

Embodied Pilgrimage and the Social Life of Ritual: A Study of the Balaji Dhwaj Yatra

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Abstract

This study reconceptualises Hindu pilgrimage through an ethnographic study of the Balaji Dhwaj Yatra. A village-based journey from Mandothi (Haryana) to Mehndipur Balaji (Rajasthan), this work challenges dominant discourses around pilgrimage as primarily concerned with the experience of liminality, *communitas* and symbolic transformation. It proposes an analytic framework centred upon lived religion, the body and affect. Based on qualitative fieldwork the study examines how ritual practice is constituted through the interplay of discipline, performativity, and social negotiation. The yatra operates by a twofold logic. On the one hand, there are strict regulatory norms governing the continuous movement of the sacred flag. simultaneously, there are carnivalesque forms of excess that suspend everyday constraints (Bakhtin 1984). This sets up a conditional social space in which normative expectations, especially those around masculinity are reworked (Chowdhry 2005). The pilgrimage is an opportunity for intergenerational convergence for men who live socio-economically marginal lives and allows them to express vulnerability and reconstitute their sense of self. Further, “shram” (toil) serves as a ritualized act of purification and a mode of affective release, linking bodily exertion with processes of psychological and social reconstitution. Overall, by placing the emphasis upon the bodily/affective aspects of ritual, this work will contribute to the development of pilgrimage studies and broader sociological debates surrounding gender, rural transition and religiosity. It argues that localized pilgrimages represent critical spaces where social anxieties, identities, and forms of agency are actively negotiated.

Keywords: Pilgrimage; Lived Religion; Embodiment; Masculinity; Rural Transformation

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Introduction

Hindu pilgrimage and rituals play a pivotal role in the religious life of practitioners, often conceived as a “journey to the sacred”, emphasizing notions of discipline and transformation (Morinis 1984). Much of the existing scholarship surrounding pilgrimage has utilized concepts, such as liminality, *communitas*, and spiritual renewal (Turner and Turner 1978). Although these approaches are conceptually useful, they either emphasize the symbolic meaning of *yatras* at a distance or their large-scale mobilizations while, paradoxically considering localized forms of *yatras* as simplistic phenomena and understandings of complex social and experiential practices. In this study, an annual pilgrimage ‘*Balaji Dhwaj Yatra*’ is described, where the residents of Mandothi village in Haryana walk to Mehndipur Balaji temple located in Rajasthan. This *yatra* is organized at a village level and co-ordinated over an extended distance where pilgrims continuously carry a sacred flag (*dhwaj*), unlike the mass pilgrimages that occupy scholarly attention. The journey incorporates not just ritual discipline, but also a high level of physical exertion, performance excesses and collective participation. The *Balaji Dhwaj Yatra* reveals how ritual practice is deeply intertwined with everyday social realities; particularly those related to masculinity, generational change, and rural transformation (Chowdhry 2005; Jeffery et al. 2007). The *yatra* is thus both a space of discipline, the law with respect to the progress of the *dhwaj*, adheres to strict rules and governance as well as a carnivalesque performances that suspend normative social constraints (Bakhtin 1984). Furthermore, this very pilgrimage creates a semi-anonymous social space where participants, especially men are able to enunciate vulnerabilities, negotiate identities as well as experience forms of emotional release otherwise constrained in everyday life. The *shram* (toil) at its core is not only reimagined as a religious practice of cleansing, but also positioned as psychological-social reconstruction. The study attempts to fill an important gap in the literature on pilgrimage by contextualizing the *Balaji Dhwaj Yatra* into larger discussions of lived religion, affect, and performativity to show how localised pilgrimages serve as locations where embodied negotiations over social anxieties and identities are played out (Ammerman 2016; Orsi 2010). In doing so, it puts forward a concept of pilgrimage as a dynamic social form that relates the rituality of body and lived experience.

For the study a qualitative, ethnographic case-study design was employed. The researcher accompanied the Mandothi pilgrim group throughout their pilgrimage, collecting observational and interview data. The field site was Mandothi village (Haryana) and the route to Mehndipur Balaji (Rajasthan). The participants of the ‘Bajrang Mandal Mandothi’ along with four extended families from Mandothi participated in the *yatra*. All participants were Hindu, organizing the pilgrimage through their local Bajrang Mandal (devotee society). In terms of the caste composition, the majority of the group par-

ticipants belonged to Jaat community, with a smaller number of Brahmin, OBC and scheduled caste participants. This caste composition is only reflective of the social network through which this pilgrimage group had been constituted rather than any larger caste based restrictions governing the participation in the *yatra*. It must also be noted that the caste composition only relates to the pilgrimage group studied and should not be taken as representative of the larger pilgrimage population visiting the Mehndipur Balaji Temple. Observations made at the mehndipur Balaji temple site suggested a presence of devotees ranging across diverse caste backgrounds. The group had performed this *yatra* in previous years, ensuring that the research studied an established tradition. In terms of data collection, participant observation was the primary method. The researcher walked with the pilgrims, carrying the *dhvaj* in intervals and stayed with the group from departure until return (a multi-day journey). Detailed field notes and photographs documented rituals and interactions. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with adult pilgrims during and after the journey. Interviews covered motivations, experiences during travel (e.g. feelings, challenges), and perceptions of the pilgrimage's meaning. The researcher also recorded informal conversations in Hindi and Haryanvi as events unfolded. These combined methods captured both the overt ritual performance and pilgrims' subjective reflections. Interviews were documented, translated and thematically coded. Observational notes were integrated to contextualize interview reports. The researcher followed local cultural norms and refrained from participating in rituals beyond a respectful observer's role. No incentives were offered. The aim was to observe and interview without disrupting the pilgrimage's flow.

Conceptual Framework

The scholarship on pilgrimage has been heavily influenced by Turner and Turner (1978) who described pilgrimage as a liminal experience that generates *communitas*, the dissolution of hierarchical distinctions and the emergence of egalitarian social bonds (Turner and Turner 1978). Turner's (1969) model highlights how ritual can transform, and the ways in which participants step outside of ordinary social roles into a new, collective moment. Later work, notably that of Morinis (1984), built upon this model to emphasize the experiential and transformative aspects of Hindu pilgrimage. Morinis (1984) contends that pilgrimage relies on an anticipation of a transformative experience whereby the journey itself is in fact used as a means of reconstituting the individual. Though this prioritises experience, it still only looks at transformation in spiritual/symbolic terms. Subsequent work has also critiqued the classical understandings of treating pilgrimage as a singular process producing *communitas*. Coleman and Eade (2004) argue how pilgrimage space should instead be understood as a contested and negotiated arena which is actively shaped and reshaped by multiple actors rather than a uniform and harmonious *communitas*. Ammerman (2016) and Orsi (2010) argue that religious rituals need to be

seen as a daily practice in the world rather than as an adherence to institutional doctrine. From this perspective, pilgrimage is not an organized rite but a kind of practice in which participants continually generate meaning through practice, interaction and improvisation. Similarly, Heiser (2021) describes pilgrimage as an exceptional mode of lived religion which occupies the intersection of institutional forms and individual agency. Thomas Csordas (1994) argues that embodiment must be understood as the core existential ground from which culture emerges rather than a secondary object for cultural analysis. Therefore, religious experience is not something that is interpreted through the body but it is the bodily practices themselves that are constituting the religious experience. The body therefore is not a passive unit through which pilgrimage occurs but it is the primary unit through which pilgrimage experience originates, is lived and understood. In this study, affect refers not just to individual emotions but to the intensities experienced collectively through embodied interaction, movement and taking part in the ritual journey. Having such an understanding enables us to move away from seeing emotions as simply private psychological states and understand them as something socially constructed and shared. At the same time, scholarship on affect and embodiment has highlighted the sensory and emotional aspects of religious practice. Contemporary takes on ritual often rest on Durkheim's vision of "collective effervescence," in which the key to the experience lies in commonality of emotional intensity. But they tend to see affect as an epiphenomenon of ritual; what needs explaining is its social function. Collins' (2004) extension of neo-Durkheimian analysis via his theory of "interaction ritual chains" explains how successful interactional rituals create emotional energy that is transferred to other social interactions. In this way, the *Balaji Dhvaj Yatra* does, as Collins theorizes, produce an emotional energy that transforms pilgrims' sense of the self and their social position post-yatra experience for weeks or months. A further limitation within existing literature is that pilgrimage has typically not been sufficiently theorized in connection with larger socio-economic transformations. Although Kinnvall (2007) relates the phenomenon of religious mobilization to ontological insecurity engendered by globalization, such studies have hardly ever been taken further down to micro-level ethnographies of pilgrimage practice. Likewise, research on masculinity in rural North India (Chowdhry 2005; Jeffery et al. 2007) emphasize changing masculine identities under the pressures of changes in employment and social structure without connecting this strongly with religious practices such as pilgrimage. Connell's (1995) formulation of hegemonic masculinity explain how masculinities do not exist as fixed attributes but they are dynamically created and recreated through social practices. Masculine identities are relational and they are hierarchical in nature, meaning that multiple forms of masculine identities are constantly competing for recognition and legitimacy. This conceptualisation helps us understand how pilgrimage provide a space where alternative forms of masculine identities can emerge and are performed and validated. Kumar (2016), who studied the youth religiosity in

Uttar Pradesh, provides crucial insights into the demographic and social conditions driving contemporary Hindu religiosity. Kumar (2016) argues that among rural and semi-urban youth unemployment, educational expansion without corresponding job creation, and exposure to digital media have created conditions conducive to new forms of religious-political engagement (Kumar 2016). For unemployed or precariously employed young men, participation in events like the ‘Balaji Dhwaj Yatra’ offers belonging, purpose, and opportunities to assert masculine identity in contexts where traditional economic and social markers of male success have become difficult to achieve. Jeffery, Jeffery, and Jeffery (2007) study the transitions to adulthood for young men in northern India and the changing economic opportunity and social context for those transitions. Their work reveals widespread anxiety about work and employment opportunities, marriage opportunities and social legitimacy among rural youth, leading to participation in collective actions including religious movements, political mobilization, and cultural assertion. The ‘Balaji Dhwaj Yatra’ provides precisely such collective action opportunity, temporarily elevating participants’ social status while offering frameworks for understanding their economic and social difficulties. This study considers the intersection of these strands, proposing that we shift our analytical attention. Instead of framing pilgrimage merely as a symbolic or transcendental phenomenon, it understands pilgrimage as an embodied social practice comprising three interlocking dimensions: performativity, affect and social negotiation. The *Balaji Dhwaj Yatra* demonstrates that pilgrimage is not only about *communitas* or transformation, but also about the regulation and release of bodily energy, the negotiation of masculinity, and the creation of temporary spaces for emotional expression. The study thus closes a gap in the literature, paying attention to localized pilgrimages as sites where ritual practice relates to messy social tensions of daily life, particularly those relating to masculinity, identity and socio-economic change.

Results

1. Coexistence of regulation and excess

The pilgrimage begins within a rich field of religious signifiers that orient it toward the sacred right from the beginning. Two vehicles are outfitted with images of Lord *Balaji* and signs bearing the words “Balaji Dhwaj Yatra Mandothi” before the departure; the symbols contribute not only to the devotional function of the *yatra*, but they clearly announce the undertaking as a collective performance. In the early hours before leaving the village, a short *puja* is conducted at the local temple, to ask for divine guidance throughout the pilgrimage. As the *yatra* advances, a soundtrack of *Balaji* songs is broadcast through loud speakers on the vehicles, with many participants singing along, thereby carrying the constant sonic field of the ritual. Together, the images, sounds, and voices create a moving sanctuary where the distinctions between traveling and worshipping become irrelevant.

The entire *yatra* can be described in terms of the clear rules that guide the movement of the *dhwaj*, which is the primary organizing unit of the *yatra*. The person carrying the flag has to stay in the front; it cannot go below the chest and it cannot touch the ground. These rules are immutable and control the progress of the entire pilgrimage. The pilgrimage progresses in terms of alternating cycles of older men and younger people. In the first stage, older men lead the way at a relatively slow pace for a few hours. After which younger people take over in an enhanced relay like performance. The flag is transferred at rapid intervals, of about 200 meters between runners who are stationed at a few hundred meters, and are transported in vehicles over that distance so as to prevent any break. Thus the progress of the *yatra* remains unbroken in its constant push toward the maximum possible distance in the minimum possible time. Around 300 kilometres is covered in approximately 26 hours. While the younger participants carry on running for several hours in a high-intensive race-like activity, the older men continue to run slowly for part of the night, until it is replaced by young people again in terms of carrying the flag. So, the structure of *yatra* interlocks enforced regularity with combined physical labour. The persistence of the motion of the flag isn't an accident; it is essential, and the unified effort needed to preserve it creates a common rhythm that structures time and participation. The physical rigour and demand of the relay system of passing the flag is not just understood as a logistical need of the pilgrimage but instead as one of the integral components of displaying devotion. Participants repeatedly narrated how bodily exertion is a crucial and central value of the pilgrimage. The relay like movement of passing the flag can be understood through Marcel Mauss's (1934) theory of "Techniques of the Body". Mauss explains that the society curates specific ways of walking, running, moving, carrying, exerting and disciplining the body. The methods of passing the *dhwaj* are therefore not merely practical methods of reaching the destination they are instead culturally articulated techniques of the body through which devotion is learned and enacted. As one of the participants (male pilgrim, 22 years old) narrated, "*Balaji ke liye jitni mehnat karoge utna punya milega*" (The more effort one exerts for *Balaji*, the greater the spiritual merit). Another participant (male pilgrim, 24 years old) similarly narrated, "*ye hamara bhakti dikhane ka tareeka hai*" (this is the way we demonstrate our devotion). Physical exertion is therefore not understood as a burden or just a logistical requirement, it is instead a visible medium through which the participants enact their devotion and toil becomes a tool through which religious commitment is expressed as well as validated.

Parallel to this disciplined framework, the *yatra* also constitutes a space of performative excess, characterized by blaring music, singing, dancing and intoxicating substances; all explicitly allowed within its parameters. Outside the strict rules concerning the *dhwaj*, the constraints on behaviour are notably relaxed, leading to a breakdown of everyday social structures. Individuals engage in ways that they would otherwise be constrained from by a normal village setting. The participants themselves do not

view these practices as a form of excess or a contradiction in the ritual procession of the *yatra*. Rather they view these forms of celebrations as an integral part of the pilgrimage and devotion. As one of the participants (male pilgrim, 28 years old) narrates, “*Balaji ke raste mein khushi manate hain. Yeh bhi yatra ka hissa hai*” (We celebrate on the journey to *Balaji*. This too is part of the pilgrimage). Expressing joy through modes like singing, dancing or collective festivities are therefore not viewed as a departure from the ritual practice but it is instead understood as legitimate forms of participation in the sacred journey to the pilgrimage site. The collective celebration and enjoyment does not exist despite of the discipline regarding flag bearing, but because of it. The continuous movement of the flag throughout provides the moral framework within which these modes of expression and celebrations become acceptable. The above statement shows how for the participants, enjoyment is not something that exists separately from devotion during the course of the *yatra*, it is one of the many mediums of expressing devotion during the journey that coexists with the ritualistic regulations. This emerges as an alternative social space in which the boundaries imposed on them by daily life are softened, thereby allowing for a high level of self-expression which participants also articulated in terms of a release from daily anxieties. Physical rigour, collective movement and relaxed behaviour thus give emergence to a distinct state which could be described as disengaged from one’s everyday pressures. This coexistence of discipline and ritualised excess is therefore not incidental in its nature. The strict rules and regulations surrounding the movement of the flag provides a stable ritual centre around which more expressive forms of behaviour thus become possible. Conversely, music, dance, and other similar forms of enjoyment and celebrations make possible the physical rigour that the movement of the flag demands. Discipline and excess thus works in a manner that is mutually reinforcing of each other, collectively contributing to the production of the pilgrimage experience.

2. Spatial Context and the mythic structure

When they reach Mehndipur, the group is lodged at a *dharamshala*, and members stay here for a few days before the flag hoisting ceremony. Activity of pilgrimage is the axis of this site. Mehndipur is in hilly area of the Karauli and Dausa districts. The local economy is largely organized around pilgrims. To cater to the needs of the devotees as well as the pilgrims, the built environment reflects a clear orientation with multiple guest houses and *dharamshalas*. In addition, a central marketplace is available which provides for religious items, food and other goods. The settlement takes on the appearance of a huge fair, with pilgrims constantly moving through its streets at peak time. The site is unique because of its linkage with practices of exorcism (*sankatmochan*). Numerous visitors come wanting relief for what they see as afflictions of supernatural origin. This identifies Mehndipur as a unique space of both worship and intervention, aided by those who serve as ritual specialists.

The myth explains the religious significance of Mehndipur in which ‘Balaji Maharaj’, ‘Bhairav Ji’ and ‘Shri Pretraj Sarkar’ are the three main characters. The infant form of Hanuman is understood as Balaji, while Bhairav is associated with Shiva. According to this cosmological framework, who commands spirits? Moreover, who works as a judge? Pretraj Sarkar is described as the sovereign ruler. Shree Pretraj Sarkar, known as ‘King of spirits’ was believed to be a king in Jaipur, Rajasthan and during his reign he captured all kinds of ‘*bhoot*’, ‘*djinn*’ and ‘*pisaach*’, and kept them as his servants. Over a millennium ago, it is believed that Balaji Maharaj manifested in Mehndipur, Rajasthan. As per local belief, the statue of Balaji was not built by any human but rather it ‘*swayambhu*’ (self-manifested) out of the hills itself. There are several folk legends behind the formation of the temple. One of them is that Gosai ji maharaj had a dream wherein he saw Balaji and located the idol at the place where it was revealed in the dream. It was only then, that he set out on constructing the temple around the idol and also started worshipping and served as a keeper of the temple.

One other belief among many that exists in Mehndipur is about spiritual superiority of Balaji, but functionally dependence on Pretraj and Bhairav. It is believed Balaji transfers the responsibility of healing devotees’ distress to Pretraj and Bhairav. One such story about Balaji-Pretraj agreement under certain conditions is: Balaji, ordered Pretraj to be his servant and reach Mehndipur. The refusal from Pretraj to take an order to serve someone else as he was a king, resulted Balaji to come back and request again. After this that Pretraj agrees to do so on the condition that the devotees will pray to him prior to balaji and in pretraj’s court he himself will be the absolute authority. Balaji agrees to these conditions and takes him with him to Mehndipur as his servant. The narrative thus helps to define the place of each divinity in the spiritual scheme of the temple, where authority is distributed and it provides a framework through which the functioning of the temple, particularly its association with exorcism is rendered intelligible to participants.

The significance of these narratives extend beyond just explaining the religious infrastructure of the temple; the distributed authority amongst the three divine figures represents a cosmological order in which power and authority is not concentrated within one central figure but is rather negotiated. The mythological divine order thus in a way reflects a broader theme that reoccurs through the course of the *dhwaj yatra* which is the importance of coordination, delegation and shared responsibilities. Just as *sankatmochan* is dependent on a mutual participation of multiple divine figures similarly the successful completion of the *dhwaj yatra* is also dependent on the mutual cooperation and coordinated labour of multiple actors throughout the course of the journey.

3. The *Yatra* as a Space of Expression and processing

Though religious devotion is mentioned as an explicit incentive, respondents spoke equally of the experiential dimension of the process of the *yatra* itself. As a journey punctuated by night stops, it provided a framework of both interaction and articulation. At the night stops, respondents grouped themselves informally according to a degree of affinity, within which they were able to share experiences and problems of a personal nature. These encounters are framed within an experience different from village life, in which social relations and personal expressions may be relatively fixed. These *yatras* function to provide spaces of articulation away from the critical perspective of the institution of family and the close-knit village society in which Haryana's villagers live. Being separated from those environments for even a short time creates a certain space of anonymity which people found facilitating. This is, for men especially, particularly relevant given how limited men's expression of emotion is typically by standards of masculine restraint and composure. Men felt free to talk about their disputes, worries and uncertainties on the *yatra* without the imminent threat of the immediate social repercussions from village and family life. These forms of concerns and worries frequently focused around issues of unemployment and economic uncertainty; one of the participants (male pilgrim, 26 years old) mentioned "*Degree kar li hai lekin naukri nahi lag rahi*" (I have completed my degree, but I still have not been able to find a job). Such remarks point towards how there is a rapid disconnect between educational attainment and employment opportunities which is the reality in most of the rural and semi urban contexts. The statement also captures the frustration of the youth and reaffirms what Kumar (2016) explains; The educational expansion has raised aspiration faster than the capacity of the labour markets to accommodate them. Regional pilgrimages like *balaji yatra* provides spaces to articulate and express these frustrations with peers who are going through similar situations. Thus they feel the *yatra* is more than simply a duty, but also a brief period of retreat from their social roles.

The composition of the group highlights two prominent age sets: in younger men often the unemployed and unmarried; and older men, over fifty years of age. Regardless of difference in age and stage of life, the two groups nevertheless share a type of marginality which emerges from transformations in the socio-economic environment. For young men, the transformations of employment patterns have removed physical labour from the locus of value which the traditional masculine ideal would have occupied. The economic insecurities that young men face are further related to anxieties regarding adulthood and marriage; one of the participants (male pilgrim, 28 years old) shared, "*Ghar wale shaadi ke liye bolte hain lekin bina naukri ke kaun karega*" (My family wants me to get married, but who will marry me without a job?). these forms of concerns closely reflect what Kumar (2016) talks in relation to educated unemployed youth in Uttar Pradesh. Kumar (2016) argues that the rapid educational expansion has generated new forms of aspirations and requirements in relation to em-

ployment, marriage and social mobility but there aren't simultaneous institutional expansions that can lead to the materialisation of these aspirations. As a consequence of that many young men find themselves stuck between educational achievement and socially recognised adulthood. The narratives of the young pilgrims reflect how there is a constant expectation related to the masculine adulthood which is marked by economic stability and the ability to provide. A failure to fulfil these expectations within time results in young men feeling uncertainty in relation to both their social status as well as future life trajectory. Chowdhry (2005) who addresses the idea of masculinity in Haryana, begins to consider the meaning ascribed to masculinity in Haryana, the transformation and the meanings given to it by different sets. As Chowdhry (2005) states, 'it is in the construction of ideas of masculinity itself that is a historical process'. To make sense of this change in the construction of masculinity it is important to understand the change in Haryana from agrarian to one moving to non-agricultural employment and urbanization. Being physically fit and knowledgeable about farming mattered more than being formally educated three generations back. This is gradually changing as an increasing number of young village residents are looking for education and employment opportunities outside. Nowadays, being employed is better than being fit or agriculturalist as it is more helpful and more sought-after alternative in the present economy. Among older men, their age causes them to lose authority in the home and community. Men of these ages likewise with the passing of years gradually lose their manhood within the familial institution where they previously wielded great traditional power. A number of older participants reflected on these changing dimensions; one of the respondents (Male pilgrim, 51 years old) narrated, “*Ab bachche malik ho gye hain, apni marzi karte hain*” (Children are the stakeholders now, so they do as they wish), while another participant (Male pilgrim, 54 years old) nostalgically added to this, “*Hamare zamane mein baat kuchh aur thi*” (Things were different in our time). The abovementioned statements reflect how the older generation perceives an erosion of authority dependent on age and it also points towards how there are broader transformations happening in the nature of family relations, inter-generational hierarchies and how the social foundations on which traditional masculinity rested itself is changing with times. As the role of the provider slowly diminishes, ageing and later life are also associated with a subordinate form of masculinity (Varley and Blasco 2001).

Normally relationships between these groups can be said to be ones of contestation but here within the *yatra* they are reformed through mutual participation in the journey. Participants frequently pointed to how the otherwise existing generational distinction are temporarily suspended during the pilgrimage performance. One younger participant (25 years old) stated, “*Yahan sab ek jaise hain*” (Here everyone is the same), to this an older participant (51 years old) added, “*Yatra mein sab milkar kaam karte hain*” (In the pilgrimage everyone works together). These forms of observations reflect how the

nature of shared demands of the pilgrimage process produces collective identities that are grounded more in participation within the ritual process rather than age-based hierarchies. The collective participation within the journey translates into an alignment based upon the mutually shared experiences of a loss of status. An alliance is formed in the *yatra* on the basis of ritual performance through the shared act of walking, running and maintaining the momentum of the *dhwaj*. A rearticulation in the construction of masculinity is experienced in the *yatra* through the embodiment of resilience, contribution and collective participation. The performance of the *yatra* then emerges as a site where inter-generational tensions are reconfigured through collective bodily practice.

Participants often contextualized the *yatra* in terms of *shram* (toil), stressing the link between physical effort and purification. It is commonly asserted that greater effort garners greater purification. Simultaneously, the results suggest that this process is not limited to a religious register. As the group travels together they will also meet many strangers on the way. This kind of interaction allows communication to take on a different form and allows people to disclose personal concerns. The relative lack of any pre-existing ties implies that there is far less “bind” to such revelations. As Georg Simmel in “the stranger” highlights, “there is a relation-to the stranger not to the neighbour and friend”. It is his objectivity that matters as “his remoteness, as well as the close distance that he shares, has made him objective.” and it “is only this objectivity that permits a man to be completely honest toward him” (Simmel 1908).

The notion of *yatra* and the physical rigour of the walk for spiritual purification “*jitna jyada shram, utni jyada pavitrata*” (The higher the toil, the higher the purification), is what the most focus is on. Everything done outside of the salvific divine space toxifies the body and only through *shram* in the salvific space can the body be detoxified (Jacobsen 2013). The case of *balaji yatra* shows that the liminal space of the pilgrimage provides a psychological detoxification as well. Terreault’s (2019) argument that “the body is the place where pilgrimage happens” is particularly useful here. Rather than viewing the physical exertion of the body as something secondary to the pilgrimage experience, Terreault (2019) explains how body itself is the primary site through which the transformative experience of a pilgrimage is experienced. In the case of *balaji yatra*, the collective movement, physical rigour and communicative encounters are not secondary features of the pilgrimage but these constitute the very medium through which the participants experience purification, psychological renewal and emotional release. The participants frequently described the pilgrimage experience with a language of emotional relief and release; as expressed by one of the participants (Male pilgrim, 27 years old), “*Yahan aa kar mann halka ho jata hai*” (Coming here makes the mind feel lighter). Statements such as these reflect how the pilgrimage experience transcends beyond just ritual purification. The liminal

nature of pilgrimage creates space where anxieties, frustration and emotion burden can be addressed as well as collectively processed. Therefore, alongside spiritual merit, the journey also produces a sense of psychological renewal amongst the participants. As the participants experience multiple exchanges of that nature, they often describe feelings of lightness, or of a weight being lifted off of their shoulders. In particular, for the younger participants, the *yatra* provides a space to reflect and receive informal guidance. Conversations with fellow *yatris* may give you insights that you won't be able to find in everyday life. Overall, the *yatra* functions as a religious act and as a medium of processing those emotions and tensions of the participants.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that the *Balaji Dhwaj Yatra* cannot fully be comprehended through the vocabulary of the dominant analytical traditions of pilgrimage studies, namely concepts such as liminality, *communitas* and symbolic transformation. While these concepts can help account for some aspects of pilgrimage experience, it is clear from the study that they are inadequate to describe all aspects of what is happening. The *yatra* emerges as a far more complex social phenomenon which is resulting out of the interconnections of bodily discipline, emotional energy, masculinity negotiation, and larger socio-economic anxieties of the participants. The findings therefore reveal how everyday social tensions and anxieties are carried along into the ritual space of the pilgrimage experience and actively engaged there through embodied practices. This work makes a contribution through its consideration of the notion of lived religion. The argument that classical scholarship has tended to overlook practice in its favour of doctrine, symbolism, and transcendence of ritual strengthens by this analysis. The religious meaning of the *yatra* is thus not limited merely to belief regarding *Balaji*, or the holy destination of Mehndipur. Rather, it is produced through the actions and sensations that the body performs (through physical movement, contact with others, music, exhaustion, dialogue and interaction with others), and the sacred is not just experienced at the destination, but actually generated in the course of the journey itself. This aligns with arguments such as that of Ammerman (2016) and Orsi (2010) that religion needs to be viewed as something that people 'do' rather than something they merely believe in.

In this context, the uninterrupted motion of *dhwaj* holds great importance. The flag is not simply a symbolic object; it is also a material centre around which social relationships are organised. The strict rules that govern its movement provide ritual order in the course of the journey to the participants' behaviour. The *dhwaj* can be viewed as a sacred object, according to Durkheim's theory and thus through which collective consciousness is spiritualized. Yet in contrast to Durkheim's insistence on

collective symbolism alone, the results indicate that the sacred is reproduced through continuous bodily practice. The sacredness of the *dhwaj* in that context is therefore enforced through physical efforts of the pilgrims as well as vigilance and cooperation. The ritual authority is not a simple inheritance from tradition only but is a continuous reproduction through embodied actions. The findings also complicate any overly simplistic understanding of ritual discipline. The pilgrimage has two elements which are very contradictory. On the one hand, participants show a remarkable compliance with the rules governing the *dhwaj*. On the other hand, the *yatra* allows for forms of excess; music, dancing, intoxication, which would not be commonly accepted in everyday village life. This discrepancy is significant if we engage with it sociologically. According to the findings, discipline and transgression are not opposites of each other, but rather mutually constituted in the course of the pilgrimage. Rather than viewing discipline and excess as exclusive to each other the study suggests that they both derive meaning from the presence of each other. Both play a role in the sustaining of the other, the journey therefore operates through a dynamic tension between order and release and between restraint and expression. Neither dimension amongst the two can truly be understood in isolation since both of them contribute to the reproduction of each other.

Here Bakhtin's (1984) idea of the 'carnavalesque' seems particularly helpful in understanding. The *yatra* represents a liminal social space where the everyday social order and behavioural rules are, in part, suspended. But this suspension is not that of total disorder. The space of excess here is existing alongside of the rigidity of the ritual regulation. The *dhwaj* has to keep moving; the sacred task must be completed. This observation of the study complicates the classical understandings of the idea of carnivalesque. In Bakhtinian (1984) understanding the carnival temporarily suspends official order but here in the *balaji dhwaj yatra* carnival does not replace order it unfolds alongside of it. The sanctity of the *dhwaj* remains intact even at moments of maximum celebration. What then emerges is not an absence of regulations and order but instead a reconfiguration of them. Resulting in a space where ritual authority and modes of expressive freedom become interdependent rather than antagonistic of each other. And in that the pilgrims find themselves free and yet in discipline simultaneously. The performance of the *yatra* proves that ritual spaces may even create new kinds of order instead of chaos, and give birth to spaces that allow temporary respite from everyday constraints while retaining a broader sacred structure. The duality also poses challenges to Turner's (1969) *communitas*. According to Turner and Turner (1978), pilgrimage fosters a type of anti-structural relationship that temporarily removes social hierarchies. The results from the *Balaji Dhwaj Yatra* uphold this contention to a degree. Participants do in fact experience a feeling of togetherness. However, these are not emerging out a total dissolution of everyday differences. They are the results of shared embodied practices. To

maintain the movement of the *dhwaj*, members of the group must participate in a coordinated manner. *Communitas* is not just born from liminality but from the experience of working and toiling together. More importantly, social tensions don't get wiped out completely during the pilgrimage. They just get restructured temporarily. This is especially true here regarding the idea of masculinity. The existing scholarship on North Indian masculinity has documented how economic restructuring, education and de-agrarianization has brought about tremendous changes in masculine identities in the state of Haryana. The fieldwork suggests the *yatra* is an important site through which these transitions are negotiated. It's of critical sociological importance that the group of pilgrims includes many young unemployed men and older men. The prominent presence of young educated unemployed men in the *yatra* reaffirms Kumar's (2016) observation regarding how youth religiosity can often result from prolonged states of economic uncertainty rather than just emerging as a revival of faith. Pilgrimage processions such as *balaji dhwaj yatra* provides young men with opportunities of getting recognition, collective participation and a meaningful endeavour at a moment of their life where conventional routes into stable adulthood seem missing to them.

In contemporary rural society, these are two categories of men occupying increasingly uncertain positions. It is becoming extremely difficult for the youth today to get a job, be on their own economically, or get married. Men of older age, on the other hand, are losing power in households and communities as traditional age-based stratification of power is changing. Both of these groups face different forms of social marginality at different stages of life. The pilgrimage therefore offers a context in which this array of marginalities can be worked out together. From a Connellian (1995) perspective we can understand how the significance of pilgrimage does not lie in just providing emotional support but instead in providing real opportunities for a bodily performance of alternative forms of masculinity. The pilgrimage provides a space in which sacrifice, bodily exertion, endurance and devotion are validated as legitimate forms of masculine achievement. Through the bodily practices involved in the pilgrimage such as carrying the *dhwaj*, running long distances, the pilgrims are able to perform a variety of alternative forms of masculinities. For the duration of the pilgrimage, moments of sacrifice, endurance, strength and devotion are awarded. In many cases, the public recognition they receive in the ritual context helps to offset their lack of reward and social standing elsewhere. The *yatra* works like a ritual economy of masculinity, whereby there is a redistribution of status through embodied action rather than economic success. This is a development upon Chowdhry's (2005) argument about transitions of masculinities in Haryana. Whilst Chowdhry (2005) shows how economic change has produced insecurity around masculine identities, this study demonstrates that religious practice offers compensatory contexts wherein new masculine identities are constructed. The *yatra* does not simply

reiterate pre-existing ideas about what masculinity involves; it redefines it. Not only does masculinity revolve around providing and dominating, it becomes tied to sacrifice, endurance, faith and the performance of a collective act of physical labour.

The research also demonstrate affect and its relation to ritual practice. Emotion's significance has primarily been a focus on its consequences, often depicted as secondary to religion and rituals. However, this study points to the affective experience being central to the pilgrimage ritual. The ritual itself was characterized by conversations, physical labour, and moving collectively as individuals repeatedly expressed sensations of release, rejuvenation and catharsis. During long days of walking, running and experiencing collective hardships, participants find themselves in social situations where vulnerability is perceived to be a more reasonable stance than in everyday life. During the *yatra*, the men share concerns over personal worries, family arguments, unemployment, emotional struggles. Such sharing is interesting in a context where men's everyday social world does not normally accommodate disclosures of weakness. Simmel's notion of the stranger is useful here. The social relationships established on the *yatra* often involves persons who are simultaneously close yet far apart from everyday structures of social life of the group. The relative anonymity in *yatra* allows communication and self-expression that may not be easily possible in village environments where people are under constant scrutiny and surveillance. This does not mean that participants are consciously using pilgrimage as a coping mechanism. On the contrary, the *yatra's* ritualistic format provides chances to handle and work through anxieties. The *yatra* comes forth as a demonstration of social practice through which participants negotiate changing identities, process emotional tensions, and construct meaningful forms of collective belonging. Localized pilgrimages, including the *Balaji Dhwaj Yatra* imply that religion, social change and the everyday of the rural north Indian village should be taken seriously as significant sites of inquiry.

Conclusion

This study examines a local pilgrimage from a village in Haryana to Mehndipur Balaji, Rajasthan to illustrate pilgrimage as something more than either symbolic movement to sacred space or the emergence of *communitas* out of liminality. It shows how pilgrimage is an embedded social process of negotiating identity, emotion, relationships, and larger socioeconomic change. Ultimately, this study asserts that pilgrimage is a social and religious phenomenon that must be explored through the interplay of its performative, affective, and socially negotiated aspects, and through these spheres we see what may have been overlooked in much dominant scholarship on pilgrimage: ritual meaning is constructed through bodies at work, bodies in motion, the shared experience of emotionality, and social interaction. Simultaneously, the pilgrimage is structured by both regulation and trans-

gression in a way that is at odds with an easy view of ritual order; pilgrims simultaneously undergo regulation and freedom, revealing ritual space as both regulated and liberating.

In addition to the insights offered regarding the politics of pilgrimage, the most vital aspect of the research is its illumination of masculinity. The study clearly demonstrates how the *yatra* acts as one critical space within which a shifting masculine identity is mediated. Religious practice thus serves as another vital location within which processes of larger social change are engaged with. On a wider level, the study thus strongly illustrates how pilgrimage must be understood as being enmeshed within wider processes of rural change and socio-economic change. It is only by understanding shifting employment structures, family relations and conditions of insecurity can contemporary forms of religious practice be accounted for; pilgrimage in other words should not be viewed merely as a retreat from social realities, but rather as spaces where they are processed.

This study addresses a site-specific pilgrimage that has attracted minimal academic attention. Many studies of pilgrimage, not to mention studies of religious mobilization, focus on mass events or pilgrimage sites that have national importance. By analysing a localized pilgrimage, the study is able to show how small-scale, village-based pilgrimage provides a rich source of information for wider sociological questions of religion, identity, gender, and social change. Localized pilgrimage cannot be dismissed as marginal forms of religion; rather, it is a critical social institution that responds to the dynamics of the time. Future research could explore how localized pilgrimages compare across regions and across traditions. It would also be useful to dedicate more research to the participation of women, caste relations, and the ways in which localized pilgrimages network and articulate with larger religious-political configurations. These questions will advance our understanding of how ritual acts engage contemporary social transformations.

In conclusion this study argues that pilgrimage should be regarded as a social field rather than just a passage to the sacred; one where bodies, emotions, identities and groups are constantly produced and reproduced. One of the central finding and claim of the study is that ritual discipline and expressive excess should not be understood as opposing dimensions of the pilgrimage performance. The case of *Balaji Dhvaj Yatra* demonstrates that even the most rigorous of ritual practices can simultaneously generate spaces and moments of celebration, emotional release and free expressions. The ritual practice is a lively field which gives people ways to make sense of themselves, cope with anxiety and create substantial ways of collective participation. The emphasis on body, affect and social process takes pilgrimage beyond its use as just a way to access the sacred to a more sociological explanation and points to the continuing significance of local religious practice in contemporary India.

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