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Rethinking Meo Identity: Cultural Faultline, Syncretism, Hybridity or Liminality?

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This paper considers the question of Muslim identity based on my research over the last decade on the Muslim community of Meos. For over a millennium the group has concentrated in the region called Mewat. Beginning southwest of Delhi the rural terrain inhabited by the Meo peasantry spreads over eastern Rajasthan and Haryana although there are substantial clusters of Meos in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and, after independence particularly, in Pakistan.

The problematic of identity discussed here relates not just to one obscure community but to a large number of communities that fall between religious traditions. The Muslim Merats, Bhatts, Musalmans and Kayakbhanis Rajputs and Khanzadas of Rajasthan, the Malkana Rajputs of central India inhabit an interstitial space between Hinduism and Islam although the precise configuration of each displays substantial variations (Singh 1990: 41-51). The Anthropological Survey of India's mammoth work entitled People of India suggest that approximately 15 percent of Indian communities inhabit a terrain of intermediate identities (cited in Nandy 1995: 26).

I must emphasize how my work on the Meos radically altered my own expectations, indeed certainties about ethnic boundaries. Elsewhere I have suggested that the notion of "fuzzy" thinking grounded in the multivalent logic of philosophical traditions such as Hinduism, Zen and Buddhism provide an alternative to the bivalent, either/or logic of the western philosophical tradition that has held sway from the Greeks to the logical positivists (Mayaram 1997). Kaviraj also uses the term "fuzzy" but his usage suggests the absence of enumerativeness grounded in census figures so that there would be "a relative lack of clarity of where one's community, or even one's region, ended and another began." This is not a notion of fuzziness with respect to traditional identities per se, which in Kaviraj's conception are clear-cut in terms of their sense of belongingness to a village, neighborhood, caste and religious denomination (1992). Fuzziness used in this essay comes from statements associated with ambiguity regarding identity claims, a deliberate ambivalence, a preferred ambiguity and a resistance to denominational boundaries.

The pedagogies of the academy propel one to look for boundaries, difference, and identity so that the ground level situation is revealed as something of a shock. This essay is particularly concerned with how the Hindu-Muslim relationship has been understood and represented. A dominant approach to Hindu-Muslim relations in political-administrative and academic writing sees their two respective lifeworlds as bifurcated and separate. A contemporary western political theorist has identified the future global faultline in terms of the conflict between the western and Islamic civilizations—all preceding battles including the world wars having been civil wars (Huntington 1993). In line with this notion recent writing about Hindu-Muslim relations has identified a similar geological metaphor of "the Muslim and non-Muslim lifeworlds" as "distinct and even contradictory...the cultural faultline can be accepted as a boundary not to be transgressed or tampered with" (Joshi and Josh 1994).

The faultline is theoretically symptomatic of division by dichotomy. The crisis, it is said, reveals the master cleavage or the faultline, i.e., it exposes reality. The faultline then comprises the image of standard normality whereas the world of everyday, by definition, is reduced to a status of abnormality. Joshi and Josh read the terrain of interreligious, intersubjective existence in terms of over-riding Hindu-Muslim conflict, polarity and sustained animosity through the medieval and modern periods. Even if interethnic intersubjectivity

exists it is held that the apparent and illusory world will sooner or later give way to the absolute reality of faultlines. The authors' own investigation does not lead them to explore the sensibility of multiple lifeworlds. Instead, the lifeworld is predefined by the master cleavage. Further, they do not ask whether the world of “crisis” is a normal world? And if it is the case that human effort is impelled towards its resolution surely it suggests that it is the crisis that is regarded as abnormal. Enormous energies are, therefore, usually directed to its resolution so that a return to the everyday becomes possible.

The insights of K.S. Sing's *People of India* are useful in this respect as they indicate how the quotidian practices of everyday living bring about a sharing between communities. Hence, also the relative harmony that prevails over a large part of the countryside and the impetus to return to normalcy quickly after every earning experience. Singh argues that the region itself constitutes a matrix. Communities look more at commonalities than at differences and easily establish rapport when they discover that they have “traits” in common. Hence, the vast terrain of sharing between low-ranked castes and tribals; between tribals and Hindus; Hindus and Sikhs; and particularly among Hindus and Muslims (Singh 1992: 98-101). A forthcoming volume of the Anthropological Survey of India series on cultural traits demonstrates that Hindu lower castes and tribals have more in common with Muslims than with upper-caste Hindus.

What I have tried to address here is a deeper problem, one that speaks to the very nature of thought and logic that tends to impute a bivalent logic. Rationality itself seeks order and strives towards the classificatory, the taxonomic. The processes of classification mean a sorting out of the conceptual or material world into either this or that. Identification is implicit naming. For example, an object can be red or not red, action can either be good or bad. Binarism is intrinsic to thought itself which proceeds by the logic, either/or and p or not p. The knowledge systems of the human sciences for long have been impelled along the directions of the biological sciences that have sought to classify lifeforms into genus and species. The latter tend to ignore the counterprocess of the constant mutation of species and the production of intermediate lifeforms. The legal, political and social sciences are similarly grounded in classification. Kierkegaard comments that true eternity does not lie behind either/or but before it (1944: 31). What then is the intellectual apparatus that we have at present to understand identities that defy classification, that precede an either/or status?

Bhabha's notion of hybridity is one of the most recent concepts of cultural theory that expresses the intercultural encounter. It has dominated contemporary discussion of identity and politics. Although hybridity emphasizes the transgression of religion and language and is juxtaposed to purity and exclusivity, it is restricted in time and space to the metropolitan First World characterized by diasporic mass migration, cross cultural marriage and transnational identities. Hybridity suggests how two entities combine to produce a third. In Bhabha's usage it is associated with postcoloniality and globalization. Bhabha derives the term from Bakhtin's formulation but reinterpret's it restrictively to refer to crosscultural kinship/marriage.

In effect, however, the hybrid constitutes as its other the pure. So if interracial marriages in the western world are “hybrid” their racial derivatives, by definition, are vested with forms of purity. This not only reproduces a racial understanding of the universe (in contrast to the multiraciality of the hybrid), but is also ahistorical as it ignores the constant intermixing, intermarriage, and migratory diasporas that have occurred across the centuries. But the problem with the hyphen is that difference is in relation to fixity. He writes, “hybrid hyphenations emphasize incommensurable elements - the stubborn chunks as the basis of cultural identifications” (Bhabha 1994:219). Bakhtin's work is far more nuanced with respect to historicizing the hybrid than Bhabha's as he suggests how in interstitial periods such as the Carolingian Revival or between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance languages and genres become dialogized (1981).

With respect to India, K. S. Singh points out that there are few persons in India who are not immigrants and that every community recalls its migration in its folklore and history. Bilingualism characterizes 64.2 percent of all communities in India (1992:103). M. N. Srinivas writes with respect to his own context that it draws from both Tamil and Kannada cultures although he is a Kannadiga. He comments on the constant production of ethnic identities by mutation so that the Vokkaligas who are demanding a greater share in political power as a category are different from the Vokkaligas for endogamous purposes or for social dining. The British, he points out, classified caste Hindus in opposition to animists whereas even brahmanical groups are known to go to a witch doctor (1992: 3-4).

Bhabha's work certainly lends the trajectory of identity an inherent elasticity hinting at the mixing and crossings of globalized cultures. For him the hybrid is the site of resolution of conflict. In fact, tensions are not always resolved and oppositions and tensions continue within. Jussawalla cites Aamir Hussein's comment that hybridity smacks far too much of the biological process
of generating new species and of gene pools and argues that hybridity denies the simultaneous existence of local older, or minority cultures (Jussawalla 1995: 87).

Syncretism is the term most often used to describe the encounter between religions. Notwithstanding the considerable slippage between the terms I find it necessary to distinguish between the hybrid and the syncretic. Both medieval historians and writers such as Roshdie have seen Mughal and post-Mughal culture as syncretic (not as hybrid) in terms of music, poetry, architecture, devotion and language. Syncretic, I have argued elsewhere, retains an ontology of poles, the dualism of the self and the other (Mayaram, forthcoming). It tends, moreover, to signify the abnormality of the moment. As in the case of hybridity the dualism is transcended on the margins by figures such as Roshdie’s Saladin Chama who is a “borderline” figure representing the migrant culture of the in-between, a minority (Bhabha 1994: 6, 224).

The analysis of the syncretic is invariably in terms of the building blocks of “cultural traits.” The problem with this understanding is that it sees cultures and particularly religion in terms of essences. Further, the mixing tends to assume mechanistic proportions. Religious authority becomes a single voice rather than the competing bazaar of interpretations that it usually is. Religious becomes the legitimate great traditions while the margins are seen as inhabited by aberrant little traditions. The latter are rendered transient and anomalous and evoke the bizarre and the eccentric and, hence, elicit surprise. The discussion tends to ignore the ways in which human agency seeks a multiplicity of meaning and anchorages in its quest to comprehend, understand, and explain the cosmos and to negotiate an intersubjective existence. I have preferred the term liminality to suggest ways in which binary identities are contested. The liminal helps constitute a third space that does not presuppose binarism but seeks to transcend the binary mode of thought and understanding.

Despite the conceptual distinction one must also recognize that there is translatability between the hybrid, the syncretic and the liminal. Cultural syncretism is generally seen as enhanced by the diasporic experience. As a hybrid product of an Asian Indian-American marriage, I could empathize with the liminalism of Meo culture. For instance, I could wear western clothes and speak “American” when I was in the US. On the other hand, I could sit for hours on end with old Indian women and share their downgrading of western culture where people had no time for the family. This was not the mere manifestation of a schizophrenic personality but a sense of alternative and multiple selfhood in which authenticity is redefined, as Taylor puts it, in terms of bi-culturalism (Taylor 1989). With the Meos I noted a distinct ability to effect a similar switching. Among Hindu castes they can talk of puranic genealogies. They can also in the presence of theologians speak a more Arabic-Persian vocabulary that emphasizes, say, their affiliation to particular Muslim sects.

The liminality of religion relates to the hybridity of kinship in terms of analogous metaphors such as of the staircase connecting two floors, the bridge between two shores and the harbor that links land and ocean. Both critical the binarism of race – black and white – or of culture – self and other. If hybridity is read as herey not only by fundamentalism and in metropolitan contexts is desacralized by the author and the critic, liminality denotes a peculiar combination of reverence and irreverence to the gods. But if, temporally, hybridity relates the space “beyond” to the present – what Bhabha calls “revisionary time beyond” (1994) – liminality also relates to the preceding, the past future.

This paper methodologically stresses that we decenter our way of talking about identity so that we examine it as being constituted in processes at multiple sites rather than in terms of fixity and cultural traits. Identity has to be seen not in terms of essences and thingness but temporally as the site of tremendous upheaval. I have found it enormously useful to use as my point of departure narratives of the Meo oral tradition. These consist of multiple folk epics, legends, myths, folktale, an eclectic mix of genres that are variously authored and performed to different audiences across time and space. Both the texts and other Meo voices are a useful point of entry into thinking about the ways in which identities are constituted and contested. In this essay I draw upon Meo poetic myths (bat aatiya, from the Rajasthani vaal) folktales or gissae, women’s songs or git and Meo-authored biostories or tariikha.

It is particularly exciting to see what happens at what Lacan calls the cusp of language. Poetic folk literature has a tremendous vigor that expresses itself among other ways in the strength of desire. Music, as Kierkegaard puts it, is an even more perfect medium than language. Language involves reflection but the spoken word cannot express the mood which is too heavy for speech to carry. Music expresses a mood, a moment. It is the demonic and has its absolute object in the erotic sensuous genius (1944: 47-84). The combination of verse and music is devastating for popular consciousness. Poetry is also the domain of the chaotic. It is hardly surprising that the rhythms of the poetic are regarded as the other of philosophical order and of science epitomized by taxonomic regimes. No wonder Plato dispelled from his utopia the potential authors of disorder, the dissipators of harmony and classification.
namely the poets!

Let me begin with poetic verse citing a passage of the Mahabharata as a clue to the whole question of how mythic cosmologies get established:

Gandharan (Gandhari) tells Jarjet (Duryodhana), “Son, make me an elephant of cowdung and mud”

He makes the elephant in a single day. Gandharan offers water (aruk) to the sun as it is setting, Kaunta (Kunti) who is watching says to herself, “men are fortunate, they can do as they will. Today I will tell my sons to make an elephant in one month.”

She approaches Arjun, her strongest son, who is tightening the kamaradi bow that he has received from Indra. He says, “O mother, why is there such sadness on your face.”

Kaunta tells him that her sister’s, Gandharan’s sons, the Kairu have made their mother an elephant from cowdung and mud that she can make an offering of water to the Sun god. “But if I tell you, it will take six months”

Arjun responds, “Is that all mother?” He promises to make her a real elephant while theirs is only of cowdung and mud. Till then he vows that both water and grain will be (prohibited) for him. He picks up his bow and aiming the bow addresses Indra saying: arak taind sandesva meri mata kine kikhi kahto airavat kun bhej dai nabin to tero ambar karun do tuk

The sacred offering of water is a message.
I am born of my mother’s womb.
Neither send an elephant
else I will rent your sky in two.

Raja Indra sends the elephant. It comes and does salam to Arjun. He takes the elephant to his mother and tells her that “while the cousins have been able to provide their mother only an elephant of cowdung and mud Indra has sent an Airavat (elephant) for her.” Kaunta joyfully says, “Go son. You already have the strength of one thousand elephants and now the strength of twenty more on my behalf. If you are ever in trouble remember this.”

It is significant to see how the puranic tradition is colloquialized so that the elephant does salam, the Muslim form of greeting. Both grain and water are haram or prohibited for him (possibly an imagery derived from the Ramadan fasts) while he trying to get the special elephant he has promised his mother. His threats to Indra succeed in getting for her the Airavat, Indra’s elephant which is visually portrayed as having seven trunks. The elephant of cowdung and mud is pushed aside in favor of the divine one.

The oral text that most clearly addresses the question who we are is the Pulon ki Bansabali. The latter describes the Meo pats whose bans (vows) are traced to various Rajput clans: the Tonvar Rajputs of Delhi, Mathura’s Jadas, Jaipur Kachwahas and Ajmer’s Chauhan. The 13 Meo pats and the multiple gat are ideally exogamous and territorial units of Meo social structure. The Bansabali further links the villages and patrilineages of the paliya Meo with gods and heroes and thereby sacralizes political and social structure.

Both in the case of the Pandun Ka Kara and the Bansabali we notice how genealogy is a metaphor for thinking about the self in relation to time and space. Myth establishes the connection of blood and flesh with the gods. Spatialized it relates the sacred terrain of Brajbhumi to the space of everyday living. Temporalized it relates cosmologies to the here and now. As genealogy is the clue to caste the genealogical castes are central to social organization. As performers they create the poetics and aesthetics of cultural identity.

Both the Meo folk epic and the genealogy are attributed individual authorship. But let me cite a passage from a text written in the early half of this century which suggests the character of intertextuality within the oral tradition and the larger subcontinental puranic tradition:

turk

In Gokul city
the incarnate Krishna was born who killed the coward (kafr) Kansa
and pierced the nose of Basak.

In the midst of the Mathura region
he enchanted the milkmaids.

Pundlot and Duhlot
and the Chiraklot all,
Daimrot and Nai
are the five powerful Jadh pats.

It is interesting to see how the Muslim classification of believer and nonbeliever (kafr) is represented by Krishna and Kansa. Basak refers to one of the divine serpents on whose hooded head the earth rests.

Meo clans are derived from the gods of the Indic epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. The Singhal and the Dhingal pats are called the suryabharanisc:

raghubans main hue ram chandra autari
jane dhanus diyo ho tor sitaji jishi nari
jako lav Kush dhab Kush bha yata sitaija mata pyari
donam kuchhva ki pal han tev agambans nirban

In the Raghu lineage was born
the incarnate Ram Chandra.

Who broke the bow (and so)
Sitaji was his woman.  
To whom Lav and Kush were born 
Sitaji, their beloved mother. 
Both are Kachhwa pah 
and the third is the Agan bana Nirban.

Although some scholars have tried to, one cannot understand the Mewati oral tradition with reference merely to the rasa theory (although the notion of bhakti as an additional rasa is particularly helpful). The crux is the relationship between the text and the context. Lest it be assumed that these are only traditional identities characteristic of pre-modern societies prior to modernity and streamlined religious ideologies let me cite an episode of the epic that was told to me by a Desbandi Mewati mauabi in Delhi. The latter is well equipped with knowledge of guhah and shirk and is also an activist who works with the Tabligi Jamaat. Trying to rectify my recorded version of the folkepic he told me how my narrator had missed out the description of the lokhadmandar episode in which Jarjot sets fire to the wax temple (palace in the Mahabharata). Bhim comes to see his mother when he learns that she is mourning their death. She is overjoyed that they are alive and no one is dead. She insists that all the rituals must be performed for the Brahmans who died in their place so that no one suspects that the Pandur are still alive. She gave Bhim, stated my mauabi informant, who already had the strength of 100 elephants, the strength of another ten. This later helped him to fight the Kichak of Bairath who had his eye on Daropada (Draupadi). Cultural memory, thus, has a tenuousness and is a deep-seated part of the self that persists despite ideological overwriting.

Eaton comments on the absence of a zero-sum-game cosmology among Bengali Muslims. The arrival of the Muslim holy man in rural settings did not require a rejection of other cults dedicated to other gods and goddesses. Processes of inclusion and identification occur so that Islamic superhuman agencies are accepted alongside Bengali, primarily Hindu, deities in popular cosmologies. He examines inscriptions and a range of Bengali literature including epics, romances and devotional poems to suggest the multiple names for god and the attempt to adapt the whole range of Perso-Islamic civilizations to the Bengali cultural universe so that Fatima is jagat-Janani or mother of the world and god is Prabhu, Niranjan and Isvar (Eaton 1994: 275-6). Mewa oral tradition reveals a large number of names for god including Kartar (Creator), Datar (Civet), Har or Hari, Sain, and Mata. Simultaneously there are also Islamic referents of divinity such as Rah, Allah and Rasul.

Rajasthan’s religious traditions indicate that agricultural castes of whatever religious denomination and tribal groups such as Bhik share Saivite and Sakta traditions of worship. Siva is popularly referred to as Mahadev and the deities of goddesses variously call Sital mata (the deity against small pox), Chavanda, etc. Artisanal and specialist groups such as tailors, washermen, barbers, potters genealogists, leather tanners, liquor brewers, cloth printers, and others consist of both Hindu and Muslims branches who share the same deities (Singh 1895). Goga Pir and the devi, for instance, are deities venerated by both Hindu and Muslim Rajputs just as kuldevi or clan goddesses and isadeva are shared by family lineages across religious boundaries, Hindu, Muslim and Jain.

Mewa Muslims carry on the cult of Allah as also animism and the worship of pirs and other deities. For the Mews the gods are not “out there” but inhabit this world as well. Mahadev, in particular, is a benevolent god who along with his wife Gora is constantly concerned about the welfare of the Mews even to the extent of supporting them against the “Hindu” castes. The gods are in the world and intervene not only to save the world but in ordinary everyday conflicts. In the qissa of Lal Mohammad the hero falls in love with the shehzadi or princess, Hira. Lal Mohammad becomes a jokir (saintly mendicant) as he removes the clothing from his body and covers it with ashes and prays to Krishna that he be united with his beloved. Eventually he gains Hira but in a twist to the story she kills him. Hira is now advised:

mahadev age kharo jako parbat main bas 
tera karra paura hovenga tiyra pary jake paw
Mahadev who lives in the mountains stands before you.
Woman, fall at his feet 
he will bring life to the dead.

Mahadev, however, refuses to help the manas khami
or man-eating woman. In Churchari Men Khan composed at the end of the 19th century, Meo bandits isolated by state police power pray to Mahadev Siva. Gaura (Parvati), his wife, appeals to her husband to help their “sons” who are in trouble. Mahadev intervenes to protect them and they are saved. This cosmologic imaginary is different from Islamic cosmology where the human and superhuman domains are more sharply demarcated.

Chandravat Guiari is about the passionate submission of Chandravat, body and soul, to the universal beloved, Krishna. Possibly this can be explained as deriving from a north Indian performative repertoire shared among both Hindu and Muslim bards. But how does one explain the retelling of popular Muslim folklore. It is apparent from the Lal Mohammad story that narratives that belong to the “Muslim” genre of qissa
and *dastan* undergo a peculiar transformation in their Mewati versions. The *dastan* was a genre of Urdu prose romance that drew upon Persian traditions and was particularly influential in the 19th century. The stories usually describe the adventurous journeys, battles and encounters of a hero in a monarchical context (Pritchett 1985). *Shamsuddin Pathan* in its Mewati telling begins with an entreaty to the goddess of Dhaulagarh. She is offered meat, and overflowing wine in return for the fulfillment of wishes:

> daru bakro mas dun kardun toy madh chak matalvi
> laj rakhe sabha main mata tu dhaulagarh vali
> I offer you goat meat and wine
> that will make you intoxicated.
> Uphold my honor in the assembly
> mother-goddess of Dhaulagarh.

As benefactress she enables Sulaiman’s employment for Rs. 2,000.

The self-other relationship is tossed around and reordered in poetic consciousness so that the other is part of the self. Further, the sacred-profane exist on a continuum making it possible to have fun at the expense of gods. In the Mewati version of a popular story called *Mahadev Gaura ka chaal* Siva tries to dupe Gaura by pretending to be a cobbler, but Gaura betters him in the guise of a Bil or tribal woman. Siva is tempted by the Bhului who agrees to stay with him only on the condition that he will shave his hair and beard. In the process the Jogi loses both woman and his identity. Shamefacedly he explains that he lost his hair while cooking!

In the Mewati Mahabharata Bhim is associated with much of the comic relief in the folkepic. He is depicted as a phenomenal consumer of food and his elephant drinks up a lake of water. Bhim encounters the demon’s daughter, Rani Hadamba, on a swing in her garden. She calls out to Bhim to give her a push. When Bhim pushes her gently she mocks him by saying that since he cannot push the swing he can hardly be expected to help his brothers. When she commands him to push the swing harder Bhim gives her such a push that she and the tree become airborne:

> kaunata ka rai jodhiya tainai dar sun dal main ger
> tol pai paruñg blhina nu tyu mero giro ambar jhel
> Kaunata’s warrior son
> your push has made me fall.
> I will fall on you, Bhim.
> unless you catch me as I fall from the sky.

When she comes down wherever her urine falls the soil turns saline. This is the peasant community’s explanation of ecological salinity, an outcome of Hadamba’s fear.

If divinities are profaned, political structures are often mocked. The Rajput prince of Alwar, author of a Hindu Vaisnavization of state and society, was awarded the title of “Bharat Dharma Prabhalaks” by the Bharat Dharma Mahamandal. Sacrifice at the Saivite centers of worship such as Bhartrihari was banned even as the prince was left free to hunt all over. The attempted “Ram Rajya” became the target of many a Mewati poet.

Noor Mohammad often narrates a folk story as part of his performance, sometimes prior to singing, that allegorizes the Mughal empire. The central figure of this and a series of comic stories is Dada Hajja. He belongs to Kol in Kishangarh tehsil (Alwar district) which is a village of fools. The story goes:

The Muslims of Kol do not keep the *roza*. The Badshah wants to instruct them to keep the *roza* fast. He summons them and tells them that *roza* is to come during the month and they must keep it. The villagers return. The entire village gets ready and waits for the appointed day. They wait all day long. “What is the matter *roza* has not arrived,” they say. By evening they say, “Perhaps the king was lying, *roza* has not arrived?” Dada Hajja tells them, “The king will not lie. Go around and look in all four corners of the village. If it comes be sure not let it go. The Badshah has told you, remember, we must keep the *roza*.”

In the evening a camel and young boy arrive. The boys descend on the arriving party. The youth escapes but they catch the old camel saying, “At last *roza* has come.” Another man says, “The smaller one has escaped, but let us keep the bigger one for a month. After that we will take it to the king’s court.”

For a whole month they give fodder and grain to the camel who becomes healthy. A month later they present him to the king’s darbar. The king asks the villagers, “Have you kept the *roza*?” “Yes,” the villagers of Kol respond, “We’ve fastened him well. The smaller one escaped. We couldn’t help it. But here he is.”

The darbar bursts into laughter.

M干o performers have a repertoire of subversive stories. In this case “keeping the *roza*” is identified with the religion of the Mughal rulers. In the presentation of the camel to the darbar by the so-called village of fools there is an iconoclasm of the subcontinental sovereignty claimed by the Mughals who are also seen as authorizing forms of religious practice. The act of storytelling, as Clayton puts it, becomes “an oppositional technique because of its association with unauthorized forms knowledge” (1990: 375-93). The Badshah’s command becomes caricature. Folklore naturalizes the power structure that is subverted in the exercise of laughter and religious structure is mocked in the pairing of the sacred and blasphemous. Aileen Kelly writes
that "it was through the muted laughter of the grotesque that Dostoevsky demonstrated the capacity of human beings to define themselves" (Kelly 1992: 45). It is in this sense that symbolic capital is truly the inverse of political and economic capital (Bourdieu 1993). Elsewhere I have referred to Meo resistance to the Tabligi Jamaat with respect to their own social organization. "Mev to mulla ki nay mane" (the Meos do not follow religious leaders) I was told when I asked someone about the extent to which they were electorally amenable to religious influence.*

Little wonder that 19th-century ethnographers described the Meos as "very lax Muhammadans, sharing in most of the rites and customs of their Hindu neighbours, especially such as are pleasant to observe; their principle of action seems to have been to keep the feasts of both religions and the fasts of neither" (Punjab DC: 4A, 25). The hybrid, Bhabha writes, exists at the juncture of displacement so that hybrid is "neither the one or the other" (1994: 25). With the Meos, however, identity is not only the neta neti of denial but an affirmation of both, of "this and that." Elsewhere I have cited the historian Ashraf's account of an incident when his father censured his mother's brother for his guanah (sin) in placing flowers before an image of Mahadev that stood in the field. The family belonged to the community of Malkana Rajputs. The uncle responded, "How do you know about the state after death? Has anyone ever returned after he has died?" His father fell silent and his uncle added that since one does not know what will happen after death, it is better that both should placated. He said in Brakhsha, "patu nain he dad na kaon kam ai ja" (who knows what will work after death) (Ashraf 1969: 395). So follow both ways, this and that. At least one will succeed, being the logic.

Intermittently there have been signs of change and it was reported in the last quarter of the 19th century that, "Recently religious teachers have become more numerous among them and some Meos now keep the Ramzan fast, build village mosques, say their prayers, and their wives wear trousers instead of the Hindu petticoat, all signs of a religious revival." Simultaneously the work of the S.P.C. and Cambridge Mission was also in progress and in 1872 twenty-five Muslims were baptized including the Imam of the mosque. In the early 1920s Mewat became a battleground for Arya Samajists and Tabligi Jamaat activists (Punjab DC: 4A, 70).

It is often assumed that identities are subject to an automatic displacement following sustained religious resocialization. But does this progressive linear displacement tell the whole story? Let me cite a conversation with the most venerated religious leader of the Meos, Mufti Jamaluddin, who lives in Alwar, "Bhupan (a major Meo chaudhart) of Chandoli is a Singhal. He is from the Ram Lachman path. The Jada vanamath of five Meo path are from Kishanj. We are surajvamsis. All the Tomar path are surajvamsis." It is interesting to see how the Mufti's sense of identity is constituted by an intersection of collective memory and religious belief. His lineage derives from the Sun, for whose worship his ancestor, Arjun, fetched an elephant from Indra. The myth of lineage descent is not seen in contradiction to taudh or the Islamic doctrine of the unity of godhead.

Muzaffar Alam comments on the attempt to understand medieval society in terms of exclusively either conflict or unity. Although there was conflict in Awadh between Mughal and Rajput from the 17th to the 19th centuries the Nawabs also consolidated in a variety of ways the alliance with Rajput zamindars. In particular, he points out that the role of the Qadiri Sufi Shah Abdur-Razzaq Bansaavi in attempting to reduce conflicts between diverse communities. Although he was known to be an orthodox Sufi in recognition of prevailing social realities he avidly watched the bhakti-ha performance at a marriage which depicted the life of Narsimha Avatar and Krishna although it violated the sharira. On one occasion he even fell into a trance during a Krishna bhakti dance drama, and helped Bairagi followers and other Muslims have a vision of the Lord and his gopis and subsequently one of Ram and Lakshman. He saw himself as a Sufi who could violate on occasions the sharira. Although he tried to integrate both orthodox and heterodox sultam the role of an aima or theologian was regarded as different and hence he kept Muha Zam-ul-Din away from such a performance (Alam, ms.).

The medieval world of Islam for the Meos was similarly complex. It comprised puris, murids, fakirs, shakhs, khwajas, sayyids, sajada nasims and sufi lineages such as the Qadirs and Chishtis. This was an extraordinarily heterogeneous universe incorporating diversity of theology and practice. Different notions of piety were invoked by sectarian groups. There were confrontations between the respective supporters of Salar Masud, on the one hand, and Mada Sahib and Khwaja Sahib, on the other. Whereas intoxication was held by some to assist divinity, it was proscribed by others. Syed Rasul Shah of Alwar became Peshwa of a wandering sect in the 18th century whose members wore a handkerchief on the head, participated in rites that induced ecstatic madhavi and hence, were prohibited from sleeping at night. The turigya was said to be unconcerned with material, worldly concerns of clothing or eating. Intoxication and sexual practices were part of the rite practiced by several secret cults (Habibur Rahman 1979: 641-5, 650-653). Similarly,
Fida Husein was a faqir who drank alcohol, refused to read the namaz and covered his body with ash. When confronted once by a maulvi sent by the famous Sufi Shaikh Abd ul Aziz, his magical powers overcame the other's opposition to the extent that the maulvi shaved off his own beard.

Since oral literatures are a performed art let us pause to think for a moment about the authors of Mewati texts and their audiences. As Bourdieu puts it the artistic work does not merely reflect the collective conscious of the group and it is important to look at the agent, the literary producer (1993). Kanvar Khan, a mirasi, was the composer of the Banawati. Sadulla and Nabi Khan are believed to have composed the Pandun ka kara in the early-18th century. Choto Meo, a participant in the Meo revolt of 1932 wrote Dhamukar. This narrative seems largely a response to growing representation of the Meos as an alien, Muslim presence by the princely state and its erosion of the autonomy of local communities implicit in the contemporary assumption of juridico-territorial sovereignty. The sajra (lineage trees) of the Meos are presented to the Viceroy in defiance of the Alwar ruler's stigmatization of the Meos as sudras. Meo chaudhari mobilize to “prove” the katriya status and to counter what they see as a prelude to displacement and deterritorialization. Genealogy plays a critical counter-claim role in politics as it establishes a counter-claim to both status and power.

I have frequently attended and recorded performances of Abdul, a 70-year-old Mirasi. Abdul learnt his craft from his ustad, Bhure Khan of Roshiyaka village in Kaman tehsil of Bharatpur. Like other Mirasis Abdul's narration begins with the veneration of the ustad and the Lord (Khuda) who is pak (pure) and subhan. The ustad teaches knowledge and Allah shows the right way. To the dev, however, is attributed all inspiration. She is seated in the midst of his hriday (a combination of dil or heart and man or the mind) and guides him in opening the "box of knowledge." The performer plays an important role in interpreting and colloquializing myths. Abdul explained to his audience the story of Krishna going to get a the ball from the sea, and being held by Basak Nag, the divine serpent, and Krishna controlling him by putting a loop through his nose.

It is interesting to note that it is not only the customary Invocation of the teacher and the divine that is part of a larger western Indian tradition. In fact, the language, metaphors, and rhetorical devices of the Mewati poetic tradition are reminiscent of the form and content of a much longer tradition of D digal kaitya. Over a period of time the literary language of northwest India, called apabhramsa, derived from Sanskrit and the Prakrits, developed into Old Western Rajasthani or Maru Bhasha. The Mewati oral tradition is a complex web of intertextuality. Hence, for instance, the reference to the parus stone whose touch was believed to turn iron into gold; to the sagan sastri or science of omens, the description of challenge in terms of the betel-leaf (bira pan ka). This explains also the striking resemblance between the Mewati Darya Khan Ki bat and Kalloo's Dhola Maru ra dha, a well-known narrative of the 13th-14th century. The separation and reunion of Darya and Sambandhi following their marriage in childhood closely resembles the episodes and metaphors of Dhola Maru (Singh, ms.). As Marvani grows up she yearns for her husband and sends a series of messages. Likewise, Sambandhi sends the barber, the Mirasi to her husband (Mayaram, unpublished).

Let me move now to the strategies of representation of Urdu texts authored by regional writers and how they imagine the group and the world. Although these texts are classified as tarikh or histories and draw upon the Perso-Arabic traditions of history writing they, nonetheless, maintain a cross-genre character. Maulana Abdul Shakur's conception of tarikh weaves together the poetic and the mythic. Both the Ramayana and the Mahabharata belong in his work to the category of history as the Meos trace their descent from the Suryavamsis and to the house of Kairu and Pundu (Shakur 1974). It is possibly because of this entwining of myth and history that the status of these works becomes suspect.

Maulana Habibur Rahman Khan Mewati is the author of a text whose subtitle evokes the forgotten Sufi traditions of the Meos. A knowledgeable maulvi with a command of several languages he works at the library of Jamia Hidayat in Delhi. Although he has considerably internalized the Deobandi-Talibighi discourse of shirk, i.e., condemnation of forms of polytheistic practice, and is committed to darwin and carabiyat he acknowledges that it was really the Sufi tawanwof or the idea of giving oneself totally up to God that historically held sway in the area (1979: 75). Although there is considerable ambivalence when it comes to tazhibi Islam, Habibur Rahman's narrative also simultaneously sees the Muslim invader-ruler as the other. In the face of a large number of historians who tend to gloss over the violence associated with the Turk-Afghan rule in India, Habibur Rahman's description foregrounds the very troubled relations of the Mewatis (as they were called by Persian chroniclers) with the Muslim rulers of Delhi. The following are commemorated as episodes dishonoring the claims of the Mewatis: the killing undertaken by Sultans Nasiruddin Mahmud and Balba Firoz; Tughlaq's setting up of a chanun in Firozpur to improve the troubled situation in Mewat; the repeated
attacks on Mewat in 1413 and 1447 by the Saiyads; Bahlol Lodi’s victory over Ahmad Khan Mewati in 1458 and the taking of the seven parganas of Tijara. Babar’s looting of Mewat prior to the battle of Fatehpur Sikri and the eviction of people from their homes are interpreted as actions that prevented local people preparing to fight against him. Habibur Rahman remarks that Babar’s final defeat of Mewat ended approximately three centuries marked by very distressed relations for the Mewatis with both the Turko-Afghan Sultanate and the Mughal rulers (1979: 38).

I am mystified when writers such as Joshi and Josh refer to a faultline between cultural enclosures that is revealed in “cries” Urdu histories by Mewati authors even as they derive from Muslim traditions with respect to the form and language of their texts invariably highlight the tortuous history of the Mewatis with a series of central Muslim rulers. Interestingly, the Meos seem have had far better relations with the Jar kingdom of Bharatpur than with the Mughals and their Rajput allies. Some sections of the community participated in Jat attacks on Mughal armies led by Suraj Mal and others in the 17th century. In the Jat uprising of 1669 Raja Ram Singh carried other castes such as the Meos, Minas and Gujars with him against the Mughals. Another section of Meos accompanied Raja Jawahir Singh on his famous pilgrimage to Pushkar in defiance of the Jaipur state and fought against the Rajputs. Suraj Mal is said to have addressed Ali Azam, the Chaudhari of Pahari in Bharatpur as “bhaya,” suggesting a fictive kinship that often characterized Meo-Jat relationships.1

The historiographical narrative of Hindu-Muslim relations that sees only the faultline of enmity, conflict and tension ignores how other emotions such as friendship and love also constitute the lifeworld. This narrative of intercommunity relations almost seems to refuse to take cognizance of the everyday. But unless the historian takes heed of this, histories will be incomplete, if not distorted. Let me illustrate: If I were to write a history of the Meos between 1890 and 1990 at the turn of our century I would have as “record” the Hindu-Muslim judicial dispute on the Lal Das property of Dhuali Dhp; the record of partition violence in which an initial Ahir-Meo hostility degenerated into an organized pogrom on the Meos; the contemporary conflict over the Karbala graveyard with the district administration. What record would there be of the quotidian, the mundane and the unevenful? Would I know of the relationship of Sardara Gujar and the Meo Chaudhari Bhupan which is characterized as don’t kati roli? And how would I get access to the traditional feuds and rivalries of the Ahir and non-Ahir castes that is evoked in the saying, “thokar aur pahar ki thokar bhal.” Indeed, one of the central features of Mewat politics is the Ahir-Ahir divide. The anti-Ahir feeling in Mewat is shared between Gujars, Meos and the lower castes.

To conclude, the emphasis on multiple subject positions in this essay is not to suggest a dissolution of collective identity but to see how identities are articulated, preserved and revisited at multiple sites. Contemporary theorists have only recently begun to perceive the flux that characterizes identity. Rudolph suggests that identities follow undulating patterns, that differences can surface and become invigorated but can also lie fallow. This is in contrast to colonial knowledge projects that both dichotomized and froze Hindu-Muslim as a master cleavage (1995: 6-7). Stuart Hall notes that identity is neither simple nor stable but “a structure that is split; it always has ambivalence within it” as more of a “process of identification” than “one thing, one moment” so that it is “something that happens over time, that is subject to the play of history and the play of difference” (1991: 9-20).

Modern taxonomic systems create categorical identities. What implications does this have for knowledge? Clearly the crossing and the overlapping spaces are left out. Applied to the sphere of religion identities are clearly demarcated. There is no acknowledgment of any intermediate reality in this dichotomous mode of thinking. One must, nonetheless, create spaces in theory for the simultaneity of this and that.

The other problem has to do with our understanding of social process. Say, one is writing a history of rural India the question arises as to how the archive gets constituted. To do a village history one would go to police records, land disputes, and so on. But reading an FIR by itself suggests the marking of otherness. The self-other compartmentalization can be further collaborated by secondary stereotypes available in the administrative record. But, we know from our own lives that there is also present a different terrain of intercommunal, intersubjective existence. We know how in everyday living people work out relationships, negotiate, compromise, collaborate, have friendships, share pain and suffering and moments of pleasure, participate in celebrations and mourning. The problem for the historian is how to access this other archive, avail of this other record which is omnipresent in quotidian, routine living but constantly submerged by the record of ethnic conflict and tension.

Meo identity exists at the interface between Hinduism and Islam. There is then a need to recover Bakhabin’s usage of the dialogic that brings out the mixing of languages that takes place within a text and how it bears immense subversive possibilities of critiquing a monological language. Although there are multiple
identifications for the self it is also the case that structures constrain, limit and also take away the human freedom to define one's identity. Sellhood is then also shaped by the ways in which others view us. Political and legal practice and religious regimes can play a major role in sharpening identities by promoting strategies of exclusivism or inclusivism.

Myth and memory, we have seen, pervade narration and along with language comprise a complex web that is a community. This then is hardly a confused space. But is it the case, as has been claimed, that liminal identities are weak identities? They are certainly seen as very troublesome and unmanageable. For this reason these identities are extremely vulnerable to being viewed as transgressive of the mainstream and in defiance of merger and doctrine. They are perceived as a challenge to be shaped and tamed by the modernizing sectors of bureaucratic governance, transnational religious institutions and electoral politics. Needless to say, these are committed to classificatory procedures and the policing of boundaries.

Lest it be assumed that the foregoing is a critical statement on modernity, let me conclude with a footnote that underlines the democratic process as a counter-process. The functioning of electoral politics suggests the ways in which alliances across religious and caste divisions are formed and mobilized in larger networks such as political parties. Aggarwal emphasizes the Hindu-Muslim lines of division of Mewat politics in terms of the Meos versus-resettled Sikhs and the upwardly-mobile Dalits (1971). But I have seen Mewat politicians in recent years strategize a Brahmin, Scheduled Caste and Meo alliance to counter Yadav dominance of the Alwar parliamentary constituency.

Notes
1 Some of the concerns draw upon an earlier paper titled, “Rethinking Meo Identity: Cultural Fluidity, Syncretism or Laminality?” The theoretical framework is indebted to Professors Daya Krishna and Ashis Nandy. I am grateful to Dr. Mukund Lath, Abdul and other Mewats for help with the Mewat sources, and to the feedback from participants of the Seminar on Muslim Communities in Western India, Centre for Social Sciences, Surat, December 14-17, 1995.
2 Interview, Jalal Khan, Alwar, April 1996.
3 Interview, Alwar, April 7, 1996.
4 A Persian specialist once told me when we were working on manuscripts at the Arabic and Persian Research Institute of Tbek that he would not think of these works as "reliable histories.”
5 All azam chaudhari tu bero bero tamburu dil, bhanga kahke bola yoko suraj mad interview, Ganga Singh Chaudhari, Bharatpur, April 1996.

References
5 Selections from the Mewati Oral Tradition, Transcribed in Devanagari and Roman and translated into English (ms.).