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Spatializing Popular Sufi Shrines in Punjab: Dreams, Memories, Territoriality

Yogesh Snehi,

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The ongoing farmers' protest has emerged as a critical site for both consolidating and complicating regional, religious, and caste identities in North India. With the movement spreading beyond its epicenter, the National Capital Region (NCR), we are witnessing the formation of new political alliances in tandem with an intense scrutiny of past conflicts and violence. Yogesh Snehi's book does not address these recent developments; still, it is an invaluable reading for anyone interested in understanding the vicissitudes of Punjabi identity in postcolonial India.

Spatializing Popular Sufi Shrines in Punjab, as the title unequivocally suggests, is an intricate analysis of popular forms of Sufism and their locally embedded spatial dynamics. Through a well-curated set of case studies, Snehi examines the quotidian religiosity of smaller and lesser-known shrines from post-Partition Punjab in India, covering places like Malerkotla, Jalandhar, Gurdaspur and Abohar. Once we dive into the chapters, it becomes evidently clear that the book presents a much deeper and broader analysis than that suggested by the title. Snehi's extensive research gives an intimate overview of the historical as well as the lived landscape of religion in Punjab. In addition to providing place-specific minutiae about lived religiosity of Sufi shrines, Snehi in each chapter addresses larger questions of identity formation, political contestation, nationalist historiography, communal boundaries, and religious traditions in Punjab.

The book begins with a deceptively simple question, i.e. why does the veneration of Muslim saints continue to thrive among different Sikh and Hindu castes and communities even after the violent religious schism of Partition in the region? Snehi's answer to this question encapsulates the complexity of his argument in the book. He states, "While shrines renegotiate their everyday realms in the post-partition realities, they also continue to be deeply embedded in rituals, memory and dreams of pre-partition social milieu" (83). Like many recent scholars, Snehi questions the linear colonial/nationalist narrative of identity formation, underscoring the significance of "absences, appropriation, adaption, abstraction or exclusion" (49) as processes through which shrine spaces respond to complex social settings and overcome temporal/religious binaries of modern nation-states in South Asia.

With each chapter, Snehi introduces a complex grammar of devotional practices that transform shrines into “archives of everyday, a mirror to understand the complex reciprocity, contestation and dissent of dominant discourses” (59). In Chapter 1, Snehi visits three sites – Dargah Haidar Shaikh at Malerkotla, Baba Lakhdata Pir Nigaha at Langhiana, and Roza Mandhali Sharif near Phagwara – and explains how the popularity of *deras* across Punjab rests on the followers’ belief in *barkat*, the embodied sacral authority and spiritual power of saints, that transcends orthodox hagiographies of conquest and conversion. Chapter 2 traces the widespread practices of Panj Pir veneration from medieval to present-day Punjab and explores the sacred landscape of this tradition through a shrine dedicated to Panj Pir in Abohar. Snehi introduces the concept of *wilayat* (spiritual territoriality) to show how sacred geographies overcome statist notions of territoriality after Partition to create an “organic interplay of popular tradition with everyday lives of people in contemporary Punjab” (124). With Chapter 3, Snehi takes us into the realm of the uncanny, where dreams and memories become palimpsests of dissent against the increasing polarization of religious identities in India. While dream interpretation remains a central tenet of Sufi traditions, Snehi uses three case studies to demonstrate how the dreamscapes of Sufi shrines are kept alive through oral histories, and become “a potent tool for reclaiming a popular memory of Hindu and Sikh veneration of Sufis and their shrines” (166). The final chapter underscores the importance of visual and music cultures in circulating ideas of popular piety beyond reformist critiques or revivalist representations of Punjab’s history. According to Snehi, popular forms like collage posters, pamphlets, videos, paintings, animation, etc. “localize as well as navigate spaces, circulate ideas and ideals of veneration, induce dreams, sustain memories of belonging and materialize saint veneration” (187).

Popular Sufi shrines, according to Snehi, open up a theoretical space to examine the lived Punjabi experience beyond the “metanarratives” of state formation and give important insights into the quotidian practices of piety, patronage, and sovereignty in Punjab. While most scholarship on Sufi shrines locates them within Islamic histories and Muslim cultural milieus, Snehi focuses on encounters, interactions, and negotiations through which Sufi spirituality is imagined and reproduced. Since many of these lesser-known saints from Punjab lack textual hagiographical traditions, their veneration exists on the margins of mainstream religious discourse and remains largely unexplored in academic studies of South Asian history and culture. Snehi’s book fills this lacuna in scholarship by underscoring the liminality of Sufi shrines in Punjab and foregrounding their

peripheral locations as “sites of memory” through which societies reconcile with their violent pasts and a divided present (228).

Snehi argues for a methodological approach that remains attentive to affective modalities of memorialization while unraveling alternate temporalities through spatial practices. He challenges established scholarly traditions of studying Sufi shrines through a liberal-secular lens, pointing out how scholars often interpret Sufi practices as a utopic alternative to the increasing religious polarization in South Asia. Cautioning us against this ‘modernist’ impulse, Snehi takes an interdisciplinary approach to analyze the imaginative topography of Sufi shrines. Combining insights from historical anthropology, visual studies, and semiotics, Snehi provides a rich ethnographic study of the shrines, but, at times, relies a little too heavily on either existing scholarship or available historical records to contextualize his materials instead of interviews with the visitors to the shrines. The length of the literature review and theoretical framing in each chapter further obfuscates Snehi’s own argument and the originality of his extensive fieldwork. Despite Snehi’s repeated disavowal of historical methods, this book is as much a project of historicizing spaces as of spatializing history, and that, in my view, is its biggest strength.

Spatializing Popular Sufi Shrines in Punjab makes significant contributions to South Asian studies by going beyond conventional readings of Sufi shrines as nostalgic sites of syncretic practices or spiritual remnants of Muslim polity. With Snehi’s brilliant and conscientious research, Sufi shrines emerge not only as living embodiments of everyday religiosities, but also as uncanny habitations that refuse to give into the territorial demands of nation states. Despite heavily-patrolled borders and closely-guarded communal boundaries, Sufi shrines continue to flourish in Punjab as not only physical sites of veneration, but also as shared spaces of affective belonging realized through saints’ *barkat*, *wilayat*, dreams, and memories.

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