Chapter VI
Legends, Spaces and Symbols: Processes of Confluences and Contestations
Legends, Spaces and Symbols: Processes of Confluences and Contestations

Communities often identify themselves as groups based on their quotidian practices that may be similar owing to geographical and social sharing over long periods of time. As time passes, these shared practices gradually take the form of shared perspectives, traditions and get consolidated through people who assume authority to safeguard such practices. What play a key role in this process are memories from the past and as Sen (1998: 10) defines,

"We live in the present, but that is a tiny bit of time—it passes as we talk. Our identities are strongly influenced by the past. The self-perceptions that characterize a group are associated with, and to a great extent defined by, the shared memories and recollections of the past."

Now, whatever comes to be known as shared brings with it fragmented elements from various broad understandings and gradually it becomes a mosaic that is left open ended so that other elements could be added to it. One of the most potent forms in which collective memories are preserved is through oral traditions that pass on from one generation to the other. These oral histories become legends with special powers attached to them by people from the geographical area where the history might have originated. Later, as outsiders (those from beyond this geography) visit the place, they carry snippets of the legend back to their homelands where they narrate it to people around them. This in turn creates positive curiosity and draws many more towards the legendary destination combined with interpretations added continuously.

However, what could be striking is how such traditions have a shifting bases contingent upon the various communities who are a part of this construction. For example, a particular community directly involved in history making would have a different perspective than those who are indirectly involved in the process. Such perspectives may clash at times which implies that such stages of development of history cannot be devoid of power equations across individuals and communities. In fact, this politics of history making often becomes the hallmark of shared traditions thus making it more potent and popular. What emerges is that identities and associations that get manifested in legends have multiple meanings and are constructed contextually within temporal, spatial, social
or political frameworks. What overrides all these processes is the historical context of the phenomenon which becomes the foundation for all beginnings and its key elements are people as agency to construct, reconstruct and carry it forward.

When the agency involves people and processes, the question that emerges is how do people preserve the history other than as oral traditions? One way could be in the form of symbols – physical or ritual or both. Discussing Victor Turner’s seminal work on symbols and rituals, Mathieu Deflem (1991) argues that symbols in themselves are carriers of meaning and these meanings could be multiple as they unify the morality of the social order and the emotional needs of the individuals involved. Now, as mentioned above, if history is preserved as a physical symbol and if that history has emerged out of shared perspectives, it becomes imperative that the symbol also exhibits shared meanings and thus it acquires multiplicity of meaning as Deflem has argued.

It would be interesting to see how all these above processes apply to Haji Malang with all its comprising elements that coexist with each other. In keeping with the discussion around oral traditions, shared meanings and multiple symbols, this chapter has been structured into three sections. Section I dwells upon the making of the history and legend of Haji Malang. Drawing from a very limited treasure of secondary sources and mostly primary data gathered over a time, the section attempts to unfold the processes of construction of history and how it gets shaped and reshaped with many actors coming into play. The section culminates in understanding the formation of the Haji Malang dargah as the potent symbol of a shared space.

Following the above thread of discussion, Section II looks into other symbols that are repositories of shared meanings. The various shrines, temples and structures that have been built along the Haji Malang mountain stand testimony to people’s processes of enshrining multiplicity of meanings. This section also attempts to understand how people make meaning of their multiple associations and practices. Drawing from the preceding discussions, Section III outlines the various actors who are behind the construction of meanings and perspectives in the context of Haji Malang. The aim here is to understand the interface across these actors and also their interface with meanings and symbols that
help them to engage with each other. Such interfaces bring out patterns of alliances and
group formations in society in the broader context of the political economy of syncretic
processes.

Section I – History in Making

Recounting the Past: Interplay of History and Myth in the Legend of Haji Malang

While tracing the historical references to Kalyan and Haji Malang, the oldest reference
dated back to 1774. According to M.R. Kantak (1993) those were the days of the first
Anglo-Maratha war and Kalyan was an important junction, commanding western routes
from the Konkan, southern routes from Pune via Borghat and eastern routes via Nane
Ghat, Kusur Ghat and Malsej Ghat leading to Bombay. It was extremely important for the
British to capture Kalyan – still in Maratha possession – to be able to control North
Konkan and hold Bombay. For this, the most important step for General Goddard of the
British forces was to capture Kalyan’s guarding fort called ‘Malang-gad’. Across various
documents, this was one of the rare references to Malang-gad, the second one being a
mention of Bawa Malang in the Thana district gazetteer of 1882. While the gazetteer
mentioned the “fair of Bawa Malang” in the “Malang-gad Hills” as one of the major
festivals in Thana district, Kantak’s book on the Anglo-Maratha war goes into some
detail about the topography of Malang-gad which is of interest to this chapter.

One of the most crucial finds from the secondary sources was an army map of the
topography which clearly shows Dhoke village, Bandhanwadi and ‘Malang-gad’82.

Description of the topography mentions the dargah of Haji Malang as a significant spot
for the Marathas:

Sixteen kms. to the south of Kalyan, a strong hill-fort, known from the broken line of its basalt crest as the
Cathedral rock, is one of the most picturesque of Thane hills. It is also known as Malang-gad or Bawa
Malang. It stands on the borderline of the Talukas of Raigad and Ulhasnagar (formerly Taluka Kalyan). The
summit of the rock on which Malang-gad is built, appears like a three-storied building. After climbing
nearly 1800 feet from the foot of the hill, one reaches its first storey, which is a vast plateau with numerous
trees. On this plateau stands the tomb or the Darga of Haji Malang, the famous Sufi saint. The plateau starts
at a short distance in front of the Darga and ends at a place known as Punch Pir (Five Pirs), which is situated
on the precipice of the projection of a rock. These five Pirs whose names are unknown, are supposed to have
accompanied Bawa Malang. The Marathas named this plateau as ‘Pir Muchi’ after Bawa Malang and his five
Pirs.

82 A discussion of the physical setting in the previous chapter mentions Bandhanwadi and Dhoke village in
some detail
At the foot of Malang-gad is a very small village named Bandhanwadi. The region between Kalyan and Bandhanwadi was unfavourable for the movements of cavalry and artillery, as the ground here was undulating. The road from Bandhanwadi to the Pir Machi, an ascent of nearly 1800 feet, was narrow but not difficult for besieging troops to go up. (Kantak 1993: 99-101)
Despite the fact that there exist historical references citing Haji Malang Baba and his dargah, none of them talk about the beginning of the tradition that led hundreds of people to venerate the saint on the top of the mountain. It is this history that is prominently heard among people around Haji Malang and also from those who have been visiting it for many decades together. Associating some relevance to Kantak’s (1993) description of Malang-gad as a fort, Bomi, a Parsee devotee mentioned the association of Narayan Rao Peshwa with the place. According to Bomi, some reference he had come across cited that “the British had stayed in this fort on this hill for sometime and it is around that time that the Peshwa had sent a moti ku mala (pearl necklace) to Haji Malang Baba’s darbar (court)”. Moving beyond historical references, Cyrus also cited legendary associations of the dargah with the Peshwas.

This legendary association was with reference to Peshwa Cheemaji Appa and his battle with the Portuguese at Bassein (also known as Vasai, another strategic fort held by the Marathas). Bomi mentioned that Kalyan always used to be a significant port and in the course of his battle, the Peshwa happened to come here and as he came to the foot of the hill, he looked up and spotted a light. He asked the villagers what it was and they told him that there was a pir on top and this was the diva (lamp) in his shrine. He was surprised and asked “Is he so powerful that his light could be seen from such distance?” The Peshwa then proclaimed that he would believe in the pir’s powers only if he could vanquish the Portuguese without a speck of blood on his own sword. The Peshwa eventually defeated the Portuguese and it was proved to him that the pir on the mountain indeed possessed miraculous powers.

According to oral accounts, it was Allah who bestowed miraculous powers on Haji Malang Baba. Rahim – a sixty five years old resident on the mountain – narrated that:

Allah spotted a roshni from Madina\textsuperscript{83} and was curious to know what it was. He then ordered Baba to go to this place to find out what was happening and what the light was about. Baba reached this place and was wandering around in the village when he came

\textsuperscript{83} Madina and Mecca are two most important places in the history of Islam and are physically situated in the Middle East
upon the Brahman’s house. He asked for some water as he was tired and the Brahman’s
daughter came out to offer him milk. Pleased with this gesture of kindness, Baba blessed
the Brahman family saying that he would be living in the mountain from now on and that
he bestows custodial rights over his shrine only to the Brahman. On the mountain, Baba
found Raja Nal and his men who were rakshashas (demons) and the fire that could be seen
from Madina was used to roast human flesh which the rakshashas consumed. Nal Raja
thought that Baba would definitely overpower him and take control over his
kingdom; hence he first sent his wife to lure him. She was known as the Devni and her
efforts were thwarted as Baba turned her into a black stone. After this, Nal Raja sent his
daughter for the same purpose. His daughter became a devotee of Baba who adopted her
as his daughter. She was buried alongside Baba after her death. Eventually Nal Raja was
buried under the stones of the mountain.

Most of this story is what one would hear from the rest of the people except for small
changes here and there. For example, some would say that only Nal Raja’s daughter – and
not his wife – was sent to tempt Baba and she later became his devotee. Also, according
to the version narrated by Vistnu Ketkar – the Brahman mujawar of the
dargah – Raja Nal was not the king of Rakshhas, but used to hold his fort on the
mountain as a ruling king. While his fort was in one part of the mountain, some demons
had occupied the other half and would burn firewood every day, the light of which had
been spotted by Haji Malang Baba who had come here from Mecca to ascertain the
source of this fire. As for Nal Raja’s wife, Ketkar mentioned that she would disturb Baba
and therefore he cursed her and turned her into a black stone. When she asked for
forgiveness, Baba said that now she would remain a stone but she would be of use to
people. People would light a lamp on this stone. Whenever anybody in pain or with some
ailment would take away oil/ghee used to light the lamp and apply it, the ailment would
be cured. This black lamp – or Rani Nal – would still be found inside the dargah and it
burned forever.

84 The Thana gazetteer of 1882 (pp.420) makes a passing reference to the Nal dynasty saying that "Chief of
Kalyan was either a Maurya or Nala"
Another version of the same story narrated by Babu – claiming to be a Malang 
faqir – went into a slightly more detailed form of Haji Malang Baba's arrival. According to him, it was in the month of Ramzan\textsuperscript{35}, when the Khwajas in Mecca-Medina had gathered to break their roza that they spotted the fire on the mountain. As a result, Haji Malang Baba started from there and eventually arrived at Bammanwadi. Haji Malang Baba’s association with Bammanwadi is another key feature of the legend that floats around the mountain and its surrounding villages. While Rahim’s story claimed that it was Nal Raja’s daughter who was buried beside Baba, Babu claimed that it was the Brahman girl who served water to Baba in Bammanwadi who went on to become his daughter. In fact, an old Muslim man from Pune reverentially called Baba’s daughter Maa Saab and observed that “Baba and his disciples came to Bammanwadi where they met Maa Saab, a Bamman woman. Baba asked her for water and Maa Saab offered him milk instead. Impressed with her generosity, Baba bestowed on her the right to serve him forever.”

The story was narrated with such conviction as if the man could visualize everything that he spoke. He narrated how Baba came on a horse and taking Maa Saab along with him, leaped up and reached the top of the high mountain. It was this place which is now referred to as the ghode ka top (spot of the horse) and this is where one would also find the chashma (water spring). On reaching here, Maa Saab told Baba “Baba, how will your devotees reach this height of the mountain?”. It is then that Baba reduced the mountain to thrice its original size. The old man said that “nobody faced any problem climbing this mountain and even old people could climb till the top with Baba’s blessings”. Adding to this, Babu emphasized how Baba proclaimed that whenever anyone visited Baba’s dargah, his daughter should be offered the first salami (respects).

Baba’s daughter who the old Muslim referred to as Maa Saab was also referred to as Krushna bai by old women from Haji Malang wadi village. Drawing from Krushna bai’s lineage, the Ketkar family from Bandhanwadi is revered as Bamman dada’s family that was granted the sole right to look after Baba and his mandir. However, another old

\textsuperscript{35} Ramzan is the 10\textsuperscript{th} Holy month according to the Islamic calendar. It is believed that it was during Ramzan that the Holy Quran was completely revealed and Muslims all over the world spend this month in fasting and prayers.
woman from the same village had a slightly different version of the story since she refused to associate the lineage of Bamman dada with the Brahman woman. According to her "A Brahman girl used to go up to the hill and she became close to Baba. It was she who gave a manapatra-dattak (authority of adoption) to Ketkar's family to look after the shrine".

The different strands of the story of Haji Malang Baba's arrival bring us to the point of briefly discussing the association of the Brahmin mujcl\var with the dargah. As narrated by various people, the Brahmin family of the Ketkars has had special hereditary custodial rights over Baba's dargah since it was Haji Malang Baba who blessed them with the same. The present custodian's son, Manas Ketkar narrated the story (Kahani) of Haji Malang Baba somewhat similarly, but owing to a closer association with Baba, he spoke assertively with authority:

*Haji Malang Baba came here in a flying horse called doddol. Ketkar Brahman served him in the village and satisfied with his services Baba ordained that Ketkar would be in his service from then on. Baba leaped from here with his horse and reached the water body on top of the mountain. As soon as they reached, the horse fell dead. No one knows the real name of Haji Malang Baba. Abdur Rahman is just the name given to him by some people. There is no record of his name or anything else anywhere.*

Attesting the story about Nal Raja, his wife and daughter, Ketkar junior mentioned that it was this daughter who was buried beside Baba. Later a conversation with the custodian Vishnu Ketkar revealed custodial relationship between the family and Haji Malang Baba and no reference was made to 'the Brahman girl' who people considered to be buried beside Baba. In fact, the custodian's family went back to the story of adoption as Vishnu Ketkar narrated:

*We have been associated with the dargah for over 350 years now and we have historical records since 1718. After the death of my grandfather, my grandmother Radhabai Ketkar looked after the affairs of the dargah for forty years. She placed an advertisement in the newspapers for adoption of a son who must be a Ketkar. My father, who lived in Sakharpada village in Ratnagiri, saw the advertisement, consulted his father and came here. He was adopted by my grandmother and thus began our custodial association with Haji Malang Baba.*
Interestingly, the custodian family with their direct association with Haji Malang Baba and his *dargah*, moved beyond the legendary realms of their association and made claims based on historical and legal records they claimed to have in their possession. Recorded history went back to the days of the British and the Ketkars mentioned that the mountain where the *dargah* was situated came under the British forest administration. In 1857, one Kashinath Ketkar fought the British administration and forced the army to leave this place. On this miraculous victory, the Peshwa of Kalyan asked how Kashinath could achieve this impossible. Kashinath owed his victory to the blessings of Haji Malang Baba on the mountain. Impressed, the Peshwa presented him a gold cloth to be offered at the *dargah*. Kashinath put the heavy gold cloth on his head, gathered Hindus and Muslims from Kalyan and climbed the mountain to offer it to Baba. It is since then that this practice of visiting the *dargah* started. According to the Ketkars, the Peshwa also issued a *sanad* declaring that Kashinath should look after the *dargah*. Kashinath then told the Peshwa that he must give donations for the maintenance of the shrine. The Peshwa donated the Dhoke village and said that the agricultural revenue from this village would be used for the maintenance of the shrine. However, the Ketkars also mentioned that there was a gap in the records of their family between 1781 and 1908 after which they have records related to Vishnu Ketkar’s father Gopalrao Ketkar and his custodianship.

Some of this above history is resonated in Kantak’s book where he mentions a Kashipant from the Maratha army who was involved in defending the Malang-gad fort from the British army. There is also the mention of Sambhaji Ketkar who was the leader of the fort and under a heading called “Religious Sentiments of the Marathas”, Kantak (1993: 107) mentions how the Maratha army attributed their power over the British to the blessings of the saint in the following excerpt:

The Pune Government had assigned half of the total annual revenue income of the village Dhokegao in the pargana of Ambarnath for the worship of the Darga of Bawa Malang. The remaining half was collected by the Pune Government. In this context, Gangadhar Ram Karlekar requested Nana Phadnis in one of his letters, “I have made a vow before the Pir that if you protect the fort from the enemy, I will see that the Pune Government will give an assignment of all the annual revenue income of Dhokegao for your worship. As I have made this vow before the Pir, you should grant my request”. Gangadhar Ram believed that because of the grace of the Pir, the
The garrison could repulse the enemy attack. His above request to Nana throws light on the religious sentiments of the Marathas. The Marathas like most of the other Hindus, respected saintly persons, be they of any caste, creed or religion.

However, this record does not mention Kashinath Ketkar and the sanad he received from the Peshwa of Kalyan. In fact some local people, while attempting to attest the significance of the Haji Malang dargah also associate it to Shivaji’s father Shahji and mention how it was Shahji who defeated the British, owed the victory to Baba and ensured the revenue of Dhokegaon for the maintenance of the shrine. Thus we see how the legend/history/story of Haji Malang Baba and his dargah has been narrated, interpreted, constructed and reconstructed time and again by various stakeholders. In most of the responses, the common refrain has been that “we are telling you what we have heard from our elders”. For instance, apart from some documents that he possesses, Vishnu Ketkar had received Baba’s history from his father Gopalrao and Manas Ketkar had received it from his father Madhav.

Sixty five years old Kamalabai Patil (an Agri) had heard it from her late mother-in-law, while Radha’s seventy years old grandmother had grown up on the stories narrated by her late in-laws. Similarly, the old Muslim man from Pune had heard it from his father and his grandmother while Sixty five years old Rahim who came here as an eleven year old had been hearing the same story from various juna log (people from olden times) he had met over the years. People ‘heard’ it and then ‘said’ it and even the only pamphlet that chronicles Haji Malang Baba’s charitra has printed a disclaimer saying that “all stories in this book are based on hear-say (kahisuni) and so the publisher or the distributor of this pamphlet must not be held responsible for the truth or untruth regarding the book”.

The analytical tool that could be used to effectively interpret the different strands that hang from the history of Haji Malang Baba is something that Gottschalk (2004) refers to as the debate between labelling a piece of the past as ‘history’ or ‘myth’. As soon as the booklet chronicling Haji Malang Baba’s charitra claims to reveal Baba’s kahi-suni kahani, suspicions about its veracity arise since after all, according to the literate world, it

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86 Charitra is a term used for character, but it is also used to define the historical significance of an important personage.
is mentioned as a 'story' which may not be 'actual recorded history' and hence lacking validity. Gottschalk (2000:74) brings out a valuable analytical element when he talks about the connotations that kahi-suni accounts of the past hold. According to him, this is an intrinsic element of oral narratives since "hearsay provides a perfect insight into the dynamic of transmission in this system: hearing and, then, saying. No formal styles of transmission rule this system beyond those governing everyday discourse".

What is then left to interpretation is what this hearsay builds and whether it could be bracketed as history or as myth. Gottschalk's concerns are that considering these accounts as history despite the fact that there are no records could mark them out as less historical and thus making dubious claims. Drawing from Bruce Lincoln (cited in Gottschalk 2000: 75), he builds a case where though history has credibility, yet a myth becomes more powerful because "a group not only accepts the credibility and truth claims for the myth but also grants it an authority to act as a paradigmatic vision for the construction of society". In case of Haji Malang, this construction comes with more interesting perspectives that seem to be the fall out of recent socio-political developments in the area. So the powerful Myth of Haji Malang Baba is reconstructed to consolidate identities across religious lines and an examination of the same would help us see if it is successful in reshaping connotations associated with the long existing myth.

A few complex social elements seem to be at play in the above mentioned interpretations of Haji Malang Baba's legend. In this respect, it is important to understand how the spread of Islam in the region might have been a dimension that explains the miraculous powers associated with Haji Malang Baba as a saint from Arabia. The Thana gazetteer from 1882 mentions how 'Bawa Malang' was a Muslim missionary who was responsible for large scale conversion to Islam through his humanitarian work. Baba's association with the Brahman family could also be explained in this context as symbolic of Islam's domination over the highest caste in the Hindu social order. For the Agris (belonging to 'lower' castes), this could be interpreted in two ways,

1) Brahminical domination of 'lower' Hindu castes was countered by Haji Malang’s Baba’s powers which were more even than the highest caste so that he could influence a Brahman girl to submit to him as a devotee and get buried beside him. On the other hand,
even if Nal Raja’s story is to be believed, then the book on Haji Malang Baba’s *charitra* chronicles how Nal Raja’s daughter embraced Islam to become Baba’s daughter and also urged the Hindu Nal Raja to do the same, while her mother who refused was turned to a stone. In this case, the Raja – a ruler – becomes a symbol of oppression and domination overpowered by Haji Malang Baba

(2) Another interpretation could be that Baba being a divine persona could only have a Brahman officiate as a priest and custodian as the *Agris or adivasis* were not ‘fit’ to take up this position owing to their lower status in the society. Thus Baba’s first point of contact when he reaches the foot of the mountain is a Brahmin who offers him water/milk with pure hands.

In all this, it is important to perceive that whatever the symbolic meanings underlying the myths, the foundation is that of partnership and accommodation devoid of strife or conquest through weapons or battle. Haji Malang Baba arrived at the spot for a humanitarian purpose of rescuing local people from flesh eating *Rakshasilas* and eventually vanquished them to become the much beloved Muslim saint. In that sense, the power of Islam that Haji Malang Baba brings resides in taking people from various communities along without disturbing the existing social order. Naturally, what builds up as a result is not a mosque – symbolising the absolutism of Islam – but a *dargah* – a space that symbolises confluence, well being and blessings.

**Contesting Perspectives**

Claiming to be an ardent devotee of Haji Malang Baba whom he invokes everyday along with *Ma Laxmi* and other gods, the *Agri ex-sarpanch* from Haji Malang *wadi* village mentioned that Alauddin Khilji came and demolished all Hindu temples including the Somnath temple and this was when the temple on the mountain was also demolished and the Muslims took over to build a *dargah*. He said it cautiously and was wary that the

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87 Dargahs are usually visited by people from across castes and religions
88 Goddess of wealth in the Hindu pantheon
89 Yoginder Sikand (2004: 167) attributes the beginning of shared Hindu-Muslim traditions in the Deccan region to the conquests of Alauddin Khilji. “In 1296, Alauddin Khilji raided the Yadava capital of Devgiri, later named Daulatabad (the city of riches), ransacked it of its immense treasures and then returned to Delhi in triumph. From the fourteenth century onwards, large parts of north Karnataka came under various Muslim dynasties, often at loggerheads with their Hindu neighbours as well as with the Muslim emperors of Delhi”
researcher might be a Muslim taking offence to his claims, but nevertheless, “the truth about the destructive nature of Muslims could not be denied”. Similarly, sixty years old Ramabai Kumbhar – a resident of Haji Malang mountain and belonging to the potter caste – reverentially observed that she “fasted every Thursday and early in the morning, went up to Haji Malang Baba’s mandir to get blessed with the loban – It is called aarti in Marathi and loban in Hindi”. However, Ramabai concluded her narration claiming that Haji Malang Baba was not Muslim and that his place had been hijacked by the Muslims who had constructed it as a Muslim place.

When asked how Haji Malang Baba was not a Muslim and if not, who he was, the most common association was that the place was actually the temple of Naunath pir who reside inside (Naunath ka pir hai andar), “but the Mohammedans had put chadar (cloth covering) on top of the shrine and had claimed it as theirs”. Kalabai Patil from Ulhasnagar put it very logically when she described the annual urs celebrations at Haji Malang: “...the palkhi comes from below the mountain and there is god Pandurang inside the palkhi. The palkhi goes up on Ekadashi and the jatra takes place on Purnima. These dates were significant enough to prove that Baba was dev (god) of the Hindus”. In another instance, an old Agri woman from Haji Malang wadi village gently explained that “Haji Malang Baba was an avatar (reincarnation) of Macchhindranath and it is a juna/purana (very old) devsthan”. She goaded people to read the book on Haji Malang Baba and also mentioned how a certain political party had been trying to change the name from Haji Malang to Malang-gad for political reasons. The old woman felt that this was not a right move and asserted, “Why should I say Malang-gad when I have always known it as Haji Malang?”.

All the above instances attempting to shape and reshape the myth associated with Haji Malang are seen to be oscillating between various stances and arguments that are beyond the realms of singular or even binary identity structures. While Alauddin Khilji is looked

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90 First day after new moon in Hindu calendar
91 Holy journey of the relics of a saint in Maharashtrian tradition
92 Full moon day
93 One of the saints of the Nathpanthi order. Refer to chapter IV for a brief discussion on the Nathpanthi.
94 The Shiv Sena had started the Malang-gad mukti (freedom) movement in 1986 claiming that ‘Haji Malang’ must be renamed as ‘Shri Malang’ since it is a Hindu shrine taken over by Muslims
upon as a threat to Hindu places of worship, Haji Malang Baba as a Muslim saint with his *dargah* on the mountain is a much revered person; this despite the notion that Muslims had destroyed the temples on the mountain to build their places of worship. At an interpretive level, it brings out how the Muslim Khilji’s domination through plunder and political rule is rejected while Haji Malang Baba is accepted as the popular Muslim saint who fulfils wishes of well-being and prosperity. On the other hand, for the old Kumbhar woman, even while “Haji Malang Baba” is “not a Muslim”, there are no qualms about fasting for him on Thursdays and participating in the *loban* which comes as a form of his blessing and can be ritually conducted only by a Muslim *pujari*. What becomes more important is that Baba is a saint with miraculous powers and this could prove beneficial for one’s family and livelihood. This brings out an intrinsic human tendency to depend upon powers that ward off evils and as Bayly (cited in Roy 2005: 55) cites, “…what mattered most was that their dargahs were universally revered as repositories of miraculous and transforming divine power, or barakat”.

Moreover it does not matter so much that only a Muslim priest can officiate in certain rituals even while the annual *urs* takes place according to the “Hindu calendar”. The most striking aspect is that Haji Malang Baba is looked upon as an *avtaar* of Macchhindranath and the person who cites this is proud of the fact that Baba possesses a dual identity that cuts across religious categories to draw people from different faiths. Also, though the Naunaths are considered to belong to the Hindu tradition, yet they are referred to as *Naunath ka “pir”* – a term used for Muslim saints or holy persons.

What emerge are the complexities that underlie traditions emanating from a site that is at once shared and contested. Jackie Assayag (2004) explains this phenomenon as something based on numerous cultural similarities and the ‘exchange equivalence’ of practices and beliefs within a variety of social arenas. Drawing from Tony Stewart’s (cited in Assayag 2004), work on ‘exchange equivalence’, he attributes it to interactions that enable dynamic equivalence in the cultural context “which can account for the different values ascribed to equivalent terms, e.g. *avatara/nabi*95, *dev/pir, bhuta/jinn*96,”

95 While *avatara* means reincarnation in the Hindu tradition, *nabi* refers to the prophet or God’s messenger is the Islamic tradition
dhikrijapa97, Muslim Yoga literature, etc.”. Such equivalence makes space for coexistence of ideas, perspectives and modes of expressions of these perspectives without causing discomfort or defensiveness in the minds of people who interact in such spaces. A middle aged Agri woman echoes this comfort when she openly expresses that “Haji Malang Baba is not Mussalman. Devotees come here from all religions and they call him by whatever name they wish to. People ask for wishes to be granted and they are always fulfilled”.

The custodian to the Haji Malang dargah, Vishnu Ketkar sums up this feeling when he expresses that one school of thought said that Baba had come here to serve the Nath panthi (belonging to a sect; panth-sect) saints since this was the abode of the Nath panthis. Not willing to dwell too much upon this perspective, the custodian takes refuge in a Marathi saying that “one should never ask about the source of the river or where it is going”. He uses this analogy to explain how one should also never enquire about where rishi munis or holy men come from and where they go and thus he or his family never wished to get into the debate about the origins of Haji Malang Baba. For him, what was of utmost significance was that “Our ancestors asked us to serve Baba and we are doing so”.

As discussed towards the beginning of the chapter, oral transmissions of myths do not remain only so and even if they do not become ‘recorded history’; they often acquire a semblance of finality in the form of physical symbols. In case of Haji Malang, this finality has been manifested in the form of the Haji Malang dargah and yet this is not the only symbol to be found here. Associated with the very myth of Haji Malang Baba’s arrival is the arrival of his friends – Bakhtar Shah Baba and Sultan Shah Baba – as well and also his disciples in the form of Panch Pir (five pir). After the dargah of “Bade Baba” (as Haji Malang Baba is fondly called), it were the dargahs of Bakhtar Shah Baba and Sultan Shah Baba which were considered most significant. Signifying the accommodating characteristic of the tradition of the mountain, the site has not limited

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96 Spirit or ghost that could be either good or evil
97 Dhikr (also called zikr) is the Sufi idea of chanting the names of Allah and japa is the Bhakti equivalent of counting the names of god
itself to the *dargāhs* only. It abounds with shrines of different nature – *mandir*, *chillāh*, open *mazār* and shrines, *ashrams*, meeting places for *sadhus* and *faqirs* and so on. In fact it almost seems that the mountain has been a site where the mere existence of the Haji Malang *dargāh* was a cue for people to come there, settle down and then construct sacred spaces besides weaving myths around them to establish their credibility.

![The *dargāh* of Haji Malang Baba](image)

**Section II – Sacred Spaces: Convergences and Contestations**

Physical spaces essentially become sacred spaces owing to the meanings attached to them by human agency and such meanings appear to the eye as symbolic features of the space. For the *dargāh* of Haji Malang, what appears to the eye is a dome like structure with particularly Islamic inscriptions of *Ya Allāh* and *Ya Mohammed* inscribed on the outer face of the structure. At the entrance to the inner chamber of the *dargāh* which houses two *mazārs*, stands a man dressed in white clothes and a white scarf tied around his head.

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98 *Allah* is the name of God in Islam and *Mohammed* is his prophet who spread Islam’s message in this world.
with shoulder length grey hair flowing out of the scarf. The man sports a longish red vermilion mark on his forehead and as devotees come in to the dargah with offerings of flowers or chadars, the man takes away their offerings and directs them first to “Baba ki beti ka mazar” (grave of Baba’s daughter) and then to “Baba’s mazar” (Baba’s grave). In fact, on a first visit, the impression of this man besides devotees and their attire and ways of worship that marks them out as belonging to particular communities 99 is apparently the only other symbol that is different from other Islamic symbols such as the grand building of the Haji Malang Jama Masjid (mosque) adjoining the dargah.

However, all impressions undergo a transformation as soon as a board citing the names of the trustees of the ‘Haji Malang dargah Trust’ come into view. A trust committee comprising two Maharashtrian Brahmans (Joshi and Ketkar), a Sindhi (Bodha) and two Muslims (Sheikhs) brings out the ethos of a shared space behind the façade of Islamic symbols and hence prods one to go deeper into understanding the complexities that lie within. However, what is interesting is that the ‘sacred’ and the ‘non-sacred’ go hand in hand in maintaining the sacredness of such a space. The dargah trust 100 was an administrative and managerial body responsible for the day-to-day operations while its composition also claimed the presence of a ‘hereditary trustee’ as a part of it not just by virtue of family lineage, but also by virtue of Haji Malang Baba’s divine orders to the Brahmin family to carry on their custodial rights over the saint and his mazar. This interplay of the worldly and the divine actually becomes the key characteristic of shared mythic spaces throughout the mountain village of Haji Malang pahad.

On the way down from the dargah of Haji Malang Baba was the dargah of Sultan Shah Baba, popularly known as doosri salami (second salute). For devotees thronging to Haji Malang, this was a very important spot since Sultan Shah Baba accompanied Haji Malang, this was a very important spot since Sultan Shah Baba accompanied Haji

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99 For example, several Hindu devotees who came first to Sultan Shah Baba’s dargah, folded their hands and bowed before the mazar following it with parikrama (circumambulation) around the mazar. Then they went up to the Haji Malang dargah and repeated the same ritual. On the other hand, Muslims would be seen entering the dargahs and immediately moving to any one corner where they would stand with closed eyes and both their hands joined in a posture of asking for something while their lips would move in prayer. Following this, they would kiss the mazar with their eyes while circumambulating around it. Both Hindus and Muslims were careful not to turn their back to the mazar and went out of the place walking backwards till they were out of the chamber.

100 A detailed discussion of the dargah trust in the context of sacred spaces and institutionalization has been included in the next chapter.
Malang Baba to the mountain and was as pious a saint. Further down was Jhule Lal mandali – a place for Sindhis to gather and sing bhajans and hold bhandaras for devotees visiting Haji Malang. The Sindhis from Ulhasnagar were a prominent sight in Haji Malang and played a crucial role in various aspects of life on the mountain village. For example, most of the public utility services along the mountain like drinking water facilities, toilets, and dispensaries bore the name of a Sindhi Bhojwani family who seem to have dedicated these services to the devotees of Haji Malang Baba. On the other hand, it was a Sindhi from Ulhasnagar who ran a Naga sadhu Akhada along the mountain and called himself a Mahant – a Sadhu practising sanatan dharm. Falling in between would be Baba Sidhwani who called himself a Sufi and had built Sufi Darshan, a structure that housed deities and praying spaces from across religions.

Describing the Sindhis, Shail Mayaram (2005: 167) refers to the liminal identity of the Sindhis that lies at the intersection of Hinduism, Islam, and Sikhism. Most Sindhis are Nanak Panthis or followers of Sufis like Lal Shahbaz Qalandhar and Shah Latif. They follow the Muslim calendar and resemble Muslims in their language and dress. Not surprisingly, there is a large Sindhi presence in the Middle East.

Another instance of ‘in-between ness’ is apparent in the positioning of a Santoshi Mata temple built adjacent to an open chillah of Gaus Pak. Babu, a faqir born of Hindu parents from Karnataka and later dedicated by them to Malang Sarkar’s service was the custodian of both these shrines. It did not perturb him that he was maintaining the shrines supposedly belonging to two ‘categorically different’ traditions. In fact it became a matter of pride for him as he proclaimed how “this entire mountain range is the abode of living saints (zinda waliyon ka pahad hai”). Babu believed that he belonged to Malang and that even his long hair belonged to him ("Main Malang ka hi hoon, mere baal uske hi hai"). Sitting inside a hut cum shrine, Babu pointed to an idol of Renuka Mata and mentioned that he was her devotee. Pointing to another photo in his room, Babu explained that “this photo showed the horse of Hasan Hussain Baba and it comes out

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101 Sanatan dharm refers to a collective of best practices that directs one to live the life of a proper Hindu with his worldly duties and responsibilities striking a balance with the divine ones (Mahant Bhaninath - Kanyphata Yogi)

102 Refer to the previous chapter for an introduction to Gursahani

103 Gaus Pak refers to Abdul Qadir Hilani of Baghdad who is revered as the biggest pir in Islam
during Moharram (Muslim festival). Faqirs take out this procession in Mahim from Makhdoomi's dargah and come here. The faqirs then dance here and go into a trance before they proceed to Gulbarga from where they go to Madras. They end their journey at Ajmer, the abode of Garib Nawaz.

Babu enquired if we were ‘Hindus’ so that he could put a vermillion mark on our forehead and mentioned with scorn that “Muslims were too rigid and did not like such things” (obviously unaware that the researcher’s companion was a Muslim who readily leaned forward so that his forehead could be smeared with vermillion). At the same time, his narration of Haji Malang Baba’s arrival from Mecca during Ramzan and his affiliations to Hassan Hussain Baba demonstrated a phenomenon wherein it was most difficult to contain him in any one religious category. Another such space was the Naga Sadhu Akhada where Naga Sadhus from the Kanphata Yog order gathered to celebrate the punya tithi (death anniversary) of Vitthal Baba. The history of Vitthal Baba was a contested one in the vicinity of Haji Malang as local people contended that he

104 Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti, the famous Sufi saint whose dargah at Ajmer is an important pilgrimage centre
105 As part of consolidation of their traditions and practice, Hindu monastic orders developed "militant" orders called naga-s ("naked ascetics" in Hindi), arranged in groups or congregations called akharas or akharas (meaning in Hindi an "arena" or "place for wrestling" but coming to mean congregations of militant sadhus or holy men), groups of Yogins trained in martial arts to defend the monastic institutions against the encroachment of Muslim bands or other, hostile Hindu groups
http://www.indiana.edu/~isp/cd_rom/mod_13/mod_13_x.htm
106 The Nath Yogis are called "Kanphata" ("ear-split" in Hindi) because of the practice of cutting the cartilage in the ears in order to hold the large earrings that the cult followers wear
http://www.indiana.edu/~isp/cd_rom/mod_13/mod_13_x.htm
“used to be nothing but a coolie and his name has been used by some sadhus to capture space on the mountain in order to earn money and wield their power over public”. However, for the sadhus at the Naga Sadhu Akhada, Vitthal Maharaj was a great devotee of Datt Maharaj who had come to the mountain for tapasya and also drew Haji Malang Baba who came here to revere Datt Maharaj and continued to live on the mountain.

It was evident that the Naga sadhus were here with a mission of promoting Hindu Samanta dharm and since they were aware of people’s devotion towards Haji Malang Baba, they projected him as Datt Maharaj’s devotee so that Datt Maharaj – a symbol of Hindu tradition – would be projected as a deity even the powerful Haji Malang Baba revered. What is evident is a continuous process of identification and counter-identification of divine personae essentially based on the agenda that the agency posits. On the other hand, it is indeed interesting that the sadhus did not wish to reject any tradition and often remarked that “sadhus and malangs are the same and they cannot be categorized into religious or caste-based denominations107.”

Strategically speaking, this made them popular among people who have been visiting the place to show their allegiance towards shared spaces and perspectives. In order to drive this point more emphatically, the Naga Sadhu Akhada was a space opened up to both sadhus and faqirs who sat together to smoke cannabis, share stories and perform karamats or items (miracles in the form of pieces of acrobatics or self flagellation that made them stand out from other people and attest their identities as world renouncers). Both the sadhus and the faqirs shared similar sartorial characteristics like loose robes – saffron for sadhus and usually green, black or white for faqirs – unkempt beards, pierced

107 “Kanphata Yogi-s,” or “Gorakhnathi Yogi-s” were followers of Tantric yoga and hatha-yoga (“exertion discipline”) and appear to be related to older traditions of both Hindu (Kapalika and Kalamukha Shaiva groups) and Buddhist (Vajrayana or "Diamond Vehicle") Tantric traditions from the preceding Indic period. The focus in these Shaiva ascetic groups is on becoming a “master” (nathu), or “perfected” Yogin (siddha) by making use of magico-religious rituals (including alchemical, occult and erotic ritual performances) and extreme Yogic exertions of posture and breathing. They were largely low-caste groups and paid little attention to caste rules. They became widely prevalent as magic-workers and healers on a popular level in North and Central India between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries, and they seem to have interacted easily with Sufi Shaykhs and Pir, possibly because of their low caste status and their general indifference to issues of caste.
ears, especially for the Kanphata sadhus and skull caps specific to the faqirs to mark out their ambiguous allegiance to Islam.

Voices of Absolutism

Though a hint of contestation of Haji Malang Baba’s divine dominance by the sadhus seems to be diluted by their strategic stance of accommodation, the mountain is certainly not free from contesting voices that are in favour of religious absolutism or what could be called religio-political movements. In a bid to “free Malang-gad from the clutches of the unpatriotic Muslims”, the Shiv Sena started a movement in 1986 under the leadership of Anand Dighe. Every year, the Shiv Sena, including Bajrang Dal\textsuperscript{105} members mobilise huge numbers of people from neighbouring villages and other places in Thane district to throng to Haji Malang. The groups come on the day of the annual urs and raise provocative slogans like \textit{Aai Bhawani Shakti de/ Malang-gada la mukti de} (Give us Courage Mother Bhawani/ Set Malang-gad free)! The crowd also enters the Haji Malang dargāh in the evening and sings \textit{bhajans} while a large number of police personnel cordon them off from the general crowd of devotees who feel threatened and insecure owing to the aggressiveness of the saffron wielding group of Shiv Sena and Bajrang Dal supporters.

\textsuperscript{105} Bajrang Dal refers to a right wing political party with its ideology based on Hindu as the form of cultural nationalism that must prevail in India among all communities. They draw their name from the Hindu god Hanuman (monkey god) who is also known as ‘Bajrangbali’ and is a character from the epic Ramayana where the monkey god was the greatest devotee of Lord Rama.
Though this is a ‘once in a year’ feature, the group has marked out certain spaces which have been established as potent symbols of their presence on the mountain throughout the year. One such physical space is the nav Durga mandir halfway between the foot of the mountain and the Haji Malang dargah. Pandurang Shankar Powar — a Maratha kumbi belonging to the Patil gharana (family-subcaste) was the pujari (priest) of this temple. According to his narration:

My mother’s name was Muktabai Shankar Powar. Durga Mata appeared in her dreams and said, “Bring me out from under the ground and establish me. Dig a well around this place for the drinking water facility of the public”. It was then that the temple was built in 1970 and it cost Rupees ten lakh. All this work was done here in Dighe saab’s (Late Shiv Sena leader Anand Dighe) name. Mata said, “Whatever work you do for mankind, do it in my name”. But Dighe did it in his own name. He got this temple built and then met with an accident during Ganpati and died. Mata took revenge for not listening to her orders.

Powar’s description of the origin of the temple is replete with symbolic interpretations in keeping with the socio-political nature of the Haji Malang mountain. Considering Shiv Sena’s Shivaji centric ideology of a Hindu Maratha nation, it would not be an exaggeration to interpret that tracing his lineage to the Marathas combined with his association with Shiv Sena’s Anand Dighe, Powar alluded to the history of Shivaji’s assertion of a Maratha Hindu identity to challenge both the Brahminical caste order as well as Aurangzeb’s Muslim rule. On one hand, this challenged the custodial rights of the Brahmin Ketkar family as it also contested the dominant popularity of Haji Malang Baba as a Muslim saint. Powar contested this claim more emphatically when he mentioned that “Vrajreshwari Mata sent kulburgi Baba Macchhindranath (the one who emerged from the belly of the fish) here to destroy the rakshash. After destroying the evil, he fulfilled his duty towards his religion and went out to travel. That is when a Muslim named Haji came here after performing Hajj and died here and later got popularized as Haji Malang”.

Despite all his attempts to question the origins of Haji Malang Baba, Powar mentioned how people came to the mountain to ask for boons, barren mothers asked for children and returned to find their wishes fulfilled. Ultimately, he also based his narration on people’s perspective of Baba’s power that did not discriminate. Even his story about the origin of
the Durga mandir was based on the orders of the goddess to build facilities for people and though it was Anand Dighe who promoted the mandir, his political might was overshadowed by the moral revenge of the goddess. Also, the story never mentioned that the temple was meant for people from any particular section of society and not for others and Powar mentioned that though Muslims, Christians and Parsees did not visit the temple, Sikhs, Nau Baudh (neo-Buddhists) came and even faqirs visited the place to seek blessings.

Pandurang Shankar Powar passed away during the research exercise and the Nav Durga mandir continues to enjoy political patronage which is evident from a large framed photograph of Anand Dighe – the deceased Shiv Sena leader who began the Malang-gad mukti movement – adorning the entrance to the inner chamber. Also Shiv Sena makes associations between Nav Durga and Bhawani – the female deity who Shivaji revered – in order to draw parallels with Shivaji’s fight against Muslim domination. However, the Nav Durga Mandir has more complex associations which go beyond the mere political agenda of the Shiv Sena. The Agris from Haji Malang wadi considered Pandurang Shankar Powar to be an outsider and hence explained the existence of the temple as a guise for earning money without any historical background unlike the credibility of
Baba’s dargah. It seemed that while the Agris belonged to a section of the Hindu community, yet, in this case their interests clashed with that of Shiv Sena and its political ideology of religious absolutism. For them, the pahad drew people owing to its unique characteristic of Hindu-Muslim coexistence and any threat to this was to be countered vehemently. Such movements around a singular identity had a direct implication on livelihood, trade relations across communities and issues of control over resources on the mountain.

Drawing from the theme of control over resources, there is a sacred space along the mountain which is lesser known but extremely significant for understanding the relationship between socio-political power and sacred spaces. As one ascends the mountain, a little beyond the Durga mandir is a narrow forest path on the left leading to a spot where a tribal woman sold lemon water. She also guarded the shrine of Wagh Jai, Wagh Devi or Wagleshwari Devi (this is what the board leading to the shrine said in 2008). Underlying the three names is a past fraught with oppression, adaptation, assertion and co-option. Personal conversations with an academician who had been visiting this place for many years revealed that the shrine used to be called Wagh Jai even till ten years back. Wagh Jai is a popular tribal deity in Maharashtra and is found in almost all villages and adjoining tribal settlements.

However, conversations with people revealed no mention of Wagh Jai and instead it had become Wagh devi. The most interesting perspective regarding this deity came from an old Agri man in Haji Malang wadi village who claimed that Wagh devi was a deity who would be found only in the open amidst trees since there was no hukm (divine order or instruction) to build a temple to enshrine the deity. Naturally, visits in 2007 revealed that indeed there were stones marked with red vermilion powder at the site on the mountain and this was known as the mandir of Wagh devi. The woman who lived near the shrine attested that truly, there was no hukm to build a temple at the site109. The year 2008 revealed a completely different picture when it was found that a small Wagh devi temple

109 It has been found that at many sacred sites, there is no hukm from the deity or Baba or the saint associated with the site to build any structure. A somewhat detailed discussion around the symbolic aspects of this phenomenon has been undertaken in the next chapter that deals with the ideas of institutionalization of faith, structure and anti-structure.
had been built at the site and saffron flags adorned the place which was marked with a board indicating Wagheshwari Puratan mandir (old Wagheshwari temple). The flags were typically Shiv Sena flags and the name Wagheshwari signified an attempt to Hinduise the tribal deity by making the name sound like other popular deities such as Vrajreshwari and Jogeshwari (kul devats in many Hindu families).

The evident attempt at the saffronisation of the site also indicated the hegemonisation and saffronisation of the tribal communities around Haji Malang who were continuously striving to strike a balance between their tribal traditions and ‘more appropriate’ caste-Hindu traditions as followed by the Agris in the villages. Jodha Gangad from Bhendi pada (the tribal settlement adjoining Haji Malang wadi) belonged to the Thakur community and when asked about the Wagheshwari mandir, mentioned that it was “Wagh devi’s mandir” and it “actually belonged to the adivasi log (tribal community)”. He further lamented that just because it was a tribal deity, “the rascal Agris had not built a temple for Wagh devi while they had spent a lot of money to reconstruct the dargahs, Shiv mandir and Maruti mandir”. Either Jodha did not know that there was no hukm for a temple or he felt that having a structure to enshrine the deity might mean an assertion for the tribal community that had a history of oppression under the dominance of the landed Agris who had also “manipulated the dargah trust and procured all the employment at Baba’s dargah”.

It seemed quite possible that history of tension between the Agris and the adivasis had led to the adivasi community’s attempt at emulating Agri Hindu practices in order to integrate with the larger village society and tradition. To this end, Jodha’s son Shiv was very particular in mentioning that the Thakurs in Bhendi pada were all Hindu Thakurs as opposed to Warli Thakurs who were not considered to be Hindus. Jodha added that they were indeed Hindus and only a Brahman could officiate in their marriage ceremonies. The Thakurs also chose to differentiate their community from the Katkaris who they said were alcoholics and lazy. Another indication of the sanskritisation process of the Thakurs was their appreciation for people who were vegetarians. As he invited the researcher for lunch, Jodha maintained with much guilt that the adivasis still practised non-

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110 Maruti is another name for Hanuman, the monkey god
vegetarianism; on the other hand, as soon as he learnt that the researcher loved fish and chicken, he seemed overjoyed and started narrating how their kul devat Khandoba\textsuperscript{111} was very fond of chicken too. This movement between one's own cultural mores and an attempt to emulate the hegemonic forces (in this case the Agris), may have also led to a hegemonising attitude within the Thakurs. Despite being adivasis, their ultimate desire to be identified with the dominant Agris had led them to exclude other adivasis such as Katkaris and Warlis from their social networks. Such an attitude is so deeply entrenched that Singh (2004b) in his People of India series observes how the Thakurs of Thane district mixed with the Kunbis and Kolis but refrained from inter-dining with Katkaris and Warlis in their area.

The history of domination suffered by the landless adivasis had another fall out in that the Shiv Sena had been successful in integrating adivasi youth into the Malang-gad mukti movement. There was an evident disagreement on this between Jodha and his young son Shiv. While the father strongly criticised the Shiv Sena for disturbing peace on the mountain and causing distress to people, Shiv defended the party saying that it was not the Sena, but Jai Bhim (reference to a Dalit political party) party that was involved in such disrupting activities. Whatever the case, both Jodha and his son were proud of the fact that Jodha's son-in-law was a Shiv Sena neta (activist/leader) and wielded considerable influence in political circles even as they pointed out to the son-in-law's photograph alongside huge framed photographs of the Shiv Sena patriarch Balasaheb Thackeray and his deceased wife.

It is interesting how Shiv Sena had gone about engaging people in their ideological politics against the Muslims in Haji Malang and yet had to allow for shared spaces to be built in the vicinity of the mountain. One such case was that of Sufi Darshan built by a Sindhi Sidhwani. Sufi Darshan housed close to fifty deities from various religious traditions besides a chapel, a space for offering namaz and a space to pray in the way Parsees do in a fire temple. Sidhwani proclaimed that this was in honour of Haji Malang Baba and what he stood for with his principle of non-discrimination. The eighty two years old man believed in the Sufi principle of Haq Maujood (God is present everywhere)

\textsuperscript{111} Refer to Chapter V for references to Khandoba as a pastoral deity worshipped in Maharashtra
in every form) and travelled far and wide to spread the message of interfaith dialogue and peace. However, he lamented that his way of life was not appreciated by members of groups such as the Shiv Sena who had created obstacles in his way of building Sufi Darshan and other public utilities along the Haji Malang mountain.

However, instead of giving up his persistence to build Sufi Darshan and the dispensary run from it, Sidhwani chose to understand the psychology of the Shiv Sena and its leader Anand Dighe. Sidhwani got Dighe to inaugurate Sufi Darshan and one gets to see a large framed photograph of the deceased leader at the entrance. Though this seems as a compromise, yet it could be interpreted as strategic accommodation in order to promote something that is syncretic and shared in appeal. What is of more importance is the revelation of the need for power that political leaders harbour. Sufi Darshan is a classic case where a Shiv Sena leader allowed for a shared sacred space just because he received a position of honour to be associated as its eternal patron. In return, what got built was a space that presents a window to the numerous traditions in the world even if it may be true that Sufi Darshan was Sidhwani’s way of immortalising his own presence in Haji Malang.

It emerges from the above discussion that sacred spaces as symbols of shared traditions and perspectives contain many layers of significance within and more importantly, these layers bring out the complex interplay of the various stakeholders associated with these spaces. So far what have been examined are the historical or legendary origins of traditions and spaces particularly from the point of view of people who are closely related to them as guardians or custodians. Going beyond this realm, what requires attention is how do such spaces thrive and continue to exist as they do for generations together. This is where the attention shifts to devotees who visit the mountain village. People from far and wide choose to continue visiting and as mentioned earlier, their sole motivation is a quest for well-being through their associations with the various manifestations of the divine and the spiritual. The questions that arise and require examination are:

- How do people account for the multiple faiths they adhere to in overtly professing a particular religion as well as professing deep devotion to a saint from a ‘different’ tradition?
How does the Brahmin custodian balance his role – that of belonging to the highest Hindu caste as well as serving as a Muslim saint?

Where do sadhus and faqirs situate themselves within the realm of religious boundaries?

Beyond Categories: Liminality, Syncretism and Group Alliances

Rahim narrated several stories of Haji Malang Baba’s miraculous powers and one of them went thus:

A poor man who was very troubled came here. He was troubled with everything in life – his work, his wife, his home. He came to the dargah and after offering salami (salute/obeisance) to Baba, he went to the ghode ka top and sat down under a tree. He started staying there and every morning and evening, he would come to the dargah to attend the laball and then go away to a place near the chashma (a place where Baba had pierced the earth to make water for the mountain which otherwise used to be a dry terrain). One morning as he slept, he heard a voice, “pluck as many leaves as you can from this tree and take them away with you”. The man looked all around and finding no one, went back to sleep. The same voice spoke the same words to him again. This prompted the man to start plucking the leaves and when he had plucked whatever he could, he put them in a sack and went back home. When people in his village asked him about what happened at Baba’s place, he opened the sack to show them the leaves and instead found it to be filled with money to the amount of leaves he had plucked.

Rahim emphasised that this particular man was a Hindu – a significant story to attest the principle of non-discrimination that Haji Malang Baba stood for. His second story included a Pathan who was killed by Baba’s wrath for being over ambitious and proud and once again stressed upon moral piety as being an important element required in Baba’s devotees. It may be said here that when it comes to existential issues of day-to-day life, religious boundaries vanish and it does not really matter who one propitiates as long as one’s wishes are fulfilled. Nagma, a young Muslim girl from Mumbai – who had been visiting Haji Malang Baba’s dargah since her childhood – made it a point to stop and pray at the shrine of Santoshi Mata whenever she visited the mountain. Despite being a Muslim she had her valid reasons for doing so and also explained that this was a recent practice begun after she got married. According to her, Santoshi Mata is worshipped by women for the well being of their husbands and being a married woman now, her
husband's well being was Nagma's primary concern. Similarly for Govind Patil – the Agri ex-sarpanch from Haji Malang wadi – what is important is his grandson's physical health since he was born due to Haji Malang Baba's blessings. It is the same man who finds Muslims destructive owing to Alauddin Khilji's conquests, but as a grandfather he insists that his grandson wears a green taawiz (amulet or charm to ward off evil) – blessed by Haji Malang Baba – around his neck.

Drawing from her ethnographic work among the Sidi\(^{112}\) community of Gujarat, Helene Basu (2004: 244) accounts for similar instances as she observes that on the level of personal experiences and motives, distinctions of religious boundaries disappear. Her fieldwork reveals that: “Issues of everyday life such as success in business or school, a good marriage match for son/daughter, or marital fertility are the common and most basic matters for which the protective support of Sidi saints are sought from supplicants of all communities”. At the same time, it is important to understand how interests and motives of people are also determined by contextual group interests. For example, the Agri ex-sarpanch who was an ardent devotee of Haji Malang Baba did not allot land to Sidhwani who wanted to be buried according to Islamic rituals. According to Patil, he is actually a Hindu Sindhi who had converted to Islam. From the Agri point of view, this was not a right thing to do and encouragement from the ex-sarpanch might have provoked negative passions among his fellow Hindu Agris.

It is within this oscillation between identities and multiplicity of beliefs that one could situate liminality as a concept that guides people in situations that cross boundaries and categories. The most striking instance of this is found in Vishnu Ketkar – the Brahmin custodian of Haji Malang Baba's dargah. Clothed in a magenta silk dhoti (cloth wound around legs), Ketkar performed the aarti (ritual of worship) of the Elephant god Ganpati at his house and towards the end of the ritual invoked Haji Malang Baba before invoking Lord Ganesha for bestowing prosperity on the family. The entire episode happened in a

\(^{112}\) The name 'Sidi' refers to people whose ancestors have immigrated from East Africa as slaves, seamen or traders. Situated at the margins of the world of Sunni Muslims, a Sidi kinship network emerged in Gujarat and this is collectively referred to as jamat (Basu 2004: 236)
small space built for the ritual with a Ganesha idol strategically placed below a black and white sketch of the Haji Malang dargah. Explaining the ritual, Ketkar reasoned that:

I must invoke Haji Malang Baba and I invoke him before any other god while praying. We celebrate all Hindu festivals at home like Ganpati, Diwali, Dusshera but everything must be done with regard to Haji Malang Baba. During Raksha Bandhan, we get rakhis for gods at home and also send a rakhi for Baba. On Vijay Dashami, we bring home leaves as symbols of gold and keep them in a clean place at home. We also send these leaves to Baba. On Diwali too we make offerings to Baba. During Holi, we make garlands of shakar kathi and the first garland is offered to Baba and then similar ones are offered to gods at home. After Dussehra, comes Kojagari when we reap the main paddy harvest. Garlands are made out of paddy, marigold, forest flowers and mango leaves. These garlands are then offered to gods and only then the family eats food. A similar garland is also sent to the dargah where it is used for decoration.

It may be pointed out that in other aspects of his life, Ketkar attempted to uphold his position as a Brahmin as both he and his wife emphasised that they were “pure vegetarians” in their diet as befit a Brahmin from Maharashtra. In another instance, during Ganpati, they invited a Brahmin Mahatma (sadhu) who lauded them for their high birth and urged them to maintain their responsibilities towards the society as Brahmins. Posited against this are symbols at the entrance to his village where one finds two samadhis (memorials) – belonging to his deceased father and uncle who had also officiated as Baba’s custodians. Though they had been cremated according to Brahminical rituals, nevertheless, their memorials resemble the mazar of Haji Malang Baba and are covered with red and green chadars. Both the memorials were treated as sacred spaces by the tribals who inhabited the village and they were extremely possessive of this space. In one sense, it was apparent that these memorials accorded significance to an otherwise ordinary rural settlement and hence were markers to symbolise the status of the village. On the other hand, they stood for a convergence of traditions and faith that defied ‘boxing’ of identities into ‘this’ or ‘that’.

In both cases – performance of rituals and establishment of memorials, Ketkar and his family entered the liminal zone where social structures seemed to disappear. They became (1) custodians of a Muslim saint and (2) ardent devotees of Haji Malang Baba. In the second case, they became equal to all other devotees of Baba who may be from the
'lower' caste groups such as the Agris or from tribal communities such as the Pardhis, Thakurs, Katkaris and so on. Extending his status of a devotee, the Brahmin Ketkar also came to be at par with all Muslims, Parsees, Sikhs and Christians who believed in Baba.

Similar feelings were reciprocated by Muslims who ritualistically visited the Ketkar family house to celebrate Ganpati. It was interesting to see how most of the offerings for the Elephant god came from Muslims living on the mountain. Two Muslim faqirs had come from the mountain for the aarti and Ganpati darshan. They received prasad from Ketkar. Soon, some more Muslims – conspicuous in their skull caps – arrived at the Ketkar house to be a part of Ganpati celebrations. They returned to the mountain only after they had had tea and snacks or a proper meal served inside the house. The party sat down for tea and snacks (sweets and fried items) and Ketkar invited them to start saying “Bismillah karo (start in the name of Allah)”. None of them seemed to be observing roza though it was Ramzan. Ketkar’s interaction with them showed a relationship that had lasted for many years and the conversations revealed how they shared snippets from their childhood days when they had grown up together. Very strikingly, none of the Agris visited the Ganpati at the Ketkar house on any of the days of the festival.

Conversations with elderly Agri men and women revealed a tinge of disappointment in the fact that the control over the dargah resources had passed on to the Brahmin owing to their associations with the Peshwas who were also Brahmins. This tension was further reinforced when Vishnu Ketkar’s son mentioned how ‘some Muslims’ from the mountain along with ‘some Patils (Agris)’ had formed an alliance against the Ketkars. Historical references would lead us to find that indeed, across the rules of Muslim kingdoms, Marathas and Peshwas in Maharashtra, a number of shrines – both temples as well as dargahs – had been gifted away to Brahmins who later became their custodians. In fact, an old Agri man who had also served on the Haji Malang dargah trust emphasised that “the Peshwa from Pune had given the Brahman this right (Pune ke Peshwa ne isko sanad diya tha). The Peshwa was a Brahman and hence he bestowed the rights of the shrine on the Brahmin asking him to take care of the dargah”.


Roy Burman (2002) recounts that from early on, various groups of Brahmins served the Muslim states of the Deccan and were crucial to their functioning as a fall out of which, they probably gained a degree of social mobility. Naturally, the partnership between the elites – Brahmins and other ruling classes – would have been seen as a threat to other caste and class groups which were lower in the social order. This dynamics is echoed in the case of Haji Malang where there are various alliances operating at the same time. There is a Brahmin-Muslim nexus where the Ketkar family shares spaces with Muslims in administering day-to-day operations at the dargah. This group includes a bevy of faqirs who were apparently encouraged by the deceased Brahmin custodian to settle on the mountain and since then they share an excellent relationship with the custodian’s family as the mountain has become their source of livelihood. On the other hand, wealthier sections of the Muslims on the mountain vie for their share of identification with the dargah and hence have formed strategic alliances with powerful Agri (The Sarpanch of Haji Malang wadi Group Gram Panchayat is always an Agri) landowners who comprise the predominant population around the mountain.

Another group that challenges the social structures with its liminality is the eunuchs. The eunuchs came to Haji Malang as it signified a liminal space that challenged binarisms. While this was a largely worldly assertion of identity, they also engaged in paying obeisance to Baba’s divine grace as his devotees. On one hand, they danced and sang for spectators who thronged during the urs since it was their worldly occupation while on the other the Gurus (heads and leaders) from the community had the right to hoist a flag announcing the beginning of the annual urs as did the trustees and the Brahmin custodian. While we see a coming together of different religions, the eunuch also symbolises an embodiment of both the female and the male. They form the interstitial space between genders. Another point of significance is that in almost all traditions, the eunuch is supposed to be auspicious in certain rituals such as birth, marriage and their revelry does not discriminate between a Hindu birth and a Muslim birth. Even in case of Haji Malang’s shrine, they seemed to occupy importance – economically, symbolically and ritually.
Symbolically speaking, the eunuch community constitutes a liminal third space in a society that is normatively based on the binarism of the *male* and the *female* and is considered to be at the peripheries of society. At the same time, they proclaim their allegiance to multiple gods from various traditions. In this context, Haji Malang integrates the 'core' and 'periphery' of the human society and coalesces the power dimensions that otherwise exist evidently. The eunuchs are a part of the devotees and participate in all the rituals of the urs along with everyone else and the fact that they enjoy the right to hoist the flag accords them a special status unlike the scorn which greets them in the larger world.

All such instances of moving away from routine social 'norms' signify a defiance of structures. Drawing from Victor Turner's concept of the 'communitas', Deflem (1991) argues that communitas can generally be defined in opposition to structure: Communitas appears where structure does not. Social structure refers to an arrangement of positions or statuses. As Turner discovered from his analysis of passage rites among the Ndembu, the characteristics of the social structure are no longer and not yet applicable during the intermediate period of liminality in ritual. What is brought about in liminality is what Turner called communitas. In Turner's work, communitas in rituals refers to liminality, marginality, inferiority, and equality. The ritual subjects are during the seclusion period "neither here nor there"; they are subjected to the rest of the community and treated as equals to one another, creating a generic bond and a sentiment of "humankindness" between them. However, as we have seen earlier, even within liminality lay hints of strategic accommodation in order to sustain traditions of shared existence. These do not have to be conscious processes, but nevertheless warrant attention in order to understand the social order that permeates day-to-day interface between communities.

**Concluding Remarks**

Three key arguments that could emerge from the above discussions are as follows:

- The implication of group memories contribute to the making of shared traditions and the changes in these memories based on group interests further reshape the past. In that sense, any past cannot be set in time since it is a continuous process
of reconstruction. This phenomenon signifies the strength of people’s processes of engaging in interactions, accommodation and resistance that culminate in shared perspectives around symbols and meanings attached to them.

- Manifestation of shared pasts in the form of physical structures often brings about structural changes in the dimensions of people and interactions. In such cases, contestations may become absolute, but once again it is important to understand that even such absolutisms have phases where concessions are allowed in order to win support from people engaging in spontaneous processes of acting and reacting. Also various strands of Hinduism, Islam, Zoroastrianism and tribalism emerge at this site and it seems like a confluence that defies homogenization of any of these faiths.

- While it is true that concepts of liminality and syncretism could be used to describe such processes where oscillations become the norm, one needs to be cautious not to use these concepts as the last word. The kind of layering that is evident from the above discussions, leads us to more issues. One wonders whether all the processes described above have been conscious efforts to come together or not? Khan (1997: 23) calls the conceptualization of such processes a reductionist approach. She asks: "...is the so-called ‘syncretism’ of a particular tradition the result of a conscious effort of its religious teachers to reconcile opposite or conflicting belief’s? Or is it the consequence of a ‘spontaneous’ process occurring at the unconscious level, as in the case of the so-called popular cults?"

- The political significance of shared spaces is evident from the way the legend of Haji Malang Baba has unfolded over many years. What Baba symbolizes is conquering people’s hearts rather than their territories. Roy Bunnan (2002) explains this phenomenon as the catalytic role played by Sufis and saints to win over the support of local people by establishing a moral order rather than conquering them through coercive power. This in turn would be patronized by the then rulers thus leading to consolidation of territorial power without disturbing existing social or moral structures. Thus the divine/moral and the temporal power shares a common berth.
A simultaneous existence of the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane’ – the custodian possesses spiritual powers bestowed upon him by Baba and on the other hand he is a businessman who runs a catering business, has some agriculture and also is a part of the administrative *dargah* trust; as for devotees, while they treat Baba’s miraculous powers as characteristic of his divine grace, they also bargain with Baba and promise to make votive offerings if their wishes are granted – becomes the hallmark of such phenomena. Such processes signify a constant moving together of both worlds and shifting in and out of both as situations warrant. The Hindu Brahmin custodian brings along another interesting aspect in that he easily moves between the dual roles of belonging to the highest Hindu caste and at the same time serving a Muslim saint. The liminal idea of adhering to more than one religious tradition can be understood in this context. For an old Muslim devotee from Pune, there was absolutely no hesitation in accepting *Maa Saab* – Baba’s Brahmin daughter – and holding her in the highest esteem and this is an instance of coexistence of multiple values. Khan (2004: 213) interprets such phenomenon as “the intermediary location” that “guarantees the existence of multiple values and the free exchange of ideas in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance”.

This continuous movement between the spiritual and the worldly, between multiple understandings becomes an interesting dimension of analysis to understand how people use various meanings and associations to validate their claims to something that oscillates between the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane’. It is this dimension of the place that makes it interesting to study how shared meanings have been attached to various deities, shrines and spaces within the same geographical context. Syncretic management of differences through negotiations of space, traditions and rituals make it a phenomenon pregnant with symbols of living together which brings with it interactions, adaptations, resistance and yet coexistence.

As a manifestation of a site pregnant with multiple symbols, Haji Malang becomes representative of a larger order with the various strains of societal processes culminating here. While we say that society is in a continuous process of reconstruction, we must keep in mind that such reconstructions lead to the shifting bases of power across community groups. As evident from group alliances that have been formed with various
interests in mind, we see how the concepts of liminality and syncretism – though not consciously – could become bedrocks of strategic power dimensions. What may be seen as purely cultural or religious synthesis may have deep undertones of accommodations that are pragmatic to existential realities that demand partnerships across groups and communities.