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RELIGION, CASTE AND COMMUNITY: IDENTITY SUBSTANTIATION THROUGH 'MAILE' CONGREGATIONS² AMONG THE DORGAS OF JAMMU AND KASHMIR (INDIA)

Background

Weberian approach to a community shall be understood as a relationship based on the subjective feeling of the parties that they belong together. This feeling will be based on the belief of the members of the community that they have certain relevant traits in common, that they share an identity. The commonality in itself, however, does not suffice for the constitution of a community, if it is not invested with meaning.....To quote Ray³, if the felt commonality is the starting point, it has to be expressed by behavior in order to transform the community into a social reality. Therefore, in the postmodern world, the so-called 'pre-established' identities have become questionable in the senses of belonging to well-defined communities with

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² The 'Maile' congregation is all about the assembling or gathering of the people of same sub castes (having same surname) once in a year to pay obeisance to their common *kul*-deity at their worship site (*dehries*) or shrine. It is actually clan worship and the word *kul* means not an individual but a group of the families having same sub caste and clan.

³ Ray, Rajat Kanta, *The felt commonalty and mentality before the emergence of Indian Nationalism*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2003.

stable self-perception and also with recognized codes of behavior. This opens the field for investigating and questioning identities, not only in academic discourse, but also in the public sphere. The renewed interest in identity and the construction of knowledge from the 1990s onwards has provoked a shift from considering communities as 'given' to investigating the power relations and discourses by which they are constantly defined and redefined.⁴

Adding further complexity to the community identity issue is the power play of religion in the contemporary world. Here the conventional wisdom assumes that religion is on the decline in Western societies, that the forces of modernization and particularly secularization are simply too strong and so the once dominant force of religion in public life has now been radically curtailed. On the contrary, it is very hard to understand the modern world without understanding the major religious traditions and influences that cut across global boundaries and feed into and shape global politics⁵. The most obvious example of the way in which the twenty-first century world is being shaped by religion was the attacks in New York and Washington in September 2001 and the ensuing 'war on terrorism'. The first witnessed with helplessness two airplanes ramming into the WTC and killing over two thousand innocent lives. At the same time US president George W. Bush announced that this was an act of Islamic terrorism and that the US would initiate a war on terror, a crusade against Islamic terrorism.⁶

Under such dilemma and imprints, we rightly reject the two important theories of social change in the modern world, namely, secularization and Marxism, which had predicted the demise of religion with the progressive modernization of society. On the contrary, our contemporary moment is characterized by a global resurgence of religion. The resurgence is taking place in all social system- from the technologically most advanced to the most traditional ones- and has manifested itself in many forms- religious fundamentalism, support to terrorism, or spiritual renewal of self and society. It is thus to be emphasized that the dawning of a new century has not been accompanied by the eclipse of religiosity among individuals and in public culture. It is rather observed that because of disenchantment with our increasingly rationalized society, religion continues to provide meaning and intertwine daily social, economic, and political activity of human world. The societal rites of the past are replaced by the religious practices in modern world and thus there occurs a simultaneous increase in the number of rites across the calendar, i.e. a

⁴ Pernau, Margrit, Multiple Identities and Communities; Re-conceptualizing Religion, in *Religion Pluralism in South Asia and Europe*, Jamal Malik & Helmut Reifeld (eds.), Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 147-149.

⁵ Nye, Malory, *Religion- the Basics*, Routledge, London, 2003, p. 177.

⁶ Puniyani, Ram, *Religion, Power and Violence- Expression of Politics in Contemporary Times*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2005, pp. 8-12.

shift in the contours of social time. The proliferation of rites and dispersion of the sacred thus encourage a more disciplined and even distribution of emotional energies over a wider spectrum of activities.⁷

Theoretically speaking, it is interesting to view the ever-green sociological interpretation of religion in contemporary world. The structural-functional approach represents the understanding of the role of religion in sustaining social solidarity and the presence in the minds of members of the society of certain sentiments which control the behavior of the individuals. Further the phenomenological approach which looks upon the religion as that special human activity through which a comprehensive, meaningful, sacred cosmos is constructed. The Religion helps to build, maintain and legitimate universes of meaning. Peter Berger, an influential social theorist, looks upon the religion as that special human activity through which a comprehensive, meaningful, sacred cosmos is constructed. Berger emphasized the importance of interpretive understanding. Religion helps to build, maintain and legitimate universes of meaning. Berger and Luckmann state that 'throughout human history religion has played a decisive role in the construction and maintenance of universe'. Religion for Berger is ultimately the means to bestow 'legitimacy' on social life and to help it to resist the onslaught of chaos. In simple words religion legitimates social institutions. It does this 'by locating them within a sacred and cosmic frame of reference.'⁸

Locating the political connotation of 'identity' vis-à-vis religion it is interesting to find that even the identity theory links contemporary religion to identity in order to provide a comprehensive frame of reference for the large amount of data about religion in the social sciences discourse. The term "identity" connotes "sameness," "wholeness," "boundary," and "structure. "This means that the term "identity" may refer to individual identity, group identity, or social identity. On all these levels identity has something to do with a tendency toward "sameness" or stability, with a tendency toward "wholeness" or integration of traits, or with a strengthening of boundaries around the unit in question. And these concepts in turn are crucial for the understanding of the function of religion for individuals as well as for groups, both in primitive and in modern societies. When religion reinforces identity, it thereby strengthens the side, which complements rather than sugarcoats alienation. In the identity approach religion is treated rather similarly. Here too social action by the religious organizations is looked upon as one of the means to heal the brokenness of industrial society. Identity is not secondary to rationality and

⁷ Fenn, Richard.K (eds.) *Sociology of Religion*, Blackwell Publishing Ltd., U.K, 2001, pp 120-125.

⁸ Haralambos, Michael and Robin Heald, *Sociological Themes and Perspective*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2003, pp. 460-462.

differentiation, but an integrative counterpart. It restores the integrative counterbalance and thereby strengthens the dialectic between the analytic and synthetic modes by favoring the latter.

We thus find that the identity theory of religion defines religion as *whatever sacralizes identity or a system of meaning*. Sacralization here refers to the process by which, on the level of symbol-systems, certain patterns/practices acquire the same taken-for-granted, stable, eternal quality, which, on the level of instinctive behavior, was acquired by the consolidation and stabilization of new genetic materials. The concept comes close to the concept of institutionalization. The important difference is that sacralization adds to institutionalization other qualities such as untouchability and awe, qualities that reinforce the materials of which the house of identity is constructed. Sacralization is the inevitable process that safeguards identity when it is endangered by the disadvantages of the infinite adaptability of symbol-systems. Sacralization protects identity, a system of meaning, or a definition of reality, and modifies, obstructs, or (if necessary) legitimates change.⁹

On the issues of continuity of religious ritual and practices in the contemporary world, it is important to highlight Pascal Boyer's¹⁰ main strategy in the study of religion. It emphasized that why some concepts of imagined entities (agents in particular) matter to them? Further, regarding the rituals about ancestors, we say people worry about the 'ancestors reactions' because they believe the ancestors are powerful. The domain of religion is one where 'magic bullet' explanations are rife. People are said to have religious concepts because they want to explain the world, to escape the anguish of morality, to explain the existence of evil, to account for misfortune, to keep society in order, or because they are superstitious, irrational or prone to cognitive illusions. The mental representation we call 'religious concepts' happens to be the few survivors in this constant mutation and selection process. At this juncture it is necessary to identify, how religious concepts are associated intuitions about agency, about social interaction, about moral understanding and about dead bodies.

In the developing nations like India, the multiplicity of groups and tradition and various characters of their inter-relations provide much of the richness to Indian culture. The varieties of social collectivities such as castes, religion, class, clan, communities and interest groups have tended to be shaped in the name of ethnic and social identities. With the above backdrop, religion vis-à-vis identity politics appears to be a sensitive issue both at global and regional level. Thus it is high time to study the status of religio-cultural practices in the modern world and to identify their

⁹ Mol, Hans, *The Identity Model of Religion: How it Compares with Nine other Theories of Religion*, 1979.

¹⁰ Boyer, Pascal, *Religion Explained: Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*. Basic Books, New York, 2001.

relevance in contemporary society. Referring Kothari's¹¹ statement that – “we shall examine the relationships between caste and politics as basically a relationship for the specific purpose of organizing public activity”; we also see the relationship between community and religion in the similar fashion. Thus, this paper not only attempts to highlight the 'maile' congregation (annual community gathering) through 'kul-deity' worship as adaptation and continuity of traditional elements in the modern circumstances but also tries to extract the political dimension of the phenomenon. Every important religious persona, scripture or shrine is invested with a number of folk notions of power. The primordial practices and symbols provide a subconscious background to very religious system. The 'maile' congregation is all about the assembling or gathering of the people of same sub castes (having same surname) and *gotra* once in a year to pay obeisance to their common *kul-deity* at their worship site (*dehries*) or shrine. Here, Jammu region (J&K State, India) being characterized as “city of temples” happens to be a right place for religious activities. The people of Jammu region have not only specific Gods for each village (*Granh devta*) but every family has its own family deity (*kuldevta/kuldevi*) which they worship during their annual community 'maile' congregation. Thus, the concept of 'maile' congregation among various communities in the region is a significant feature reflecting the continuity of past ritual practices. The paper thus provides socio-political insights about these practices in the contemporary society, the aspect of continuity and functionality of these primordial identities in the era of globalization. The findings of the work also reflects the intersection of religion, lineage, caste, identity and gender issues involved in the 'maile' congregation and deity worship.

Dynamics of Religion, Caste and Politics in India:

Religion and politics have coexisted in the whole world since ancient times. However, the recent manifestations of religions being exploited to further political interests have become much more overt. An intensification of communal violence over the last two decades has made this clear to us in India. It may not be wrong to quote Kothari that - if 'modernization' is the central tendency of our times, it is 'politicization' that provides its driving force.

In a global framework, India has always been projected as a country of social differentiation and cultural plurality. The varieties of social collectivities such as castes, religion, class, clan, communities and interest groups have tended to be shaped in the name of ethnic and social identities. In every day life of individuals and their lifecycle, these categories played a significant role both in terms of

¹¹ Kothari, Rajni, *Politics in India*, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 1970, pp. 232.

interpersonal relationship within and between the categories as well as those, which are external to in-group. We may thus say that, one of the most challenging aspects of Indian culture is its variety and complexity. The multiplicity of groups and traditions in India and the manifold character of their interrelations provide much of the richness of the Indian culture. Primal religions seemed to have been concerned mainly with the security of society and were, on the whole, conservative in their outlook. The rise of modernity creates new crises for the maintenance of religious boundaries. While on the one hand these become hardened through the geopolitical and economic demands of empire, they are at the same time blurred through the massive migration of peoples, the emergence of hybrid types of religions, the contact between peoples due to modern transportation and information technology, and the new understanding of the unity of the human species in its spiritual experience, which is one of the gifts of the study of religion to human reconciliation.

It may not be wrong to say that religion has been, and continues to be, a matter of absorbing interest for many in India still today. In former centuries no aspect of life was set apart from religion. All social relations were inevitably and legitimately suffused with religious ideas and acts. The possibility of religion in a modern world can be felt through altered functioning of religion. The marketization of religion by religious gurus performing miracles and fascinating public, the involvement of religious organizations in the building up of hospitals and schools, working for the victims of natural disasters etc. and politicization of religion by the outburst of fundamentalists reflect the altered character of it. Modern forces have certainly influenced folk culture and traditions in developing countries like India, but they have not as yet lost their vigor. References to modern objects, events and experiences find their way into folklore through the usual process of reworking traditional items, the composition of new pieces, and even the merger of new types. Thus in contemporary India, the impact of modernization has led to the emergence of new religions, revivals, and reforms within the great traditions. In modern societies, with their complex fabric of social differentiations, not only among religion, but other groups and social activities, there appears a proliferation of rites.

Since many rites are attached to the practices of specific groups and do not take on a societal-wide role, this proliferation does not necessarily impede societal integration. Even those rites that are societalized are combined with others in a larger number, with a reduced emotionality for each. The sum of societal rites themselves become routinized and more fully integrated into the workaday fabric of social

order, reaching a variety of accommodations with other institutional spheres such as the state, the workplace, the market, the ethnic group and the family.¹²

Religion thus continues to be an important identity marker for its worshipper in Indian society. Religious beliefs and practices have a large impact on the personal lives of most Indians and influence public life on a daily basis. Majority of people engage in ritual actions that are motivated by religious systems that owe much to the past but are continuously evolving. Religion is one of the most important facets of Indian history and contemporary life. The emergence of new religions and their revivals lead to diversity which appears through the integration or acculturation of entire social groups—each with its own vision of the divine that base their culture on literary and ritual traditions preserved in regional languages. The local interaction between great traditions and local forms of worship and belief, based on village, caste, tribal, and linguistic differences, creates a range of ritual forms and mythology that varies widely throughout the country. The continuity of practices like worshipping village deity, family deity, performing 'shradh rituals', 'mundane ceremony', existence of spirits etc. justify the relevance of religion especially in rural context.

Simultaneously, on the question of caste Kothari¹³ rightly points that, everyone recognizes that the social system in India is organized around caste structures and caste identities. In dealing with the relationship between caste and politics, however, the tendency is to start at the wrong end of the question: Is caste disappearing? In reality, however, no social system disappears. A more useful point of departure would be: What form is caste taking under the impact of politics, and what form is politics taking in a caste-oriented society? A few who are free from a dichotomous view of caste and politics and are prepared to look into precise empirical relations suffers from another preconception and often a contrary theoretical construct. Politics, in this view, is an instrument wielded by a particular stratum in society to consolidate or raise its position; its function is to reproduce, or modify, existing states of superior-subordinate relationships. Such an approach blurs understanding of the developmental reality which consists not in any approximation to a preconceived framework but in the changing interactions of the constituent elements in a dynamic situation. But in the particular case of caste and politics, even this is only partly relevant. Where caste itself becomes a political category, it is futile to argue as to whether caste uses politics or politics uses caste.¹⁴

¹² Fenn, Richard.K (eds.) *Sociology of Religion*, Blackwell Publishing Ltd., U.K, 2001, pp 120-125.

¹³ Kothari, Rajni, *Politics in India*, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 1970, pp. 229.

¹⁴ Kothari, Rajni, *Politics in India*, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 1970, pp. 230.

It may not be wrong to say that Hinduism is organized on the basis of a vast number of cults, large and small. By cult I mean here a complex of religious activities directed towards a common object of reverence (be it a deity, saint, animal, spirit, natural feature, or indeed a living human being). That is, the members of the cult are united by the fact that they all worship the same object, rather than by the fact that they all hold the same views or dogma. Most Hindu cults have a fairly clearly discernible geographical dimension or 'spread', to use the term coined by Srinivas¹⁵. They generally have a cult centre or centers where the cult object has his or her chief shrine and to which pilgrims come from a larger or smaller 'hinterland'..... Throughout the area of its spread there will be numerous small shrines erected and maintained by local people and dedicated to the cult object. Many devotees will also practice the cult privately in their own homes independently of such shrines and without reference to any ritual specialists which the cult may have. Indeed these specialists – priests, custodians etc., usually have no authority in the cult, only an interest in its survival and a certain expertise (special knowledge of songs, stories and rites associated with the cult object) which they may place at the devotees disposal.

This also reminds us of the three dimensional issue of caste vis-à-vis political dimension (see Kothari, 1970) namely; secular, integration and dimension of consciousness. Here the third dimension appears more realistic regarding the 'maile' worship. As pointed by Kothari¹⁶, in their concern with stratification, sociologists have generally neglected the ideational underpinning that is inevitably associated with any social system. Thus the contest for positions between various *jatis* often follows some variation of *varna* either by approximating to the reality as in the case of the various layers of Brahmins status, or by invoking label as in the case of the claim of certain castes to be *Kshatriya* (a caste of warriors and rulers). Indeed the very fluidity and nebulosity of the concept of *Kshatriya* has been an important lever in structuring secular aspirations from time to time in the various regions, following real shifts in the social and economic positions of different groups. The same holds true for the brahmanic symbol as well as the symbol of certain middle range castes. Caste has several meanings, refer to *varna* at one level and to other meanings of segmentation at other levels. By shifting from one referent to another, it demonstrates the basic continuity between the various referents-doctrinal, rituals, economic and occupational, and associational-political. At the same time by being different things at different points in social interactions, it provides for immense flexibility, and produces tension management and assimilative capabilities.

¹⁵ Srinivas, M.N. *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2003.

¹⁶ Kothari, Rajni, *Politics in India*, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 1970, pp. 235.

This also brings out the importance of the manner in which traditional status urges such as '*sanskritization*' get intertwined with more modern urges like Westernization and secularization..... By itself the *sanskritization* urge produces some very basic psychological strains in the group that is trying to acquire a new identity in its search for status, as in the process its status becomes subjectively ambivalent and thus insecure; as with Jews, Negroes and other minority groups elsewhere, it is a 'negative assertion', a mood of 'submitting yet opposing' the emulated group.¹⁷

Further, the macroscopic view on religion (on the process of *sanskritization*) also reflects the presence of folk religion as an invisible reality. According to Bhatti¹⁸, those who believe in it may not be entirely conscious of the fact and for a rational modern educated person, it is simply a survival of primordial superstitions Strange but true the practice of folk religion is growing. People unconsciously transform the practice of high religions into their own framework of folk religion. In this regard, the '*maile*' congregations (annual community gathering) through '*kuldevta*' worship are adaptation of traditional practices to modern circumstances. Every important religious persona, scripture or shrine is invested with a number of folk notions of power. This infinite capacity of transformation makes folk religion a mine of folk materials, worthy of sociological investigation (Ibid: 9).These primordial practices and symbols provide a subconscious background to very religious system. The common and traditional notion of religion is that it validates the social value scheme with divine sanction and thus reinforces the social order. On a day-to-day basis, the vast majority of people engage in ritual actions that are motivated by religious systems that owe much to the past but are continuously evolving. Folk religion is an open non-exclusive combination of different religious beliefs, practices and customs, characterized by a pragmatic attitude towards powerful beings for the satisfaction of the worldly needs. The basis of the folk religion is pragmatism; it is not bothered about the construction of an abstract theological system though it recognizes the basic notion of causality. Deities are treated like human beings and supposed to behave in worldly manner. Negligence can provoke the anger of a deity while respect and devotion can appease him. Folk religion includes many features of nature worship and ancestor worship without recognizing any contradictions in beliefs and practices associated with different deities. The structure of folk religion being open and unifying, a particular deity may show a unique combination of elements of different religious traditions. All religious saints, Gurus, heroes are usually adopted into the

¹⁷ Kothari, Rajni, *Politics in India*, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 1970, pp. 236.

¹⁸ Bhatti, H.S, *Folk Religion: Change and Continuity*, Rawat Publication, New Delhi, 2000, pp 9.

folk tradition by attributing the powers to them. Thus, a religious reformer or hero may transform into a powerful deity with the growing popular association of some pragmatic functions with his powers.

In this regard, the contemporary 'maile' (annual gathering) through *kuldevta*' worship, like modern caste associations, are adaptation of traditional patterns to modern circumstances. Although there is talk of a casteless, sectless, ecumenical form of Hinduism, M. Singer¹⁹ observes that - already tendencies have appeared towards new forms of ritualization, intellectualization, and sectarianism which render such an outcome unlikely. It may be that this 'maile' gathering or something like it will lead to structural revision of caste and sect among its adherents. The growth of this 'maile' congregation illustrates only part of the historical cycle of religio-caste re-grouping. Jammu region, which is known as city of temples, is frequent practitioner of the 'kuldevta' worships during the community 'maile' congregation. They are normally done annually during the later phase of the year. This phenomenon attracts the community people from different regions for a collective gathering and thus stabilization of their community identity.

In the study of religion, it is emphasized that why some concepts of imagined entities (agents in particular) matter to them? People are said to have religious concepts because they want to explain the world, to escape the anguish of morality, to explain the existence of evil, to account for misfortune, to keep society in order, or because they are superstitious, irrational or prone to cognitive illusions. At this juncture it is necessary to identify, how religious concepts are associated intuitions about agency, about social interaction, about moral understanding and about dead bodies.²⁰

'Maile' congregation and Kul-deity worship among Dogra community:

Sati are essentially a type of disease goddess, a deity of the most worshipped but least formally institutionalized sort with only a few exceptions, the sati have no 'murtis', no temple, no priests, no festivals and no pilgrimage places. They seem to have little or, at least, no widely known mythology. They are regarded with awe rather than affection. None of the deities has a particularly significant textual component to her cult. Their locus is ritual and experience, not texts²¹. Unlike the brahmanical Gods who are worshipped at Pan India level the influence of local deities is restricted to a particular region or a locality. Moreover they are aboriginal in character and their references are to be found mostly in folklore and folk literature.

¹⁹ Singer, Milton (ed.), *Traditional India: Structure and Change*, American Folklore Society, Philadelphia, 1959.

²⁰ Boyer, Pascal, *Religion Explained: Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*. Basic Books, New York, 2001.

²¹ Thapar, Romila, *Imagined Religious Communities? Ancient History and the Modern Search for a Hindu Identity*, Critical Quest, New Delhi; 2007.

However, as a result of the process of assimilation, some of them have lost their tribal or aboriginal characteristics completely. To quote few examples, in eastern India, *Jagannatha* of Puri is a striking example of the transformation of a tribal god into a great deity of the Hindu pantheon. The icon of this god is made of a big log of wood and some of his essential priests still belong to a local tribe. As lord of the world he has been identified with Vishnu. The history of the temple city of Chidabaram also illustrates that how through the process of sanskritization; the autochthonous cult of a local god was placed within the context of the great tradition.²²

The Jammu and Kashmir State, which constitutes of three different regions i.e. Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh, has three different sub-cultures because of their own peculiar cultural heritage. The hilly tract of Jammu which reaches down to the plain land of Punjab from the south of Kashmir Valley is inhabited by '*Dogra*' of Indo-Aryan stock who profess both Hinduism and Islam²³. According to legends, Jammu was founded about 3000 years ago by *Jambu Lochan*, who established his rule over the area and had his capital on the left bank of the *Tawi* river. According to the understanding of historians, "Jammu came into existence around 900 A.D". It is also about this time that the earliest references to '*Durgra Desha*' (from which the term '*Duggar*' and '*Dogra*' are derived and refers to Jammu region) in the form of two inscriptions on copper plates of the 11th century have been found²⁴. Geographically the whole of the region is divided into four major sub-divisions: The Eastern plains which include Jammu proper and erstwhile principalities of Jasrota, Balaur, Basholi, Babbur and lower parts of Reasi and Udhampur. These plains are popularly known as Duggar Illaa due to the dominant Dogra culture prevailing here. The Western plains comprises erstwhile Bhimbar, Khari-Kharyali and Mirpur, which now forms part of present day Pakistan. This area was once known as Chibhal after the Chib clan of Rajputs. The Eastern Hills comprise Kishtwar, Bhaderwah and Dacchin areas where as the Western Hills include Rajouri, Punch and Kotli areas.²⁵

Jammu region is an intermediate zone lying between plains of Punjab and ascending hills that is the tract lying between river Jhelum and river Chenab to the south of Pir Panjal range of mountains. A major portion of the region now forms the part of Jammu province in the State of Jammu and Kashmir. According to

²² Kulke, Hermann & Dietmar Rothermund, *A History of India*, Routledge, New York, Reprint 1998.

²³ Sharma, Kanchan. *Socio-Political Aspiration of J&K People*, Jammu: Akshay Publisher, 1995.

²⁴ Wakhlu, Somnath, *The Rich Heritage of J&K-Studies in Art, Architecture, History and Culture of the Region*, Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi, 1998.

²⁵ The Census Report of India, Jammu & Kashmir, GOI, 1911, pp.201.

Raychandhari²⁶, culturally Jammu region appears to have made its first contact with brahmanical culture with the arrival of *Madra* people in the region. We know that *Madra* was a section of the famous *Anu* tribe that dwelt in central Punjab and its adjoining northern region. With the coming of the *Madra*, brahmanical culture was introduced in Jammu. Since then, the brahmanical culture appears to have penetrated into all the geographical sub-regions of Jammu region depending on its acceptability. At this juncture, Jammu region in Jammu and Kashmir State (India) have its own uniqueness. Jammu city being characterized as 'city of temples' happens to be a right place for religious activities; this is evident with the presence of various holy shrines such as *Mata Vaishno Devi* Shrine, Bhagwati Kalka of Jammu, Sukarla temple near Billawar, Shiva temple at Sudh Mahadev near Chanaini, Raghunath temple and Pir-kho temple. Apart from this, the residents of the remoter parts of Jammu and especially of the hilly (*Kandi*) tracts have not only specific Gods for each village (*Granh Devata*) but every family has its own family deity / guardian God i.e. *kul-deity* (*kul-devta* and/ *kul-devi*) which they worship during their community 'maile' congregation. Here we can see 'Bawa Jitto shrine' in terms of 'sacred space' and annual 'Jhiri Mela' in terms of 'sacred time'. It had become the practice for the pilgrims to visit the sacred shrine during auspicious time of *Jhiri Mela* which is marked by week's time. The *Jhiri Mela* is organized on *Purnima* (full moon) of *Kartik / Magher* to honor the supreme sacrifice of *Bawa Jitto* (a tiller) and his 9-year old daughter *Bua Koudi*, who sacrificed his life to show protest against the injustice that the poor tillers often experienced. This is the only time when the pilgrims from different states throng to his *samadhi* (memorial) to pay him obeisance. I will try to analyze the ritual practices associated with the worship of *Bawa Jitto* especially during auspicious time (*Jhiri Mela*). Other than the *Jhiri Mela* which is organized every year to immortalize the martyrdom of *Bawa Jitto* and *Bua Koudi*, several other rituals and ceremonies are also performed at different occasions by different communities at the site of sacred shrine. One such ritual is 'maile' congregation performed by the different communities who worship *Bawa Jitto* as their *kul-deity*. These congregations are organized either annually or biannually by the community concerned at the sacred shrine to take the blessings of *Bawa Jitto* and *Bua Koudi*.

Viewing the microscopic view of *Dogra* community we find that the every *Dogra* family has its own history of sacrifice and remorse. The most pathetic as well as heroic element of social history in the *Duggar* region has been the performance of self sacrifice. It was a common tradition among all communities and classes of *Dogras*. The *Dogras* being a martial community was used to the tradition of self sacrifice, since their known history. A great many of these local heroes were only

²⁶ Raychandhari, H.C., *Political History of Ancient India*, University of Calcutta, 1972, pp. 63

great men of the past who sacrificed their lives in order to get justice for their people or to achieve their rights, a fact which showed the extent to which hero worship prevailed in this part of the region.

The '*maile*' congregation as the name depicts the term '*maile*', which means the meeting or gathering. The '*maile*' congregation is all about the assembling or gathering of the people of same sub castes (having same surname) and *gotra* once in a year to pay obeisance to their common *kul*-deity (*kul-devtas* and *kul-devis*) at their worship site (*dehries*) or shrine. It is actually clan worship and the word *kul* means not an individual but a group of the families having same sub caste and clan. All the *Dogra* clans have their clan deities known as *kul-devta* and *kul-devi* (*kul*-deity) who are propitiated on religious and social occasions. For example, the Mehta brahmans has *Bawa Jitto* as their *kuldevta*, the *Jamwal* clan has *Rani Parmeshari* as their *kul-devi*, and the *Charkas* have their martyr priest *Bawa Ranpat*. It is considered as the auspicious day by the community members and all the families of the particular community joins together at the worship place (*dehra* or *dehri*) to show devotion by paying homage to *kul*-deity by performing certain rituals, which are passed from generation to generation.

Every *Dogra* family has its own history of sacrifice and remorse. The most pathetic as well as heroic element of social history in the *Duggar* region has been the performance of *sati* i.e. self sacrifice, by putting her self in the pyre made for the dead body. It was a common tradition among all communities and classes of *Dogras*. The *Dogras* being a martial community, was used to the tradition of *sati* i.e., self sacrifice, since their known history. The heroic death of soldiers, generals and rulers was common occurrence in this region because of constant struggle of the *Dogras* against Turks and Ghori invaders the sultan and the Mughal emperors. The spouses of the heroic soldiers, chiefs and rulers invariably committed *sati* i.e. self sacrifice. The custom of *sati* (self sacrifice) had somewhat degenerated in its conception and performance. The original custom had the high ideals of conjugal fidelity and was performed in two conditions, firstly on the death of husband and secondly, at the time of invasion of a place by the Muslims in which case, women irrespective of caste, married and unmarried, performed collective *sati* (self sacrifice). In both cases the object was to preserve female honor and fidelity toward husband. But in most of the cases referred in the *Dogri* literature, the *sati* (self sacrifice) performed was not a well considered and sane step, but it occurred under the stress of emotions, mostly by the mothers for their sons, daughter for the father, sister for the brother. In the case of *Bawa Jitto* who sacrificed his life to protest against the injustice. His minor daughter of some eight years *Bua Koudi* who was mother-less and so emotionally attached to her father that shy could not bare the tragedy. She made a pyre for her father and

jumped into it and ended her life i.e. become *sati* (self sacrifice). The self immolation of *Jitto's* daughter of very tender age at the pyre of her father is probably the most touching part. Similarly, the *Bua Makha* for her brother, *Bua Alama* and *Dati Charago* for their son sacrificed their lives and performed *sati* (self sacrifice). The noble maternal affection was the cause behind the sacrifice of *Bua Alama* who immolates herself when her son was mercilessly murdered and buried in the field.²⁷ It was the deeper emotion under the situation and the great affection which induced women to become *sati* (self sacrifice) for their blood relations.

The females of *Duggar* have bravely made an end of their lives also in protest against injustice, insult and baseless imputation (allegations). They not only proved the innocence of their character but earned reverence and are worshipped as *kul*-deities. These are generally deceased local celebrities, deified for the occasion, or worshipped. However, performance of *sati*, self-immolation, and self killing for a noble cause were considered noble acts in society and such events are commemorated in the form of memorials. To atone and immortalize the sacrifice of these deities where symbolic statues of these clan deities have been installed their memorials in the form of *dehries* (*samadhi's*) were raised. These memorials are worshipped mostly by the family or *kul* (members have same surname and *gotra*) of the person as a common *kul-devi* (also called as *Sajavaties* or *Satiavatis*) from generations to generations.²⁸ Some of the *kul-devi* which are usually worshipped among the different communities of the *Dogras* are *Bua Tripta*, *Dati Charago*, *Bua Sajawati*, *Bua Sateybati*, *Bua Shilawanti*, *Bua Alma*, etc. Similarly a number of men who sacrificed their lives either to protest against the ill treatment or for some noble cause, are worshipped as *kul-devta* such as *Bawa Jitto*, *Bawa Sidh Gauria* and *Bawa MaiMal*, *Bawa Kodda*, *Bawa Ambo*, *Bawa Kalibeer*, *Raja Mandlik*.²⁹ Like *Baba Jitto*, *Baba Mai Mal* who was a tiller, sacrificed his life to prove his innocence. *Raja Mandlik* who was noted for his justice, meekness and mercy towards his subjects, is worshipped throughout Jammu region. A great many of these local deities were only great men of the past who sacrificed their lives in order to get justice for their people or to achieve their rights, a fact which showed the extent to which hero worship prevailed in this part of the region. The heroic deeds of local heroes who have been deified and are worshipped, the memorials (*samadhi*) are constructed in reverence to the deceased. These deities gained local celebrity by the efforts of attending *yogis* who go about singing praises of them from one area to another.³⁰ Such persons are not

²⁷ Nirmohi, Shiv, *Dugger Key Lokgathain*, Radha Krishan Anand and Company, Jammu, 1982, pp. 107.

²⁸ *The Census Report of India*, J&K, GOI, 1911, pp.97.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 97.

³⁰ Singh, K.S, *People of India: Jammu and Kashmir*, Vol XXV Lordson Publishers Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi, 2000, pp. 277.

only worshiped but their names and deeds are perpetuated in *karaks* (emotional songs) which are framed by the *yogis* and *bards*, which they enjoy singing in chorus. The *karak* of *Bawa Sidh Gauria* and *Bawa Mai Mal* also narrate self sacrifice under strange circumstances.³¹

To commemorate the sacrifice of these *kul*-deities, fairs known as *melas* are held on traditional and customary days at these shrines once or twice in a year by the community concerned. The one such example is the *Jhiri Mela* which is organized to commemorate the supreme sacrifice of *Bawa Jitto*. At that time the '*maile*' congregation is also organized by the communities to worship their respective *kul*-deity (*kul-devta* /*kul-devi*). It is confined to a particular locale and has elaborate ritual practices. This is done probably to pacify the wrath of deity (departed Soul) who might have uttered curses under the circumstances. Negligence can provoke the anger of a deity while respect and devotion can appease him. The Deities are conceptualized as patrons of children, protectors of cattle and a healer of diseases. The worship of *Sidh Gauria* is associated in particular with the loss of cattle or other property. The owner of the lost property invoked the aid of the deity for its restoration by worshipping him. The blessings expected could be the bestowal of a son and even tongue to dumb if they develop the faith in the Deity. Their name and heroic are perpetuated in *Karaks* (holy songs) which were framed by the *yogis*.

As rightly mentioned by Atrey³², Jammu region also has its own complex hierarchy of local deities. Here they are popularly referred to as *kul-devta* and *kul-devi* due to reason that, the people in the region reverse them as family deities. No ritual or ceremony is performed without having first venerated them. This cult, therefore, forms an essential part of the living heritage of the region and as such can help us to understand the socio-cultural processes in the region. In general there are following categories of local deities (both caste and religious based) in Jammu region.³³

Gram devta: Scholars have identified about fifty major and minor *gram devtas* in the region. According to a view, these deities are called *gram devtas* due to the reason that their area of influence is limited to a village. Geographically, the larger concentration of the *gram devtas* is in the hilly areas such as in *Bhadrawaha*, *Rajouri*, *Udhampur*, *Reasi* and *Katra*. They are worshipped to get favors in form of protection

³¹ Chandan, Meenakshi, *Rituals of Dogra Community: A Socio-Cultural Analysis of Maile Congregation at Jhiri Mela of Jammu Region*, Unpublished M.phil thesis in Sociology, University of Jammu, under Dr. Ashish Saxena, 2006.

³² Atrey, Mrinalini, *Deity, Cult, Rituals and Oral traditions in Jammu*; Saksham Books International, Jammu, 2008, pp. 4.

³³ Nirmohi, Shiv, *Duggar ke Lok Devta*, Sahitya Sangam Publications, Jammu, 1997, pp. 20, 155-56.

against natural calamities, for agricultural prosperity, for cattle wealth, for justice delivery, family prosperity etc.

Gram Devi: The local goddesses largely exist in the form of village goddesses. Most of them have been identified with *Durga* and *Shakti* cult. Some of the local goddesses especially *Vaishno Devi* have attained widespread popularity after their absorption into the Pan-Indian hierarchy. They are worshipped to get favors in form of agricultural prosperity, cattle wealth and protection from dreadful diseases.

Nag Devta: The major concentration of the *Nag* deities has largely been in the Eastern hills, especially in Bharderwaha, Udhampur and some part of Jammu and Kathua district. It seems that since *Nags* were also the ruler of the region, many of them appear to have worked for the welfare of the people especially in the field of irrigation. After their death they were probably raised to the status of the deity. Over a period of time, these *Nag* deities came to be symbolized through snake as a totem. Moreover, we also find that all these *Nag* deities reside near water resources. In many places the water resources itself is considered as deity especially in form of waterfall or a pond. They are worshipped for the purpose of agricultural prosperity, cattle wealth and family prosperity.

Shaheed Devta: It includes both male and female deities. They are also family deities and later acquired the status of folk deities. Going through the ballads and legends connected with them, we come to the conclusion that they were probably common folk people who were either killed or got sacrificed in the cause of humanity or other reasons. Once the victim died, the guilty person or community would start revering the dead person, to escape his wrath and anger. The study shows that the major reasons for their martyrdom were largely: atrocities of the feudal lords, killed in land disputes, human sacrifice (practice of *parha*), unnatural death. It has also been noticed that many of the *shaheed* devta include brahmins who gave their life for justice through the practice of *Praha Pratha* (a kind of passive resistance or self-torture sometimes culminating in self-immolation and self-killing).

Silabantis (Sati Deities): One who sacrificed life for their husband and sons.

Aaghat Devtas (Exotic Deities): The local deity cult also assimilated some of the Exotic deities who have been termed as *Aaghat* in the sense that they came from outside regions. They include the deities such as *Raja Mandleek*, *Baba Kalibeer* and *Narsimha*.

Form of Representation of the Deities: The form of the deities is both non-iconographic and iconic. In the non-iconographic form the deities largely exist in form of *Pindi* or *Mohara*. The variation in representation of the deities depends on the extent of the brahmanical influence that has worked on the form of the deities. The existence of deity only in non-iconographic form (*pindi*) shows the absence of brahmanical influence of the deity. On the other hand, depiction of deity in both non-iconic and iconographic form shows that brahmanical influence has been successful in influencing the deity but it is not complete. The deities in the region are also worshipped in the form of '*Moharas*' especially the *shaheed devta* and *silabantis*. These *Moharas* are a kind of memorial stones.³⁴

Rituals and Festivals Associated with Deities: Most of the festivals celebrated in the honor of these deities are connected with agriculture prosperity. There is festival of *Gaestan* where devotees seek favor from deity for good harvest, cattle wealth and domestic prosperity. There is another festival *Kharke* and *Rade* for good harvest (see Shiv Nirmohi; 8)

'*Maile*' or annual congregation is another important festival where families worshipping same deity assemble at its shrine and perform traditional rituals. The annual congregation at the shrine of *Baba Jitto* popularly called *Jhiri ka Mela* is held on the day of *Kartik Poornima* at *Jhiri* village. During the '*maile*' of deity, an important ritual is performed which is known as *Jatra*. In *Jatra* ritual, a medium '*dowala*' goes into trance and communicates with the deity. He is religious professional capable of having direct experience of possession and ecstasy. When in a state of possession and ecstasy, he is believed to communicate its wishes and suggest corrective measures to alleviate the sufferings of the person affected.

The persons associated with the performance of rituals at the shrines are called *Karkuns*. The foremost is the priest. He is called *Bojaki* in the plains and as *Pran* in the hilly pockets. He normally belongs to *Thakkur* sub-caste. Some of the priests at certain shrines are from low castes as well. The job of the priest is to conduct *Puja* at the shrine. *Dowala* is the second important person in the performance of rituals. He acts as the communion between deity and devotee. There can be many *dowalas* of the deity but only one priest. *Gardi* ranks next in hierarchy. They are from the lowest strata of the society and belong to *Dum jati*. The job of the *Gardi* is to beat the drum during the *puja* performance and sing *karaks* on honor of the deities. The caretaker of

³⁴ Atrey, Mrinalini, *Deity, Cult, Rituals and Oral Traditions in Jammu*, Saksham Books International, Jammu, 2008, pp. 19-22.

the shrines is called *Bhandari*. He is responsible for maintaining the records of income and expenditure.³⁵

Changing Dimensions of Kul-deity Worship: Some Observations

The modern indicators play their role resulting in the changes in the rituals practices related to *kul*-deity worship; the '*maile*' congregation is not an exception to these modern forces. The change is witnessed in mode of sacrifice worship where the devotees substitute it with offering of other things as people are turning into vegetarian and believe it is better to feed to poor or to give alms to the needy than to kill an animal. In some communities where the sacrifice worship still persists, there are some families in same communities who instead of offering goat to the deity, offer *halwa* and ask for forgiveness for doing that and others instead of sacrificing the goat, they leave the goat in the shrine after offering to the deity. The ceremonies are now very elaborate one; the food served in the *bhandara* is no simpler as it used to be. The '*maile*' congregation highlights the constructive role played by mass-media, as the advertisements regarding community '*maile*' is flashed week earlier in the local T. V, channels and newspapers. The documentary or short-films highlights their place of worship and their relevance. The combination of media, construction, conveyance, Publication of literature and maintenance of proper organizational set-up is all the play of modern forces in the traditional '*maile*' congregation.

The '*maile*' congregation also provides a platform for political and economic activities along with ritual activities. It helps in a way to create a social networking as provide a chance to interact with the other members of the same community ,for making new relations and to develop a social contact which also results in the development of economic relationships by taking guidance from their elder experienced member's regarding the economic issues. Every community formed their organizational committee for the utilization of the donation and formulating the policies for the betterment of the community. Almost every community who participated in the community '*maile*' has full-fledged body of organizational set-up which comprises of President, Secretary and Cashier, who are elected by male members of community. The female has no role to play in these committees. They play strong role in making best possible use of the donation offered by the community, for the development of the sacred place and manages all issues related to '*maile*' such as giving advertisement in the paper, publication of literature related to their deity. Now the roles is extended as it offers help to the needy people of the

³⁵ Ibid, 21.

community and discuss the problems. Sometimes these committees are also used in a way to achieve political inspirations as it is alleged that only influential person hold the position in the organization and it is the way by which they tried fulfill their political motives.³⁶

Apart from above significant aspects of politicization of religion vis-à-vis identity substantiation, following observations are worth mentioning:

- Historical practice of the drawing of persons from different castes to work in the honor of the deity shows how the caste relations are arranged and caste distinctions have been harmonized. However, now a day, the shrines management is being run by organizations involving people of the same clan or caste whose *kul*-deity is in question. It speaks about the crystallization of caste-based sharp identity, obviously for political reasons.
- As an evident case of tribe-caste continuum, local deities of Jammu region now form part of the broader brahmanical fold, but, although originally non-brahmanical in origin. This is evident through the imprints of aboriginal characteristics in the existing deities. Another aboriginal feature is the continuity of non-brahman priestly class at the shrines of these deities. Moreover, it is the families with aboriginal roots only, who owe allegiance to local deity cult and reverse them as their *kul*-deities. Thus we see the simultaneous existence of little and great traditions. These local deities enjoy well established hierarchy among themselves. In this way they also reflect the level of governance among them. All these reflect the retaining of one's own identity even after assimilation with the mainstream Hinduism.
- The *Dogra* community has partially changed with the modern age and this change is for betterment of the community as a whole. It is true that the *Dogra* community has adopted modern technology in their daily routine but they resist changes when it comes to the ritual activities.
- It is observed that even under the modern forces of globalization, the '*maile*' congregations showcase the traditions and deep rooted philosophy of faith and belief. It is strange but true that people in modern age have belief in the age old sanctions associated with the *kul*-deity and perform sacrifice worship even today. The considerable changes are also witnessed in the age old rituals, the modern forces are responsible for it but a traditional

³⁶ Chandan, Meenakshi, *Rituals of Dogra Community: A Socio-Cultural Analysis of Maile Congregation at Jhiri Mela of Jammu Region*, unpublished M.phil thesis in Sociology, University of Jammu, under Dr. Ashish Saxena, 2006.

customary practice still dominates and sanctions the community-identity sharply. In other words, the contemporary '*maile*' (annual gathering) through *kul*-deity worship is adaptation of traditional patterns to modern circumstances with a relatively new agenda of community identity assertion.

- It may not be wrong to say that the secular, integrative, and ideational dimensions of religio-caste have provided a sophisticated and differentiated cultural background for receiving the modernist impacts and responding to them without either great disruption or any widespread feeling of dissonance and alienation.
- It is a tribute to the subtle dynamics of Hindu society that in spite of this psychological cost, the adjustments of *sanskritization* go on all the time; and one of the many reasons is that the structural distance that a group tries to jump can often be related to the achievement of other indices of power and position in the modernist segments of society, thus facilitating the transition to a consensus on the new status of the striving group. Important in this respect is the crucial role that the distribution of secular power has always played in status ranking in Hindu society; and the consequent capacity of the system to keep adjusting to its changing hierarchical balance.³⁷

³⁷ Kothari, Rajni, *Politics in India*, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 1970, pp. 237.

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Abstract

Ashish Saxena

**RELIGION, CASTE AND COMMUNITY: IDENTITY SUBSTANTIATION
THROUGH 'MAILE' CONGREGATIONS AMONG THE DORGAS OF JAMMU
AND KASHMIR (INDIA)**

In the postmodern world, the so-called 'pre-established' identities have become questionable in the senses of belonging to well-defined communities with stable self-perception and also with recognized codes of behavior. The renewed interest in identity and the construction of knowledge from the 1990s onwards has provoked a shift from considering communities as 'given' to investigating the power relations and discourses by which they are constantly defined and redefined. Substantiating the domain of religion as one where 'magic bullet' explanations are rife, the political connotation of 'identity' vis-à-vis religion also links contemporary religion to identity.

In India, the varieties of social collectivities such as castes, religion, clan, communities etc have tended to be shaped in the name of ethnic and social identities. Thus it is high time to study the status of religio-cultural practices in the modern world and to identify their relevance in contemporary society. This paper not only attempts to highlight the 'maile' congregation (annual community gathering) through 'kul-deity' worship as adaptation and continuity of traditional elements in the modern circumstances but also tries to extract the political dimension of the phenomenon.

Key words: Community, Identity, Modernity, 'Maile' congregation, Deity worship.

Резиме

Ашиш Саксена

РЕЛИГИЈА, КАСТА И ЗАЈЕДНИЦА: ПОТВРДА ИДЕНТИТЕТА ПУТЕМ „МАИЛЕ“ БРАТСТВА КОД НАРОДА ДОРГА ИЗ ЏАМУА И КАШМИРА (ИНДИЈА)

У пост-модернистичком свету, такозвани претходно афирмисани идентитет који подразумева строго дефинисану заједницу са непроменљивом свести о самој себи, са препознатљивим начином понашања је доведен у питање. Почев од 1990. године, обновљено је интересовање што се питања идентитета и конструкције знања тиче. Ово интересовање проузроковало је напуштање погледа о заједници као датој категорији, да би се прешло на истраживање односа путем којих се зајднице дефинишу и реafirмишу.

Политичко значење појма „идентитет“ наспрам религије повезује, такође, савремену религију са идентитетом, доказујући тако да је поље религије оно где су распрострањена веровања у надприродно решење свих проблема.

У Индији, различити облици друштвених група као што су каста, верска припадност, клан итд. показују тенденцију да буду обликовани на основу етничких и друштвених идентитета. Стога, крајње је време да се почне са проучавањем религијско-културних пракси модерног света, те да се укаже на њихову важност у савременом свету. Овај рад не настоји само да прикаже „маиле“ (верски годишњи скуп заједнице) преко култа „кул“ - божанства као адаптацију и наставак традиционалних елемената у модерном окружењу, него настоји да издвоји једну политичку димензију овог феномена.

Кључне речи: заједница, идентитет, модерност, „маиле“ скупови, култ божанства.