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Women's 'popular' practices as critique: Vernacular religion in Indian and Pakistani Punjab

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SYNOPSIS

This article highlights women's popular spiritual practices in Punjab and examines how spiritual rituals and events performed, largely by women are either conveniently overlooked by religious authorities or seen as contentious by more rigid perspectives on religious belonging. By focusing upon women's participation and worship at spiritual sites and functions, attention is drawn to the continuum of practices that run between life-course rituals and acts of spiritual embodiment and worship, making it difficult to maintain such firm distinctions between cultural and religious practices. By focusing upon examples in Punjab, across India and Pakistan, the article suggests that there is an underlying vernacular spiritual culture in the region within which a *cosmology of spiritual acts of belief* occupies a central space. The article will draw upon secondary ethnographic studies as well as upon fieldwork conducted by the authors in developing a picture of women's 'popular' practices.

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Introduction

Women's 'popular' religious practices form a central part of everyday spiritual and cultural life in South Asia. They serve as markers of routines, rituals and life-course while also representing acts of belief, belonging and location at the household and community levels. Despite this centrality to contemporary social life in South Asia, women's popular practice is quite often dismissed within more official discourses on 'religion' as either deviation or as expressions of the female domain of 'culture' (Ahmed, 2002). Indeed, the dichotomy between religion and culture forms part of a domain of binaries. Scriptural and vernacular; formal and common; mainstream and marginal are examples of the problematic of defining and confining the vast terrain of spiritual practices. Our aim is to contribute to this debate through the lens of gender, by considering the ways in which women's vernacular spiritual practices in the region of Punjab spanning the Indian and Pakistani border disrupt and mould the binary of formal and informal religion.

This article aims to highlight women's popular spiritual practices in Punjab in the manner in which they function. Two areas in particular will be focused upon. First, how spiritual rituals and events performed, largely by women are either conveniently overlooked by religious authorities or seen as contentious by more rigid perspectives on religious belonging. Secondly, women's participation and worship at spiritual sites draws our attention to the continuum of practices that run between life-course rituals and acts of spiritual embodiment and worship, making it difficult to maintain such firm distinctions between cultural and religious practices. Women's popular practices illustrate the gendered nature of spiritual experience in Punjab. Perhaps even more profoundly, women's practices can also highlight the tenuousness of the boundaries so often drawn to distinguish large religious categories such as Sikh, Muslim, Christian and Hindu, through acts and rituals of worship and celebration. Thus, the article will argue that women's popular practices offer a lens through which we can better understand the social context within which spiritual and cultural expressions operate, an approach which does not rest upon fixed notions of religious belonging or categories. By focusing upon examples in Punjab, across India and Pakistan, a region divided ostensibly along religious lines in 1947, the article suggests that there is an

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underlying vernacular spiritual culture in the region within which a *cosmology of spiritual acts of belief* occupies a central space. It is within this space that many popular practices of women in Punjab can be better understood.

Rethinking religion through women's 'popular' practice

The vocabulary commonly used to discuss popular religious practice is rather problematic on the grounds of both vocabulary and meaning. Frames for understanding religious practice are generally seen through binaries of informal–formal, common–elite, authentic–superstition, and orthodox–heterodox amongst others (Scribner, 1984). These binaries are often used as methodological tools for charting out the domain of religious practices which exist within as well as outside of official discourses of religion in society. Focus upon rural, village or folk religion similarly shows how popular religious practice occupies a space which cuts across and is not entirely locatable within these binaries. Attention towards folk religion illustrates how roots of worship often predate formal religious traditions and have distinctively 'cult'-like practices, oral traditions and ritual devotion, such as phallic worship, idolatry and offerings, and in this sense unsettles any neat categorisation (Elgood, 2004; Oberoi, 1994). Despite this scholarship, studies still become engulfed within the binary-approach in which village or folk religion again is constructed as an opposite to urban, formal religion.

Popular religion has numerous connotations: a sense of the 'masses' or a 'bottom-up' position, new religious movements (Reader & Tanabe, 1998) or that which holds the most widespread currency or popularity of a particular time. The term popular religion is used in this article, however, to indicate a notion of religious acts, beliefs and activities which are practiced and experienced, rather than being defined and assigned (Davis, 1982). Thus, we use the term to denote the experiential dimension, or the sense of the popular being that which is tangible to the masses in a proximate sense. The term, as we use it here, also connotes an alignment with experiences of the 'ordinary', 'common' or the 'every day', which tend to exist alongside, though also both within and outside of formal institutionalised forms of religion. Women's practices operate within so many realms of religiosity that it is difficult to separate formal from informal, mainstream from marginal or any other distinctions to characterise their location. Therefore, it is only a sense of the *popular* rather than a definable terrain which we utilise for the purposes of this article.

The centrality of women's religious practice to religious life is not a new area of interest. A dominant current has been to examine women within formal notions of religion (i.e. women and Islam or women and Judaism) or to analyse the use of women within the construction of religious identities or movements (Jeffery & Basu, 1998; Bacchetta, 2004). Women, their bodies, access to education and resources dress and custom, to name a few aspects, have historically been utilised to erect and maintain boundaries between different religious identities and, in this sense, have been used as vehicles for social control and distinction. The deconstruction of religious, class or caste community identities through the lens of gender has been an important area of enquiry in the realm of understanding women's centrality to mainstream processes and social formations (Malhotra, 2002). However, by assuming the very

categories within the deconstruction exercise, one finds in the process that categories become perversely reified while other forms of identification and activity are overlooked. It is precisely for this reason that this article chooses the working definition introduced earlier of *popular* religion as the starting point from which to launch an examination of women's positionality. *Popular* religion, as an unfixed cosmology of spiritual acts, practices and beliefs which are proximate to women's everyday lives provides a lens not wholly confined to the categories of religious distinction. There are problems associated with locating and critically analysing women's position within religious discourse and practice, whether *popular* or otherwise. Ahmed (2002) poignantly addresses the myopic view of 'religion' inherent within discussions of religion and women:

While it is all very well to discuss women and, for example, Judaism, Islam or Buddhism, the assumptions that we bring to the issues are such that they preclude any genuine recasting of extant and widely held ideas about religion per se, as well as about women (Ahmed, 2002, p. 70).

Thus, the mainstreaming of a women-centred, feminist or gender analysis of religion has yet to sufficiently decentre the gendered, masculinist underpinnings of the disciplines of religious studies or theology. Women's practices engage with cultural expressions of spirituality which are often overlooked in terms of how religious identity is formally understood. However, acknowledging practices within the spiritual realm which are generally relinquished as 'cultural' rather than 'religious', such as idolatry, consultation with holy figures, the use of votives, or divas, broadens the lens of analysis of religious practice. Women's practices often tread the fine line distinction between sacrilege and culture. It is no wonder then, that women's practices including dress, mobility, social mores and education were targeted explicitly by the social reform movements of the 1920s and 1930s in India and by subsequent religious reform movements in post-colonial South Asia.

The perception of polarised religious categories has been highly discredited by the recognition of the multiple nature of practice and identification brought on by the onslaught of post-structuralist and post-colonial critiques of 'religion' (King, 1999). Assayag (2004) points out how a polarised understanding of Hindu–Muslim has been formulated out of a *de facto* acceptance of primordial distinctions, despite evidence of rich 'confluent' histories of coexistence and commonality. Analysis of the constructed nature of major religious boundaries, for instance, draws attention to state and other modes of control and rationalisation which have historically attempted to disrupt popular notions of religious pluralism rather than foster them (Malik, 2000; Mayaram, 1997).

The deconstruction of religion has indeed opened up the space for enquiry of women's positionality and agency. However, there are two noticeable trajectories that emerged out of this space. The first is that women's religious practice is seen through the construction of religious identities (Malhotra, 2002) and the second is of women being the vehicle for the furthering of colonial and communal agendas. Little attention has been paid to the spiritual practices of women as expressions of agency and control of private religiosity. This chapter will argue that women's practices exist alongside, coterminously, but often outside of the 'mainstream' religious discourse.

Cultural practice, sacred acts or religious belief?

In general then, my proposal is that when we talk of “religion” in a non-theological sense, we really mean “culture”, understood as the study of in-stitutionalized values, and the interpretation of symbolic systems, including the ritualization of everyday life. If we are to use the word “sacred” (though I am not convinced that we need it) it can be used to refer to those things which are fundamentally valued by a community; that these values can be identified as symbolically ordered and reproduced in a whole range of institutions. (Fitzgerald, 1997, p. 96)

Despite the religious ‘policing’ of women’s practices that occurs in women’s everyday lives, many practices by women have continued to operate within a relatively spiritually autonomous sphere. Autobiographical accounts of rural Punjabi life, such as this one by Giani Gurdi Singh (1965) are commonly understood as cultural, rather than spiritual, despite the overt references to everyday places of homage and worship:

The people of my village have so many things considered worthy of devotion. These could be large or small...Every caste has its own tomb or grave, belonging to their elders. Every well is a symbol of the God of water and every Pipal tree a sign of the god Brahma. Actually every place that gives something to the village is considered worthy of worship (Singh, 1965, p.68).

It is here that the question previously posed about the religious–cultural distinction becomes significant to understanding the Punjab context. The symbolic marking of texts such as the *Guru Granth Sahib* as being ‘essentially’ Sikh, or worship of living or eternalised *Pirs*, as inherently Muslim, is commonly upheld in defining or locating religious practice. The more formal of these settings tends to be at the tombs of *pirs/sants* or people who are known for their piety, and these burial sites become the focus for acts of worship which cross formal religious boundaries. In Bhatinda in East Punjab, *Jandwale Baba* is a well-known *pir* in the area known for possessing various powers in improving health, settling disputes among other things. *Jandwale Baba* uses rituals and practices otherwise defined as belonging to different religious—such as ‘*taveez*’ reflecting Muslim connotations, sacrifice of animals which could be seen as a Hindu ritual, and kirtans which draw from Sikh traditions. Similarly, in Amritsar the gurdwara complex of *Baba Buddha Ji* and in other parts of east Punjab there are other *pirs*, living and non-living, and *darga*’s which are sites of pilgrimage for people wanting male children, at which money, gifts and sweets are made as offerings. Despite such acts being consistently denounced by Sikh social reformers throughout the 20th century these practices continue.

Gendered locations and practices in the universe of spirituality and religion in Punjab represent an engagement with the interface between what is seen as formal (religious, spiritual) and informal (folk, cultural, mysticism, and kismet) (Ballard, 2000), whereby popular modes of spirituality can often represent critiques of mainstream social, religious and cultural orders. Women’s religious practice, as Ahmed (2002) argues, tends to reflect an experiential critique of monotheism as a masculinist endeavour of symbolic and absolute (male) authority. A

recognition of the range of women’s religious and spiritual practices widens the field of understanding of the realm of religious practice to include exchanges outside of formal places of worship which can involve mediators, healers, mendicants, *sants*, and *pirs*. Nonetheless, this is still a relational practice as most (though certainly not all) of these living intermediaries are men. The gendered space of formal worship often structures what is considered mainstream/formal and marginal/informal.

While one of the inferences of this argument is that there are multiple and overlapping ways of being religious, another dimension is that this multiplicity is often expressed through marginal or counter-hegemonic perspectives and practices. Caste and gender form bounded perceptions of religion which privilege upper caste, male leadership. The binaries of men/women and high/low caste become part of the way in which formal religious boundaries such as Sikh, Hindu and Muslim come to be formed and in turn are deconstructed in popular practices. This is not to say that women are less ‘formally’ religious or that men do not engage in popular practices, but rather to reveal the ways in which gender and caste frame the way in which *popular* and *mainstream* have come to be understood.

Punjabi popular spiritual practices or acts of piety and devotion do not fit neatly into existing frameworks of religious syncretism or heresy. In the Punjab colonial context Oberoi (1994, p. 2) articulates the dynamism and multiplicity in devotional practices through a dichotomy between folk and religious traditions. The suggestion here is that somehow the religious domain can only be seen in bounded terms, whereas our contention is that gender and caste are central to what becomes rendered as folk and what is seen as religious. In an attempt to avoid the conflictual stance that has often emerged in the debate between folk and religious or vernacular and scriptural traditions Mir (2006) argues that the starting point of analysis should be a shared notion of devotion and piety that is not predicated on pre-existing ideas of religious identity (Mir, 2006), even going beyond a concept of hybridity. Within this framework, there is no conflict with these shared notions of piety and those of the formal religious identity. Building up Mir’s argument, these shared notions or contexts may then be called Punjabi or Sindhi, rather than Muslim or Hindu, and could also then be complementary rather than in opposition to one another.

Teeaan da Mela

Teeaan da mela provides an example of a women-centred festival, with religious roots but whose evolution in the East Punjab context offers an insight into how women’s popular rituals and practice can be reinterpreted within a collective notion of celebration and festivity. The specificities of the context of kinship relations, and of women’s structural position within that context, are at the centre of how the festival has evolved in East Punjab. In the monsoon month of Sawan, the festival of Tii, Teej or Teeaan takes place across North India. In Rajasthan it is also called the festival of swings or the monsoon festival. It has been most written about (at least in terms of analysis of songs) in the Nepali context (see Skinner & Adhikari, 1994). In the Hindu context and cosmology, the festival involves women in a day of fasting followed by festivities. The fast represents Parvati’s sacrifices (of which there were many and multiple) to gain Shiva as her husband. In Rajasthan, the goddess Teej is one of the representations of Parvati and is displayed and adorned on that

day. While this background seems to have disappeared in the Punjabi context (as there are no references to fasting or to Parvati in any of the literature on the festival in Punjab nor by the women I spoke to), the other aspects of the ritual remain. Primarily, these are the return of married daughters to their natal villages; the gathering of women to sing and dance in public; and an atmosphere of playfulness, most symbolically represented through swings hung from trees.

One of the general contexts for this return to the natal home and the subsequent formalised playfulness is a recognition of the natal/conjugal distinction: 'Apart from the distinct ritual and gift-giving roles in the two villages, a woman's everyday social identity is also grounded fundamentally in this contrast. Standards for proper behaviour differ dramatically in the two villages' (Raheja & Gold, 1994, p. 108) For example; free movement in the natal village is contrasted with *purdah* in the conjugal village, even though this is always subject to contestations (Sharma, 2005). The central contradiction that Raheja wishes to demonstrate at the heart of North Indian kinship ideology is that of women being distinctively as 'one's own' and simultaneously 'other' (Raheja & Gold, 1994, p. 2). This idealised notion of women's relationship to place and space comes before the advent of communications technology and in Punjabi villages the urbanisation that came with the green revolution. The ability to visit the natal village and to maintain constant contact through the mobile phone has seen a diminished need for the Teej mela. Indeed, Teej in Punjab is more often found in the modernised context of girls' schools and women colleges. Our analysis of the rural context of the festival therefore arises out of textual accounts.

Women's popular culture, as Malhotra, (2002) also terms it, was subject to the modernising hand of the Singh Sabha (Sikh social reform) movement in Punjab at the beginning of the 20th century. Gurdit Singh (1965) notes how in 1910 the urban Singh Sabha reformers came and mobilised against women singing vulgar and bawdy songs. Indeed, this is part of the generalised system of new controls being placed on women in the colonial period in Punjab. Malhotra's (2002, p. 166) work in this arena, notes how women's popular cultural practices, that crossed 'castes, classes and sexes' were subject to the most vociferous attacks by the 20th century religious reformers (Malhotra, 2002, p. 166). It was of course the site of women's sexuality that became the precise place in which the reformers took most zeal in confrontation. This was resisted, as Malhotra notes, as 'women, may have been actively hostile towards the activities of the Singh Sabha' (Malhotra, 2002, p. 190). Gurdit Singh gives weight to this with the following couplet:

Death to them, those Singh Sabhiye's who have stopped
the Giddha at the Teeaan [festival] (Singh, 1965, 262)¹

But there is surprisingly no mention of the Teeaan festival in Malhotra's work, though arguably it is encompassed under the general notion of women's popular culture. What is of more interest is the way it would perhaps tie in with the notion of *Parivrata* or the ideal of the upper caste women which is central to the thesis that is being proposed by the Singh Sabhas as the 'ideal female'. In this sense there is a central problematic in the Punjab case where there is almost no mention of the Teeaan festival being related to the Teej festival, even axiomatically.

The last ritual described by Gurdit Singh (1965) as part of the Teeaan Mela is the mock wedding. Here women play all the roles of bride and groom and wedding party, but the main target for the mockery is the groom and his family. So as the marriage party arrives at the bride's house, rather than throwing money, stones are thrown. Rather than giving the groom a bag full of gifts, a bag full of pebbles is given. As the groom's family is leaving with the bride, it is set upon by a band of robbers and bandits who steal away the bride. Once again the ritual clearly indicates how the groom's family are seen as unwanted intruders into the lives of the village daughters. In a sense the groom's family are the real bandits and the women by recapturing the village's daughter are merely symbolising the reality of the exchange. Gurdit Singh (1965) finishes the chapter with songs sung on departure, from the festival which arguably empowers women for a small period of time, the last lines of this verse are notable given the context of the era in which they are being recalled from (circa 1950s):

*The girls waiting to go are munching on fresh riorhiya (sweets)
We are not going to come everyday Chacha take that frown
off your temple. Fill the waiting girl's baskets with grain
The kingdom of women has come We no longer grind the
grain And one day we will no longer cook!! (Singh, 1965,
p.267)*

Indeed, the liminal state of the Teeaan festival is marked in these departing words. Women with children and with older sons stop coming to the festival, as it is seen as more of a rite and ritual for the newly married. But here the commentary on grain and cooking, potentially represents wider changes in Punjab where mechanisation has meant that women no longer need to grind grain and may one day no longer need to cook. For Raheja and Gold (1994), these song texts are subversive, for Skinner and Adhikari (1994), they are a 'critical commentary' rather than indicating 'a ritual that reinforces the gender relations... and helps produce women who willingly and compliantly accept the constraints of this patriarchal system' (Skinner and Adhikari 1994: 261). In the Punjab context no doubt in the midst of these popular practices² (and not just at the Teeaan festival), there are certainly indications of critical commentary and potential subversion, but nonetheless it does seem that these spaces act as safety valves rather than as vehicles for subversion. In the context of the lack of an organised women's or feminist movement in the region, the question of where this subversion or critical commentary finds any material manifestation becomes of paramount importance.

Sharma (2005) and Raheja and Gold (1994) offer an analytically useful set of tools for examining women's lives. Their concerns with the multiple places from which women speak and relate, as daughters, sisters, wives and mothers complicates any notion of a unitary female subject. Despite these sophisticated accounts, however, there is at the base of their work a heteronormativity at play, in that women who are outside of patriarchal roles appear largely as figures of marginality (as in Sharma, 2005) or as object of ridicule in many of the song texts. For Raheja and Gold (1994), it is 'barren women, women whose husbands decide for one reason or another to take a second wife, and of women accused of engaging in illicit sexual relations' (Raheja and Gold, 1994: p. 136) who are subject to scorn in certain textual and oral traditions. The main theoretical point that Raheja and Gold (1994) makes about the natal and conjugal houses does not of

course pertain to these figures. Even though the important point is made at the end of this article and in her other work, that women as wives, sister, mothers (and in-laws) and marginal figures, sing together and therefore change voices, this is perhaps only 'ironic apprehension' in the face of the kinship system which splits them.

Teean da mela has been presented here as an illustration of a festival whose interpretation from a women-centred perspective offers an example of how the distinction between cultural and religious rituals and practices can often be rather unclear or fuzzy. It is precisely this fuzziness, which can neither be labelled nor fixed to a community which presents an example of a set of practices not locatable within any set identity or tradition. Indeed, the contemporary marking of Teean da mela in many colleges and universities in north India provides yet another example of how Teej, when understood within its contextual celebration, can simultaneously represent its 'modernity' as well as its 'traditional' significance. Higher educational institutions in east Punjab are emerging as yet another set of spaces of meeting and collectivity for young women where the rekindling of the celebration of women-centred festivals such as *Teean da mela* seems highly appropriate, though will no doubt lead to new interpretations within its evolving commemoration in contemporary Punjab.

Shrine practices in Muslim Punjab

If the mela represents an informal women's space which came to a slow demise with the advent of religious uniformity and modern forms of communication, then the practices of women at shrines in West Punjab provide a living example of the vibrancy of popular practices despite institutional and state mechanisms to streamline religious practices. Though once again the pressures on informal practices at shrines from reformist and formalist religious orthodoxy and the Pakistani state work through control of women's bodies. Set in the broad context of South Asian Sufism, the practices of women at Sufi shrines in Punjab forms a demotic parallel universe to the Persian textual tradition of South Asian Islam. The literature on South Asian Sufism and on shrines in particular is often caught up by a demand for recognition of the complex, textual world of Sufi Islam. In some senses this becomes the starting point of an analysis, that both lends a certain sense of credibility to what are seen (by non-Sufi Muslims) as heterodox activities, but also provides a context that formalises what can be ethnographically viewed as demotic practices. This dichotomy is neatly represented and followed by Huda (2003):

... the perception of Sufis as primarily intoxicated, dancing, socially withdrawn ascetics is still conjured up in contemporary works... Some of the problems that are associated with the individual sufi journey without any structure to the Islamic doctrines and law are tied to western studies of mysticism... (2002, p. 4).

Huda, then goes on to present an intellectual history of the writing of the Suhrawardi sufis, indeed following in the footsteps of another strand of Orientalist scholarship best exemplified by the canon of Anne Marie Schimmel (1975; 2001). Though this intellectual tradition has produced great insights into the

schematic matrix of Sufi thought, the actual gendered nature of 'mystical' practice at sufi shrines has not been too well explored.

Richard Eaton's detailed and historically well researched articles on the shrine of Farid Ganj Shakar, in Pak Pattan (between the 11th and 18th centuries) mainly focus on ceremonies and rituals which primarily involved men, such as the *dastar bandi* (turban tying) and the *mureed* initiation ceremonies. This is not from the lack of a more general recognition that 'the dominant role played by women in this Indian folks Islam cannot be underestimated' (Eaton, 2000, p. 197), but perhaps due to the lack of textual sources to support this claim in the case of Farid's tomb. So even in the Deccan case study where Eaton acknowledges the central role of women, this is not through their ritual practice but rather how their everyday culture, appears in the texts of the sufi poets: 'The bulk of the folk poetry written by Sufis was sung by village women while engaged in various household chores. The most common types include the *chakki-nama*, so called because it was sung while grinding food grains at the grindstone of *chakki* and the *charkha-nama* sung while spinning thread at the spinning wheel, or *charkah* (Eaton, 2000, p. 191). There is an inversion at play in this analysis, whereby women's practices are approached through the textual sources of the Sufi saints. A similar process is at play in the work of Abbas (2002) whose book *The Female Voice in Sufi Ritual: Devotional Practices of Pakistan and India*, would at first sight promise to provide some accounts of women's practices at Sufi shrines. Rather we are offered the ways in which Sufi textual and performative traditions embody the feminine principle. There are some interesting ethnographic pieces on women musicians but scant details about devotional practice.

Rather, it is in a study of the ephemera of popular culture, in the wonderful book *Sufi Poster Art*, by Frembgen (2006) where the reader is given a clear exposition of the multiplicity of practices that constitute the living shrine through the posters depicting *Auliya* and their shrines:

Individual intentions (*niyyat*) for that are childlessness, disease, conflict in marriage, unfulfilled love, problems at work, etc. Thus the devotee vows to make a pilgrimage and to offer something to the saint if the wish is granted. Following the principle of contagious magic, pieces of cloth and threads tied to the tomb lattice, to doors, windows and trees are a reminder... In the context of fertility, women sometimes deposit small votive candles... (Frembgen, 2006, p. 8).

Other customs are the lighting of incense, giving of food as well as drinking of water that is blessed. These practices and many more are profoundly gendered. In many shrines the space of the tomb itself is only reserved for men, where the laying of *chadars* (cloth, often embroidered) on the tomb and the placing of flower garlands is precluded for women. At the same time the distribution of food and engagement with a living *pir* crosses genders. In our fieldwork at the *Urs* or *melas* of the sufi saints Shah Jamal and Mian Mir in Lahore, women are involved in a wide range of devotional practices. Though barred from entering into the main tomb of the saint (though this was not the case historically with many shrines), nonetheless in the vicinity of the tomb they perform prayers and other activities. The space surrounding the outside of the tomb of Mian Mir comprises of a 'women's space', though this is not a formal distinction nor are men completely absent. It is here that internal contestations

about shrine practices are negotiated by women. For instance, at the time of *maghrib namaz* at sunset, women censor one another's practices in terms of body positioning vis-à-vis the mosque and the shrine with respect to the direction that one should be faced, asserting a moral authority amongst one another. However, at Mian Mir there is no segregation between men and women in formal terms, whilst Shah Jamal has two separated areas. In each case garlands of flowers are blessed by passing over the tomb and then given back to women (given their restriction on actual entry). From lighting incense and divas to praying at the walls of the tomb, women's activities are fairly uncontroversial. At the urs of Shah Jamal, groups of women in their own large gender segregated courtyard (with only the presence of boy children) also take up group singing. Reflecting devotion to the Prophet Mohammed, and to the saints, these simple songs in Punjabi reflect on the long tradition of women's folk tunes being incorporated into spiritual song (see above).

Whilst women singing in segregated spaces may push at the margins of acceptable but tolerable behaviour by orthodox Muslims, dancing in a mixed setting would be relatively easily condemned. Yet at Mian Mir and the Urs of Bari Imam in Rawalpindi, during the musical performances or (*sama*) there is the presence of a small number of women dancing. This dancing hitherto is restricted to the time of the *urs* or *mela*, but at shrines in Sindh, such as Sehwan Shareef it is said to be a regular practice. The role of *dhammal* or ecstatic dance in sufi performance has been well explored by Richard Wolf (2006), who notes in terms of the context of the *mela*:

These processes are of particular interest here because 'urses are, ideationally, "weddings" of the spirit of the saint to God. Some of the more engaged participants seek, through ecstatic corporeal practices and music, a spiritual transcendence that recapitulates the saint's union with God (Wolf, 2006, p. 247).

In this otherwise detailed and ethnographically based article which engages with the Urs at Shah Jamal, no mention is made of women's participation in singing. Clearly there are differences in practices at different shrines (see below), but it is not restricted to men, even in the explanation of dancing from the sufi point of view so well explored by Wolf. It is the contested nature of this dance which is perhaps of most significance. The *kefiat* or state of altered consciousness that leads to *wajid* (trance) is central to the mystical experience that is inculcated by the *sama* or musical performance (Abbas, 2002). Similar conceptualisations are forwarded by dhadi musicians playing to Sikh audiences (Nijhawan, 2006). Nonetheless, these are sharply contrasted to the general playing of music. The following quotes from both Abbas' and Wolf's work make the same point:

... there is a fine line between the ecstasy of *kefiat* and what is vulgar... He elaborated by using the example of rock'n'roll, which he considered the opposite extreme of sufi music... (Abbas, 2002, p. 13).

Dham'al and bhangr'a, as two kinds of 'urs-appropriate drum genres, one more serious than the other, roughly reproduce the distinction between those who are considered more serious or pious in their dancing for the saint and those who are just fooling around (Wolf, 2006, p. 234).

Wolf goes on to note that it is practically impossible to disaggregate the 'multiple' reasons for why people dance. Even deploying interview techniques is likely only to illicit a dominant ideological response, in that given the shrine context it is for ritual purpose. What is perhaps of more significance is that women's presence in the shrine and performing there is a strongly demarcated terrain. In the entrance to the shrine at Madho Lal, there is a sign forbidding women to go into the main alley which leads to the shrine. This prohibition finds legal sanction in the Music in Muslim Shrines Act, 1942, which states:

3. Punishment for singing or dancing in Muslim Shrines.—If any woman or girl sings to the accompaniment of a musical instrument or dances with or without a musical instrument in a Muslim Shrine, she shall be guilty of an offence under this Act and shall be liable on conviction to be punished with fine not exceeding five hundred rupees or with imprisonment of either description for a term not exceeding six months or with both such fine and imprisonment. (http://punjablaws.gov.pk/laws/56.html#_ftn1), accessed on 7th August 2009.

What is of crucial importance here is that the legal statute refers to the general aspect of Music and shrines, but the controlling aspect is solely about women's bodies and agency. The gendered nature of debates about *kefiat* and the proper conduct in shrines becomes exposed in the explicit desire for the control of women's bodies. The fact that a law was required in this matter and fieldwork with those attending shrines over a long period indicate that women's participation was substantial in many of the main Urs, particularly that of Imam Bari in Rawalpindi. It was during the period of Ayub Khan's rule from 1959 onwards that women's participation in dancing and singing and the general autonomy of shrines began to be curbed. As Ewing (1997, p. 70) notes 'The Ayub Khan administration... worked to develop a new ideology towards saints and shrines'. One of the central aspects of this was the greater control over women's participation.

This process of ideological shift impacted on how women (and men) perceived the shrine. In Katherine Ewing's original and finely crafted book *Arguing Sainthood*, women's perspectives on shrine worship are well articulated. But the thematic is primarily concerned with the tensions that are inherent in the practices from a religious perspective. The following analysis of one of Ewing's respondents illustrates this point:

In the story of her visit to Data sahib, Zahida expressed contrary positions simultaneously and attempted to resolve them. She still maintained the position that it is wrong to pray at shrines... But her experience has forced her to adopt the position that it is proper to visit the shrines of certain highly respected saints, if one is careful not to pray to the saint as an independent agent who will grant one's request without God's help (what she called "doing puja") (Ewing, 1997, p. 124).

What praying at the shrine of Data Sahib actually constitutes is not of central concern to Ewing's narrative. Yet it is precisely the restrictions on women's practices at shrines that embody the ideology that defines whether it is 'right' or 'wrong' to visit shrines. It is the acts of lighting incense, of giving offerings and lighting divas that constitutes what might be seen as 'puja' rather

than the abstract practice of prayer. Rather than viewing these practices as part of a general schemata of devotion, the ideological work of Islamisation that is central to the Pakistani national project comes to the fore. It is also the moment in which women's ritual practices become controlled and subordinate to a more formalised religious orthodoxy. This is not to argue that this does not offer progressive potential for women's emancipation but that the diversity and fluidity inherent in shrine devotion is subsumed to a prescriptive set of practices.

Conclusion

Popular practices are often not registered as being formal ones. As a result, there is a continuing discourse on religious identity in Punjab which posits most acts of women's worship as cultural rather than as religious, thus relegating their contributions and activities to the margins. Sikh women observing *karva chauth*, for instance, or Muslim women light diva's or making pilgrimage to Nankana Sahib, the birthplace of Guru Nanak, in Pakistan, can often be understood as being superstitious or as indiscretions, rather than as acts which show boundary crossing activities through shared practices, spiritual sources and reference points. These shared spiritual sources and practices form the foundation of Punjab's vernacular religion. This exists in tandem with other forms of religious expression and identity but which should not be merely dismissed as cultural or marginal merely because it is largely women who continue to keep these practices alive.

The Indian–Pakistan border that runs through Punjab does not disrupt this vernacular set of religious practices, nor does it show that the strong forces of disapproval from formal institutions have done away with women partaking in such practices and rituals. What the frame of cross-border Punjab does show is that the general desire for the control of women's bodies and their mobility within the public space exists across both Indian and Pakistani Punjab, as both places become increasingly hyper-masculinised societies. By focusing on the Teeaan da mela in East Punjab and shrine practices in West Punjab we hope to have shown the resilience of popular practice but also the contested nature of this terrain. The neglect of women's practices diminishes our understandings of religious practice and tends to enforce a singular view of religious identity and belonging, which has historically had tragic consequences in the region.

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Endnotes

¹ All translations from the Punjabi carried out by the authors with additional support from Surjit Singh Kalra.

² There are other rural spaces that women would solely occupy in the Punjab. The *Trinjhan*, a gathering around the spinning wheel, in pre-gas and electric ovens, the *tandoor* would be a place of women's gathering and talking. But the Teeaan festival most potently brings out issues of belonging because of the returning daughters.

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