forms to represent, perform, and abreact.

Economic marginalization goes hand-in-hand with discursive or symbolic domination, not only expressly by a statist order, or a global network of neoliberal structures, but also through the normative insinuations of academic representations

exhibiting the certitude of objective knowledge, which champion supposedly “progressive” and “universal” standards and historical goals.³ Narrating the influence of macro-economic structures and policies in the everyday labors, traumas, and performances of the marginalized masses, in confined life courses and dead end futures, is a novel and crucial sociological contribution of contemporary urban ethnography.⁴ However, given the rather hermetic character of academic disciplines and sub-disciplines, few of these critical scholarly discourses have percolated into the sociology of religion.⁵

With respect to globalization, the growing interest in religious practices today, as described in Chapter Two, is usually explained in terms of cognitive dissociations and cultural threats of globalization. Rarely are these formulations, however, based on thick ethnographic work on religious practices and the social and existential contexts in which they are embedded. That “local” task is left to anthropologists – who carry the extra methodological and historical burden of navigating the wide chasm that separates the researcher from the object of research on distant shores, in apparently “another” time – even as sociologists devise often sweeping, abstract statements on religious practices across the globe.⁶

The following narrative focuses in particular on the reflection of the dread of everyday existence, and the precarious performances of social roles and obligations in religious practice. Religious practice here, I show, expresses, performs, represents concerns, anxieties, fears, and images that are repressed in the dominant consciousness occupied by, say, discourses of the nation, economy, work, daily bread, or the media. For some of the most overwhelming experiences, fears, and desires of social and psychic life

in dystopian conditions, the mainstream world seems to have no time, no means of accommodation, no sites for registration, no performances. These realities are often deferred and displaced to, and play out in religious practice.

As these motifs of “repression,” “displacement,” and “return” would indicate, this analysis is significantly informed by psychoanalytic theory. Dream work, the simple economy of the pleasure principle, and repetition compulsion, are powerful themes with a gestalt-like effect that makes coherent and legible the otherwise complexly coded and dissimulated effects and compositions of social and religious practices. The salience of psychoanalytic idioms here is, I believe, a direct consequence of the narrative focus on personal historicity, the profound lived time of the subject, as opposed to historical time with its focus on collectivities – both as events and factors – which is usually privileged in the social sciences.⁷ The subject here is a phenomenological entity as situated in a personal historicity with its memories, anticipations, and significant others, as it is a relatively open site perceiving, registering, and responding to a charged sensory environment.⁸

Dread and Mortification

“ ‘I will have to do it, mother . . . if I don’t who else will . . . otherwise, He [Śiva] will keep on breaking (khandita) our lives’ said my younger son’ ”, the old woman recollected. It had been more than a decade since his elder brother, sitting beside his four-year-old almost fully paralyzed child in the hospital, had pleaded for the recovery of his child.

He could not speak; could not lift his hands, nor legs, nothing was left, had even gone blind . . . “Hey Śivaji [said the father] I will bring your *kānwaṛ* on my shoulders and offer you jal [holy water] not from Hardwar but from Gaumukh

itself . . . but at least improve him such that he can talk to us, that he can drink and eat on his own.

Her grandchild was now 18; “so clever,” continued the woman, now full of pride.

“One of his legs is sure affected, but he runs a shop and is very smart in his studies.” A Kanwar from Hardwar, however, was one thing; from Gaumukh, another 170 miles, at the roof of the Himalayas, quite another. Before he could find a companion to pull off the journey with him, the father himself died, from “paralysis and heart attack.” The onus shifted to the younger brother who also, despite some pilgrimages from Hardwar, found it hard to gather the courage and find a companion for the trip from Gaumukh. “Some time ago,” she continued, three of my buffaloes, all of them very vigorous and healthy, died within a year. . . . We could not believe it. . . . I had not been for the pilgrimage for some years. “Bhole Nath,” I pleaded [in grief] “don’t test me so much! I have not forgotten you.”

They stopped rearing cattle after that, and over the next two years the younger brother – the boy’s uncle – brought the Kanwar from Gaumukh twice to fulfill his expired elder brother’s promise. The possibility of God’s displeasure was too much to take for a family that counted on His beneficent disposition. “We cannot even live without Him,” she said, her voice turning soft and heavy. Most years she had gone for the Kanwar as well as to other religious centers with only the wish of the well-being of her loved ones, and seeking peace and welfare in general. If it is out of dread that the actor seems to frequently seek the assistance of Bhole Baba, the demands of the Baba are to be feared no less. As we sat on a parapet by the canal we decided to suspend the *kānwars* by the parapet itself, seeing no other place. In the process, several caveats were exchanged.

“The two sides of the *kānwaṛ* are not balanced”, one observed. Another said: “Make sure that the *kānwaṛ* [any part of it] does not pass over someone else’s . . . that they are all evenly set.” Yet another advised, with fear of a part of the *kānwaṛ* touching the ground: “Your *kānwaṛ* hangs low. Why not try the tree there?” At every step, there was an obsessive anxiety to abide by every scruple, to repetitively ensure the ritual appropriateness of every action, the symmetry of every alignment. The violation or failure of every stricture carried the final threat of the fragmentation, the failure (*khandita*) of the pilgrimage, the offering itself. When lifting the *kānwaṛ*, it had to be borne on the right shoulder, and could be moved to the other shoulder only around the back, never in front or above the head; and, as far as possible, with the containers evenly balanced. No animal or person could be allowed to pass under it.

The ritual cleanliness of the bearer was equally significant. The pilgrim had to wash herself, including the clothes she had worn, not only in the morning and after defecation, but after every meal in which solid food had been consumed. A compulsive quality may also be seen in the necessity of immersing the whole *kānwaṛ* in the river, after the vessels are filled; or in the pilgrims who traverse the distance to the shrines, repetitively measuring their bodies’ length on the ground. Likewise, it is critical that the pilgrimage is repeated; the pilgrimage is made in pairs, or in groups of five or seven if avowed in such a form. And although not all stick to this imperative, all Kanwar s in one set should be repeated using the same beam. The series of abstinences, behavioral and dietary, to be repeated by the family at home, further emphasizes the compulsive quality of the ritual.

The word "*khandita*" – breaking down, fragmentation, disintegration – invoked in reference to existence earlier is also precisely the word that is used for the Kanwar if it can't be completed, if it is breached. It disintegrates. The precarious carrying of the water is the precarious carrying on of life itself, its breaking down is a sign of impending disaster. The obsessional character is toned by one's abject conditions. The desperate expectations from the symbolic order are correlatives of precarious social conditions. The expectation of demand from the symbolic order (in conditions of mass unemployment or underemployment) the anxiety that attends, anticipates every demand which the subject promises to unconditionally meet, as it were – for the most trivial looking of them may potentially, like a hidden trick, like an omen, make or ruin everything – constitutes itself in reference to the precariousness of circumstances. That is, in reference to a phenomenology saturated with daily, foreboding exposure to disease, poverty, misfortune, death, humiliation; a neighbor consumed by tuberculosis; a gruesome accident on the road yesterday; a child who barely escaped being run over by a speeding motorcycle; the friend complaining her kidney was removed by the doctor, a crook, on the basis of a false diagnosis; the crowded clinics filled with rude staff and authoritarian physicians; word of a young relative who burnt himself to death; the anxiety over a child who is frequently sick and doesn't seem to be growing; a drunken man drowned in the open sewage line in the neighborhood this evening; the agonizing humiliation of someone (or oneself) pulling a rickshaw being slapped by a policeman. "If the obsessional mortifies himself", says Lacan with characteristic insightfulness, "it is because . . . he binds himself to his ego, which bears within itself dispossession and imaginary death"

(1988: 268). Butler in her paraphrase of Hegel is equally to the point, “Although devotion appears to be a form of self immersion, it is also a continuation of self-beratement as self-mortification The sanctification of abjection takes place through rituals of fasting and mortification.”

Visitation

The anxiety of following every diktat, almost to the extent of inventing new scruples – since there are scarcely any canonical texts – is part of the performative construction of the pilgrimage. And insofar as the performances, the desires, are tied to one’s performances in the world, it reflects a compulsive anxiety to ward off every possibility of infringement, every untoward event, every threat to fortuitous possibilities, to the desired objective –often just for life to keep to its ordinary course. Bimala, one of my respondents, tied her recent misfortunes with the consequences of not meeting a promise, when a deity warned her in her dream, days before people were leaving for the pilgrimage:

It is a man, he comes from the direction of the pond to stop at the doorway, next to my cot. “People make pronouncements, and then don’t fulfill them”, he says. “What did we commit?”, I ask him. “Didn’t he vow a Kanwar?” he answers back, referring to my husband. “Did you bring it? Did you have it brought? Isn’t that why your home is in ruins?” “I will have it brought”, I say, “this time . . . will that be okay?” “It is up to you”, he replies, “bring it if you wish, forget it if you don’t want to”. I do not know who he was . . . must have been one of our *devatās* warning us.

Others sitting with us concurred: “It is a *devatā*’s call; some *devatā* warned you.”

Bimala’s family had been forced to move from Delhi to this small town in Uttar Pradesh after her husband died a year ago. He died from a wound on a foot struck by a brick

during construction work. The wound had festered when he kept working in a paddy field despite the injury and, “according to the doctor,” because of his heavy drinking which undercut the effect of the medicines. “I am willing to die”, he is said to have insisted, “but I won’t abstain from liquor.” Earlier, the elder son had absconded after a tiff in the family (probably over the father’s drinking), after which the father had vowed he would have him bring a Khari Kanwar on his return. The young man did return for a while but left again, and when his wife asked him to bring the Kanwar in lieu of the son, the man was evasive.

The rebuke in the dream alarmed Bimala, who immediately began consultations next morning. “You will have to bring the Kanwar in his place,” people said. “Take the younger son with you, and have him lift the *kānwaṛ* on his brother’s name.” Without a penny at home, she nevertheless quickly arranged a loan and made the necessary arrangements. And, although she faced many problems in the journey because of intense chafing between the thighs, as we will see, together the two successfully brought the Khari Kanwar in the others’ names. The pair would be completed next year. “But whenever the elder one returns,” Bimala insists, “I will have him do a pair too . . . even if I have to pay the expenses myself.”

We can see here that the pilgrimage has to be completed, whether the wish is fulfilled or not – say, fulfilled only partially, nominally. And, whether it is completed by the vower or a subject assigned through a series of substitutions: the parent calling in the child’s name, the wife replacing the husband, one sibling filling in for another. One felt the compulsion to keep the faintest word to the deity, the smallest hint of a pact.

Although some may categorically say, “I will make the pilgrimage when X happens,” in most cases, the anxiety is such that the pilgrimage needs to be completed in any case. The smallest trace of fulfillment has to be seen as a sign of His beneficence; beneficence one feels compelled to construct, read, instead of denying. But coupled here, one also sees the play of desire. There is an attraction to the pilgrimage, as the occasion, the season descends. As one of my respondents put it: “There is a joy that takes over my heart at the time, making my hair stand on end and tears well up in the eyes.” The dream here thus also manifests a desire to go on the pilgrimage, merged with the desire for the vow to actually come true, for felicitous conditions at home. As the head of the family, Bimala was now making her own decisions, and also assuming expanded responsibilities for mentoring her wards.

Desire and the Dreadful God

The desires, whether for the many joys and pains of the pilgrimage, or for domestic felicity, the company of an absconding child, or general peace and well-being (“Baba, grace everyone with your benevolence”) are merged with dread, and a premonition of misfortune. Such collapse of desire and dread into a singularity, two sides of the same phenomenon, finds a perfect adumbration in Śiva, in his complex character, and the bountiful, timeless mythology surrounding him along with Sati/Pārvati, and the Ganga.⁹ On the one hand, Śiva is the destructive principle itself, garlanded with bones and skulls, smeared in ash from funeral pyres, drinking *bhāṅga* from skulls with rotting flesh, his dreadlocks filled with snakes, throat blue from deadly venom, and in the middle of his forehead, the all-consuming, grotesque third eye, which once burned Kama, the god of

desire, to ashes.¹⁰ Thus, for example, once “Brahma said to Rudra, ‘Śiva, lord of Sati, perform creation’,” but Rudra said, “‘I will not perform creation. Do it yourself, and let me destroy. I will become Sthanu [the pillar, an ascetic]’”.¹¹ Surrounded by ghosts and goblins, this drunken, necrophiliac ascetic is, in his own words meant to dissuade Sati, an “ugly naked beggar who makes his home in the burning ground, who smears his body with ashes taken from burned corpses.”¹²

On the other hand, however, this Kāpālīka (skull-bearer), Bhāsmabhūta (Made of Ashes), Vāmadeva (the crooked God), Bhikṣāṭana (wandering about for alms) is also Bholā, the Simple One or the Fool, and Āśutoṣa, who is easily pleased; He is the most generous, and the greatest renouncer. Śiva fulfills everyone’s wishes. Such descriptions of Bholā – and, by extension, of the devotee, the bholā – are very frequently cited, for example in the following excerpts from popular material on the pilgrimage:

Lord of the three realms . . .
 Yourself a seeker of alms . . .
 Settler of the universe . . .
 You live in the wilderness . . . (Śiva Upasanā, n.d.: 38–9)

To Indra you gave all wealth . . .
 Nectar you gave to the gods, keeping the poison to yourself . . .
 To Bhagiratha you gave the Ganga, for everyone to bathe . . .
 Lanka you gave to Ravana . . .
 To Rama you gave the bow and arrows, to Hanumana, the Lord . . .
 Yourself you remain in drunken ecstasy, drinking *bhānga* from a skull. (Bol Bhole... n.d.: 3)

And, at the same time, Śiva – the phallic god usually worshipped in his iconic form with the lingam placed in the yoni – is Desire, Kama itself; his dreadful countenance also makes him most desirable to Sati as well as to countless other women.¹³ And, in later

Tantric editions, Śiva as Bhairava is but the lesser deity, the consort who resides by Sakti at every Pitha (Seat).¹⁴ In a widespread practice, young unmarried women worship the śivalinga every Monday with offerings of milk and often requesting desired characteristics in their future husbands. Generous as he is, Śiva – who is also Ardhanārīśvara, God who is half woman – understands and disposes desire. He is, at the same time, the supreme ascetic, and a householder; the power of his *tapas* (meditative energy) such that even marriage and cohabitation cannot affect his ascetic potent, and Śiva remains a *brahmacarin* (celibate) despite marriage. Śiva is the greatest of yogis (ascetics) and an equally great bhogin (hedonist) and the two affects are often merged in the existential aesthetic, the ethic he epitomizes.

In one respect, however, phenomenal representation is not tied to affect; a level of arbitrariness or play is involved. If Śiva's frightful and disgusting aspect arouses dread, in other cases, for example, in the worship of Laddu Gopala (the adoption of the infant Kriśna in a form of Vaiśnavite worship) the purity attributed to the deity may be even more mortifying. The worship demands meticulous rituals, attention, and discipline, and the smallest violation of the deity is fraught with the greatest danger. Instead, Śiva's aspect with its manifest forms, in its appropriation of the phenomenal forms of death and destruction – ashes, snakes, poison, fire, sex, nakedness, monstrosity – seems to be more “liberating.” It perhaps provides greater abreacting efficacy; thereby, the abandon of Śaivite religion, the merger of opposites. Thus, Bhavan, one of my respondents, described an uncle who had been on several Kanwar pilgrimages who used to regularly smoke *bhānga* ; however, once he “adopted” Laddu Gopala, “he renounced everything,

not just *bhānga* and liquor but even onions and garlic.” The idol is kept in a separate room which is cleaned every day and can only be entered after bathing. It is worshipped and offered milk twice a day. Moreover, a house in which the deity has been installed cannot ever be locked; a family member therefore has to be at home all the time. While the deity’s presence is very auspicious, violation of his purity portends grievous consequences.

“It is like bringing Balaji home,” continued Bhavan, a college educated, unmarried man in his mid-twenties, “but the Balaji rites are of course much more difficult.” Much like the purity of the infant Kriśna, the celibacy of Balaji – that is, Hanumana – requires stringent behavioral regulations. The ritual adoption of a Balaji idol, according to this respondent, requires 41 weeks of *vrats* (fasting rituals) including dietary regulations as well as sexual abstinence. “It is extremely difficult to pull it off; the Lord will put numerous obstacles in your way ... and if you break up, the consequences are very bad, therefore, few people take the challenge; but if you can make it, you will see the Lord himself, manifest.” The dread that binds the subject to the security promised by Hanumana or Balaji, powerful like the wind, or the domestic bliss promised by the adorable playfulness of the infant Kriśna or, for that matter, the generosity of Śiva, repeats itself in the religious performance. Since, the deities are powerful and to be feared, as much by the self as by others; it is precisely their power that assures their influence on the forces of the world as well as on the spiritual alignments that may bring bad fortune.¹⁵

The dread that binds the subject to the security promised by the deity also repeats itself in the religious performance. The sudden invitation, the case for visiting the God “You cannot go on the pilgrimage unless He calls you.” This refrain echoed by almost every participant, and even by those who have never been able to make the journey, succinctly expresses the peculiar dialogical character of the performance. The expression is common to most north Indian pilgrimages, although particularly salient in the context of the Himalayan goddess, Vaisno Devi. In one popular, and widely filmed, rendition: *“Chalo Bulavaaya hai; Mata ne Bulaya hai”* [Let us go, an invitation has arrived; the Mother has called]. The expression reckons a return to the mother – now the divine Mother – the time of her authority, and the care, protection, and endearment her presence promises.¹⁶ She would both listen to one’s agony and grant wishes. The figure of “invitation” is often characterized by specific existential references, shared by both the goddess pilgrimages and the Kanwar. The invitation is the paramount condition for the pilgrimage – unless He invites, the journey cannot materialize, by any means; but if He calls, it will take place despite any number of obstacles. “No one can go just like that, whatever offering you may announce, but when He calls,” said Amma, forcefully emphasizing, “you go automatically. . . Only then will you raise a step.”

And it was in reference to the same force of the call that Bimala had recounted the dream which had sent her on the pilgrimage. “We simply did not have the wherewithal for the journey till the last minute, it was totally out of question; and then I had this dream” Things happen at the last minute. It is a last moment swell that sends one on the journey, an impulse that breaks out of normative concerns – financial

restraints, calm reasoning, the many expenditures of the adventure. Suddenly, in the manner of the immediacy of a call, desire holds sway; although in correspondence with the desires of so many others. Yet, as I noted in the first chapter, the “invitation” has the added resonance of its specificity, of being God’s elect, the recipient of divine grace and therefore felicitous, blessed – “Everything is fine, God has been generous.”¹⁷ The call has to be followed, literally, by a visit. And, almost every visit, whether to the goddess or in the Kanwar, expresses the desire to come yet again – if the deity wishes, and times are propitious! In addition to the absolute agency of the deity of course, since the pilgrimage depends on circumstances being propitious, on events being favorable, or perhaps a wish being fulfilled – since it depends on desire – it invites the assurance that everything will be fine and no untoward incident meanwhile will preclude the anticipated journey. It seeks the assurance of security amidst the dread, the ravages of Time, of Kala, which is as much Death as Duration.

But, of course, circumstances are not always felicitous. One must acknowledge the blessings of Bhole Baba, and not appear ungrateful, for things could always be far worse and life itself is a gift; still, there are instances where His injustices are hard to condone. Thus, Kshetrapal, who has made more than a dozen pilgrimages, several of them Khari (Standing), questions the Lord’s justice:

Bhole Baba does not fulfill anyone’s wishes. . . . He doesn’t do anything. It is just that we bring the *kānwaṛ* out of our own desire. . . . My wife’s pair of Khari Kanwars remained incomplete. She did the libations in this very temple. . . . Where was Bhole Baba? ... She died [the same year] before she could complete the pair . . . leaving three children behind her.

“ [L]eaving me alone to look after them”, he continued poignantly. Kshetrapal nevertheless continues to go on the journey, every year. The journey continues despite His injustices – ““I will keep going as long as I can still walk, as long as there is some desire left. The suffering He inflicts, one will have to endure.” And the wife’s pilgrimage itself would be completed at some point, “by her child,” says Kshetrapal. In the completion of that particular journey, the Khari Kanwar, by the child who would have come of age, Kshetrapal would also have completed a critical component of his own journey or performance in the world: fulfilling a primary responsibility to the absent companion. But if fate continued to be defiant, the vow would still be completed. “Why not you?” asked someone in the background yet again. “It is better the child does it,” he replied, after having avoided the question, the unfortunate contingency, for a while, “but if it falls on me, I will have to endure that as well.”

Bhavan, who comes from a family with several members invested in religious activities, and who had himself made six pilgrimages, likewise acknowledged the difficulty of times, and expressed doubts about divine help. Two years ago, a taxi he used to drive was stolen from the street in broad daylight, “at 2 pm, within a span of 15 minutes The owner filed a police report against me, I had to recompense the cost of the car . . . what other option does a worker have?” This development disillusioned him with the job, although he continues to drive rental cars which can be returned to the owner every evening. “I have not progressed since finishing studies. . . on top of that, this loss.” If there is little that is certain here, he nevertheless keeps feeling for certainty in Baba.

When here, I am more disturbed . . . but in Hardwar, my mind is set on him. I don’t go after sight-seeing et cetera . . . I just look for where He might be, where I

might have his *darśana* [sight/encounter] . . . I will climb a hill, a rock, and look around.

In some of Bhavan's expressions, the pilgrimage was truly complete only if one was able to touch, embrace the lingam, or at least have a clear, satisfying *darśana*. Here, the sensuous perception of the lingam – in those marked days of the pilgrimage – seems to carry the effect of the actual manifestation, *darsana* of the deity, an exalted motif of Hindu religious belief or tradition.¹⁸ Bhavan's desires correspond with the experiences of his father, an ardent devotee of Hanumana. "Although he will rarely talk about it, on days when he is very tense . . . Hanumana manifests himself to him . . . and then he is at peace."

And if it is in the power and composure of the mighty Hanumana, who conquers all fear, that his father finds solace, for Bhavan, Śiva is the great source of energy and inspiration. "The slogans hailing Him give me so much peace. My body feels suddenly animated, energized . . . even if you don't say them yourself, just hearing them inspires you." Nevertheless, Bhavan continues to wait for some wish to be fulfilled, for a whiff of divine assistance. The obsessive abidance by the protocols of this Master, Śiva, continues the anxiety in relation to the arbitrary whims, demands of that other master, the diviners of the symbolic order. It weaves in the anxiety attending, anticipating every demand – demands one hopes for, awaits – from the equally elusive worldly masters, chances which one is well aware make or break lives. There is a transfer, a communion of affects between the different orders. While the pilgrimage is often a merry, carnivalesque occasion (see next chapter); on the other side of its spirited merriment, one also finds the compulsions of a desire to follow, to serve much anticipated commands of the symbolic

order which, however, never seem to come. In other cases, even when the wish fulfilled may be so grave, the gratitude so binding that the subjects feel compelled to perform the journey year after year, the dread may nevertheless continue to haunt.

The Greater Suffering and the Case for Renunciation

Unlike the commotion of the many temples and ghats of Hardwar, the temple of Bilvakesvara, located under a hill about a mile south-west of Har-ki-Pairi (God's steps; the primary ghat of the town), has a rare, quiet, verdant ambience. Here, Pārvati, in one of her avatars, is said to have meditated on Śiva, following which the Lord appeared to grant her a boon. The place where Śiva manifested himself hosts the central temple complex, while the site of Pārvati's meditation, deeper in a hill recess beside a stream, has another temple with a small well, the Gauri-Kunda. By the kunda [a natural pool] on that day sat a man dressed impeccably in trousers and shirt, perhaps a local, chanting hymns. Outside, two middle-aged couples who had just finished bathing in the celebrated waters of the stream packed their bags.

The Kanwar couples had been in Hardwar for a few days, and there was some confusion over whether they would begin the journey that day or the next. "We come for the pilgrimage every year," said one of the women.

My only child was brought dead from the hospital . . . the doctors had resigned, and had let him go. There was no hope. "Śivaji", I had then cried in front of Bhole Baba, "I will not ask you for anything else ever again in my life, grant me the life of my child!"

Her husband stood by, nodding somberly. The child, they said, revived miraculously. "His debt on us is infinite. We will keep coming as long as we are alive, as long as these limbs will still carry us." We lingered around the setting for a while and, on

the way back, again came across the two couples. The women had sought shade under a tree, while a heated argument was going on between the two men sitting by the curb of the narrow paved pathway. The man we had conversed with was frantically challenging the claims of the other, who spoke in a more subdued manner. The other person had apparently suggested self-reflectively that the fact he looked old beyond his age was the result of a life-time of hardships. “I am scarcely 40”, he repeated for us, “but already look older than a 50-year-old. This is because of a life of endless hardships . . . I began working when I was not yet 12.” Our previous interlocutor, a few years older than him, sensed here a negation, an underestimation of his own suffering. “I began to work at 20, but I have been through so much pain. . . through one ordeal after another.” If the latter was provoked by an apparent discounting of his suffering and ordeals, the former recognized in these signs of early aging the ravages of Time – life’s tribulations, as if one could not but lose against them; even when one had come past, conquered them, one after another, with the greatest heroism and courage, they would have the last laugh, in the ruins they left behind. For the man, who indeed looked much older than his age, a weary countenance seemed to be as much the repetition of a lifetime of suffering as its confirmation – if not for recognition by likewise competing others, perhaps in the face of the absolute Other.

The endless tribulations of life in one place seem to correspond with the endless iterations and excesses of the journey in another. In phenomenological terms, the individual is but one boundary for such experiences, and their affects and resonances, which determine the social field for a vast majority. “I just keep repeating Bhole Baba’s

name as I walk, and as long as you are doing so, everything remains fine,” said Basant, a man in his mid-50s who has been on the pilgrimage almost every year since the late 1970s. “Earlier, I used to take the Kanwar to my native village in Haryana,” continued Basant, recounting a time when the rivers were crossed by ferries, the roads were infested with robbers, and the pilgrimage was rather obscure and had many fewer participants. “People would occasionally mistake us for snake charmers.” It has been a long time since. Following the many pilgrimages from Hardwar (several of them Khari), for the last two decades he has been bringing *kānwaṛs* from Gaumukh; in addition, Basant has also made pilgrimages within the Himalayas, taking the sacred water from Gaumukh to the upper Himalayan shrine of Kedarnath. A widely travelled person, he has many tales to tell: of deep valleys and gorges, perilous tracks to Kedarnath, where one would not come across a human being for hours on end; of a boulder hurtling down a mountain he barely escaped; of exhaustion and indefinite periods of hunger, thirst; of walking in the night under fear of robbers and wild animals; of villages that live off water from the streams; of landslides and a cloud burst when the paths were flooded with four feet of water; of dangerous mountain roads. Once, as he was coming down from Gaumukh with the water, he ran across fellow villagers who had travelled uphill by a shared car. Visibly shocked, they said to him, “Basant, disaster struck!” “I had my heart in my mouth,” said Basant, “I feared the worst. I thought the vehicle had fallen into the valley.” However, they had been saved; their car slid backward toward the deep river valley, ready to topple in, but had been saved at the bare edge by a god-sent rock that stuck into the base.

Basant's expression of his desire for the pilgrimage is evocative. "As soon as the month of Savana [Śravana] sets in, I have the compulsive feeling to leave. Every morning, after prayers, I will reach for the calendar. . . check the various dates. . . I feel restless." Some of his enthusiasm for the journey has perhaps been inherited from a family with an extensive culture of Śiva worship; especially on his mother's side, where his uncle and grandfather had both made several pilgrimages. "My grandfather [and later, mother] would make little śivalingas, and statues of Śiva, Pārvati, or Ganeśa from clay. . . say, 11 or 101, or 1001 [an auspicious number] of these." The idols would be worshipped ritually, using milk, rice, Bael leaves, and bananas. The sacred objects would be made in the morning and dispersed in the canal or the pond after prayers in the evening. At times, when the practice would become associated with a particularly strong wish or concern, it could include resignation, and the offering or promise of as many as 125,001 śivalingas. If the labor of the offering manifested the force of the desire, if it was meant to convince the deity of the artist's, the devotee's compulsion and gratitude, the dispersal of the works in the waters every evening also had the effect of renunciation. It is precisely the mood, the existential attitude of the renouncer that seems to appeal to Basant. "Now, where I am concerned," he continued,

I don't have any wish in mind. . . . Otherwise, there is no limit to human wishes. . . . About Śivaji, you see, what people aspire for, He rejects. The world likes dresses, ornaments . . . Śiva stays away from them. The world likes palaces, he looks for crematoriums . . . it is the same for the Kanwar ... just need to have five to ten days' worth of bare necessities, like the ascetics, that's all.

In his highly controversial studies, the French sociologist Louis Dumont argued that in the history of India, a society structured on the principle of hierarchy, the renouncer has

been the only creative figure. In Dumont's portrait of the fundamental code of Indian society, the Indian is "Homo Hierarchicus"; the renouncer alone breaks from the vise-grip of the caste society to be an individual-outside-the-world.¹⁹ Setting aside Dumont's essentialist propositions, it is important to note that the oppressive concerns of regular social existence are clearly a key impetus to renounce social roles. The desire to leave the householder's conundrum and become a renouncer is expressed quite commonly in Indian homes, usually as a threat, a last resort in times of conflict or excessive anxiety. By its definitiveness, other-worldly character, resignation and the loss and difficulties it represents both for the subject and the addressees, the declaration verges on that of suicide. In the pilgrimage as well as the other votive rites, the desires and agonies of everyday life are as much expressed as they are renounced or transcended; they represent as much involvement as detachment. The pilgrimage is itself as much a departure from the ordinary social world as a return to it. The tension expressed in the structure of the pilgrimage – the going and the returning – is close to that which is afforded by the phenomenological edge of the suicide threat – a will that verges on action, a departure that may or may not actualize.

The play of this duality perhaps finds its best analytical illustration in Freud's astute observations in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.²⁰ Particularly pertinent here are Freud's reflections on a peculiar game he saw his grandchild play, to master the mortifying experiences of the departure of the mother, to whom he was greatly attached. "The only use he made of any of his toys," Freud says, "was to play 'gone' with them": a habit of throwing the toys in a corner under the bed, giving in the process "vent

to a loud, long drawn out “o-o-o-o” . . . [which] was not a mere interjection but represented the German word “fort” [gone]; and in a more complete version, pulling the object back, hailing the reappearance with a joyful “da” [“there”]. Realizing that these observations were incompatible with the pleasure principle, which had been at the center of his theories to this point, Freud finds himself forced to recognize here a drive of which the pleasure principle would be but one component. Beyond the pleasure principle, he sees in this compulsion to repeat – which may often dawn on people as an obscure fear of “some “daemonic” force at work” – an impulse more primitive: the death drive.²¹ Likewise, in the case of a person in analysis, Freud says, the compulsion to repeat childhood events in transference “disregards the pleasure principle in every way.”²² The child’s game here demonstrates a rejection, renunciation of the object of one’s interest, the mother, in view of her inevitable departures, the phenomenological complications of being with her. This was followed by an expression of the pleasure in her consequent return. The compulsion to repeat the dreaded moment, and the pleasurable feeling of the mother’s return, “converge here into an intimate partnership.”²³

In both its joy and self-inflicted violence, this “peculiar tension” closely represents the performative intensity of the pilgrimage. On one hand is the worldly experience of dread (a relentless exposure to pain, suffering, and social demands, as biographical as it is phenomenologically pervasive) which forces the subject to repeatedly depart from the world, to renounce it again and again. This is followed by a return, in peace, carrying the sacred water, yet also, in a painful, mortifying manner, and often with an element of

fractiousness. In this repeated practice, now in control and in a field of one's choice, an absolute field, one also sees an element of mastering over otherwise repressed affects. As Freud meticulously describes in his 'Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through,' the best manner of negotiating the repressed impulses was to repeat them in the 'definite field' of the analytical setting, 'a playground in which... [they are] allowed to expand in almost complete freedom' (154).²⁴ The transference allowed by the religious field and phenomenon "is a piece of real experience, but one which has been made possible by especially favorable conditions."²⁵ At this point, one must radically if cautiously consider the transferences between psychic and social dimensions of repression. In view of the large scale, manifestly social nature of the phenomenon we are considering – a social issue instead of a personal trouble as Mills may have differentiated – "repression" is another word for the lack of satisfactory discursive and moral (self) recognition by the subject as much as by the social or institutional actors in reference to which she addresses herself. The pilgrimage becomes an alternative field of performance, simultaneously repeating the traumas of daily life, and transferring, transforming, binding them to a sacred occasion and performance. For the subject, here an adult, it will also be a site to practice her resolve.

Agency, Between Pain and Dread

"Once it so happened", said Basant, "my brother while bringing the Kanwar from Hardwar tipped on a speed-breaker – the kind they make in the villages, with wood stumps covered by soil – and badly sprained his ankle." Among his siblings, Basant's expired brother was the only other person who used to bring *kānwars*. However, since he

had lived an urban life, suggested Basant, he was not as versed in walking in this manner. The injury delayed him and he sent word home that he would be late. When Basant, who had brought the Kanwar from Gaumukh, reached home, the sister-in-law reprimanded him for not getting his brother along. “But I never met him,” he had to reply. The next day, he went back to his brother in a neighboring village en route. Seeing him barely able to stand, Basant offered to carry the *kānwaṛ* for him. The brother, however, was firm: “The *kānwaṛ* I will carry myself, even if the legs are to be amputated.” Continued Basant, “slowly, we made it to the temple; he carried the *kānwaṛ* himself although I walked with him. He fell very ill at home thereafter and was on intravenous fluids for several days.”

Although people frequently carry each other’s *kānwaṛs*, bring joint *kānwaṛs*, and helping one another is considered meritorious, here the suggestion, the context of failure, the hint of an inability to complete the sacred, all-important journey made the subject refuse the assistance; perhaps especially when he was so close. Evidence of a lack on this chosen ground would imply a deep, essential lack that threatens to repeat in every other sphere, in every other responsibility, and most immediately in the object of one’s wish or vow. This is a widely shared orientation, perhaps the defining feature of the event: the compulsion to complete the journey despite all obstacles and physical excesses. Failure in this religious, chosen task – although surely not unknown, as we will see – most regard as disastrous, a fundamental failure. It would be inauspicious. Thus, while many may seemingly pull off the journey without grave difficulties, a good number labor to the end with evident pain and suffering. The tracks are often blue from feet soaked in potassium permanganate solution to suppress blisters; although regarded as

ineffective by many, trays filled with the solution are ubiquitous. Numerous participants toil in heavily bandaged, bleeding feet, after the skin from the blistered soles of the feet is removed by medical personnel. And the frequent medical stalls on the way, either selling or freely distributing antibiotics and basic medicines for pain relief, fever, muscle strain, diarrhea, and other common problems, are crowded with clients. In some cases, people assist others, especially children, by pulling them with ropes tied to their backs.

“I was vomiting on the way back from Gangotri this year. The air pressure on the mountains creates a problem. My body has started developing fever from cold these days. . . bathing in the freezing water gives shivers.” Basant kept speaking of his own problems in bringing the water from Gaumukh after describing his brother’s ordeal. Despite precautions and extensive guidance, pain and suffering in the pilgrimage is as common as the resolve it provokes. These features are evident in the experiences and narratives of many of my respondents. “I had a high fever on the way,” one said, describing the experience of his first pilgrimage, “but I was determined to complete the journey even if I were to die.” In other cases, where participants may not be as vocal about their resolve, their ritual completion of the journey, despite intense pain and struggle speaks for itself. In a previous discussion, Amma, one of my elderly respondents, had been critical of a woman in her group for dithering while taking the frequent showers:

“My thighs will chafe”, she said, and did not bathe properly. On the other hand, I immerse myself in the shower without hesitation and nothing happens to me. . . . In Baba’s journey you have to do everything with a pure heart. Her thighs got stuck into one another from chafing, giving her a very hard time.

In view of the frequent ritual baths in the open and in clothes, and because of the inconvenience of drying clothes as well as their minimal baggage, participants would often continue to walk in the clothes they bathe in. The dilemma is worse for women; younger women in particular rarely change clothes after baths because of privacy considerations. The wet clothes rubbing between the thighs on skin tender from the bath can cause intense chafing and bleeding, making literally every step of the journey painful. When later Amma introduced Bimala as the person who had the difficulty, the latter acknowledged that it had been a painful trip. Bimala's ordeal as she pulled off a Khari Kanwar (covering the distance with very little rest or sleep), despite pain and anxiety, in a time of grave difficulties in her family, and in apparently not very sympathetic company, can only be imagined. About another woman who went with her last year, Amma would say, spreading her hands indicating a tree trunk, as it were, "her legs were this swollen." A man speaking of his own first journey, likewise pointed to his knees: "my legs were draped this high in bandages. . . the toes were completely ulcerated, I walked on my heels." Amma herself was a goiter patient, and had gone on the pilgrimage without a break for many years – although often deciding at the last moment – even when battling fever and injuries.

Yet, in certain instances, it becomes just too difficult, or the circumstances stack up, leading to the relinquishment of the project – almost arbitrarily, as it were. In the middle of the journey where every step may be painful and the destination inconceivably distant, or a possibly feverish, enfeebled body no longer able to orient itself to the project, or perhaps just the circumstances, the company unsupportive, the journey may

have to be aborted. The woman showing us Rati's place was perplexed, and somewhat dismissive: "What could you want to know from her? Her pilgrimage remained incomplete." Rati's house was next to a small temple where a soothsayer, a devotee of Sai Baba (a renowned fakir with his shrine in Shirdi, Maharashtra), sat for a few hours every evening attending on people's everyday anxieties and their concerns about the future. A composed, middle-aged woman in a sari, dressed and looking like any regular, married Hindu woman, she would listen to people, answering their questions and offering advice and comfort, while meditating on a picture of Sai Baba. As I sat in the temple later that day after my conversation with Rati, a woman asked her: "My parents are both old, and my brother's family does not care for them. Can you tell me, which of them would be the first to die?" "You are a daughter, why would you ask such a question?" she asked in turn. "They are concerned, and wanted me to enquire", she said. Nodding understandingly, the seer closed her eyes while gazing at Sai Baba's picture and made a few observations on the poor treatment meted to the parents, and the current goings-on, and continued: "I see both your parents, your mother will still be healthy. . . your father I see in a wheel-chair. I see him leaving earlier." When the petitioner repeated to confirm, the seer only nodded subtly, as though hesitant in intruding over fate and such final matters. About then, a man circumambulating the śivalinga at the center remarked: "There is relief in my stomach pain since yesterday, after several months." "Keep to the regimen I gave you, it will go away completely", she responded.

Rati, a young woman, married for several years, had not gone for the Kanwar with any new wish; rather, the pilgrimage, her first, was in thanksgiving for the child who had

survived after several of her children died in infancy or sooner. “My pilgrimage would have been completed, if only our companions had been supportive . . . they would not stop, and kept pushing. I came crying till Roorkee”, she observed, regretfully. Rati’s feet developed giant blisters, which made it difficult for her to walk. And half way through the journey her companions saw her off by train, along with a young nephew accompanying her, and an older woman in similar agony. The other woman had a previous injury, which was aggravated during the journey, and a hair-line fracture was diagnosed later. “But I only had blisters, and could have completed the journey. They could have sent the other woman on her own. . . at least my pilgrimage would not have been breached,” Rati had continued pensively.

Resolve, Signs, and Delusions

The first time I can remember having been hit by *bhānga* was in 2001 at an outlet outside the renowned Mahakalesvara temple in Ujjain. There are a limited number of such outlets, 3-4 in selected towns, where the drug can be legally sold – although irregular stalls abound on festive occasions – usually in the form of *thandai*, a sweetened cold drink of diluted milk or water to which crushed leaves and flowers of the cannabis plant are added. Initially, the effect would be a mild elation, a slightly buoyant feel of reality. Soon, however, time consciousness would change radically. The present of which one would have the most vivid experience one instant would recede at an alarming pace into distant spectacular imaginaries; words one spoke faded in the distance even as they were uttered thus washing away the coherence of every sentence. Every return to the present, at the blink of an eye as it were, would meet the same consequence. “It fragments the

consciousness, *bhānga* comes from the Sanskrit *bhānga* [to break, to rupture],” observed the eminent Hindi literary critic Madan Soni, in one friendly interaction. One would be thereby occupied by a spate of transitory imaginary experiences, each more vivid and forceful than the other; the subject here, like a leaf, being blown in the wind in different directions. “An absolutely blizzard-like production of images... so extraordinary, so fleeting, and so rapidly generated that we can do nothing but gaze at them simply because of their beauty and singularity,” Walter Benjamin noted of his experience of Hashish.²⁶ Walking in unfamiliar streets and riding pillion on a motorbike with this loss of sensory grip on reality had been exhilarating, and mildly anxiety provoking.

During the pilgrimage trip I first had *bhānga*, with K, while climbing the mountain to Neelkantha. It was a good trip, a climb of about six miles from Rishikesh. Situated immediately at the point where the Ganga exits the Himalayan mountain range to enter the great North Indian plains, Rishikesh, about 20 miles upstream from Hardwar, is the other major center in this sacred geography. The town is host to a number of religious institutions, asramas, and temples. It also features in the Indian itinerary of most Western tourists attracted by a heady mix of religion, the natural magnificence of the Himalayas, and, equally importantly, relatively cheap and easily available marijuana. Between the tourists and the sadhus who abound here, money is perhaps exchanged as much for religious experiences as for marijuana supplies. One of the twin sacred towns, Rishikesh is likewise a part of the common itinerary of the Kānwariā. As important for the Kānwariā, however, is that the town is a transit point for the Neelkantha temple in the mountains immediately above.

After bathing in the river, we had collected, like other pilgrims, a small quantity of water for libations in the temple. It was early in the pilgrimage – in fact it was only the first day of *Sāvana* – yet an already impressive crowd was climbing on the paved pathway. Intermittently in the crowd, one would come across a person advancing in a much more demanding manner, measuring the length of her body on the ground. In this form called the *danḍavata* Kanwar, at every step the pilgrim would stretch himself on the belly, and the tip of the stretched arm would be marked on the ground by a companion; the next step would repeat the action, beginning at the mark. It would be an extraordinary and painful journey of about 6-8 hours for these pilgrims, many will come out with their palms, bellies, and knees chafed, swollen, and bleeding.

For us, however, it had turned out to be a relaxed journey in fine weather; a light drizzle earlier had cooled the day and the abundant foliage on the mountains seemed to have come out fresh from the shower. The *bhānga* we had on a wayside stall, had at most a faint euphoric effect and we gaily climbed the mountain before being pulled, immediately outside the temple, into long queues progressing at a snail's pace alongside a rocky wall infested by monitor lizards. The lizards played in the crevices immediately above, looking us in the eye, while we cringed away amidst the hectic pushing and shoving in the queues. Not surprisingly, the lizards attracted much attention; some were issuing caveats against annoying them, others curiously followed their movements attracting attention to new ones peeping between the rocks, and yet others seeing in this another confirmation of Śiva's presence – "They will not harm anyone here; this is their place, beside Bhole Baba." The threat passed without any event.

The next and last occasion I had *bhāṅga*, only half-knowingly this time, and to very different consequences, was on the first evening of our main pilgrimage. Despite the harshness of the sun, the journey till Roorkee had been smooth; we had covered the 20 mile stretch in about six hours including a few breaks. We stopped for lunch at a *dhaba*, a wayside restaurant with the barest means in which a number of Kānwariās were sprawled on dusty carpets. As I looked around for an opening to suspend the *kānwaṛ* on frames that had been set up for the purpose, K took the *kānwaṛ* from me to ensure there was no ritual violation and that it was securely placed. “No part of the *kānwaṛ* should pass below or above anyone else’s *kānwaṛ*,” he advised me at the time, “and one always has to be on guard; keep the *kānwaṛ* close, within sight, lest a stray dog or another animal pass under it, or someone violate it.” Locating a space, K tied the *kānwaṛ* to the frame with the strings we were carrying for the purpose. Even as I waited on K, observing the lesson, I could feel the fatigue in my legs and a painful stiffness in the joints, which, I feared, did not augur well for the journey. I hoped the pain would subside after the rest, but after the break when I had to limp my way for the obligatory shower at a nearby water outlet, the worst fears seemed to be coming true. For a body unaccustomed to walking such distances, and in flip-flops, the rest had had the opposite effect, my ankles and knees were hurting badly and the soles of the feet were sore from the body weight – a stage indicating the impending abscesses. The open bathing place, set up by an adjacent rest camp, had multiple showers at which several people –women, men, and children alike –pressed to soak themselves. After managing to get a few seconds under the shower, I walked back trying to ensure the sandy soil did not fill up my slippers. I had

been advised that grains of sand would scrape the skin between the fingers of the toe, especially if it rained.

Other members of the group – all of them of a working class background, as I described in the first chapter, and used to walking barefooted – looked in relatively much better shape, although one had been liberally spraying a pain reliever on his joints and another was suffering from loose bowels, a particularly nagging concern since he would need to bathe every time. As for myself, I lifted the *kānwaṛ* with the hope – better, the wish – that once we set on the march, and the body warmed, the pain could be suppressed. That, however, was not to be. No sooner had we started, that I found myself falling behind the group, anyway seemingly one of the fastest on the route. I would accelerate to catch up with them but with the frequent twitches from the ankles, and afraid of aggravating the injury to the increasingly tender soles of the feet, I kept falling back. The mood of confident resolve I had previously followed was gradually giving way to anxiety. This was only the first leg of the journey, and Pura Mahadev appeared hopelessly distant – the future course seemed hazy and unpredictable.

Seeing my deteriorating condition, K offered to carry the *kānwaṛ* and I took instead the bag with our belongings. We had covered about 4 miles, and took another break in which while the others rubbed and smoked *bhāṅga* in a nook in the fields – apprehensive of being seen by a group of following acquaintances – I sprayed my ankles and knees with borrowed pain reliever. But rest, at least in short periods, was no answer to my condition, and when we got up again with every step I felt a squish in my soles, watery pockets had developed between the skin and the flesh. Another mile, and as a

gap built up between us, I purchased a *thandai*²⁷ from a peddler, a boy 10-12 years old, only half aware of the possibility of *bhānga* in it, but also partly I think with the hope of emulating K and the others who had been smoking, expecting some wonder relief for my legs too. However, if it was some assistance for the journey I sought, this adventure surely had the reverse effect. The young man seemed to have added a liberal dose of the plant, and soon I was finding it hard to keep myself steady. At this point, although we had planned to stay the night at Manglaur, another two miles, when I saw a large camp on the way, I was able to convince K to break the day's journey, and we parted company with the group.

While K tied the *kānwar* at a frame, I spread myself on the dusty carpet in the tent, close to a fan, and closed my eyes – the bag under my head, slippers under the feet. And I soon descended into a half sleep, my eyes now open, now closed, the mind seamlessly flipping between transmogrified perceptions of the surroundings, and dream states. With the complete loss of control over my body and mind, out of grip with sensory reality, and sensing a fever, I had a feeling of complete vulnerability – deserted and alone in an unfamiliar place and at a critical time. Fearing a protracted fever and the endlessness of this delusionary state, I felt the complete hopelessness of my ability to complete the pilgrimage and ritually, safely deliver the sacred object to its destination. The dread of the embarrassing failure of the pilgrimage loomed in front of me in the form of so many fantastic visions of past failures. In these visions – amidst a cacophony of surrounding voices and interspersed with a phone call from my father and K's brief visits – the looming failure of this trip turned into both a confirmation of past failures and a

prognosis of impending ones. They created the frightening impression of a doomed life, the inability to meet any promise, any responsibility; deserting others in my own utter inability to cover the journey. Therefore, when in the morning I woke up to a sensible state, and without fever, it was great relief. And although still apprehensive over the reliability of my limbs, I resolved on completing the pilgrimage. I would also religiously stay off *bhānga* hereafter.

The Missing Dread

In one of the essays on his hashish experiences, Walter Benjamin (1999) notes the continuity between the mind's normal trails and the spectacle it generates under the influence of the drug.²⁸ Whereas in the normal state, he notes, free-floating images heedlessly fly by the mind, under the influence of hashish these images – now in extraordinary shapes – present themselves to us without requiring any attention.²⁹ Thus, fleeting images which otherwise “simply remain in the unconscious” in this case present themselves vividly without any effort. Now, since images here are of course not mechanically optical, one may add that such experiences also rejuvenate affects, memories, desires, which otherwise find no room or expression in conscious life. Without over-determining the drug high, let us note that this has Freudian parallels in the return of repressed associations and affects. Furtive emotions, fears, desires that go almost unknown, unrecognized return in the form of a slip of the tongue, a symptom, a dream image, a pattern of forgetting – a whole different realm of being whose patterns Freud will delineate, interpret, illustrate through a lifetime of work as the “unconscious”. This

echoes in Nietzsche's observation that "the great principal activity of the organism is unconscious."³⁰

The performances in the pilgrimage indicate a parallel phenomenon. They demonstrate the powerful presence of a nether zone left unrecognized, or repressed in normal public practices or the dominant modes of the consciousness. A nether zone which yet unfolds explosively in these religious practices, and in a mythical vocabulary, a world of gods, *devatās*, rituals, repetitions, phrases, exhortations, fears, vows, resolutions, desires, desires of the other – a world of apparently timeless, collective performances congealing at a large scale in the form of an alternative text, a text of unbelievable appeal that sends millions marching, as it were. Yet one cannot think of this "zone" as an island, an identifiable thing present elsewhere; it is the effect of continuities, of differences. It is a sequential efflorescence in touch with exclusions, refusals, a shortage of signifying and thereby practical possibilities. It shows the limits, the shortages of the consciousness – or what we may have to here qualify as a certain "dominant consciousness" – the limitations of ideological force, of networks, cartels of signs that exclude in power-oriented processes, historical as well as geo-political, and as active in a certain sphere marked as "religion" as anywhere else.³¹

In its treatment of this "other" realm, where psychoanalysis seemingly retreats into the individual, a kind of personal historicity – which, as the above narrative should show, is no less important here – the performances in the pilgrimage also show an agglomeration of affects in which the individual is but one border. These affects are as embedded in personal histories as they are relational or free-flowing – friends, relatives,

self, deities, cows, streets, all feature in a phenomenological continuum. Thus, Benjamin's emphasis on the sensory is important; it underscores the phenomenological aspect of these affects or impressions that seem to pass by the consciousness without being acknowledged or recognized – or indeed are denied, and yet may register deep, precisely by virtue of this negation, as “repressed.”³²

I have suggested earlier that in a context marked by continuous and foreboding exposure to poverty, disease, death, to the violence and humiliations of everyday life, its excesses that may feature as much in personal history as in the encounter with the other's suffering, the experience of dread is part of the tonality of everyday life. All one finds oneself seeking is peace and wellbeing as much in reference to the self or immediate relations with their longer temporal involvements as, say, on the street or in the past, which nevertheless keep repeating in dreams. “Hey Baba, do good to everybody. . . let your grace be on everyone”, Amma would interject multiple times in our discussions, almost out of context. This experience of dread also drives desire – the desire to escape it, conquer it, forget it, or as much the desire to suffer, repeat it, to practice, master the falling.³³ Thereby, also the resolve to persist.

In one respect, then, we find in these religious practices, dread, anxieties, desires, concerns, and images that go unrecognized, unaddressed – mockingly, cynically suppressed even – in the dominant collective consciousness, which is usually the discourse of the nation, the economy, work, daily bread, ego-centric achievement, or of mediated spectacles. For such desires, fears, and their psychic life, the world otherwise has little patience, or means for registering or performing – except perhaps for drinking,

squabbling in personal relations, or a general brusqueness in social conduct.³⁴ One hears a new intimate, heart-rending account of death, suicide every day – of a relative, an acquaintance, a family member. In distant parts of the country as much as in nearby villages, women and men committing suicide using pesticides; a violence that threatens to get personal any time. It is this dread and the desires that are its corollaries for which there is no time, place in everyday reality that are deferred to these religious practices.

¹ See Scheper-Hughes N(1993) *Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil*. Berkeley: University of California Press; Wacquant L (2003) Toward a dictatorship over the poor? Notes on the penalization of poverty in Brazil. *Punishment and Society* 5(2): 197-205; Wacquant L (2004) Following Pierre Bourdieu into the field. *Ethnography* 5(4): 387-414; Wacquant L (1999) Urban marginality in the coming millennium. *Urban Studies* 36(10): 1639-47; Auyero J (2000) The hyper-shantytown: neo-liberal violence(s) in the Argentine slum. *Ethnography* 1(1): 93-116; and Auyero J (2007) *Routine Politics and Violence in Argentina: The Gray Zone of State Power*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

² Benjamin W (1968) *Illuminations*. Zohn H (trans). New York: Schocken Books, pp. 253-65, p.255.

³ See Mbembe A and Roitman J (1995) Figures of the subject in times of crisis. *Public Culture*, 7(2), 323-352; Bourdieu P and Wacquant L (1999) On the cunning of imperialist reason. *Theory, Culture & Society* 16(1): 41-58; Mahmood (2005); and Singh, 2011, 2012, 2013a).

⁴ See Gaines D (1998) *Teenage Wasteland: Suburbia's Dead End Kids*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁵ The trajectories and closures of academic disciplines are, however, no accidents. In this case, they are related to the historical dominance of functionalist and cognitivist orientations in the social sciences. Thus, sociological narratives of contemporary religion are often defined by grand abstract questions of the function and logical (im)possibility of religion in modernity, where both “religion”, and the “modern” may be often employed as monolithic terms with self-evident meanings. Accordingly, contemporary religiosity may be characterized as fundamentalist and anachronistic, traced either to “postmodern” social processes or “primitive”, “irrational” psychological processes. Others would argue of religious behavior as a “rational choice”, using the terms “reason” or “rationality”, in a manner, which is both colloquial and characteristic of Chicago school neo-liberalism. The notion “rationality” may be thus used adroitly either to positively assert the instrumental, self-centeredness of a Cartesian entity in some places or, negatively, to exclude only the absurd in other cases. See Bauman (1998) for the

“postmodern” classification, and Springett (2003) Springett J (2003) Religious fundamentalism and primitive projective processes. *Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy* 17 (4): 325-41 for the consideration of religiosity in terms of “primitive”, “irrational” psychological processes. For perspectives somewhere in between see Beyer (2006); Marty ME and Appleby RS (eds) (1995) *Fundamentalisms Comprehended*. Chicago: Chicago University Press; and Lechner F J (2000) Global fundamentalism. In: Lechner FJ and Boli J (eds) *The Globalization Reader*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, pp. 338-41. See e.g., Craib, 1998; Bourdieu P (1988) Vive la crise! *Theory and society* 17(5): 773-87. See Asad (1981), Mahmood (2005), and Derrida (2001) for more nuanced anthropological and philosophical treatments of ‘religion’ as a category. See Stark R and Bainbridge W S (1996). *A Theory of Religion*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press; Stark, R (1999) Micro foundations of religion: A revised theory. *Sociological theory* 17(3): 264-289; see also Becker, G S (1993) Nobel lecture: the economic way of looking at behavior. *Journal of Political Economy*, 385-409, perhaps the most reactionary of the Chicago School Neo-liberals, boasting in his Nobel lecture on the widespread adoption of his theories in sociology, among other disciplines (403). See Stark and Bainbridge (1996) for a positive understanding of “reason” and Iannaccone (1998) and Stark (1999) for a negative application. Such colloquial understandings of ‘reason’, over-determined by the neo-liberal discourse (Friedman, 1953; Becker, 1978, 1993), would not even be true to the classical sociology of Max Weber, leave alone the extensive interrogation of Cartesian rationality which has defined modern thought from Kant, Hegel, and Marx, to Nietzsche, Heidegger, Freud, Foucault, and poststructuralist theory (see e.g., Heidegger, 1962; Gadamer, 1975). For the behavioristic expressions of neo-liberal economics, see Becker G S (1978) *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; and Friedman M (1953) *Essays in Positive Economics*. Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press.

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⁶ See Fabian J (2002) *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*. Columbia University Press; and Clifford J and Marcus G E (eds) (1986) *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

⁷ I could not agree more with Lacan when he says, ‘in order to have perhaps a slight chance of conducting a correct ethnographic inquiry, one must, I repeat, not proceed by way of psychoanalysis, but perhaps, if there is such a thing, be a psychoanalyst’ (2007: 92).

⁸ Cartesian individuality then is but one manner of marking a boundary in a phenomenological and temporal continuum. It is particularly important to note this since we exist in a time dominated by teletechnology, relentless bombardment by imageries, discourses, and forces, at once remote and instant, expertly coded to capture and manipulate attention, bodies, and affects. One may think of such subjectivity as suspended between the subject of contemporary affect theory with its conceptual antecedents in the monism of Spinoza and Deleuze on one end, and the temporality of Being-in-the-world in Heidegger’s existential phenomenology on the other. See Clough P

T (2000) *AutoAffection: Unconscious thought in the Age of Technology*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; Clough P T (2008) The affective turn: political economy and the biomediated body. *Theory, Culture & Society* 25(1): 1-24; and Singh (2012).

⁹ See also Obeyesekere G (1981) *Medusa's Hair: An Essay on Personal Symbols and Religious Experience*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹⁰ See Coomaraswamy A K (2011) *The dance of Siva: Essays on Indian Art and Culture*. Dover Publications.

¹¹ Skanda Purana, cited in O'Flaherty, 1981: 137–8)

¹² Excerpt from Śiva Purana and Matsya Purana cited in Handelman D and Shulman D (1997) *God Inside Out: Siva's Game of Dice*. New York: Oxford University Press, p.160.

¹³ See O'Flaherty W D (1981) *Siva: The Erotic Ascetic*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹⁴ See Sircar, D. C. (1998). *The Śākta pīṭhas*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass; see also Sax W S (2009) *God of Justice: Ritual Healing and Social Justice in the Central Himalayas: Ritual Healing and Social Justice in the Central Himalayas*. New York: Oxford University Press.

¹⁵ See Lutgendorf P (2007) *Hanuman's Tale: The Messages of a Divine Monkey*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹⁶ See Erndl K M (1993) *Victory to the Mother: The Hindu Goddess of Northwest India in Myth, Ritual, and Symbol*. New York: Oxford University Press.

¹⁷ On this point, see also Weber's (1946) illustration of the significance of the 'calling' in Protestantism.

¹⁸ See Eck, 1981.

¹⁹ This hierarchical disposition, he located to the traditional superiority of the Brahman – and thereby the purity he represented – over the worldly power of the king. See Chapter Six for a more extensive analysis of Dumont's interpretation of the caste system. See Dumont, 1970.

²⁰ See Freud S (1959) *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. Strachey J. New York: Norton.

²¹ Freud (1959), p. 65; also see pp. 42–7

²² Ibid., p.67

²³ Ibid., p.46.

²⁴ Freud (1950), p. 154.

²⁵ Freud (1950), p. 154.

²⁶ Benjamin, Walter. 2006. *On hashish*. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, p.59.

²⁷ Sweetened, cold water with a trace of dry fruits, and possibly *bhāṅg*.

²⁸ Benjamin W (1999) *Selected writings, Volume 2, Part 1, 1927-1930*, trans. Livingston R. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

²⁹ Ibid., p.329.

³⁰ Assoun P (2000) *Freud and Nietzsche*. London: Athlone Press, p.112.

³¹ See also Lacan, 2006.

³² See also Chapter Two

³³ See Freud, 1958, 1959.

³⁴ See also Lacan, 2006: 215.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUBVERSIVE AESTHETICS OF INFORMALITY

After a night's delusional scare, this morning we had covered some distance, and despite my apprehensions over the reliability of my limbs, I had not lapsed into a protracted fever as I had feared last night, and the paranoia had somewhat allayed. Both K and I felt that since I was unaccustomed to walking in flip-flops, I would need a pair of shoes. K had asked me to be in shoes at the outset; but, in my attempt to approximate the practice of most pilgrims, and at the advice of some other acquaintances who had warned that shoes would be scorching, I had opted, in hindsight injudiciously, for a pair of flip-flops. Thus, as we entered Purkaji stretched along the highway, like most towns here, a scalding sun on top, we wavered around looking for a place for lunch, and a shop to buy a cheap pair of shoes. A community feast, *bhandārā*, seemed to be going on inside a temple, but it turned out to be only a resting place. However, we did find a shoe store soon. Trying to bargain the price of a pair of shoes, further down from a reasonable amount I must say, I was struck by the salesman's remark, "We, anyway, quote *you people* a low price." As we bargained first over the shoes and then a pair of socks, he made the assertion several times, and I think earnestly, that they never tried to profit from *us*.

For the first time, I had been directly addressed in a bare Kānwariā identity. With K, and the group of pilgrims who were with us yesterday, although we were Kānwariās and that performance would often be at the surface – especially when walking there was almost no conversation but an exchange of the calls of Bam Bhole! – in one's own consciousness and in perceiving the others, individualities were never really lost. Thus,

we knew that Ramlal, who with his extraordinary aptitude for continuously raising calls had been at the head of our group, was suffering from loose bowels, apparently because of food poisoning at Hardwar. Ramlal worked on daily wages as a construction worker, and as I described in Chapter One, he had been able to join the pilgrimage at the last minute, because of the resourcefulness of his wife in obtaining a short term loan.

Another member of the group, although a little more reserved in nature, was often teased in jest, for his frequent application of a topical muscle relaxant over his knees and ankles. Distant cousins, K and I knew each other quite well, and shared that familiarity during our interactions. However, although we behaved in an ordinary manner when resting, as soon as we had lifted the *kānwaṛ*, another order of imperatives, a different field of responsibilities, a subjective attitude of intense sincerity and moral consideration seemed to take over.

Thus, there was an internal complexity to the Kānwariās' interactions and performances; here, different temporalities stimulated, merged with, and substituted for one another. The *kānwaṛ* performances may by no means be removed from the participants' everyday struggles and responsibilities, although they may engage them at a different, almost transcendental register. However, when the salesman faithfully identified me with a collective identity, I recognized us as other to his everyday world. It was the marked and distinct identity of a pilgrim, a *bholā*, a devotee of Śiva, making a rather penitential, demanding journey in celebration of Śiva... the *bholā* belonged to the legions of Bhole Baba. And it is indeed for the service of these *bholās*, of the devotees of Bhole Baba, and to earn religious merit thereof that several Delhi businessmen –probably

millionaires –may be seen on the route, lined up in their cars along with their families, distributing medicines and topical ointments, and often applying the ointments on the pilgrims' feet with their own hands.

Although this does not quite amount to that cultural figure, and has functional evocations, it is important to note here that “touching the feet” is a loaded figure in Indian culture, and in addition to its religious connotations, is also emblematic of caste, and age hierarchies – a devotee touches the feet of the deity, and ideally, a child his parents', a younger brother his elder brother's, a woman her elder in-laws', a low caste villager imitates touching the feet of higher caste notables. In the extremely inegalitarian and hierarchy conscious culture of northern India, where brown sahibs reproduce and maintain their status by keeping alive colonial practices and pre-colonial figments alike, and contempt for the poor, more broadly the multitude, characterizes the tenor of public interactions, such service and regard by the rich, perhaps upper caste, of ordinary folks, most of whom belong to lower socio-economic groups would be unthinkable outside of a religious field. The pilgrims here are held in high esteem, and can be served in humility precisely to the extent that they can be dissociated from their everyday persons and concerns, and perceived as a godly group, their identities condensed into devotees of Śiva –say, like the *gaṇas*, Śiva's mythical legion.

For the rich devout, a class that revels in constructing ever more opulent temples, thus, ordinary people would become respectable as devotees, everyday stigmas can be repressed, once they ascend into a religious aesthetic and ethos, into a sublime zone. Here, the aesthetics of two classes, of two cultures almost, can converge – at least at a

formal level, in the celebration of the same deities, the same myths or legends.¹ On the other hand, however, precisely this transformation in social space, the assertion over space by an undisciplined, lower class habitus, under the authority of tradition and the sacred, is repugnant to a numerically small but visible urban middle-class, as much as to authoritative religion, which finds this unbecoming of Hinduism, betraying the refined global image it has assiduously cultivated for itself.

The Culpable Pilgrim

Pilgrimages do not usually provoke adverse reactions. Instead, they often induce tender feelings —participants' motives are often deep and personal, their faith inspiring, their group behavior affable, their austerities and labors can be exacting. They evoke an ambience beyond social differences and discriminations, transcending historical tensions. Not surprisingly, the Turners, in their now classic *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* discerningly described the phenomenon as liminal, and an expression of *communitas*.² Although anthropological research has also shown the many contests and conflicts over pilgrimage shrines and the role of institutional power, politics, and history, the aura of the pilgrims' piety and their good faith is rarely at issue.³ From places as widely dispersed geographically, historically, and culturally, as Latin America, Europe, and North America, to Africa, New Zealand, and India, scholarly narratives of pilgrimages abound with profound impressions of the sincere faith and inspiring performances the authors witnessed.⁴ In many cases, these accounts seem only to transfer the equally evocative perceptions of the community. Such convergence of opinion looks all the more impressive in light of the geopolitical and scholarly controversies over the status and

significance of religion itself, as discussed in Chapter Three. And even where scholarly accounts have been more critical, such as the cases of the Vaishno Devi and Amarnath pilgrimages in India, the popular perception is yet generally positive, and of adulation.⁵

In such a harmonious field then, the Kanwar comes across as a rare and flagrant discrepancy. The pilgrimage of course has a passionate following among broad sections of the populace. Accordingly, the performances and rituals that compose it are often inspiring and evoke compassion, and the participants' behavior despite its divergences, as we have seen in previous chapters, frequently demonstrates their piety, labor, and suffering.⁶ Nevertheless, antipathetic observations abound —it is common for the pilgrims to be characterized as “hooligans”, “thieves”, “unmannered”, “disorderly”, “disruptive” *et cetera*. Such characterizations are particularly common in English language media and among the urban middle-class in general— including on the internet. Moreover, these appellations come from both the “Left” and the “Right”— that is, from atheistic orientations as much as from religious authorities. Thus, a secularist observer from the Left dismissive of this “puerile” practice writes,

In most cases he [the Kanwar pilgrim or Kānwariā] is not a person devoted to religion. Usually from the urban fringes, or poor, low middle class habitats, he prays infrequently, and *he reads and understands the religion even less....* In most cases he is a person who has no respect or say in his community... [while, in the pilgrimage] he is urged to eat more...at times his feet are washed and bandaged by ladies who would not care to employ him as domestic help in normal settings.... The present socio-religious subaltern assertion may become a political assertion in the days to come. To paraphrase Sartre's analysis: the character of that political assertion will be Fascism.⁷

Likewise, the Sankaracharya of Sardapeeth, one of the highest authorities of institutional Hinduism, is quoted as saying,

“They [Kānwariās] are presenting a distorted picture of Hinduism where recreation has taken over devotion and bhakti,” he [the Sankaracharya] said, lashing out at the Kanwar. “What kind of faith and worship is this?” he asked...elaborating that Hindu scriptures do not mention any Kanwar Yātrā. It is a tradition, which has grown on the basis of hearsay.⁸

In both these authoritative voices, the Kānwariā’s is a poor, botched, illegitimate version of religion—it is “puerile”, lacks the composure of adult rationality. This is a religion commingled with local customs and personal desires, an example of ritual miscegenation. Proper religion, on the other hand, would be unadulterated; it would be a detached, serene exercise concerned either, like Vedantic religion, with metaphysical truths and eschatological questions, or with pure devotion in the manner of *Bhakti*. It would be a distinct sphere of activity, to be practiced under the guidance of virtuoso religious leaders, in accordance with canonical texts. The Kānwariā’s religion, its poor taste, thus disgusts both the authoritative representative of religion, and the teleological vision of the Left intellectual.

Such aversion to mass religiosity is on expected lines. It reflects pervasive sensibilities, an embedded aesthetics, which I analyse in the next chapter, widely shared across the ideological spectrum—from the Left to the Right, from political and religious elites to social scientists, from classical religious texts to the contemporary sociology of religion. Thus, contemporary literature in the sociology of religion has been surprisingly indifferent to the significance of mass religiosity, except for its putatively retrogressive, reactionary, or resentful push as seen in the extensive discourse of religious fundamentalism.⁹ Likewise, in Weber’s classic studies, although Asiatic religions as such are categorized *tout court* as other-world oriented, and exponents of a “flight from the

world”—as opposed, of course, to the this-worldly asceticism of Protestant rationality—mass religiosity everywhere is interpreted as primarily oriented toward magic, in expectation of immediate, “solid goods in the world”.¹⁰ As magically oriented, mass religiosity here is irrational; only the religion of the virtuoso offers possibilities of a “rational ethic” for social life: “The religion of the virtuoso has been the genuinely exemplary and practical religion”.¹¹

Furthermore, in this conception, religion is a distinct realm of social life, “it receives its stamp primarily from religious sources...other spheres of interest could only have a secondary influence”.¹² The Weberian perspective centred on Western exceptionalism, which would give rise to capitalism—a cultural phenomenon of “*universal* significance and validity”—employs an almost tautological definition of rationality, specific to capitalism and the Protestant ethic.¹³ This perspective is untenable in the context of the Kanwar pilgrimage; as opposed to such a typology, I have argued in previous chapters that the pilgrimage needs to be understood in terms of a performative rationality.

Where I have illustrated the performative dimension of the pilgrimage earlier, this chapter relates such performativity to the controversial nature of the event, the revulsion it frequently provokes in the English language media and segments of the middle class. It analyses the affective divergence, between the millions that the pilgrimage mobilizes—as well as within them—and those dismissive of the phenomenon, many of whom seem to indeed find it revolting. I argue that such revulsion to the pilgrimage has, at its base, an often aesthetic distaste—a rejection, at once sensuous and ideological. The Kanwar

allows the habitus of a huge but invisible majority to occupy centre space. Here, the otherwise suppressed, inferior habitus of the majority pits itself as absolute, occupies the highways, and performs its ethic under the full splendour of the public gaze. The dialectical constitution of the pilgrimage is thus a site of political conflict. This chapter argues that this conflict is not so much between progressive forces and a retrogressive religious or cultural belonging, as a teleological reasoning may conclude; rather, it demonstrates a conflict between a dominant habitus and its ideal values, and a lower class existential aesthetics performing a very different ensemble of life concerns and obligations.

The Carnival—Enjoyment and Disgust

Kanwar processions have a partly carnival character. The *kānwaṛs* are often ornately decorated, with ochre coloured polyester or georgette cloths, garlands, pictures of deities, streamers *et cetera*. A fraction of the contraptions are more elaborate, with temple-like structures at either side of the pole; and, some can be enormous, where several people would carry the sacred fare often shaped like a temple with a *śivalinga* inside while others carry the Ganga water (see figs. 5.1 & 5.2). In addition to the walking pilgrims, the pilgrimage also includes heavily decorated *jhankis* (tableaux) on wheels, illustrating mythic episodes in various art forms such as sculpture, paintings, and live performances. These *jhankis*, accompanied by performing artists and a continuous stream of often peppy, high-decibel music put up quite a spectacle, and the procession attracts a large audience. The large *kānwaṛs* and *jhankis* are financed collectively by the group. While liquor consumption is a strict taboo, a good number of pilgrims make the



FIGURE 5. 1: KANWAR WITH A REPLICA OF A SIVALINGA



FIGURE 5.2 KANWARS WITH TEMPLE LIKE MODELS ON BOTH ENDS

journey under the effect of cannabis products, *bhānga* or *sulfa*, which are regarded as things Śiva himself relishes. En route, a number of transit camps provide resting space, and, sometimes, food and medical assistance to the pilgrims.

Even as a large number of Kānwariās [Kanwar pilgrims] had been diverted by the police to the canal-side street from Hardwar, the main carnival with larger, elaborately decorated *kānwars*, tableaux, statues, masquerades, and art performances mounted on wheels, accompanied by small trucks and tractors had continued on the national highway. Moreover, despite the strict enforcements, pilgrims diverted to the canal-side would often find a way to the main pageant. The street by the canal, called the Kanwar *patri* (lane), had been specifically developed over the last few years to free the highway; but with a width of about 12 feet, it was too narrow to accommodate the procession. More importantly, the carnival would be nothing without the audience from the numerous towns and villages, the almost uninterrupted rows of habitations and markets along the highway. Many of the troupes would thus make strategic halts to pass through the towns during the evenings—when whole towns would descend into the streets to cheer their ornately lit, shining tableaux, the live performances—dances, costumes, plays—the labour, the frequent sport with the onlookers, accompanied by boisterous, peppy music themed on Śiva, the Ganga, and the Kanwar itself. At the many camps alongside, volunteers served free food and drinks, thus creating a seductive environment of celebration and gaiety. Channelling the carnival via the low profile back street would thus strike at one of its core elements. If therefore the administration fretted

unproductively on the challenge of diverting the procession to the canal-side street, it was because it underestimated the phenomenon's (inter)subjective dimension.¹⁴

Walking by the canal side, we remained rather oblivious of the main carnival till the second morning when, at Mangalaur, about twenty-five miles from Hardwar, the two routes intersected. With this we had crossed over into the state of Uttar Pradesh, now no police manned the intersection leaving us free to choose our route. Here we took the highway—the road was much wider, the number of pilgrims had multiplied, numerous large *kānwaṛs* and tableaux dotted the stretch, some resting on street sides, others matching pace with the walking pilgrims with intermittent stops to remain in tow. In many of these large *kānwaṛs*, a certain number of pilgrims, usually four or eight—and if the structure is prone to imbalance, another 2-4 to keep it vertical with the aid of ropes—carry the *kānwaṛ*, while a truck loaded with supplies, music equipment, and including a generator follows behind. On a scaffold on the vehicle, or on another platform tagged ahead or behind it, there could be actors modelled after Śiva or Pārvati, sometimes poised still, only performing a few characteristic motions; at other times, dancing and acting out to scripts/songs from loudspeakers mounted atop the vehicle [Figure 5.3].

Other members of the troupe may go dancing in front to the rhythm—or, as commonly, out of rhythm—of the music, much in the manner of an ordinary Indian wedding party. These impromptu dances, often out-of-step imitations of Bollywood movies or pop albums rarely make any devotional pretence except for an exaggerated gesture here or there following the mention of a divine name or act in the song/script.



FIGURE 5.3 AN ACTOR PERFORMING AS SIVA

There is little to differentiate the religious occasion on this score, the dances being only another place for the exhilarated participants to practice or show off their favorite steps. And frequently, with little regard for the music, the dance steps would imitate the flirtatious or sexual banter between a heterosexual couple characteristic of Bollywood—here usually by male participants, some acting male, others female. The gendered suggestive banter is often imposed on the characters of Śiva or Pārvati, their conjugal life, or the quotidian exchanges between a fictional *bholā* and *bholi*, or his wife, for example, on the subject of their desire for the pilgrimage as much as their common aspirations. Such performances are iterated in a prolific number of video albums on religious themes. Where some songs are based on pop albums with a country wide

appeal, most are composed by numerous local artists in dialects such as *Khari Boli* and *Haryanvi*. With few copyright enforcements, the scarcely inventive scripts usually drawn on a mythological repertoire or familiar and customary tropes of everyday life, the music likewise either rudimentary or copying Bollywood tunes, there is a vast amount of overlap among the albums. Many of these albums are released by T-series or any of the prolific number of smaller companies, which have imitated its business model.¹⁵ In catering to market demands, these video albums simultaneously work out the desires of young women and men aspiring after Bollywood ego ideals, their rags to riches stories, the glitter of their lives. The wish for an unexpected windfall, an unlikely yet tantalizing turn of fortunes, is of course always an additional lure; the desire for recognition of one's talents can be equally conspicuous.

While devotional music following sacred chants and the poetry of renowned historical figures such as Surdas, Tukaram, and Kabir may be played at hours of prayer, most albums draw on folk renditions of Pauranic myths, imageries from the Kanwar pilgrimage itself, and common themes and episodes of domestic life set to a blend of Bollywood musical scores. The songs may thus include eulogies of the *Kānwariās*, their piety, their suffering during the pilgrimage, their *kānwar* decorations, their journey, their love and appreciation for Bhole, their appeals to Śiva and his kindness, their love of gaiety and weed, Śiva's voluntary destitution, his fondness for drugs, propensity to dance, the conjugal games between Pārvati and Śiva, episodes from the Śiva Purana, and so on.

Despite the numerous themes, however, there is little artistic virtuosity, the lyrics may seem repetitive and predictable, the voices often unrefined, the music usually a rip

off may be dissonant. The impressive variety of themes which seem to convey real feelings and social concerns are as if transformed into a singular, boisterous effect, with little discrimination. These videos often show a number of young adult men, and fewer women, with limited musical training, making affected gestures in imitation of Bollywood actors in fields and in temple compounds. Others may feature a likewise hyperbolic duet by a man and a woman often setting up a conjugal narrative, with secondary characters dotting the background.

Notwithstanding the unrefined music and the lack of artistry to the cast, some songs with a clearly pop quality and often drawing on Bhole's inebriated aspect are widely popular, and a few indeed have a rustic charm. The refrain of one popular song is as follows: "*Neelkanth pai chadh kai pee gayā ek bālti bhānga; O Bholā nue matkai; O Bholā kyun matkai*" [He went up Neelkanth and had a bucketful of *bhānga*; therefore Bholā struts; O why does Bholā strut?]. Another popular track in the last few years has been, "Babam Bam", a peppy number by the pop singer, Kailash Kher, a prominent Bollywood artist hailing from the adjacent town of Meerut. The song is structured as Pārvati's address to Śiva expressing her desire to live with him, and Śiva's riposte discouraging her in view of his life in the wilderness and his disagreeable form covered with ash and snakes. Interspersed in the number are eulogies of Śiva and, importantly, the alliterated refrain "*babam bam, babam bam babam bam bamlehri*" in a very fast tempo.

Such racy numbers exhorting the pilgrims themselves to swing to the tune, and sashay after an intoxicated Bhole Baba, obviously strike chord with pilgrims, many of

whom —specially the younger— are likewise under influence. Videos of such songs will show actors in costumes acting as Śiva and Pārvati. Śiva's character is often dressed, with a tiger-skin printed wraparound, a wig of matted hair tied on top, numerous *rudraksa* necklaces, and with snake replicas around the neck. Pārvati, in turn, features in sari and blouse in the manner of North Indian housewives; at times, the blouse is skimpy, the sari short, imitating the depiction of goddesses and mythological characters in epical TV serials such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. This conjugal play may thus often have a titillating effect. Other variations of the theme may involve child actors, with a male child acting as Śiva, the female as Gaurā/Pārvati— the former insisting on the *bhānga* and asking her assistance in making it, the latter refusing. The songs clearly enact the playful, often fractious, exchanges of domestic life, in stereotypical gendered forms.

At a basic, visceral level, this indiscriminate, folk religiosity of the Kānwariās offends middle-class sensibilities or taste. Such offensiveness becomes particularly disturbing in the context of identifications stemming from a national belonging or with the putatively sublime spirituality of an ideal Hinduism, with its Vedic rituals and Vedānta metaphysics, the image it has assiduously crafted internationally. These poor, indiscriminate performances claim to represent *one's* religion, the most sublime of cultural identifications, in the most crass and distasteful manner; giving a lie, as it were, to ideal imaginaries of the future of the (postcolonial) nation, libidinally driven by a past, constructed as at once golden and traumatized. Offensive and uncanny, this representation expresses precisely what is sought to be repressed.¹⁶

In addition, the Kānwariās' occupation of public spaces, particularly roadways, disrupts the routines, and inconveniences the urban middle-class, provoking their resentment. There is thus a collective notoriety to the festival, an aura of scandal. A livid middle-class commentator from Delhi notes,

Kānwariās, the name could send jitters down the spine of any civilized person. These hooligans have no ethics and have no rules to follow.... People who pay tax in numerous forms, who pay toll tax to use a petite [*sic*] road made out of their own money are left with JAMS [*sic*], snail speeds and MESS [*sic*] when these people with no work at home hit roads in the name of God! Does the Linga God not accept my prayers? He does! I am a Shivite [*sic*] and I know how dear is my God to me.... But does that need a show off on the road? [...] A dirty number show...a dirty political motive is what I sense behind the hooligan carnibal [*sic*]!¹⁷

Equally angry with this ritual miscegenation, and their occupation of roads, another argues:

They are a strange mix of tradition and modernity—men wearing Nike shoes and gaudy saffron vests walk or trek and occasionally stop to take rest. The resting places are audible before they are visible, with loud, garish devotional music being played over cheap amplifiers. Number of *Śiva Bhakts* can be seen there squatting or resting on makeshift tables or cots and engorging themselves at the *Bhandaras* sponsored by the local traders. Recently *Kānwariās* blocked the Delhi-Mathura highway.... Seven *Kānwariās* were recently run over by speeding vehicles in three mishaps, which sparked the protests.... All this points to one disturbing phenomena [*sic*]*—the lumpenization of piety. And that is frightening.*¹⁸

And although the pilgrimage indeed creates business for trading and religious communities, since a large part of the financial operation is in the informal economy with limited tax accruals to the state, the latter sees little advantage:

The State Government has planned to consider Kānwariās as non-tourist arrivals as they create more law and order problem than the revenue they generate. The law and order problem caused by Kānwariās can be gauged from the fact that most of the foreign tourists prefer to stay away from Hardwar and Rishikesh during the Kanwad Mela.¹⁹

The traffic disruptions and detours for 4-5 days at the height of the festival are important—perhaps not as much in the dimension of the Real as in terms of symbolic dissonance. It disrupts routine perceptions of rights over public spaces, of an assumed function of roads; otherwise unshaking beliefs in one's prerogatives are challenged, identification with statist, instrumental rationality and one's status as a rightful subject are suddenly breached. The inconvenience, however, does not explain the disgust — it is at most a discursive referent, a prop, for an upsetting affect caused by an affront to one's sensibilities.

The disgust instead, I would argue, is in the necessity of rejecting, disavowing, dissociating from the low-brow culture, its often gaudy aspect, the remixes of loud, raunchy Hindi film songs to which the Kānwariās dance, the frequent references to Śiva's conjugal life in the songs and slogans, the lascivious themes of many of the plays and dances either performed live or on videos, the ambiguous sexualities of the actors, the suggestive bodily gyrations of males performing as females or females as males, their garish make-ups. It is an affront to cherished identifications and aesthetic ideals, it upsets one's imaginaries—national, local, historical. This distaste, disavowal is personal, since there is a merger of identities—a historical, national, religious belonging-together. It comes across as the uncanny, recurrent, inexorable return of what one seeks to dissociate from, perhaps a past, an ascribed stigma, a lower part, a behind, sexual or excretive, to identify elsewhere in a national imaginary, a future, an image in the world. And yet this abyssal, obscene thing, it presents itself as religion, as sublime—thereby shamelessly mixing things. *It is the abject*. Then we have the genius of Kristeva:

I endure it, for I imagine that such is the desire of the other. A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A “something” that I do not recognize as a thing.²⁰

...what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a saviour.... Immoral, sinister, scheming and shady....²¹

The Politics of Indiscrimination

If the performances here are disgusting to some, for others they express the anxieties, desires, and obligations that define the tenor of everyday life. Weaving in the radical antinomianism of Śiva, these performances, as I have argued in previous chapters, express and sublate the complex social affects that mark the subjective existence of a large number.²² This anxiety-laden experience is further intensified by expectations and desires provoked by the continuous spectral presence of an array of aspirations and commodities, indeed expertly coded to tantalize and incite. Striving after an uncertain success in highly informal conditions where there is much to chance, and at an age with a lot at stake, these performances often demonstrate an anxious resort to supernatural assistance. At the same time, they compete with the dizzying novelty and disparity of commodity-mediated social relations; whereby their spectacular value cannot afford to be any lesser than the latter, which they are to out-shine and to re-signify—to master, if one were to use a Freudian figure.²³

In the Kanwar, one finds — not unlike the modern market perhaps — a near lack of reserve, minimal normative regulation, in performing to or supplying desires. Thus, the proliferating video albums, while catering to market demands, simultaneously work out

the desires of young women and men. The Bollywood star, her absolute success, is easily among the supreme fetishes of many a young person, yet grappling with the suspect rationalities of a highly unorganized social order. Unlike the obviously gigantic odds against a celebrity career, such albums provide bountiful opportunities with minimal restrictions; set in the name of God, these performances seem to as much provide an avenue for these desires, as perhaps to transcend them. The relaxed sensory regulation here corresponds with the lack of social divisions in the pilgrimage itself, where people irrespective of caste, class, age, and, to a large extent gender, merge in the singular identity of the *bholā*. The suspension of otherwise rigid caste identities is notable in this context, since caste ideology in India today often operates practically as an aesthetic differentiation. After all, vulgar taste, poor manners, tendency to excess, over-indulgence, these have always been the marked characteristics of the “low” caste, the inferior, abject, disgusting. In the caste society, aesthetic preferences are merged with intellectual qualities and the morally good —collapsed into a hereditary essence, this combination operates as an enduring ideology of caste discrimination.

Contrary to these normative discriminations, one finds in the pilgrimage, a radical inter-mixing, a lack of differentiation. Outside and away from one’s fixed identities and historical trappings, in a context of anonymity, an undifferentiated monism where Bhole Baba is the only reality, caste identities are no longer recognized. Likewise, in the pilgrims’ actions too, and not unlike the radical antinomianism of Śiva, judgments over distinctions between the “low” and the “high”, sacred and profane, between the devoted ritual and the frivolous action, the saintly and the petty, are, to a large extent, suspended

—“One cannot judge another person’s *śraddhā* (faith) from their external actions,” one after another, my respondents refrained from commenting on others’ sincerity of faith. “This is Bhole Nath’s great fair, you may expect people of every kind,” one said. If, however, among many pilgrims sharing a common phenomenal experience in its intensity, there is a deference to this intermixing of the sensible, the lack of discrimination in the pilgrimage—“oh, they say anything that comes to their mouth,” said Shamli, the young woman pilgrim of Chapter One, blithely, without a hint of disapproval—this very intermixing, indiscrimination to which caste and class significations are never missing makes the pilgrimage an anathema to others.

And, at times, things may indeed appear very mixed. Thus, a member of a group of young, economically destitute pilgrims from the Dalit community (outcastes or “untouchables”, traditionally identified with scavenging) boasted, “We brought a very large and excellently decorated Kanwar. After winning a game of gambling, we decided to put all the money into it”. The Kanwar offerings were done at a temple the community had constructed a few years ago. What may seem, from one perspective, as a banal “show off” is also on another dimension an intervention in a historical struggle, a group assertion in the context of a history of oppression, of exclusion—above all, from temples—which goes back to the very beginning of (historical) time as much as it repeats itself every day in the smallest interaction, and is, perhaps as frequently, resisted.²⁴ And if in some cases, such indiscrimination shows a collapsing of time, others more clearly manifest negotiations in the present.

“Yes, kids like this, such people go for the Kanwar. They don’t get food at home, and are therefore attracted to the free food at the camps.... You see, my own kids, I have two. They will never go for this, because they get everything they need at home”. Thus, a woman interjected a while after she walked in, as I was discussing with Sundar, a boy 13-14 years of age, his experiences in the pilgrimage. Now in grade IX, he had been going for the pilgrimage for three years. The eldest of three children, his father informally employed as a salesman on a motor cycle shop, Sundar said he dreamt of *bholes* going for the pilgrimage, and when he asked his mother, she agreed to let him go with the elders. “No, we only ate at restaurants, only rarely would the leader let us make a halt”, Sundar told me later. “[But] we danced and had a lot of fun”, he said, referring to the children in the group.... I was wearing *ghungrus* [musical bells worn around the anklets]...I liked their sound”. Another pilgrim, a young college-going adult, likewise added, “I had the same dream...I saw *bholes* going on the pilgrimage”. This was an observation several others had made. The festival reflected a collective mood: a time, a season — marked by the pleasant showers after months of scalding weather—when a multitude, and many in one’s circle, set out for the glorious, legendary city of gods, Hardwar, to tread the long way back home in memory of that adorable deity, Śiva. The desire was irresistible. As Basant had said, “There is a joy that takes over my heart at the time, making my hair stand on ends, tears well up in the eyes”.

In an economy where the formal sector is but a pittance, and lack of institutional regulation the norm —where more than 90 per cent of people are informally employed — Sundar’s desire and the relaxed control of the family is no aberration.²⁵ Instead, it is in

addressing, negotiating these relaxed norms, also represented in the relative normlessness of the pilgrimage, that one will learn, face, play with the prospects of a future that is very likely to be as undefined and uncertain. From real estate to agents interfacing with the bureaucracy to petty swindlers, from small entrepreneurs to self-employed or, more frequently, unemployed skilled or unskilled workers — that is, except for a few government jobs and fewer formal private sector jobs, which are likewise often informally distributed — adroitness in dealing with informality will very likely determine one's life chances.²⁶ On the other end, however, precisely this extent of informality and uncertainty would lead to anxious over-controlling, obsessive attachment to an ideology identifying extensive behavioural regulation, studiousness, and discipline as conditions for success. And, in the tenuous gains this success would make and defend—perhaps not without guilt, but inflexibly and accusingly—in the middle of a sea of destitution as though ready to devour, the other with its threat of contamination will have to be kept at a distance, as abject. Thus, the frequent parental admonition: “Do not mix with *those, other guys*”!

The negative perception shows the moral ambiguities associated with the gaiety, the carnival in the pilgrimage, which seems out of character with accepted religious conventions. This is evident in the ambivalent perspectives of many of the pilgrims themselves. “Three or four decades earlier, it would be only a few people—one or two from our whole village—who would make the pilgrimage to fulfil a vow...now, it will be hard to find a family without a participant...it is hard to explain. Call it a herd mentality if you wish, it is hard to say”. These words of one respondent, who has himself made the

journey several times, echo the views of many others likewise amused by the explosion of the phenomenon. For many, the increasing numbers correspond with a dilution in the intensity of the event; there is a levity to the occasion, a carnivalesque atmosphere.

According to one common complaint: “there are too many young people on the pilgrimage—they have turned it into a carnival. They take *bhānga* and make merry. The festival is therefore earning a bad name, despite a large number of seriously pious devotees”. As for the proportions, there are wide deviations. While for some, there are only a small percentage of devoted pilgrims, the rest being ruffians, for others a handful of bad apples are responsible for spoiling the occasion and its reputation.

And yet when followed, I rarely found a person who would name someone either in their group of pilgrims or acquaintances who could be blamed of levity of faith or ritual insincerity. It was more a vague feeling that seemed to vanish in context of the dense situatedness and historicity of any specific individual. For, of course, in addition to the seeming abandon and gaiety of the celebrations, the pilgrimage, its toil and penance, also amply demonstrates the ritual intensity and good faith of the participants. Thus, in most cases, as seen in Chapter Two, the vow of the pilgrimage comes to be pronounced in the immediacy of overwhelming agonies and apprehensions. Thus, we may speak of Bimala whose elder son ran away from his family after a domestic conflict. In a family fatally immersed in the throes of poverty, when the father who had promised to bring the arduous *khari* Kanwar died of sepsis compounded by alcoholism before he could fulfil the promise, the mother haunted in her dreams had to take the bait and set on the journey herself. Or, we could speak of the unfathomable agony of the parents I met at the

Bilvakesvara temple in Hardwar, whose only child had been returned home with no chance of survival—the doctors having resigned—but who miraculously revived as the parents prayed to Bhole Baba in frenzy, avowing the labour of a Kanwar. In their unceasing gratitude, the parents have been coming for the Kanwar ever since, year after year. Or, one might speak of the anxiety of the father who vowed a Kanwar concerned about the future of his son who had an infirm leg, or of Samli the destitute mother likewise anxious over her daughter's polio-affected limbs. Further on, we could speak of a brother's vow imploring Bhole Baba to be generous to his sister, childless after many years of marriage. Or, another of my respondents who, wishing likewise for his friend's childless daughter—whom he had adored and entertained since she was herself a child—has been bringing *khari kânwar*s for five years.

Contested Traditions

We have seen previously that the pilgrimage is performed in difference from the time, the performances, and the exchange logic that dominate ordinary sociality; it provides an occasion for expressing, sublimating, mastering desires, aspirations, and obligations which command little consideration in the everyday social context. At the same time, however, the Kanwar has strong contentious tendencies, which are perhaps the most evident in the conflicts over territorial rights—particularly the occupation of the roads.

“They refuse to yield even an inch of the road”, a news report claims in amazement.²⁷ Another commentator, likewise, avers “the Kânwariās have also become very aggressive. They just walk wherever they feel like, cross roads where it suits their fancy.... And god forbid if a Kânwariā is hurt in an accident. All hell breaks loose”.²⁸ And

yet another finds it “unusual”, that when “seven Kānwariās were recently run over by speeding vehicles in three mishaps”, they sparked protests leading into “burnt buses, blocked roads” and clashes with the police.²⁹ This resentment clothes itself in the rhetoric of national loss, public good, and “proper religion”, violated by irrational actors. Thus, a state bureaucrat deplores the disruption of commercial life as irreligious: “Religion never allows anyone to cripple life”.³⁰ Likewise, one asks, “What intrigues one is the sudden increase in the number of Kānwariās of late and their aggressive behaviour, the last thing that one would associate with a religious congregation”.³¹

While this imperative of “common interest” and “public good” seems reasonable, it is also, to an extent, oblivious of any specific genre of concerns and suffering, notwithstanding a widely disreputed polity and administration, its criminal disregard and injustices. It is important to consider the other perspective. First then, the violent reaction to pilgrims being “run over by speeding vehicles”, itself requires little specific explanation. Not limited to the Kanwar by any chance, such incidents reflect the common animus over the usage of limited, poorly managed roads—between “speeding” cars and other vehicles, their negligent drivers, and an often destitute pedestrian traffic—which tips over a threshold of tolerance during such unfortunate yet common episodes. For example, two weeks after the *Kanwar* libations, in one of the research towns: a child on his way to school was crushed by a speeding bus, provoking wide public reaction. Cars and buses were burnt, shops and police stations gutted, and the demonstrators chased the police. The situation was controlled only after a curfew, and flag march by special forces. In a place where police action is almost thoroughly governed by its rent-seeking

character, and the legal system is more or less ineffectual, witnesses often assume the role of the retributive agent. In the Kanwar, since the huge numbers of pedestrians share a common, religious identity and normal traffic conventions—in which pedestrians have neither rights nor respect—are suspended, traffic accidents become marked. Group psychology, and always the possibility of a few inciting characters among such vast numbers may lead to further aggravation.

At a more specific level, however, the speeding traffic, its effortless hubris, unquestioned right over space or roads is quite the opposite of the Kānwariā's difficult, painful treading over endless space, anxiously protecting the sacred water in the containers, upholding its ritual status. The spilling of the water, even its minimal violation—say by a traffic indiscretion—would destroy all the merit of the act, the immeasurable labor and cathectic investment that goes into it. And insofar as one's most intimate worries and concerns as though hang on this precarious and difficult ritual act of getting the water safely to the shrine, such an incident could be ominous, disastrous. "When a Kānwariā's water gets spilled, he is unable to move...gets stuck to the ground, as if he had lost everything...prepared to die", I was frequently told by witnesses. These contentions, however, should not be perceived as discrete; they are on a continuum with, and transfer the affects of everyday life. The refusal to "yield an inch", as the above report claims, has to be seen in the context of embedded power relations, where cars fly effortlessly—in an expression of what looks like the mocking comforts of life for a small minority—even as a vast number of people drag themselves through the struggles of life in dire and humiliating conditions, often silently bearing the ailing, emaciated bodies of

their children, their disillusioning futures. (Or, equally importantly, have witnessed such suffering of their near ones). In the public space of the road, its rights, in the daily conflicts it hosts, two different worlds ceaselessly cross paths every day. In the Kanwar then this balance is, as if, upended.

Effectively then, the Kanwar allows the habitus of a huge but invisible majority to occupy centre space. This shift, lacking the form of a great endless wave of protest movements, massive demonstrations, open revolts, becomes feasible through the means of an antinomian religious tradition. The religious performance invokes an ethic, a past, a culture, a higher order; it invokes the Absolute without betraying the subjects' *jouissance*. The otherwise suppressed, inferior, abject habitus of the majority pitches itself as absolute, occupies the highways, and performs its ethic in a spectacular form. And it is precisely this pitching as absolute, ethical, religious by what is abject and unsightly—culturally inferior, tasteless, over-indulgent, indiscriminating, characteristic of those *other* castes or groups—that the ideologies that construct dominant perceptions find most consternating.

The disgruntlement caused by traffic inconvenience, the detours one may be forced to make for a few days in a year, cannot be extricated from an aesthetic intolerability of this abject other that presents itself in the name of one's own culture and religion. Here, the Left and the Right agree to a surprising degree. The repulsion is an effect of this unusual, unseemly mixing of the sensible—devotional songs on Bollywood tunes, gaudy religious or traditional costumes, suggestive bodily gyrations affecting Śiva's great dances, intoxication on a religious occasion, *kānwars* decorated "with multi-hued

cheap plastic festoons and toys, Pokemon *dumroos*”, “pilgrims engorging themselves at the *bhandaras* [community eateries]” —which yet presents itself as absolute, transcendental, and as a representation of *one’s own* identity and religion.³²

The Kanwar thus becomes the place, voice, acts, and opportunity of a majority, which although obviously numerous remains invisible, non-intrusive, unheard if not silent, and, to an extent, suppressed much of the time. The difference is striking. Instead of the apparently smooth operations of daily commerce with all their silences and inequities, another order of concerns, desires, responsibilities, skills, habits, world-views, customs, and works authoritatively takes over the space. This intrusion becomes particularly annoying in its occupation of the highways, as a complacent worldview that usually keeps its thin veneer of order intact, despite gross inequities, excesses, and the silent, inordinate suffering of the multitude, is forced to give way to the existential concerns and the habitus of the majority.

Religious performances such as the Kanwar thus function as occasions for participants, here mostly lower class young males, facing and anticipating the social expectations and excesses of a highly hierarchical society, to cultivate social and self-recognition. They are also cathartic events that at once subvert normative protocols and the imperatives of daily commerce, and give expression to repressed anguish. In these practices, one sees a lower class habitus, clearly reminiscent of indiscriminate taste and practices identified with the abject, presenting itself as legitimate *representations* of Hindu religion.

The revulsion caused by the Kanwar is provoked by such unusual, unseemly mixing of the sensible; it has as its base, an aesthetic distaste – a rejection, at once sensuous and ideological. The aesthetic chasm here, however, builds on India's caste heritage – a differentiation between the subtle and the gross, the pure and the abject, which is simultaneously aesthetic and metaphysical. Vulgar taste, poor manners, tendency to excess, over-indulgence, these after all are simultaneously the marked characteristics of the 'low' castes, and the ideological moral ground marking their 'inferior' status.

Neo-liberalism and the Stigmas of Neo-casteism

As we have seen over the course of this work, religious performances such as the Kanwar function as occasions for participants, here mostly lower class young males, facing and anticipating the social expectations and excesses of a highly hierarchical society, to cultivate social and self-recognition. They are also cathartic events that at once subvert normative protocols and the imperatives of daily commerce, and give expression to repressed anguish. In these practices, one sees a lower class habitus, clearly reminiscent of indiscriminate taste and practices identified with the caste abject, presenting itself as legitimate *representations* of Hindu religion.

Said one of my respondents: "there is no 'high—low' here; *jati* (caste) does not matter...of course, everyone is a Hindu." Caste difference turns secondary to the category of the "Hindu," construed in an alternate structure of difference both within the nation—say, Hindu, Muslim, or Christian—and internationally in terms of "Indian" identity. If caste identity and anxiety was embedded in the structure of India's traditional,

sedentary society, the “Hindu” identity is an effect of a nationality and personhood navigating the culture and time-consciousness of a dynamic, global society. The “Hindu” is the new one—condensing both national and personal identity—and calling for solidarity in the face of difference, where the marked “high—low” must be transcended for the cause of Hindu national solidarity. Yet, much like a transcendental cause and moral duty bound the ancient caste divisions, the new unity is conditional to another abject in the form of a treasonous other. While the above respondent prided in this performance of “Hindu” faith and identity, it is precisely as betrayal and denigration of “Hindu” culture and its noble identity that the phenomenon arouses moral revulsion and disgust in others.

The “disgust,” they provoke may be well described using Kant’s expression. “Disgust,” says Kant, is aroused by a unique “kind of ugliness,” with an artistic object “insisting, as it were, upon our enjoying it, while we still set our face against it.”³³ In the Kanwar, what arouses disgust is precisely the certitude of the practices, the actors, their shameless claim to sublime, religious merit, showing such contemptible lack of discrimination and respect that only the caste unworthy may be capable of. It is the profanation of Hinduism, a treasonous defilement of Hinduism, of its ideal image in the world and a pure ancient past that it has assiduously salvaged from the debris left by the historical traumas of Islamic occupation and English colonization. The act is as morally unforgivable as it is aesthetically abhorrent. From being identified through closed caste markings of a pre-modern society, the abject here is the constitutive externality of a new national and “Hindu” consciousness.

National self-consciousness, however, itself transfers the anxiety of self-recognition and social recognition in the liberal capitalist context of a highly unequal, poor, and hierarchical society. It is an identity anchor in hopelessly challenging social conditions, where one must frantically kick around to barely stay afloat in a sea of poverty while struggling with moral and existential dilemmas. The abject here is a stigmatized other – over-determined at once as social and economic failure, moral degeneracy, aesthetic offensiveness, bad habits – whose company and mere thought must be shunned to accomplish a meaningful life.

Thus, it is increasingly in the context of an aesthetics of morality shaped by the imperatives of national identity and neo-liberal certitudes (of work, discipline, and the commodity spectacle) that caste is evoked. The collective memory of caste works as a metaphysical and historical reserve that can be mobilized towards a consciousness (conscience) of distinction in the context of new exclusions. If it was a moral aesthetics and its correlated economic distinctions that caste substantiated in the traditional society, it is precisely as the implicit but substantive reason for moral and aesthetic distinctions and economic exclusion that it is now invoked. Thus, the dynamics of Sanskritization of particular social groups, which the anthropologists have shown so much interest in, are not nearly as important as the binary distinctions between the cultured or the sanskrit and the uncultured, one lacking samskars, which serve as the condition for social exclusion and the concomitant accomplishment of social and ego integrity. Although specifics must vary, the exclusive function of caste powerfully elucidates contemporary racial exclusions.

Today, as racism has evolved into a new social form identified as “neo-racism,” cultural difference has become the primary focus of racial difference while, at least in public discourses, biological arguments have regressed. Likewise, sweeping political and economic changes of the last several decades have transformed caste relations and sentiments substantively enough to warrant a term such as “neo-casteism.” It is appropriate that these neologisms indicate newness; yet, these social changes also bring into light new dimensions of caste and racial relations per se. The prefix “neo” simultaneously marks a social phenomenon, and an analytical step. Thus, “neo-racism” while indicating a new phenomenon also directs attention to issues of culture, economic status, and disposition in explicit forms of “racism,” previously occluded by discourses of biological difference. This revealing feature is particularly true for caste; the changing profile of contemporary caste practices helps address many of the persisting puzzles of India’s timeless caste structure.

Mediated by hegemonic nationalist and neo-liberal ideas, neo-casteism operates as pervasive and insistent exclusion of the habitus and popular culture of the poor and the downtrodden as contaminants and risks, simultaneously to the nation and its cherished projects/futures, and to personal ideals and desired life courses whether for the individuals or their loved ones. These anxiously guarded exclusions are the condition for certitudes that can weave together nationalist ideals with comforting narratives of self (ideal ego) and aspired life courses and objectives, whether or not they are realistic. In fact, for the most part, the harder it is to realize these objectives, the more anxiously one upholds them to foreclose the threat and the greater likelihood of being rendered

abject; in conditions of widespread and growing poverty and unemployment, such an outcome is indeed highly probable. The social patterns previously designated “caste,” now cannot but express themselves in the new legitimacies of nationalism and neo-liberal references that equate morality and propriety with economic success and a culture of high consumption, and poverty and deprivation with corruption of character and a lack of work ethic. Notwithstanding inflections from the specifics of India’s postcolonial nationality, obviously, neither nationalist nor neo-liberal imperatives are confined to India. Rather, they constitute a dominant ideology that increasingly orders moral and social considerations in societies across the globe. As it happens, exclusion is increasingly a defining feature of these societies. Caste as much as racial exclusions increasingly must be constructed, practiced, and thus conceptually constituted not through a social logic that focuses on division, but in a sweeping discourse that putatively incorporates everyone.

That discourse today is neo-liberalism, specially of the Chicago School variety, simultaneously an economic doctrine, a political strategy, and a moral and aesthetic horizon.³⁴ In this hegemonic global discourse, economic logic provides a universal grid of intelligibility for any kind of social practices, from family and marriage, to work, crime, and state justice.³⁵ This discourse would conceive the human in totality as herself a form of capital – *human capital*, a product of investments in education and upbringing, or the natural merits of genetic ability, and wages as the income earned by this capital.³⁶

Racial and caste ideology and practice inevitably combines interests of politico-economic domination in a normative morality and aesthetics. If earlier race and caste

practices were produced by the dominant discourses of their age, colonial liberalism and Brahminism respectively, today both neo-racism and neo-casteism are aligned to the common global hegemony of neo-liberal ideology. The sweeping, exhaustive nature of American neo-liberalism, its singular emphasis on wealth accumulation, also means that its exclusions will be that much more compulsive, the race of its abject that much virulently patrolled.

Several scholars have drawn attention to the emergent dystopian characters of contemporary societies, where beyond a core of people with full-time work and secure, embedded life-courses – a sphere of meritocracy and equality between the sexes, kind and gentle in its relationships, with life exigencies covered by comprehensive insurance – lies a growing outgroup. As Young (1999) elucidates in a narrative evocative of the Dalit poetry discussed earlier:

The outgroup becomes a scapegoat for the troubles of the wider society; they are the underclass who live in idleness and crime. Their areas are the abode of single mothers and feckless fathers, their economics that of drugs, prostitution and trafficking in stolen goods. They are the social impurities of the late modern world.... This section of the population has a large ethnic minority constitution, creating the possibility of easy scapegoating and of confusing the vicissitudes of class with those of race.³⁷

Likewise, describing the world that shapes the ruminations of the famous dalit poet, Namdeo Dhasal, Vijay Tendulkar writes:³⁸

This is the world of days of nights; of empty or half-filled stomachs; of the pain of death... of overflowing gutters... of the jobless; of beggars; of pickpockets; of Bairaga swamis; of a hashish cot and a beautiful child asleep on the edge of that cot and a tubercular father... of hermaphrodites; of home-brew liquor... of smuggling; of naked lives; of opium... where children cry near-by, where prostitutes waiting for business sing full-throated love songs... Dhasal says, here all seasons are pitiless, here all seasons have a contrary heart.³⁹

From this perspective then, the abject is not just a particular, stigmatized demographic minority but indeed a majority obliged to negate itself by the imperatives of a collective morality.⁴⁰ No wonder then that cultural iconoclasm and the profanation of cultural artifacts with their pervasive meaning-loaded presence are inevitably the first targets of subaltern resistance groups. Not surprisingly, the Dravida movement of the late 19th century consciously rejected Sanskritizing values. Likewise, the Dalit Panthers asserted new cultural imperatives that “exploded their subaltern world into a complacent middle class, upper-caste consciousness.”⁴¹

What Goldberg has to say about racialized exclusions in conditions of contemporary neo-liberal hegemony may be said for the over-determination of exclusion over multiple axes in more or less any epoch:

Those thus seen as threatening to disrupt these authorized economic, informational, and cultural flows, movements, placements, and positionings – the media of value and significance, of capital, after all – become more or less racially marked, racial rogues, mutant states. The racial marking of the targets serves to rationalize – both to economize and legitimize – the invocation of *violence*.... [Race] sustains systematic social conditions of exclusion, and the varieties of a more or less visceral violence underscoring and extending them.... A state of exception licenses the state... to treat such subjects in any way deemed necessary to restrict, restrain, or disappear them.

Characterized as much by the working as the consuming disposition, moral irreproachability expresses itself aesthetically. The lesser race is marked by dubious behavior, poor consumption, and poor presentation of the self. Where work was a necessity, and surely also a theological value in nascent capitalism, it was not at any wide scale a disposition or trait that defined one's *mode of being* itself so much as it does in the advanced neo-liberal economy. Where morality came to center upon the

appropriateness of such disposition, extant racial separation could not but become imbricated within its attendant economic and aesthetic evaluations. This social order motivates the body of the nation through imperatives of material and cultural progress, simultaneously advocating a "pragmatic" social stratification where the previously natural and hereditary differences in social ranking give way to a logic of differences apparently earned in a social space defined by "freedom". The individual body remains a significant site for studying and validating race in addition to cultural practices to be sure; yet, what the body now more than ever marks and represents is a purported lack of cultural achievement, whereby power can continue to assure itself of being "Good" in the medium of an aesthetic that putatively manifests the spirit of the age.

Aesthetic repulsiveness is merged with moral and intellectual degeneration — collapsed into a group essence, this combination operates as an enduring ideology of caste discrimination. In the Kanwar, to the contrary, as we have seen, the otherwise suppressed, inferior, abject habitus of the poor pitches itself as absolute, occupies the highways, and performs its ethic under the full splendor of the public gaze.

And yet, few would see such a phenomenon as an example of "resistance." Notwithstanding the complex social conflicts apparent here, such religious practices are rarely treated in sociological scholarship as forms of "resistance." This, the next chapter argues, is because the notion of "resistance" in the social sciences is normatively framed by embedded ideas of individual freedom and historical liberation; religious actions then are more likely to be characterized as "fundamentalist" than as instances of social resistance. But it is to "resistance" that we must refer to understand these subjectivities

in their anticipation, mastering, and opposition of oppressive and humiliating conditions. Questioning the teleological, modernist paradigm that commonly frame instances of “resistance,” the next chapter makes a case for an alternative hermeneutic that would embed these practices in moral philosophy, existentialist literature, and psychoanalysis.

¹ See e.g., Waghorne, Joanne P. *Diaspora of the Gods: Modern Hindu Temples in an Urban Middle-Class World*. New ork: Oxford University Press, 2004.

² See Victor W Turner and Edith L. B. Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press: 1978).

³ For contests over pilgrimages, see John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow (eds), *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Kama Maclean, *Pilgrimage and Power: The Kumbh Mela in Allahabad, 1765-1954* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Dominique-Sila Khan, *Conversions and Shifting Identities: Ramdev Pir and the Ismailis in Rajasthan* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 1997).

⁴ For Latin American pilgrimages, see N. Rose Crumrine and Alan Morinis (eds), *Pilgrimage in Latin America*, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991); for European pilgrimages, see Willy Jansen and Meike Kuhl ‘Shared symbols: Muslims, Marian Pilgrimages and Gender’ in *European Journal of Women's Studies*, Vol XV, no. 3, (2008), pp.295-311. On African pilgrimages, see Katharina Schramm, ‘Coming Home to the Motherland: Pilgrimage Tourism in Ghana’, in Simon Coleman and John Eade (eds) *Reframing pilgrimage: Cultures in Motion*, (London: Routledge, 2004), pp.133-49; and on New Zealand, see Karen Sinclair, ‘Mission to Waitangi: A Maori pilgrimage’, in Alan Morinis (ed.), *Sacred Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage*, pp.233-56. On pilgrimages in India, see I. Karve ‘On the Road: A Maharashtrian Pilgrimage’ in *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol XXII, no. 1 (1962), pp.13-29; Agehananda Bharati, ‘Pilgrimage in the Indian tradition’, *History of Religions*, Vol. III, no. 1 (Summer 1963), pp.135-67; and Ann G. Gold, *Fruitful journeys: The Ways of Rajasthani pilgrims* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

⁵ See, for example, Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion, and Cultural Nationalism* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2001). Also see Christophe Jaffrelot, ‘The Hindu Nationalist Reinterpretation of Pilgrimage in India: The Limits of

Yatra Politics', in *Religion, Caste, and Politics in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp.324-42.

⁶ See, for example, Jatinder Sethi, 'Maha Shivratri, Kovad Mela and a Long Weekend' (06 March, 2012) [<http://www.ghumakkar.com/2012/03/06/mahashivratri-kovad-mela-long-week-end/> accessed 15 July 2012]

⁷ 'Street Eternity', Hard news (not dated). [<http://www.hardnewsmedia.com/2008/09/2335> accessed 15 July 2012]. Emphasis added.

⁸ 'Kanwaris Distorting Hinduism', *Hindustan Times* (11 August 2007) [<http://global.factiva.com> accessed 14 May 2012]

⁹ See, for example, Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (eds), *Fundamentalisms Comprehended* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995); and Zygmunt Bauman, 'Postmodern Religion?' in Paul Heelas (ed.), *Religion, Modernity, and Postmodernity* (Massachusetts: Wiley-Blackwell), pp.55-78.

¹⁰ Max Weber, *From Max Weber*, (ed. & trans.) H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), p.277.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.289

¹² *Ibid.*, p.270

¹³ See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of Capitalism and Other Writings*, (ed. & trans.) Peter Baehr and Gordon C Wells (New York: Penguin, 2002), p.356.

¹⁴ 'Kanwaris to Follow the Usual Route', (*Hindustan Times*, 18 July 2007) [<http://global.factiva.com> accessed 12 April 2012]

¹⁵ On the T-series business model, see Ravi Sundaram, *Pirate Modernity: Delhi's Media Urbanism* (London: Routledge, 2010), p.120.

¹⁶ See Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (New York, Penguin, 2003), pp.121-58.

¹⁷ S.K. Deshwal, 'One Response to Handling Kanwaria Rush,' *MetroNow* (23 July, 2008) [<http://metronow.wordpress.com/2008/07/21/handling-Kanwaria-rush/> accessed 27th May 2012].

¹⁸ Shantanu Dutta, 'Kanwaria: The Lumpen on the Pilgrim Trail', *Merinews* (10 August, 2007) [<http://www.merineews.com/article/kanwaria-the-lumpen-on-the-pilgrim-trail/125905.shtml> accessed 27 May 2012]

¹⁹ 'Kanwaris may be Termed Non-Tourists', *Pioneer* (21 July 2010) [<http://global.factiva.com> accessed 14 May 2012]

²⁰ Julia Kristeva, *The Portable Kristeva* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p.230

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.232

²² On the juxtaposition of opposite affects in Siva, see Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *The Erotic Ascetic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981). On the subversive symbolism of Siva, see also Wakankar (2010).

²³ Sigmund Freud, 'Remembering, Repeating and Working-through', in James Strachey (ed. & trans.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. 12* (London, England: Hogarth Press, 1958), pp.145-56. Also see

Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, (trans.) J. Strachey (New York: Norton, 1959).

²⁴ See Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: An Essay on the Caste System* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970). See also next chapter.

²⁵ See National Commission for the Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector, *Report on Conditions of Work and Promotion of Livelihoods in the Unorganised Sector* (New Delhi: Academic Foundation, 2008). The report defines informal employment as consisting of 'those working in unorganized enterprises or households, excluding regular workers with social security benefits, and the workers in the formal sector without any employment/ social security benefits provided by employers' (p.3). According to the data based on the 2004-05 National Sample Survey (NSS), out of a total working population of 457.5 million, 422.6 million, that is, 92.4 per cent is informally employed (*ibid*, p.4).

²⁶ See also József Böröcz, 'Informality Rules' *East European Politics and Societies*, Vol.14, no.4 (March 2000), pp.348-80.

²⁷ Purnima S. Tripathi, 'The Long Walk for Worship', *Frontline*, Vol.21, no.17, (Aug 14-17, 2004) [<http://www.frontlineonnet.com/fl2117/stories/20040827000206600.htm> accessed 15 May 2012]

²⁸ Shobhit Mahajan, 'I grew up in sleepy small town on the outskirts of Delhi' (n.d.) [people.du.ac.in/~sm/smweb/ARTICLES/kanwarias.doc accessed 17 July 2012]

²⁹ Shantanu Dutta, 'Kanwaria: Lumpen on the Pilgrim Trail'.

³⁰ 'Kanwarias Distorting Hinduism' (*Hindustan Times*, 11 August 2007)

³¹ Purnima S. Tripathi, 'The Long Walk for Worship'.

³² Shantanu Dutta, 'Kanwaria: The Lumpen on the Pilgrim's Trail'.

³³ Kant, 2008, 174 [312]

³⁴ See Becker 1964; Friedman 1957, 1962; Clough 2008; Bourdieu 1998; Goldberg 2010

³⁵ See Foucault (2008).

³⁶ As capital normatively defines not just work and social status but the mode of being itself, as much in working as in consuming, as much in terms economic as cultural, behavioral disposition is perhaps the best marker of race. Race marks the lack of appropriate, or worthy disposition.

³⁷ Young, Jock. 2010. *The Vertigo of Late Modernity*. Los Angeles: Sage, 2010, p.20

³⁸ Tendulkar writes to describe the poetry of the Dalit poet Namdeo Dhasal.

³⁹ Maloney, Clarence. 1978. *Language and civilization change in South Asia*. Leiden: E.J. Brill., p.85.

⁴⁰ "Bahujan," "majority" or "many" is how dalit political groups in India's electoral context have framed their political constituency.⁴⁰ The successful mobilization of group interests and identities behind a vanguard of caste-oppressed may be explained as political pragmatics, but it no less indicates that the "excluded" –the Sudras and the "untouchables," as some commentators would like to phrase – are indeed *many*. In Uttar Pradesh, the north Indian state perhaps most radically divided on caste lines, for the last two decades political power has alternated between the Bahujan Samaj Party and the Samajwadi Party. The former is indeed the party of the caste-oppressed while the latter

consolidates “lower” caste groups with Muslims, another abject social group of modern India.

⁴¹ Guru, G and Chakravarty A, 2011, “Who are the Country’s Poor: Social Movement Politics and Dalit Poverty,” in Visweswaran, K. 2011. *Perspectives on modern South Asia: a reader in culture, history, and representation*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, p.262.

CHAPTER SIX

THE RESISTANCES OF RELIGION

“My life has been a series of struggles, moving from one crisis to another, but Bhole Baba has helped us stay aboard... very often from the verge of a breakdown,” Shailesh had reflectively observed. Shailesh was about 13-14 years old when one day his father’s disfigured corpse was found on the nearby railway track. Using a fudged birth certificate, Shailesh was able to get a job replacing his father. This provided financial succor to a family that included four younger siblings and the widowed mother. Twenty years later, Shailesh recounts several tales of the harrowing times he and his mother had gone through. The series of adversities that encumbered his memory here include the recent deaths in traffic accidents of his youngest brother-in-law and of a cousin who had mentored him on his first Kanwar pilgrimage, as well as the endless ongoing expenses on his spouse’s fertility concerns. But it was his father’s death that Shailesh mostly dwelled on during his conversation with me:

They said, *babaji* [father] might have been drunk, and may have walked onto the railway track, probably suicidally, but that can’t be true. All his things, a box of cigarettes, eyeglasses etc., were found neatly placed in his shoes one side of the track. Which man bent on suicide has the care to empty his pockets and neatly place things aside? ...several years later, in a dream ... that repeated several times... God (*Bhagvan*) showed me very clearly what transpired that evening... my mind would be tense... as usual, I went to sleep humming the name of God... *Aum Namah Śivay!*.... He showed me the events of that tragedy, saying this was how it happened. I saw everything very *clearly* in full *detail*, as if in a movie....⁹ Father walks out after closing the government ration shop (which he used to run as a part-time job), with shop collections from the week. (It used to be about 20 to 25 thousand rupees, which in those days was a large amount). As he comes out, he is invited over by a group of people sitting outside a liquor shop in that market. This includes a leader, the person in-charge of the whole market. There, they make shots of liquor and give my father a poisoned one. When he fell unconscious, they

took all his money and laid him on the railway track close by. I saw everything very clearly... saw them serving him liquor and carrying him to the track.

Shailesh had continued, "In numerous crises, on so many occasions, I have had to run till the last minute from one place, one person to another and yet another for a small amount of money for my sisters' weddings and on other occasions but, god be thanked, our heart's desire has finally, always been met... *automatically*."¹⁰ As for so many of my respondents, for Shailesh the eventual emergence of a path, "God wishing," has attained an axiomatic status. Such resolution has the tenor of a wish.

The wish, as we know, denotes the temporality of a sign that gathers the subject in an irreducible tension; the fulfillment of the wish, as Freud tells through the pleasure principle, is the resolution of a tension. A resolution, already half-inscribed in the mode of time, in the finitude of matters: a marriage has already been fixed, a body revives, and there is death. But it is momentary, for waiting on it is another wish, another responsibility, as much in the form of a 'coming due' as a futurity already weighing in on the present. If this repetitive wishfulness has something of the pleasure principle, it no less responds to a beyond of the pleasure principle.¹ As Freud shows in the "Dream of Irma," which would be the fulcrum of his theory of wish-fulfillment in dreams, at issue – "the artisan of the dream" – is a subject so mired in responsibility that the necessity of exculpating himself pushes him to the verge of the Real. The Real –that is, a formlessness, the raw flesh of the mouth, nose, sexual orifices, death, to the dissolution of the symbolic order such that the symbol, paradoxically, comes forth in its vertiginous arbitrariness. It pushes the subject to a point of breakdown, where one interpreter after the other is left wondering, how, possibly, did Freud not wake up.

Freud's dream 'Irma's injection,' narrated at the beginning of his thesis in the *Interpretation of Dreams*, is the launching pad of this text, which is of seminal significance to the history of psychoanalysis. The dream had to do with the events of the day where Freud enquires of Otto, "a younger colleague," and one of his "best friends," who had visited Freud's patient Irma in the countryside, how she was doing. "She is better but not altogether well," replied Otto.² The words, and specially Otto's tone and expression somehow disturbed Freud very much; he sensed in these words a reproach to the effect that he had perhaps promised too much. "The very same evening," says Freud, "I wrote down the history of Irma's case, in order to hand it, as though for my justification, to Dr. M., a mutual friend, who was at that time a leading figure in our circle." Among other several intricacies of the dream, which will require the reader to go to the text, it is important to note that in the dream, the episode evoked the case of Matilde, a patient who had died of Diphtheria, for which Freud blamed himself and his over-eagerness. Freud's eldest daughter had the same name as the patient, Matilde who had died. The daughter herself had had a weak development, and as a child almost died from the same disease. Freud would continue to worry over her health for a long time.³

Thus, one must be careful not to be deluded by the simplicity, the familiarity of this word "wish" to expect transparency, and thereby the possibility of a neat classification of its "object" – such as, whether the objective is "mundane" or "soteriological," centered on "needs" or "wants."⁴ Phenomenologically, however, the association of wish with simplicity is not without significance; it indicates the relieving quality of the wish, which is but precisely relief from a tension – relief proper and

therefore possible only through a performance that will deliver on it. The wish is to be exculpated, says Freud.⁵ In Freud's *Irma Dream*, it meant "exculpated," in a context where a defense against an aspersion on professional ethic and an innuendo of over-ambition rapidly involutes into a drama where in the accountability for the particular patient was merged the case of the patient who had died from a professional oversight; who in turn in her name (Matilde) associates the daughter (also, Matilde) that almost died of a disease, diphtheria. The associations of this disease, Lacan tells us, run amok in this dream. Matilde for Matilde, a tooth for a tooth: here one finds inscribed an order of responsibility that will only find its proper voice in analysis several chapters later in the *Traumdeutung* – in the dream of the unfortunate father shaken out of his slumber by the address of his dead child, "clasping his arms and calling out reproachfully, 'Father, don't you see that I am burning'." The child's corpse was in fact burning in the next room.⁶

Recounts Freud in Chapter Seven of the *Interpretation of Dreams*:

For days and nights a father had watched at the sick bed of his child. After the child died he retired to rest in an adjoining room leaving the door ajar, however, so as to enable him to look from his room into the other where the corpse surrounded by burning candles. An old man who was left as a watch sat near the corpse murmuring prayers. After sleeping a few hours the father dreamed that *the child near his bed clasping his arms and calling out reproachfully, "Father don't you see that I am burning?"* The father woke and noticed a bright light coming from the adjoining room. Rushing in, he found the old man asleep and the covers and one arm of the beloved body burned by the fallen candle.⁷

A similar order of responsibilities one must decipher in Shailesh's life. Far removed from the "hierarchy of needs" of a Cartesian individuality, on the level of subjective historicity one finds here a being that becomes only in the obligations that it enacts – in respect whether of a younger sister, an infant brother, a worried mother, a

father killed, unrequited, haunting.⁸ And insofar as one's responsibility to each, all, of them remains infinite and impossible to deliver on. Such running from one person to another, one place to another, then, is as much a running amok forced by circumstances, the *hic et nunc* of a history, as it is a drama of the subject who thus enacts itself, finds its gatherings in the recognition of a body of witnesses. An appeal to a crowd as much for assistance as to understand, bear witness to his exemplary state, his efforts, that he was not guilty on account of not having tried. In the dream of Irma, and one of course owes this to Lacan's guidance, we find Freud likewise appealing to one person after the other, frenetically gathering a crowd to assist him and equally to witness and recognize his good faith.

For Shailesh, the pilgrimage perhaps had the significance of a rite of passage. The labor and pain of the pilgrimages doubled as an embodied demonstration of resolve and fortitude; repetitions of everyday adversity in an intensely physical form, on faith's celebrated ground. The pilgrimage, not unlike the dream here, allows the subject to persist in a performative relational idiom, and address one's responsibilities and desires despite the terms and practices of an ascendant discourse of exchange and self-interest. The figure of *śraddhā*, that is, faith, is thus ubiquitous in the narratives of Kanwar participants, such that it appears as much a quality of the act as of the person herself. The act of faith, Kierkegaard has told us, involves an order of responsibility beyond any determinate ethics.⁹ The paradox of responsibilities that support such symptomatic investments and is performed here, cannot be framed in the Universal, and is therefore beyond speech.¹⁰ If Kierkegaard's reference lies in the exceptional events surrounding

the sacrifice of Isaac, it no less illustrates the “most common and everyday experience of responsibility”.¹¹

Here, it is also a responsibility to he who is dead, unrequited, the father whose place one has come to occupy, in a twist of fate that as it were inculcates one in the very discharge of one’s responsibilities. Asks Lacan, again in the context of Freud’s Irma dream, how is Freud content “at this first step in his demonstration, to present a dream which is entirely explained by the satisfaction of a desire which one cannot but call preconscious, and even entirely conscious”?¹² Lacan then goes on to ingeniously amalgamate into Freud’s explanation another order of significance, suggesting in this dream – that is the analyst’s, Freud’s, dream – the desire to know. And yet, Lacan himself has said, in the previous seminar, “In fact, we don’t always know if it [desire of the dream] should be located on the side of the unconscious or on the side of the conscious. And whose desire anyway? And above all, from what lack”?¹³ Unconscious, conscious, preconscious – these remain qualities of the subject’s temporality. The dream here as though performs, repeats the concerns and obligations that occupy the subject – a historical entity – in all the freedom and vitality of the imaginary register, insofar as this latter bears in a primary medium (images) the exigencies, the charges, the responsibilities transcribed in the subject’s waking mode.

Unhinged from the patrols of discourse, in this pause from the time of reality, the dream is the splendor if tragic of the unfolding of the subject in its immediacy. The subject is tied to the dream; what takes place here has a veridical significance. “Freud addresses the subject in order to say to him the following, which is new: *Here, in the field*

of the dream, you are at home."¹⁴ And "here", in the dream as much as in these religious performances, one finds an implicated subject, performing to one's relations, responsibilities, and desires, and living a fate that is one's alone.

Social scientists avoid using the term "resistance" for such religious phenomena. Instead, this scholarship prefers to read here a reactionary politics frequently summarized under the pejorative label of "religious fundamentalism."¹⁵ In these formulations, such religious phenomena are effectively retrogressive expressions of an inability to surmount past affects and prejudices and embrace futuristic horizons. Even in the subaltern studies literature, where such phenomena are ubiquitous, they are usually seen as substitutions for other, explicit social and political causes and interests. For example, although James Scott in his now classic *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* frequently refers to religious expressions, practices, and movements, in his examples, the adversary and the social cause are usually clearly identifiable, and the social oppression explicit.¹⁶ The religious expressions are at most of secondary interest. Subaltern scholars such as Guha (1983) likewise find religious movements as perhaps the most frequent expressions of resistance, but they likewise underplay their semantics and maintain the focus on specific oppressive groups such as the colonists and feudal authorities.¹⁷ Thus, extant literature provides little precedence to employ the analytic of resistance to understand a contemporary phenomenon such as the Kanwar in sufficient theoretical detail. To approach the resistances in the Kanwar, we must re-think the notion of "resistance."

Re-thinking “Resistance”

The notion of “resistance” has had a pivotal –if sometimes confounding –role in most lines of social thought in the Twentieth century, from theoretical explorations in cultural studies, political philosophy, and feminist studies to the more empirically centered observations of disciplines such as anthropology and political science. Once the fault lines of a political imaginary and praxis dominated by teleological arguments became apparent over the course of the century, new developments in Left thinking gradually shifted attention to the cultural domain. A rediscovered Gramsci and Althusser both showed the grip of dominant ideologies in the cultural constitution of individual subjects, and thereby the difficulties and importance of engendering a critical class consciousness.¹⁸ Although acknowledging the role of ideological forces and apparatuses in popular consciousness and individual subjectivity, new Left scholars such as Hall and Jefferson, and Hebdige sought to demonstrate that youth popular cultural practices were also sites of resistance.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the constitutive role of power and ideology in the very interiority of the subject has been hard to challenge, since the subject could not presumably pre-exist the social and discursive conditions of her production. A similar tussle on the credentials of “resistance” has ensued in ethnographic narratives.

Noting in resistance studies the tendentiousness of a scholarship as against a coherent disposition of the empirical situation, the anthropologist Abu-Lughod warned against the “romance of resistance.”²⁰ Local resistance to a particular order of power exercised by a group of subaltern subjects, the ethnographer realized, was often motivated by another often far more insidious system of power relations, such as the

pervasive ideologies and machinations of global capitalism. With a similarly critical instance, Kellner describes readings of “resistance” in anthropological narratives as “fetishizing,” while Gal argues that these studies betray an ahistorical notion of self and personhood without regard for cultural differences.²¹ Others, however, are loath to let go this formulation, and instead criticize such disavowals as symptomatic of a scholarly fad -- the putative “crisis of representation” characteristic of the postmodern turn – which they manifestly disapprove of.²²

Grappling with this paradox, contemporary theory generally asks for a departure from binary categories of “domination” and “opposition” to invoke instead Foucault’s studies of power and agency.²³ Such an epistemology of power and agency as illustrated, for example, by Judith Butler, itself, however, inevitably slips into the dilemma of the kind that Abu-Lughod observed. Butler argues that the power assumed by the subject “cannot be thought of as a) a resistance that is really a recuperation of power or b) a recuperation that is really a resistance. It is both at once, and this ambivalence forms the bind of agency.”²⁴ In Butler’s Hegelian project much like in Abu-Lughod’s empiricism, the analytical endeavor comes to an impasse, an intransigent state where power and resistance, master and subject, become inextricable. The dialectic is blocked; it does not offer an immanent resolution.

Is this, then, the nature of the subject, of the signified, its originary involvement in potentially repressive power, so to speak, or is it a consequence latent in the discourse, an inevitability produced by a mode of signification, which, despite all the disavowals on the part of these scholars, remains binary: power/resistance?²⁵ In other words, in what

manner is the resistance of the discourse of the human sciences complicit in the resistance attributed or denied the research situation?²⁶ In an apparent inversion, Abu-Lughod suggests that incidences of “resistance” may be more useful as a diagnostic, since they invariably signal the presence of “power.”²⁷ However, does not such a proposition turn resistance – and should we not thereby say, the subject herself – into a function of power, making her temporally subsequent? What assumptions of *time* operate here; what notions of psyche, subject, and freedom are at issue?

I would argue that this epistemological confusion is a consequence of a flawed notion of “resistance.” A radical problem here is the epistemological priority given “collectives” or “classes,” often framed in reference to an abstract teleological project of universal emancipation. This discourse, as I have argued in previous chapters, often functions under the cover of a grand ethic and project of emancipation defined by a universalism of which the dialectic of the Hegelian World Spirit remains perhaps the most eloquent representative.²⁸ Philosophical specificities aside, a number of key determining prejudices of Western thought – including its teleological biases and the abstract orientation towards the object (or other) as present-at-hand – which inevitably implicate knowledge in the instrumental perspective of power continue to have a determining influence in Marxist –and new Left –thinking as well as in social scientific discourses.²⁹ These embedded biases towards “externality,” and historical Time to the exclusion of the lived, suffered time of the subject have been profoundly brought to attention by thinkers such as Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, and developed systematically by Heidegger in *Being and Time*. The temporality of Dasein – being-with-one-another in

relations of care, concern, and solicitude – Heidegger showed, comes prior to History or world-time; “it temporalizes world-time, within the horizon of which ‘history’ can ‘appear’ as historicizing within-time.”³⁰

Heidegger’s radical reformulation of the philosophical project, together with the new fronts opened by Freud, laid the ground for far ranging epistemological developments, particularly in the form of work often glossed under the title of “poststructuralism.”³¹ Although the New Left built on some of this thinking, particularly through Lacan, Althusser, and, more recently, Zizek, the mainstream of the social sciences –encouraged at least in part by academic cultures of high expertise and narrowing disciplines –have usually scoffed at such philosophical intricacies. In the process, they have unwittingly tied themselves into irresolvable binaries of “structure” and “agency.”³²

To address, the resistance in the religious practices discussed in this manuscript, one must conceive of “resistance” in reference to the moral and existential anxiety of Being-in-the-world, instead of the aloof Being of Historical Time. In addition to the obvious platform of Heideggerian thought, this analytical movement incorporates a return to Kant’s emphasis on the moral imperative of being human. If Kant, however, bracing to the charges of an “empiricism in its naked superficiality” found himself advocating a categorical moral imperative beyond the pathos of human existence, and radically removed from any sensate considerations, it is the moral quality of being-in-the-world that has been the focus of this study.³³

An analysis of the social form would be a hollow exercise in syllogisms and platitudes unless the analysts can relate to the actors, the subjects, that are its players.³⁴ It would be unwise for the ethnographer to disregard the subject, and deny her significance for a vague, poorly conceived impulse of generalization. Here, I found it important to heed psychoanalysis, perhaps the only discipline that has given systematic, protracted attention to the profound paradoxes of subjective temporality. It is precisely in reference to such particularity of the subject, to this crowded solitariness that “discourse shuns”, but which is manifested in the symptom, that the *moment of resistance* appears in psychoanalysis.³⁵ If the order of obligations and motivations that guides Shailesh, and the religious performances and expressions here, are hard to qualify as “resistance” in progressive scholarly discourses and the Universalist politics of liberation it vouches, it is precisely in terms of “resistance” that psychoanalysis asks us to understand them. The “resistance” of psychoanalysis then and the context of “transference” it warrants, provide a medium both to analytically depart from the pervasive powers of discourses, practices, and institutions so well characterized by Foucault and other scholars, and to understand the subjective significance of religious practice.³⁶

Absolute Resistance: Symptom, Śiva, and the Resistance to Discourse

In a seminar on Freud’s paper, “the dynamics of transference”, Lacan notes the coincidence of resistance and transference in psychoanalytic practice.³⁷ Here, resistance is the name for the turn in the subject’s discourse as it approaches, what Lacan calls, the “pathogenic nucleus.” “Resistance is the inflexion the discourse adopts on approaching

the nucleus”.³⁸ While deferring interpretation of the signifier , “nucleus,” – for “the value of the object may be a purely tactical one and may perhaps emerge only in this one battle” – one should note that precisely at this point, in a process Freud described as transference phenomenon, the subject begins to take a special interest in the analyst.³⁹ At other places, Lacan will argue that the only resistance is the resistance of the analyst; it is the insistence – even the “ill will,” the “biased belief” – of the analyst that produces resistance.⁴⁰ Resistance, let us say then, is the resistance to discourse whether it takes the form of the analyst’s insistence or is the discourse that speaks under the name of the subject, as a representation of the subject.

[...] it is worth recalling that the first resistance analysis faces is that of discourse itself, insofar as it is first of all a discourse of opinion, and that all psychological objectification proves to be intimately tied to this discourse.⁴¹

In her excellent treatment of the problematics of the representation of the subaltern subject in *Can the Subaltern Speak*, Spivak illustrated the impossibility of representation in the discourses alike of first world and third world intellectuals.⁴² While Spivak’s primary reference is to the subaltern as a collective identity, a class, or a gendered class, for the singularity of the subject, which is the definitive contribution of psychoanalysis, one recognizes the subject at the moment of resistance. Resistance here is the resistance to representation; of a memory, a moment, a subject (subaltern, if one will) inscribed as a loss in representation – loss that may nevertheless be the basis of representations. Precisely at the instance of this loss – the repressed, in the Freudian vocabulary – in proximity to it, the subject invests itself libidinally in the person of the analyst – seducing, inveigling, and calling upon the other to bear witness. What is important in transference

is the particularity of the relation, the call for a symptomatic community that nevertheless has a special halo of recognition since it is a community with the “one supposed to know” that emerges at the cusp of the subject’s recognition of her own condition – although insofar as this condition is cognitively unavailable. “Analysis is an experience of the particular.”⁴³ Unlike recognition in dominant discourses of knowledge complicit in power formations, their metaphysical or sociological grounds, we can locate the emergence of the transference phenomenon to the ability of the analytical situation to interrupt in a tongue – “that can be understood in all other tongues” and yet be “absolutely particular to the subject” – the self-alienation imposed by the master’s discourse.⁴⁴

In the master’s discourse, of course, the subject happens to be configuring itself by the semblable of its place, status in the historical designs of the master’s *jouissance*.⁴⁵ The analyst’s discourse responds to, indeed subverts, the realization of the Hegelian dialectic of self-consciousness (as the strict commensurateness of the universal and the particular) as fundamentally disjunctive of subject.⁴⁶ Thus, the dialectic – and this is of course not related to Hegel alone as it implicates a whole tradition of western metaphysics – betrays itself as the master’s discourse.⁴⁷ Instead, analysis “introduces him [the subject] to the language of his desire.” (In reading, “his desire,” one may never forget Lacan’s refrain, one’s “desire is the desire of the other”). Using a quartet of signifiers and discursive positions, in the *Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan has provided an excellent figurative demonstration of the manner in which the analyst’s discourse subverts – through an inversion of mathematical proportions – the discourse of the

master.⁴⁸ Even if the situation should turn out to be as fantastic as Humpty Dumpty acting in front of Alice in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* as the "master of the signifier", that is, the word. This, despite his hilariously precarious situation, as much physically as in the terms of the symbolic order that Alice of course could not fail to reiterate.⁴⁹

Likewise, one of the first things one can say about the relation with the deity is that it is an address in the particular. Addressed here is a figure who *knows*, as much in the particular as she is master of the universe itself. "Bhole Baba knows your heart's desire, much better than you do yourself," is a common refrain among Kanwar pilgrims. The ubiquity of expressions such as, "Baba has invited," or "an invitation has been received from the Mother," in north Indian pilgrimages, as discussed in previous chapters, also indicates the particularity of the address.⁵⁰ However, as in all instances of the symptom, the tables are turned; it is a question of being the object of the other's, the deity's, desire – a desire that harbors the subject's symptom.

Evident here is a resistance to discourse, insofar as discourse and the manner in which it inscribes, relates the world affects the subject. Instead, we find here signifiers that symptomatically engage the subject, by their relation to *her* "pathogenic" condition. Above all, these signifiers bring about a different relation of death, the finitude of human existence and precisely in the context of, that is in difference with, the infinite power of mastery that drives western metaphysics, from Plato to Hegel, and *a fortiori* the History that materializes it – which is today more or less the History of the world. They are the call of a different order of temporality.⁵¹ Unlike metaphysics, the symptom is in the manner

of a Being-in-the-world. It is an embodied difference, a performance that fundamentally implicates the subject in her particularity, whether to be hailed or denounced, praised or stigmatized – simultaneously embedded and transcending, remarked one commentator.

52

The mythic idiom of the pilgrimage allows such particularity while subverting discursive hegemony. In its ability to artistically play discursive opposites, the mythic allows alternate forms of subjectivity; opens additional possibilities of experiencing time and space.⁵³ Anterior to the binary split that often defines discourse, it funds the play between good and bad, between power and opposition, between pleasure and death;⁵⁴ to use the Lacanian vocabulary, it provide a locale for the rapture of *jouissance*. Contrary to a detached universalist project, then, the mythic addresses a subject implicated in the game. Here one may subsist with the imperatives of being in the game, of keeping the performances – that is, life – going, without shedding anything off an utter disregard for life; seek goods at the same time as renouncing; ask for favor and protection while yet being outrageously sovereign. For Śiva or Bholenath (the Guileless Lord), the great renouncer is also the epitome of generosity, the all-giving – much like the pilgrim, the *bholā*, who identifies with the Lord in this duration:

Great you are my Lord
 you have not a dime in your treasure
 Settler of the three realms
 Śiva, you live in the wilderness...
 You have many names honorable Shankar
 'Naked' is the best of them...
 Lord of the three realms
 Yourself a seeker of alms...
 So generous you are the great Giver
 you kept not a dime for yourself.⁵⁵

Far from normative expectations of giving and taking in familiar processes of measured exchanges, this “giving” operates amidst highly precarious material conditions. These narratives reflect, as discussed previously, a pervasive sense of anxiety, which is not difficult to understand amidst the massive deprivations of contemporary India. The dreadful uncertainty of life is reflected in the dread that seeks the grace and protection of God almost continuously, from every direction: “May the destroying Rūdra protect me from destruction... from all kinds of afflictions... from the north... the east... the west... the south... at the beginning of the night... at all time...”⁵⁶ Says Shailesh, “For as long as I can remember, I have never got out of bed without chanting the *Hanuman Calisa*... I know it by rote.”⁵⁷ *Sankaṭ Mocan*, the one who wrestles with troubles, Hanuman (a manifestation of Śiva) is a guardian deity frequently invoked for his prowess.

Thus, suffering is widespread. And yet it behooves the ethnographer to note that what one sees here, in the radical relation to the deity is an arrogant, sovereign affirmation of one’s suffering; as illustrated, for example, by Lacan in “the resistance of the *amour-propre*... I can’t bear the thought of being freed by anyone [in this case, by any ordinary terms or relations] but myself [or here, by the Supreme].”⁵⁸

In the achievements of the Kanwar, despite the pain and hardships, in the common competitive banter and wagers, in the anxious expressions of self-worth, I have argued, one finds a repetition of messages exchanged with a dominating neo-liberal ethos. It is a repetition of the subject of the economy, its expectations and directives, in an alternate and definite field. For adolescent and young adult subjects set to encounter the full might and overbearing structure of the ‘real field’ of the exclusive economy,

these are obviously anxious steps that call for compulsive practice, ‘working through’. To practice and prepare, however, as we know is only one part of Freud’s articulation of ‘repetition.’

Eventually, in perhaps the culminating expression of this theme, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud will ponder over repetition in the context of a dialectic of renunciation and desire, of rejection and anticipation, which will have nothing less than quiescence or death for its transcendental reference.⁵⁹ And in yet another profound turn, Lacan will reinterpret the death drive, echoing Sade, as the desire for the *ex nihilo*, the desire to destroy and ‘begin again’.⁶⁰ Repetition thus is also to strive to *master* – master, with nothing less than death, sovereignty, and absolute renunciation at hand. Not a moment passes where the slave who sets out to prepare and work does not have her masterly mantle by her! The anxious repetitions of the economy, following-through of its directives, the apparent willing subjection to its refusals, exclusions, and excesses is no less attended by an imperative of rejection, destruction, and affirmation of sovereignty. After all, it is the destructive signifier of *Śiva*, where the *imagos* of destruction and death converge in abandon, that attracts the pilgrim.⁶¹ As if nothing less than this figure – which gains as much from the destructive instincts which, as Lacan shows, are anchored in fundamental images of the mutilation and evisceration of the human body commonly found in the human psyche as it does from history, a rich and varied scriptural tradition celebrating such images – would meet the pilgrims’ demand. Only *Śiva*, presenting the ashes of all presence, the detritus of forms, can go past the subject’s defenses.⁶²

The Freudian notion of the death drive, articulated as the beyond of the pleasure principle, helps elucidate this attachment to Śiva, the compulsion behind these repeated pilgrimages. It is the same desire for the *ex nihilo* as articulated by Sade, which funds all production but is also the beyond, the destruction of all production. Sade exclaims, “For nature wants annihilation; it is beyond our capacity to achieve the scale of destruction it desires.”⁶³ Yet, as Lacan has demonstrated, the drive is historical, its reference is strictly “outside of the natural world” and; coupled here in the desire to destroy, “is also a will to create from zero, a will to begin again.”⁶⁴

As we saw in the previous chapters, the resistances of the pilgrimage are evident in so many resistances to the pilgrimage. The apparent absurdity of the phenomenon, whether in relation to religion, institutional morality and economic sense makes it suspect to a liberal ethos. Thus, the aggressiveness, hubris, the offensive penance of these Śaivite pilgrims makes them an anathema, as much to the “middle-class” sensibility of English language news-media as to the figure-heads of organized religion, and the state. These normative liberal impressions lead into strong repressive feelings and action against the pilgrims. Sitting next to me, two policemen speak in unison:

“During the pilgrimage, we allow them to create all the disorder they wish. Challenging them during the festival is unwanted trouble... we just ask them the name of their village, town, anything. But swiftly after the Kanwar is over, the police swoop in on their location irrespective of how far they may live. No Kanwar then to their aid!... just pick them up.”

“Lumpen proletariat” or “hooligans” or reactionary religious fanatics, in a society flush with images of mass-mediated consumption amidst widespread deprivation, these are performances of the underprivileged. In contemporary India, steeped in power

relations whether in a capitalist, statist, or feudal mode, where a large majority of people live under very precarious circumstances and high levels of insecurity, yet burdened with many responsibilities, such expressions of the death drive function to affirm the subjects' sovereignty. And yet, if this journey in the name of Śiva occasions an aggressive vindictiveness in one instance, in the other it connotes (to follow another of my respondents) "spiritualism" – a turn away from the cacophony of common desires; (other-worldly) gift to the gods in one instance, in another it evinces (this- worldly) responsibility to one's dear ones.

The "Hidden Transcripts" of the Ethical Subject

In his excellent treatise, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, James Scott focusing on the social performances of the hidden transcripts of subordinate social groups frankly admits that his analysis is predominantly focused on relations of personal domination. The hidden transcript subverted relations of personal domination to voice, perform, and assert the dialectical experiences and consciousness of oppressed groups in forms and spaces that avoided the dangers of overt encounter with power. This interesting formulation is, however,

[L]ess relevant to forms of impersonal domination... by say, scientific technique, bureaucratic rule, or by market forces of supply and demand. Much of Michel Foucault's work bears on those... there is something qualitatively different about claims to authority based on impersonal, technical, scientific rules.⁶⁵

This divide that Scott admits is, I would argue, more a theoretical issue than a question of actual social differences. It is as much a consequence of Foucault's rather pervasive formulation of power as of Scott's anecdotal, if evocative, approach. Foucault's overwhelming interest as we know is in the genealogies and structures of modern social

control; questions of agency or resistance are rather secondary to his interests. Scott, on the other hand, is more interested in subtle anecdotal illustration than in theoretical formulations; to his credit, such delimitation helps him ward off the teleological reifications discussed earlier. To proceed further, without submitting to over-determining teleological frames, as we have seen in the case of the Kanwar participants, we must draw the problematic of resistance to the complexities of subjectivity in the phenomenological and psychoanalytic corpus.

As the above conversations should show, it is not possible to recover the subject, and her resistance, without an unqualified prioritization of her time, the horizons of her own finite existence bound in relations of care and obligations. From an analytical perspective, this time comes before any expectations of sacrifice for an abstract collective history, which itself can only be a motif in her own temporality. As Scott notes eloquently,

We know relatively little about a Malay villager if we know only that he is poor and landless [that is, in abstract terms]. We know far more about the cultural meaning of his poverty once we know that he is particularly in despair because he cannot afford to feed guests on the feast of Ramadan, that wealthy people pass him on the village path without uttering a greeting, that he cannot bury his parents properly, that his daughter will marry late if at all because he lacks dowry, that his sons will leave the household early since he has no property to hold them, and that he must humble himself --often to no avail -- to beg work and rice from wealthier neighbors.⁶⁶

On a theoretical plane, the Heideggerian moment in Western philosophical thought is a *sine qua non* for the epistemological departure necessary in the above case, from the abstract notions of poverty and class to the profundity of lived time. Note that, every time, it is in the necessities of existence, whether in meeting one's obligations to loved

ones or in the struggles of going about life in a dignified manner – concerns often shared with a social group – that Scott finds expressions of resistance. This is also precisely why he finds that there is very little of hegemony in actual social existence.⁶⁷

In view of the above observations on Kanwar participants, it is no surprise that it is on the subject of ethics that Mahmood in her study of the “piety movement” in Egypt finds herself forced to question the liberal or progressive notions of agency and resistance.⁶⁸ It is the ethical subject behind Muslim women’s religious practices, Mahmood would argue, that liberal and progressive conceptions of subjectivity based on notions of “choice,” and “free will” are unable to address. These perspectives gloss such religious practices as oppressive insofar as the women here are seen as subjects of “custom, tradition, transcendental will, or social coercion” instead of exercising their own choices out of “free will.”⁶⁹ Mahmood instead argues that “socially prescribed forms of behavior constitute the conditions for the emergence of the self as such and are integral to its realization”.⁷⁰ Situating herself in a tradition of “positive ethics,” with its roots in Aristotle, Mahmood argues that morality should be conceived not just in terms of “rational content” but in the dispositions, “procedures, techniques, and exercises” through which the specific self affectively realizes itself in varying social conditions. For Mahmood then, it is only in the context of a particular habitus that ethical being can be understood.⁷¹ Hence Aristotle, “Moral virtue comes about as a result of habit... For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them . . . we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts.”⁷²

Albeit I believe Mahmood dismisses Kant rather peremptorily when laying the blame on him for displacing an Aristotelian tradition emphasizing the embodied ethics of virtues and practices with an ethic elaborated through critical reason, the anthropologist makes an important theoretical intervention in critical scholarship. In emphasizing the ethical motivations of a subjectivity that consciously and with protracted effort cultivates a moral disposition grounded in customs and practices, the author throws into question a pervasive liberal discourse of “choice,” and “self-interest” uncannily complicit in a hegemonic capitalist economy driven by exorbitant mythologies of desire and consumption. Echoing William Connolly, she reasons that political judgments, “do not simply entail the evaluation of abstract moral principles, but issue forth from ‘visceral modes of appraisal’ that draw their force from an inter-subjective level of being and acting.”⁷³ This is a conclusion we can clearly expect from the temporality of Dasein discussed earlier. However, we must proceed further.

The issue is not limited to the ethic and labor of a mode of embodied customary existence as Mahmood avers. The resistances to a hegemonic capitalism, which has (neo)liberalism as its choice voice of discursive articulation, are no less elaborate and subtle than the multifarious forms –political, economic, moral, and cultural –in which this discourse expresses itself.²² The question then would be not only of cultivating customary practices, but also of “inventing,” excavating new discourses, customs, performances, rituals, of not only a disciplined disposition but also a destructive disposition now specific and targeted, now generic and radical. Then we must go back to “resistance,” as Scott illustrated, but with the insights we have from Kant, Heidegger, and the psychoanalytic

corpus. We must then conceive of resistance not in an hermeneutic predicated on an abstract teleological universal Good, but rather in the temporality of being-in-the-world. Such a conception is necessary not only to theoretically situate Scott's "hidden transcripts" but also to address the anthropological and feminist disaffections with the notion of "resistance."

Insofar as it is an instance of the subject, then, resistance cannot be reduced to a power-effect, whether as reiteration or opposition; it will have to be read in the difference – say, in a complex of form, force, and repetition – that enacts the subject, as much in her attention as in her forgetting, in her refusals as in her silences, in her symptoms as in her appropriation of symbols.⁹ It must be witnessed in a temporality incommensurate with the historical progression of a Universalist dialectic, and the specific metaphysical pursuit or renunciation of the good(s) it entails. While it might be possible to question the value of such performances on the measure of a visionary Universal Good; at the same time, one also finds that such sovereign renunciation including invocation of the figure of death also radically interrogates the Universalist dialectic, which governs to like measure a certain concept of resistance and, of power. Thus, if going by the discourse of the social sciences and its metaphysical presuppositions, true resistance is impossible to find, it remains, from another perspective, ubiquitous and radical. The subject may be imbricated in power *ab initio*, but she no less participates in a fundamental rejection of its metaphysical foundations and the economy of its History. Bringing the lessons of psychoanalytic practice with my critical ethnography, I have argued in this chapter that such re-articulation of resistance is indispensable for a radical

epistemology that can encounter the new, global infrastructures of repressive power and violence.

² Freud, S. (1913) *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Trans. A.A. Brill. New York: The Macmillan Company, p. 89.

³ See Freud (1913), pp. 88-104; and Lacan, J. (1988b) *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-1955*, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller New York: W.W. Norton., pp.146-72.

⁴ See Raj, Selva and William Harman (2006). *Dealing with Deities: The Ritual Vow in South Asia*,. Albany: State University of New York Press, pp. 250-251; and Maslow, Abraham. "A theory of human motivation." *Psychological Review* 50.4 (1943): 370-96.

⁵ See Freud (1913); Lacan (1998).

⁶ Freud (1913) p.403; and Lacan, 1998, p.34

⁷ Freud (1913), p. 403.

⁸ Maslow (1943).

⁹ Kierkegaard, S. (1983). *Fear and trembling; repetition*. Ed.and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

¹⁰ "Abraham did not speak. He spoke neither to Sara nor to Eliezar nor Isaac," says Kierkegaard. "He *cannot* speak, therein lies the distress and anxiety. The relief provided by speaking is that it translates me into the universal.... Abraham can describe his love for Isaac in the most beautiful words.... But this is not what is on his mind; it is something deeper, that he is going to sacrifice him because it is an ordeal. No one can understand the latter, and thus everyone can only misunderstand the former" (ibid., p.113).

¹¹ (Derrida (1995: 67)

¹² (1988b: 151)

¹³ Lacan, J. (1988a) *Freud's Papers on Technique: Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book I*. Trans. John Forrester, ed. Jacques Alain-Miller. New York: Norton, p.45.

¹⁴ See Lacan (1998), p.44 (emphasis in the original).

¹⁵ See also Mahmood, S. (2006). Secularism, hermeneutics, and empire: The politics of Islamic reformation. *Public Culture*, 18(2), 323.

¹⁶ Scott, J. C. (1990). *Domination and the arts of resistance: Hidden transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

¹⁷ See Guha, R. (1999). *Elementary aspects of peasant insurgency in colonial India*. Duke University Press. See also Sax, W. S. (2008). *God of justice: Ritual healing and social justice in the central Himalayas*, New York: Oxford University Press; and Roberts, M (2005), "Symbols, Sacrifice, and Tamil Tiger Rites" *Social Analysis*, 49 (1): 67-93.

¹⁸ See Blackman, L., Cromby, J., Hook, D., Papadopoulos, D., & Walkerdine, V. (2008). Creating subjectivities. *Subjectivity*, 22(1), 1.

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- ¹⁹ See Hall, S., & Jefferson, T. (1976), *Resistance Through Rituals*, London: Hutchinson; and Hebdige, D. (1995). "Subculture: The Meaning of Style," *Critical Quarterly*, 37(2), 120-124.
- ²⁰ Abu-Lughod, L. (1990) The romance of resistance: Tracing transformations of power through Bedouin women. *American Ethnologist*, 41-55; and Gal, S. (1995) Language and the "arts of resistance" *Cultural Anthropology: Journal of the Society for Cultural Anthropology* 10 (3): 407.
- ²¹ Kellner, D. (1995) *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity, and Politics Between the Modern and the Postmodern*. Oxford: Routledge; and
- ²² Ortner, S. (1995) Resistance and the problem of ethnographic refusal. *Comparative Studies in Society and History: An International Quarterly*. 37: 173-193.
- ²³ See Ahearn, L. M. (2001) Language and agency. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 30 (1): 109-37; and Bilge, S. (2010). Beyond subordination vs. resistance: an intersectional approach to the agency of veiled Muslim women. *Journal of intercultural studies*, 31(1): 9-28.
- ²⁴ Butler, J. (1997) *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, p.13.
- ²⁵ See also Mahmood (2005)
- ²⁶ See also Derrida (1978).
- ²⁷ Abu Lughod (1990).
- ²⁸ (see also Heidegger, 1962; Lacan, 2005, 2006; Derrida, 1981, 1978)
- ²⁹ (see Derrida, 1978; Fabian 2002; Heidegger, 1962; Foucault, 1980)
- ³⁰ Heidegger (1962), p. 486.
- ³¹ See Derrida (1981).
- ³² See Emirbayer, M and Mische, A (1998). What Is Agency? *American journal of sociology*, 103(4), 962-1023; and Wang, Yong (2008). "Agency: The internal split of structure." *Sociological Forum*. Vol. 23. No. 3.
- ³³ Kant, Immanuel. 2004 [1909]. *Critique of Practical Reason*. Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications.
- ³⁴ For an excellent illustration of the limitations of ethnographic practice, see Clough, P (1998) *The End(s) of Ethnography: From Realism to Social Criticism*, New York: Peter Lang.
- ³⁵ Lacan (1988a) p. 36.
- ³⁶ Foucault, M. (1980) *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- ³⁷ See Lacan (1988a) and Freud, S. (1994) The dynamics of transference. In: Bauer, Gregory P. (Eds.) *Essential Papers on Transference Analysis*. Northvale, N.J. u.a: Aronson, pp. 5-18.
- ³⁸ Lacan (1988a), p.36.
- ³⁹ Ibid., p.41.
- ⁴⁰ See Lacan (2005), p. 314.

⁴¹ Ibid., p.348.

⁴² Spivak, G. (1988) "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In: C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds.) *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. London: Macmillan, pp. 271-316.

⁴³ Lacan (1988a), p.21.

⁴⁴ Lacan (2005), p.243.

⁴⁵ See Lacan (2006).

⁴⁶ See Lacan (2006), pp. 242-3; and Lacan (2007). Also see Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* for a critique of Hegel's focus on the Universal and exteriority, especially on the question of religious responsibility and ethics. It is important to note that Kierkegaard is a constant presence in Lacan's observations on ethics, repetition, and the death drive. See also Levinas' (1998) excellent commentary on Kierkegaardian ethics in the essay "Existence and Ethics."

⁴⁷ See Lacan (2006), *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* for compelling observations on the play of the master's perspective in the dominant discourse, and in western philosophy in general. Lacan posits the analyst's discourse as a structural subversion of the master's discourse. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger (1962) is likewise critical of the Cartesian notion (followed through from Plato to Hegel) of the subject, which relates to entities as present-at-hand. Derrida provides an expansive elaboration of this 'metaphysics of presence' in several texts. But see his analysis of Socrates' discourse in "Plato's Pharmacy" (in *Dissemination*), which shows how Socrates' dialectic in the *Phaedrus* sets out to give reason, logic to the self-pronounced word of the mythical king. Working on the authority of the king, the *logos* comes to translate, replace, disseminate the king's *manteia*. Foucault's (1980) critique of power/knowledge although more disjointed and institutionally oriented demonstrates the relation between power and discourse in "concrete," historical terms.

⁴⁸ Lacan (2005, 2006).

⁴⁹ See Lacan (2005), p. 242; and Carroll, L. (1894) *Alice's Adventures in wonderland and; Through the Looking Glass*. New York: Macmillam & co.

⁵⁰ See Author (2011, Forthcoming). Likewise, Sered (2005) notes how the word "understand" is "reiterated with particular fervor and frequency" in the discourses of women visiting the cults of the three Rachels in Israel: "only Rachel really understands my suffering (86)." Observing cross-religious female interest in Marian shrines, Jansen and Kuhl (2008) likewise note how pilgrims see Mary as someone who can "understand," and address their suffering in its felt intensity, by virtue of their identification with Mary's womanhood and her subservient status. Such singularity of address, the symptomatic community it heralds, is likewise evident as much in the attachment of the intensely marginalized labor force in the *sertao* (North East Brazil) to St. Francis of Wounds (King 2005), as it is in Obeyesekere's account, in Srilanka, of the Muslim ecstatic, Abdin's "abject surrender" to "Skanda, the great Hindu-Buddhist god, the son of Siva himself" (1990: 3).

⁵¹ See also Crapanzano (2004).

⁵² A remark by Elin Diamond at the conference 'Globalization and Aesthetics', Rutgers, 3rd Dec 2010.

⁵³ See Crapanzano (2004); Doniger (1981); Obeyesekere (1990); and Roberts (2005).

⁵⁴ See Derrida (1981).

⁵⁵ *Śiva Upāsanā* [Praying to Śiva] (n.d.) Delhi: Lakshmi Prakashan, pp.37-9.

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 30-51.

⁵⁷ The Hanumān Calisā is a eulogy to Hanumān in forty couplets.

⁵⁸ Lacan (2006), p. 87.

⁵⁹ Freud (1950).

⁶⁰ Lacan, J (1992) *Ethics of Psychoanalysis: Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book VII*, Trans. Dennis Porter, ed. Jacques Alain-Miller, New York: Norton, p. 212.

⁶¹ Lacan (2005), p.85.

⁶² On the play of 'force' and 'form,' see Jacques Derrida's excellent essay "Force and signification," in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1978).

⁶³ Lacan (1992), p.212.

⁶⁴ At this point Lacan (1992) warns, "Don't put the emphasis on the term 'will' here. Whatever interest may have been aroused in Freud by an echo in Schopenhauer, it has nothing to do with the idea of a fundamental Wille" (p.212).

⁶⁵ Scott (1990), p. 21.

⁶⁶ Ibi.d, p.113

⁶⁷ Scott (1990), p. 82.

⁶⁸ Mahmood (2005).

⁶⁹ Mahmood (2001), p. 856.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p.857.

⁷¹ Ibid., p.846.

⁷² Ibid., p.851.

⁷³ Ibid., p.860.

CONCLUSION

In his succinct but authoritative articulation of the broad sociological understanding of religion, *The Sacred Canopy*, Peter Berger argued that religion was a human creation, which, however, existing as an external entity comes to impose itself rather forcefully on human behavior.¹ Bringing in concepts of alienation and false consciousness, the individual's forgetting of her co-participation in the construction of the religious realm, Berger reasoned that as an empirical discipline, sociology could only view religion as a human projection. Impelled by modern industrial conditions, Berger thought, there would be a growing secularization of cultures across the world, much in the manner of the history of the modern West. The *Sacred Canopy* predicted the final triumph of knowledge, of industry, the commerce between objects where religion itself if it did not subside completely would remain only as another commodity in the market place. The facticity of the "rational" order would eventually replace any other claim to order human experiences.

Social constructionism has justifiably had a central status in the history of sociological discipline. Beyond the many fine details, however, the upshot of the argument appears somewhat plain. For, of course, "religion," much like any other social institution, is a social historical product. The issue, however, is the assumed split in truth value: while religious symbols and "myths" are false imaginary projections that are reified and come to exercise power on unwary human actors, commerce in the market society and instrumental social exchanges apparently belong to the order of truth and "reason," where humans act with full self-consciousness. Even if one gives this thesis the benefit of

doubt to say that the latter claim is not asserted, the suggestion that a putatively “rational” order of bureaucratic and instrumental social relations, with the power of market and industry behind it, shall eventually prevail gives the latter an aura of fact, reality and activity. Religion in contrast being irrational, anachronous, mythical, and passive, would become increasingly untenable.

Decades later, Berger would make an about turn on his prognoses of global secularization to instead point to “desecularization.” Amidst nods to the lasting significance of religion, Berger, although in passing, comes up with an explanation for modern religion – the need for certainty in the context of modern social changes. This association of “religion” and “social change” is a recurrent and widely approved theme of contemporary sociology and requires a careful consideration. The key coordinates of this theory, as discussed in Chapter Two, are perhaps best explicated in Anthony Giddens’ neo-functionalist translation of certain shades of psychological and phenomenological reasoning. Let us look at these briefly once more.

In his notion of “practical consciousness,” Giddens, following on the existential formulation of anxiety as a primary human condition, argues that such anxiety is only held off by the security provided by familiar habits and practices. This requires the development of “basic trust” based on early experiences with the caretaker and a consequent integral narrative of self “identity.” Drawing on the theories of Erikson, Giddens argued that an unhealthy level of anxiety would be a consequence of the inadequacy of inoculation usually ensured during childhood in the form of confidence in the return of the caretaker. Lack of such securitization, leads into an eruption of anxiety

manifested in neurotic behavior and the inability to lead a “normal” life.² It would reflect in the inability to maintain a consistent narrative of biographical self-identity, to develop basic trust of others, and to subsist normally in the mode of practical consciousness.

Although Giddens’ reflections on religion are rather sparse and necessarily aphoristic, this reasoning leads him –and others who have followed him or belong to the same traditions of thinking more or less of a structural functionalist nature –to see contemporary religion as a reaction (usually characterized as “fundamentalist”) against social changes. Religious movements thus arise in “reaction to globalization;” they are reactionary expressions of collective solidarity as long held traditions, worldviews, and beliefs struggle to stay aboard amidst the tumultuous exchanges of globalization –religion “originates from a world of crumbling traditions.”³ Prophetic binary battle lines are thus drawn: “the twenty-first century will pit fundamentalism against cosmopolitan tolerance.”⁴

This notion of “fundamentalism,” the dubious epistemology here has taken a lot of flak in inter-disciplinary scholarship in recent years. Many theoretically complex and ethnographically situated accounts of religion, community, economy, and the profound diversities and sufferings of everyday life across the world have shown that the “modern” is a much more complex, variegated, and contested ground than abstractly represented here. The above schematic treatments of religion are likewise proven fanciful. In sociology too, “fundamentalism” has surely become a fraught term; yet, beyond a certain slant of appropriate symbolism, sociological discourse continues to be intrinsically defined by the vector of modernization and the apparently infallible logic of the market society as Reason.

“Modernity tends to undermine the taken-for-granted certainties by which people lived through most of history,” says Berger without quite explaining this term “certainty.” Clearly, “uncertainty” here is predominantly perceived as a cognitive quality; for, of course, who would say, for example, that there were no material uncertainties before capitalism? “Uncertainty”, in this discourse, is caused by the disturbance of the sense of belonging in stable social practices. This cognitivist explanation of the function that religion is called on to serve amidst the dynamism of modernity, its industry and radical socio-political achievements, receives a more assured voice in Bauman as he argues that the appeal of religious fundamentalism – and indeed contemporary religion – lies in its promise to “emancipate” from the “agonies of choice... those who find the burden of individual freedom excessive and unbearable.”⁵ According to Bauman then, in the paradise of consumerism which is the “postmodern” world, all mysteries of death and experience have become routine and regulated, and eschatological concerns no longer occupy people who when not actively seeking peak-experiences, ultimate sensations, are only wishing or obliged to go about business as usual. Religion, in its postmodern form – that is, religious fundamentalism – only appeals to those unable to compete in the great game of the market, “left behind in the scramble for entry tickets to the consumers” party.”⁶ Thus, Bauman cites Kepel to enounce such religious subjects as:

true children of our time: unwanted children, perhaps bastards of computerization and unemployment or of the population explosion and increasing literacy, and their cries and complaints in these closing years of the century spur us to seek out their parentage and to retrace their unacknowledged genealogy.⁷

These misbegotten, illegitimate children – Bauman, the sociological theorist, never really cares to ask, how many of them there are? In this social order framed by the peak experiences of hyper consumerism –their thorough-bred quality, of being true children of their epoch –any inability, unwillingness to immerse in this particular game (of which Bauman can claim to know everything insofar as this is offered as a transparent, shining game) can only be a sign of miscegenation, of illegitimacy, of unworthy parentage. For our part, however, let us not forget the numbers here: about half of the people in the world live on less than \$2.5 a day; above 80% on less than \$10 (95% in non-Western countries), a brazen minimum one may benchmark for being a part of this world defining hyper-consumerist party.⁸ Except, arguably, for Western Europe and a thin proportion of global elite, Berger notes in his new orientation, the world is as “furiously religious” as it has ever been.⁹ We then have a world brimming with illegitimate people, people of doubtful parentage, the merit of whose choices, practices, it is hard to recognize in any legitimate ancestry – political, economic, ideological, or biological.

Referring however to peak sensual enjoyment in the hyper-consumerist culture portrayed in Bauman as the only genuine representation of this epoch, an entity fascinated by and performing to reflections in an object-world – of course at work in the background is the neo-liberal hyper-rationality of the state and the corporation – one has to ask whether this involves a complete absorption as presence, an instantaneous identification, that is, if the entity has ceased to be temporally extended. That is, whether the pleasure of these sensations is dissociated from any sense of pain, suffering, from any prospect or possibility of relation to others, to the world, to death; whether indeed this is

power, “infinite human potency,” without a trace of any “weakness,” any lack; whether it is a complete eclipse of lived time, of Being-in-the-world. According to Bauman, these possibilities of “postmodern” culture have put the peak-experiences, “once the privilege of the “aristocracy of culture”” (saints, mystics, ascetic monks etc.) “in every individual’s reach... as the product of a life devoted to the art of consumer self-indulgence.”¹⁰

In this consumerist utopia, one may indeed see how the symbolic order addresses, incorporates human experience; however, to describe this as a true representation of the real is perhaps as misplaced as the comparison that Bauman makes with the past with the sweeping characterization of religion as focused on the “perpetual insufficiency” of the human. As I have tried to demonstrate in this manuscript, insofar as in this “postmodern culture,” there remains any concern for others, for an otherness beyond all others, any acknowledgment of a lack of absolute knowledge, insofar as there still resides the possibility of a sociality that is not completely mesmerized by the order of the system or the object, insofar as the object itself remains a product of work and labor, we are already in the realm of the religious.

Berger’s portrayal of “rationality” in *The Sacred Canopy* lacked the hesitation of Weber who with his profound understanding of human psychology and morality could foresee a foreboding Kafkaesque future with an ever more effective penetration of “rationalizing” systems in every sphere of social existence and meaning. In a rather linear return to a simplistically translated Hegel, for Berger the market society was the *fait accompli* of Reason. Yet, while in Berger the emphasis was still on the actual power of the market, in subsequent formulations in sociological theory, market abstractions are raised

to the level of formal social principles.¹¹ This is seen particularly in the rational choice frame of the “new paradigm.” In *A Theory of Religion*, Stark and Bainbridge provide an extensive exposition of such reasoning. Beginning from a limited number of axioms on human nature, they deductively propose an economistic theory of religion, where religion provides “compensators” for rewards that are scarce or unavailable in the world. While religions and religious movements offer the most general compensators, magic and cults promise more specific rewards, which are more liable to be proven wrong. In a crowning irony that illustrates the totalizing quality of market hegemony, rational choice scholars are among the few sociological voices that predict the future persistence of religion, and the untenability of the notion of “religious fundamentalism.”

Such analytical fudging of religion with the putative truth value of market relations holds little promise beyond being an incredible expression of faith in Adam Smith’s free market. It is a positivist understanding based on a narrow interpretation of Cartesian rationality, and rather aloof to the exhaustive criticism of Cartesian thought in twentieth century continental philosophy, and in diverse traditions such as psychoanalysis, cultural anthropology, and poststructuralist theory. Analytical separation of religion and the world of commerce has been thus the premise of some of the recent developments in secularization theory.

Faced with the “resurgence of religion,” proven false by the continuing popularity of religious belief and practice, sociologists hitherto unequivocally convinced of eventual secularization have been forced to some modifications.¹² Some galvanize new defenses for a more expansive secularization thesis that can account for the discrepancies, others

find it wiser to substantively qualify it. In a turn reminiscent of Habermas's distinction between the socio-cultural life-world and functionalist systems, a stream of sociological theorists although believing in secularization predict the persistence of religion, and even its significance since religion helps "question and contest the claims of states and markets to function according to their own functionalist norms without regard to extrinsic traditional moral norms."¹³ Demerath and Williams describe churches in U.S. society as the "carriers of the moral."¹⁴ This is, however, juxtaposed with an emphasis on secularism in the economic and political spheres as a consequence of systemic differentiation—following Niklas Luhmann—and the general weakening of religious authority.¹⁵ For these scholars often identified with the "neo-secularization paradigm," such a connection between the religious and the secular is not only empirically true for contemporary U.S. society, this social objective is also to be preferred normatively. It not only assures a state and economy free of sectarian interests but also ensures external moral regulation of these realms of action to ensure that they don't slip into vacuity.¹⁶

This surely has Habermasian echoes, where systemic complexity is but an emanation from the life-world, which nevertheless threatens to colonize the life-world.¹⁷ Much like Habermas' speculative project, however, there are extensive problems with this abstract sociological model. It reflects a cognitive understanding of religion, an institutionalized system of faith and belief outside the political and economic battlefields, outside people's lived conditions, responsibilities, and sufferings. Likewise, this liberal conceptualization of social and economic systems is itself abstract, as it removes these systems, their forms and achievements from their embeddedness in a global history of

power, conflict, and struggle – a history which despite clairvoyance to the contrary is, surely, far from any closure. In an impressive study, Talal Asad, for example, has shown that this construction of religion as “a distinctive space of human practice and belief,” – that is, where religion is considered an autonomous sphere, much like the economic sphere, the political sphere, or the scientific sphere – is a “modern Western norm,” a product of a dominant liberal discourse.¹⁸ Historically, such an understanding of religion is the consequence of a unique post-Reformation history quite at variance with how religious practice was inalienable from social and political existence in Europe of the middle ages. The emphasis on religious “belief” or meaning, in opposition to sensory or practical aspects is likewise a historical artifact of Christian theology, and the distinctive kinds of religious experience it tried to promote.¹⁹

Departing the Religious Way

In view of this state and orientation of sociological theory and scholarship, this monograph has been driven by a few key departures. Firstly, a consistent refusal to consider religion, or for that matter, the economic sphere, morality, or sexuality as “distinct” spheres of life. Of course, seeing these as distinct spheres – say, as ideal types – may have obvious epistemological reasons and advantages. Yet, the greater burden we face today is of exorcizing these reified distinctions and the iron fist with which they set the norms of analytical work. Instead of being considered analytical conventions, much like Berger pointed out for religious myths and beliefs, these distinctions are frequently treated as “real;” a slippery slope easy to slide into because of the unique history of the Protestant reformation, and modern secularism where such separation of religious belief

and worldly interests is indeed called for. In contrast, in this manuscript I have shown that religious practice must be considered as simply another manner of performing the social, of being human, a practice of a piece with the moral, the sexual, the economic, and other dimensions of human existence.

In my research, I found the “social fact” to be a useful notion to point to subtle social phenomena and practices, the force they command. It is a good heuristic to communicate the physicality of social affects, to mark the object of empirical research in its specificity. Yet, it becomes incredibly constraining when used generally in the form of notions such as ‘religion,’ ‘pilgrimage,’ ‘religious fundamentalism,’ or ‘nationalism’ since they call a world of pre-conceptions and expectations that encumber analytical creativity. What is subtle perception at one end is replaced by the *obviousness* enforced with all the force and certitude of institutional decree at the other end. On one end, the light object setting the analyst’s work into motion, on the other it is replaced by the force of the category inside whose confines the analyst must labor. Perhaps, it is disciplinary convention that best illustrates the social fact with all its “compelling and coercive power... [which] asserts itself as soon as I try to resist.”

From the contemporary sociological perspective, therefore, the Kanwar can only be a reactive assertion of ethnic, religious, or national (postcolonial) identity in a modernizing social context. Adopting a normative sociological language focused on *collectivities*, such a conclusion is unavoidable; if it is on the collective defined by solidarity or identity that the sociologist predicates her practice, this is what she will by definition collapse the phenomenon into. Yet, both these figures are preconceived in

abstract opposition to macro-historical, teleological notions of secularist progress and civic liberalism. The social fact may be a phenomenological entity, but it is no less framed by a concept – usually a dominant one. For the critical analyst, thus, its value lies at most as a point of departure, an always suspect and therefore easily suspended reference. In dispensing with the most obvious quality, we also often rid the object of research of its greatest encumbrance.

This clear break with the contemporary sociology of religion aside, this work is founded on the solid grounds of classical sociology, particularly the sociology of Max Weber, which clearly rests on considering religion, economy, and social conflict and recognition together as more or less inseparable constituents of subjective integrity. Speaking of “religion” in the Kanwar outside of its embeddedness in concerns moral, economic, sexual would have been as meaningless as Weber describing the religious beliefs of the Calvinists devoid of their moral, social, and economic significance. While this departure may appear deceptively minor, following through with such an integral perspective in the context of the contemporary academic culture of expertise has been a challenging task, requiring something of a gestalt switch.

The realization of this departure was conditional to another departure, the core of which as I have argued is perhaps best illustrated by the Heideggerian movement from Historical time, an abstract collective temporality, to the temporality of Dasein; from considering things at present-at-hand to the ready-to-hand; from the individual contemplating the world detached and from a distance, to one anxiously embedded in social and material conditions and obligations, and subject to all the risks and

responsibilities thereof. To understand the Kanwar performances, it was critical to shift from a hermeneutic that privileges abstract collectives and a teleological Universal Good, which is deeply ingrained in sociological discourse and practice – although the Hegelian dialectic of the World Spirit is surely its most eloquent illustration – to instead center on the temporality of being-in-the-world.

While Hegel's teleological universality is primarily a product of his immense interest in the progressive concretion or externalization of the Spirit, and historical growth of self-consciousness as knowledge in a rather infinite progression of collective Time, Heidegger may be credited with bringing philosophical attention back to the finitude of human existence. He advocates looking first and foremost to the temporality of Dasein, Being-in-the-world with one another in relations of care, concern, and solicitude. This conception is embedded in a fundamental critique of the Cartesian notion (followed through from Plato to Hegel) of the subject, which exists in the world in distance from other entities, and relates to them as present-at-hand.²⁰ Instead, Dasein is always already affectively existent in the world with other entities. From an analytical perspective, this time comes before any expectations of sacrifice for an abstract collective history – such as for political ideals of progress and emancipation – which itself can only be a motif in her own temporality. This conception of Dasein, that has been the bedrock of this study, also helps us recover another philosophical moment, vital for any conception of agency – the Kantian critique of practical reason. Kant, Heidegger would assert, already had a more radical understanding of time than Hegel.²¹

The autonomy of the moral imperative, Kant found, was indispensable for any conception of human freedom. The moral will alone, as “a transcendental predicate of the causality of a being that belongs to the world of sense,” could provide a principle of freedom outside of a fatalist empiricism in which time future would always have been determined by time past.²² Whether an “*automaton materiale* when the mechanical being is moved by matter, or with Leibnitz *spirituale* when it is impelled by ideas,” freedom then would be “nothing better than the freedom of a turnspit, which, when once it is wound up, accomplishes its motions of itself.”²³

To such moral quality of Dasein must we attribute both the social and moral obligations of everyday existence, and the more generalized passion for historical emancipation on class, gender, and such grounds that drives critical politics and thought. Such moral obligation both drives social movements based, say, on class, gender, or environmental considerations, and the multitude of resistances with their paradoxical expressions and necessary subterfuges that James Scott, for example, called “hidden transcripts.” As Scott notes, “A cruel paradox of slavery, for example, is that it is in the interest of slave mothers, whose overriding wish is to keep their children safe and by their side, to train them in the routines of conformity.”²⁴ (24). A hermeneutic driven by this double movement – from a modernization or evolutionist paradigm with its conceptual antecedents in Hegelian teleology to Heidegger’s existential phenomenology and simultaneously to Kant’s transcendental reasoning – has been critical to the production of this monograph.

Additionally, Jacques Lacan's subversion of Hegelian teleology and a capitalist social structure in which its symbolic representations are embedded has been one of my primary anchors. For this recourse, I may be accused of disciplinary hereticism; after all, it is by differentiating the subject matter of the discipline from biology and psychology that Durkheim carved the institutional field of sociology as a robust and lasting field of enquiry – the study of 'social facts,' an objective entity – 'a new species and *to them must be exclusively assigned the term social*'.²⁵ Notwithstanding the institutional force of this separation, for my research, the distinction between the social and the psychic would have been fallacious. This opposition based in the knowledge formations of 19th century Europe is altogether sublated in Freud, and surely in Lacan. While transcending this distinction, psychoanalysis –focused on understanding human experiences rather than a positive discipline of measuring them –also led into a more humane epistemology. It is therefore not surprising that psychoanalysis, unlike sociology that has progressively narrowed itself, has been a great factor in the development of 20th century thought, from cultural studies and critical theory to poststructuralist philosophy and feminist theory.

By way of conclusion, let me briefly clarify the significance of my epistemological arguments and research findings for the South Asian studies field. In a substantive sense, this field is surely part and attachment of global cultures of social scientific knowledge production.²⁶ The broader motifs of "religious fundamentalism," "modernization," and "secularization," have been as important to many of the popular and authoritative works on South Asian religion and society, such as by Hansen, Rajagopal, Jaffrelot, and van der Veer as to scholarship as in the United States.²⁷ Yet, of course, the field has had its

specific set of formations situated in Indian history and politics. Following on the constructions of communalism, against civic social relations, this literature focuses on Hindu nationalist assertion driven by anxieties based on a colonial history and opposition to Muslims.²⁸ This perspective has thrown valid and interesting insights: majoritarianism in post-colonial India, the suppression of Muslims, and the daemonic force of the nation, a mystical community that comes across as much as a futuristic project as it congeals around an imagined past. This illustration emphasized the analytical strengths of Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, but also its limitations, insofar as the paradigm ignores colonial turmoil and traumas, postcolonial struggles, and the novelty of the imaginary force, the compulsions, of the new, Southern nations.²⁹

Religious or ethnic nationalism, where culture and religion are bound to an assertive nationalism is bound to scandalize and raise hackles, post the European national socialist disasters. In the Indian context, these are legitimate fears, founded on a real history and equally real possibilities of religion based violence, frequently in collusion with the state.³⁰ Hindu nationalism with its powerful cathexis around colonial and historical injuries, real or imaginary, has indeed frequently attempted to assert itself through an exclusionary, retrogressive figure of cultural essence with obvious affinities with European fascism.³¹

And yet such focus on "religious nationalism," that is, primarily on religion as represented in political parties—their ideologues, institutions, agendas, and activities—also runs the risk of determining interpretations of popular religiosity based on the machinations of power politics. In the very magnitude and inevitable complexity of their

social contexts, popular culture and religion surely must exceed the statist, power-oriented referents of nationalist ideologies. To absorb the density of the phenomena, the manifold concerns of religious practitioners into a single, statist idiom would imply a failure to distinguish different dimensions and scales to the social event; it would also imply an analytic itself focused on power, incognizant of the many other forms of subjective investments, popular religiosity may perform or represent. It is important to analytically separate the ideological representations of religion as only one dimension, albeit important, of the phenomenon.

The research presented in this monograph has shown other multiple dimensions to these ostensibly “Hindu” religious practices as they perform the precarious informality of the participants’ life; the demanding performances here repeat, perform, sublimate the excesses and aspirations of being in India’s contemporary conditions. For the participants here, often living under conditions that are simultaneously precarious and challenging, under constant exposure to and risk of death, disease, debilitating poverty, the pilgrimage devoted to *Śiva*—in whom dread, death, and gaiety are inextricably bound together— we have seen is at once an expression of anxieties, responsibilities, and desires. The *Kānwaṛ* is then effectively the institution of a phenomenon, which is no less the invention of a genre, to performatively respond to current social and economic paradoxes and intimate personal concerns. This research has shown that the importance of a religious development is not so much in that it provides the subject with a distinguished signifier (or ‘identity’), but rather in the various operations through which it

intervenes to re-negotiate or reconfigure an existing system of signifiers, and consequently the subject's social existence.

¹ Berger, P. L. 1967. *The sacred canopy: Elements of a sociological theory of religion*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Doubleday.

² Giddens (1991), p. 61.

³ Giddens, Anthony, and Will Hutton. *On the Edge: Living with Global Capitalism*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2000. Print (preview).

⁴ Giddens, *Runaway World*, p.4

⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, "Postmodern religion?," In Paul Heelas. Ed. *Religion, Modernity, and Postmodernity*, (Massachusetts: Wiley-Blackwell: 1998), p.74.

⁶ Ibid., p.73

⁷ Ibid., p.72

⁸ Pritchett, L. (2006). Who is not poor? Dreaming of a world truly free of poverty. *The World Bank Research Observer*, 21(1), 1-23.

⁹ Berger 1999.

¹⁰ Bauman, 1998, p.70.

¹¹ In *A Theory of Religion*, Stark and Bainbridge provide an extensive exposition of such reasoning. Beginning from a limited number of axioms on human nature, the authors deductively proposed an economic theory of religion, where religion provides "compensators" for rewards that are scarce or unavailable in the world. While religions and religious movements offer the most general compensators, magic and cults promise more specific rewards, which are more liable to be proven wrong. See also Iannaccone (1998), and Yamane (1997).

¹² Berger, Peter (1999) *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*. Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, p.11.

¹³ Casanova, J. *Public religions in the modern world* (1994), 56-57.

¹⁴ Demerath and Williams, *A Bridging of Faith: Religion and politics in a New England city* (1992), p. 419.

¹⁵ See Beyer (2006).

¹⁶ See Demerath, "In a minor key: religion, politics, and the state in India," in Silk, M. (ed.) *Religion on the International news agenda* (Hartford, Connecticut: Pew Program on religion and the news media, 2000), 3-18. See also Demerath, N.J. "A Sinner Among the Saints: Confessions of a Sociologist of Culture and Religion," (*Sociological Forum*. 17.1, 2002): 1-19; and Yamane, D. "Secularization on Trial: in Defense of a Neosecularization Paradigm," (*Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. 36.1, 1997): 109-122

¹⁷ See Habermas, Jürgen (1985). *The theory of communicative action: Volume 2: Lifeworld and system: A critique of functionalist reason* (Vol. 2). Beacon press.

¹⁸ Asad, Talal. 1982. "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category," in *Genealogies of Religion; Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press), pp. 27-54.

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- ¹⁹ See Asad (1982), pp.43-5.
- ²⁰ See Derrida, Jacques. 1981. *Dissemination*. Trans. Barbara Johnson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Heidegger, 1962.
- ²¹ Heidegger, 1962: p.480, 499.
- ²² Kant, Immanuel. 2004 [1909]. *Critique of Practical Reason*. Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, p.99.
- ²³ Kant, 2004: 102.
- ²⁴ Scott, J. C. (1990). *Domination and the arts of resistance: Hidden transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Press, p.24.
- ²⁵ Emphasis added. Durkheim, E (1982) *The rules of sociological method*, New York: Macmillan Press Ltd., p. 52.
- ²⁶ See Bourdieu, Pierre, and Loïc Wacquant. "On the cunning of imperialist reason." *Theory, Culture & Society* 16.1 (1999): 41-58.
- ²⁷ See Timothy Blom Hansen, *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu nationalism in Modern India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1999); Arvind Rajagopal, *Politics After Television: Religious Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Indian Public* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994).
- ²⁸ See Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990); and Ashutosh Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2003). See also author (forthcoming).
- ²⁹ See *ibid*; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983); and Partha Chatterjee, 'Whose Imagined Community?' *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* Vol.XX, no.3 (March 1991), pp.521-27.
- ³⁰ See, for example, Parvis Ghassem-Fachandi, *Pogrom in Gujarat: Hindu Nationalism and Anti-Muslim Violence in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).
- ³¹ See Christophe Jaffrelot, *Religion, Caste, and Politics in India*.