

Memories, Saffronising Statues and Constructing Communal Politics

Managing the memories of different communities and reinterpreting them at the local level to suit the logic of a particular political group, is an oft-observed phenomenon in the ongoing political processes of the country. Lesser known historical events associated with particular communities are searched out and converted into popular memory in a way that suits the political agenda of the concerned political forces. The article is focused on one such attempt of the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh and Bharatiya Janata Party to search for space among the dalits of Uttar Pradesh by looking for heroes of their communities, creating warring identities against Muslim invaders, and relocating them in their broader project of constructing communal memories among Hindus as a whole, including the dalit castes.

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Managing the memories of different communities and reinterpreting them at the local level to suit the logic of a particular political group, is an oft-observed phenomenon in the ongoing political processes of the country. This entails digging out lesser known historical events associated with particular communities and converting them into popular memory, after making additions and deletions that suit the political agenda of the concerned political forces. Sometimes historical events are placed in confrontation with each other, and communities are mobilised by creating warring memories and warring identities against other communities. In this process a space is forged in the collective memory of the communities concerned.

Political forces that follow this strategy succeed in their efforts by using arresting and powerful memory kindling devices like constructing memorials, organising festivals, staging theatres and circulating their stories in the form of popular literature for popularising their own version of a historical event. Popular memory is created by selectively remembering and conveniently forgetting. The Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) or the Association of National Volunteers, and its political wing, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) are the main players of this game and they have been following this strategy ever since the BJP joined the political bandwagon. Even after the 2004 general elections held in which the party lost to the Congress and CPI (M) combine, it reiterated its objective of following and implementing its Hindutva ideology by creating warring memories among various communities, especially dalit castes [Laxman 1994].

The method adopted to mobilise these castes was by searching for lower caste heroes who suited the Hindu way of thinking. Local histories were explored, popular dalit heroes were dug out, and their stories were circulated back among the people from whom they were originally taken. The present article tries to show that these stories are not always produced by the people themselves and should not be treated as original, primary and sacrosanct cultural and narrative constructions. They are constructed through complex processes by outside socio-political forces and diffused among the common people through various means of transmission. Often these local myths are integrated into the grand history of the community as a whole that is being created as a part of the ideology of the party. This phenomenon can be

commonly observed in the political scenario of Uttar Pradesh in which BJP is trying to mould and reinterpret the local histories of various regions according to their own political agenda and create a metanarrative of all the communities in their political fold.

This article studies one such attempt of the RSS and BJP to search for space among dalits of Uttar Pradesh (UP) by searching for heroes of their communities and relocating them in their broader project of construction of communal memories among Hindus as a whole. In the study that is based in Bahraich and an adjoining village Jittora, we will document the local history behind myths, and the politics of communalisation around these myths. Bahraich is approximately 160 kilometres from Lucknow, the capital of UP. In the north it touches the Nepal border. A famous dargah (mosque containing a tomb) of a warrior called Salar Masood Ghazi who is popularly called Ghazi Mian, is located here. This dargah is visited by thousands of devotees each day and an annual fair is held in May. Lakhs of devotees (jayren), the maximum being Hindus, attend the fair to pray for the fulfilment of their wishes. In Jittora, on the other hand, there is a temple built in the memory of Suhaldev, a *pasi* (dalit) king who supposedly killed Ghazi Mian and himself died in the battle. The BJP which is one of the many parties active in the region also organises a festival in May each year around the same time as the one held in the dargah, to commemorate the memory of Suhaldev and to emphasise among the dalits and Hindus together, that Suhaldev was a Hindu warrior who sacrificed his life to safeguard the original residents from Ghazi Mian. Thereby it is trying to create a warring heroic identity of Suhaldev and positing it against a so-called Muslim invader. This hero is then being used for asserting the identities of the Hindus and dalits of that region, which the party hopes will ultimately lead to the political mobilisation of these communities in their favour.

Hindutva Rhetoric, Communal Politics and Dalits

The RSS, claimed to be a non-political Hindu nationalist organisation but which is known for its politics of communalism based on Hindu identity, was founded in 1925 in order to fashion India as a Hindu nation. One of the important functions of RSS, also known as Sangh parivar, is to build up a cadre base for the

BJP, which is the political wing of RSS. Jaffrelot (1996: 46), in his analysis of the social profile of its cadres has shown that in spite of the tall claims of the RSS as a vanguard of an egalitarian Hindu rashtra (nation), it has a high brahminical dominance in its structure and politics. While analysing its ideological discourse, Pandey (1993: 244) suggests upper caste racism. However, when the dalit voice emerged on the public and electoral scene, the RSS was compelled to expand its boundary of Hinduism to include them. For this they started a multipronged strategy which included launching a campaign called 'samajik samrasta' (social harmony) and established a 'samajik samrasta manch' (social harmony forum). This forum became active in the 1980s with a view to appropriating dalits under their own fold. The basis of this forum was that social inequality could be eradicated only by a change of heart of the upper castes. Schools were set up in dalit 'bastis' (settlements), 'samrasta bhoj' (community meals) were organised and sensitisation campaigns to link dalits with upper caste Hindus, were launched [Idate 1994]. Another strategy was to search for similarities in the symbolic images of Hedgawar, one of the founders of RSS, and B R Ambedkar, to show their close affinity with him.¹ Narratives were also created by them for this purpose.² In 1989 during the birth centenary celebrations of Hedgawar the RSS launched a network of 'Hedgawar Sewa Nyas' (Hedgawar Welfare Organisation) to work in dalit hamlets, colonies and bastis for linking the lower castes with Hindu identity and politics. Organisations such as Dayanand Shiksha Kendra, Swami Vivekanand Shiksha Kendra, Jaya Baba Ramdeo Kendra, etc, were also set up with the same purpose [Bharat 2004].

When BJP entered the political scenario, it also started making efforts to bring the dalits under its political fold. One way was by involving dalit leaders in electoral processes. Another way was supporting the reservation policy recommended by the Mandal Commission, as decided at a meeting held in Bhopal on July 20, 1985 [Singh 2004]. Alongside, the Ram movement was started to produce a counter politics against the dalit mobilisation that had started over the issue of the Mandal Commission. They propagated the concept of 'Ramrajya' (Ram's land) in which upper and lower castes live together in harmony. Ram was projected as a symbol of unity among dalits and upper castes. The idea was circulated that the dalits had played a monumental role in the entire life span of Ram. During the battle fought in Lanka, Ram took the help of Sugriv, Angad, Jamvant, Hanuman and the monkey brigade, who were actually the so-called deprived communities of today's period, to rescue Sita, the soul of India. Hanuman was none other than a symbol of the deprived and the underprivileged (ibid).

In this manner, the RSS and BJP started projecting dalits as the people who protected the Hindu dharma. The so-called dalits and backward castes were said to have contributed the most to keep alive the cultural heritage of Hinduism in the long history of India. India was known as a golden bird in world history only because of their contributions [Laxman op cit]. The BJP-RSS combine further declared that even when the Mughals attacked India, it was the vanvasis, bheels and so-called dalits of today who lent their support to Maharana Pratap to fight against Akbar when no Rajput king agreed to do so (ibid). Shivaji also fought alongside the dalit communities of bhavlis, paharis and vanvasis, and established the Hindu kingdom in the south with their help, which shook the foundations of the Mughal monarchy. Thus the dalits had helped in ending the Mughal rule and establishing Hinduism in the country (ibid).

Coming to the present, the BJP said that in the communal riots that have taken place in the last 45 years, the maximum number of people who fought and died were dalits and backward castes. They were the ones who stood their ground against the Muslims to protect Hinduism (ibid). Through these and other such narratives the party tried to make it appear that the feeling that inspired the dalits to protect this religion was that it was theirs but because of some historical distortions they might not be getting their due respect and position in society. In spite of this, whenever any danger falls on Hinduism it is the dalits who save it. That is why Hinduism is their possession and they are its true guardians [Thengdi 2004].

It is interesting to note that the Sangh parivar's strategy to appropriate dalits under their own fold is heavily centred on their own interpretation of dalit identity and history. For this they are creating their own propaganda literature through print and visual media. A special issue of *Panchjanya*, their mouthpiece weekly newspaper, called Samajik Nyay Issue, was published in order to absorb the growing dalit dissent against brahminism and their growing struggle for self-respect and equality. The purpose was to reinterpret their past, history and identity in their own way and transform their newly emerging dalit-bahujan identity into Hindutva identity (ibid). Many newspaper reports can be found of lectures delivered by the BJP leaders like Uma Bharati and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP; another wing of RSS) leaders like Ashok Singhal who tried to interpret dalit history as the history of Hindutva in dalit bastis, slums and jhopar patties (resettlement colonies) in the urban fringes and in villages, qasbas and small towns.

Contesting Histories, Warring Identities and Making of Popular Domain

An example of the strategy of BJP-RSS to search out local heroes of dalit communities and create communal warring memories can be seen in the Bahraich region of Uttar Pradesh. They did this by positing a local pasi king called Suhaldeev against Ghazi Mian, who is very popular in the region, and giving him a warring identity. The reason for creating this narrative was firstly to appropriate pasis who consider Suhaldeev as a hero of their caste and secondly to extend and construct Hindu history against Islam to mobilise Hindus under their own fold. This project was launched on May 2, 2004, when a Maharaja Suhaldeev Sewa Samiti, Uttar Pradesh was formed in Bahraich, which organised a five-day celebration in memory of Suhaldeev. The organisers of the programme were Mahiraj Dhawaj Singh, the 'pracharak' of RSS and Sureshwar Singh, also of RSS. The other members of the organising committee were members of the BJP. The headquarters of the organising committee was mentioned as Keshav Bhawan, Model House, Lucknow, which is also the head office of the RSS in UP. Shri Yogi Adityanathji Maharaj, a BJP MP from Gorakhpur inaugurated the function. The other names mentioned in the invitation letter were mostly of local leaders of BJP, Hindu Parishad and RSS. According to the letter, it was being held to commemorate the memory of maharaja Suhaldeev, the great warrior who defended the Hindu religion and religious people from the foreign invader Masood who despoiled Indian cultural traditions, ravaged women and killed children and men without facing obstruction from anyone. They proclaimed that it was essential to sing the glory of such great sons of the nations otherwise the defender will be erased from the pages of

history while the cruel invader will be glorified.³ Many programmes were organised as a part of the function, including a 'kalash yatra', 'yajna', sports competitions, a huge (virat) wrestling match and a 'Ram katha' (discourse on Ram).

On May 6, 2004, another fair began in Bahraich at the dargah of Salar Masood, who was claimed by RSS to be the foreign invader who had caused ruin and desolation among the people. Surprisingly, he seems to be revered more by Hindus than by Muslims since they attend the fair in large numbers each year.⁴ According to a news report published in the Hindi newspaper *Amar Ujala* on that day, the fair symbolises communal harmony in the region. The report said that the 'baraat' (marriage ceremony) of Ghazi Mian will be held on May 9 which will be attended by almost five lakh people, of which the maximum will be from the majority community, i.e., Hindus (*Amar Ujala*, Lucknow, May 6, 2004). On the same day, another report was published in the same newspaper saying that Kunwar Manvendra Singh, the president of the legislative assembly and council and a leader of the BJP, who had come to inaugurate the Ram katha on the last day of the five-day fair of maharaja Suhalddev mentioned above, termed the worship of Salar Masood Ghazi as unfortunate. He said, it was tragic that maharaja Suhalddev had been resurrected so late, but everyone should attend the victory celebrations of such a great person. Proclaiming maharaja Suhalddev as a great martyr he said that, earlier governments had not understood his greatness. He appealed to the people to follow his footsteps and emulate his ideals (*Amar Ujala*, *ibid*).

From these two reports it is obvious that two parallel, but contesting and warring histories are being celebrated in the same region which the two communities inhabit. The BJP-RSS is trying to create a warring history of Suhalddev by projecting him as the defender and saviour of the Hindu religion who had laid down his life to save the people from the hands of the foreign invader who was ruining and destroying the existing culture. The managing committee of the dargah of Ghazi Mian, which organises the fair every year, on the other hand, projects him as a symbol of communal harmony between Hindus and Muslims. The committee is a non-political one comprising members affiliated to all political parties.⁵

The story about Suhalddev and Ghazi Mian that is popular in the region is that Suhalddev was the king of the bhar kaum (community) living there. He was also the leader of 17 small kings in the region but was very cruel and oppressive. At that time that place was a jungle. Ghazi Mian, whose actual name was Salar Masood, and who was the nephew of Mahmood Ghaznavi and also his son-in-law, had come to the jungles to hunt. He set up his tent inside the jungles and was supposed to leave after hunting. The Muslims of the region, who had all been converted from Hinduism, went to him and requested him to protect them. Ghazi Mian agreed. Suhalddev, suspecting that Ghazi Mian was trying to overthrow him, attacked him and after a fierce battle, killed him and his entire army. He himself died in the battle.⁶

Another myth in circulation is that Salar Masood was in love with a girl named Zohra, who lived in a nearby village called Rudauli. Unfortunately he died before his marriage. The girl then built a tomb for him and also built her own tomb. She died soon after that on a Sunday, which was also Salar Masood's death day. That is why a baraat or marriage procession of Ghazi Mian is taken out from the dargah each year on a Sunday as a part of the annual fair held there, and a symbolic marriage ritual is performed in their memory. Even today people from the Rudauli

village pose as members of the bride's family and lay a 'chadar' (bed spread) on her tomb.⁷

The reason why Ghazi Mian is so popular among the Hindus of that region is that when Ghazi Mian's tomb was built, it was believed to have acquired magical powers. The local people narrate that both Hindus and Muslims are blessed after praying there. According to the popular history of that region, the first person to have experienced his miracle was a yadav woman. She had no offspring but after praying there a son was born. Since then many miracles have occurred. Lepers who come to pray at the shrine during the annual fair get cured and people in whom ghosts enter are exorcised there. More than 75 per cent of the visitors to the annual fair are Hindus and all the political leaders standing for elections visit the tomb to get Masood's blessings both before filing the nomination and after winning the elections (Yadav field diary *ibid*).

Invention, Incarnation and Interpretations

Our purpose here is to see the process of myth making of the battle between Suhalddev and Salar Masood and its transmission as popular history among the people of the region. Our focus is on the political processes being played at present and thereby to see the politics of construction of hatred through history. The myth of Suhalddev is developed around the story of the battle between him and Salar Masood. According to the *Gazetteer*,⁸ Masood was a nephew of Mahmood of Ghaznavi. He was born in Ajmer in 1015. At the age of 16, he started on his invasion of Hindustan. After travelling through Multan, he reached Delhi and from there he went to Meerut, Kannauj and Satrikh in Barabanki. Before arriving at Bahraich, he sent two 'kotwals' (lieutenants) of his army Saiyad Saif-ud-din and Mian Rajab, there. A confederation of the nobles of Bahraich threatened them and tried to push back the army. Masood then himself marched to Bahraich reaching there in 1033 AD. The chieftains of the region were at first daunted by the young warrior but gradually took heart to fight against him. But Masood defeated them repeatedly, until the arrival of Suhalddev turned the tide of victory. He was overthrown and slain in 1034 AD and buried by his servants in Bahraich, where his dargah was built in 1035.

Suhalddev was the eldest son of the king of Sravasti, called Mordhwaj. According to the stories circulated popularly he had many names like Suhalddev, Sakardev, Suhirdadhvaj, Rai Suhriddev, Suhridil, Susaj, Shahardev, Sahardev, Suhaaldev, Suhildev and Suheldev. But in contemporary print culture he is referred to as raja Suhalddev.⁹ It is popularly believed that he was the king of the bhar community, from which emerged the pasi community, a dalit caste of the region. Some people of the forward castes of Bahraich project him as a vais kshatriya (suryavanshi kshatriya) [Shukla 2003] but there are no historical records to substantiate it. In 'Mirate Masudi' he is mentioned as bhar tharu. Boys, a British historian mentions him as bhar rajput.¹⁰ Cunningham mentions him as tharu (*Gazetteer* 1903, *ibid*). Some writers claim that he was pandav vanshi tomar; some say that he was a bharshiv and some pasi.¹¹ Gonda *Gazetteer* mentions him as rajputvanshi jain. Gewail, in the Bahraich *Gazetteer* calls him tharu kalhans. The paragana book of Bahraich mentions him as nagvanshiya kshatriya and the Kaifiyat Paragana Ikauna writes of him as visen kshatriya. Kanth Charitra and Shankar Vijay texts refer to him as suryavanshi kshatriya (*Gazetteer* 1903, *ibid*).

Gradually with the flow of time the pasis became convinced that Suhaldeve belonged to their caste and started glorifying him as their caste hero. Just before the 2004 elections, Guddi Rajpasi, a pasi candidate standing from Barabanki Lok Sabha region, a neighbouring region of Bahraich, as a member of the Bharat Kranti Rakshak Party (BKRP), appealed to the pasis in her election leaflet to vote for her in the name of Rashtra Bhakt Maharaja Suhaldeve and other heroes of the pasi caste such as Maharaja Satandev, Bijli Pasi, Virangana Udadevi, Ganga Baks and other dalit heroes like Jhalkaribai, Mahatma Buddha, Mahatma Gandhi, Baba Saheb Bhimrao Ambedkar, Sardar Patel and Amar Shaheed Abdul Hameed.¹²

As the second largest dalit community in Uttar Pradesh, the pasis are the targets of various political parties who would like to marshal them as vote banks. Understanding this the RSS launched a campaign to search for heroes that suit their Hindu political agenda. They found such a hero in Suhaldeve and started organising festivals in Jittora to evoke his memory among the common people. Suhaldeve is projected as a 'rashtra rakshak shiromani' who defended Hindu society, culture and the country from Muslim intruders by forming a confederation of local kings. In the narratives, Suhaldeve is depicted as an ideal Hindu king who protected cows ('go rakshak'), protected Indian culture, provided a respectful position to saints ('sant rakshak') and worked for the uplift of Hindu culture ('dharma rakshak').¹³

Cow as a symbol is used for glorifying both Suhaldeve and Salar Masood. In another version of Salar Masood's story narrated by the dafalis, a low caste Muslim community, whose profession is to sing songs praising Ghazi Mian at his dargah, it is said that when Salar Masood was sitting at his marriage 'mandap' (tent) just before his marriage, a woman ran up to Salar Masood saying that some people had unchained her cows. Hearing this, Ghazi Mian rushed to rescue them but lost his life. He was thus unable to marry his lover and died before consummating his marriage.¹⁴

The narrative glorifying Suhaldeve says that Salar Masood, realising the significance of cow in the Hindu psyche, placed a herd of cows in front of his army as a shield. As a counter strategy, Suhaldeve unchained the cows on the eve of the battle both to save the cows and so that Salar Masood would be forced to fight man-to-man.¹⁵ Thus one narrative glorifies Ghazi Mian as a cow protector while in the other narrated by RSS glorifying Suhaldeve, Ghazi Mian is depicted as being insensitive towards dumb animals, and who used the sacred cow against Hindus. Through this narrative Suhaldeve emerges as a saviour of the cows that were being needlessly killed during the battle.

Through the print media also the BJP-RSS tried to carve the image of Suhaldeve as a pasi hero who was a pride to Hindus. In the booklet 'Hindu Samaj ke Gaurav, Pasi Veer Maharaja Suhaldeve ki Shaurya Gatha', written by Triloki Nath Kol, a local RSS activist and BJP leader of Bahraich [Kol 1997], he tried to influence the pasi community in favour of Hindutva agenda. He also attempted to create a narrative instigating hatred against Muslims within the pasis by exaggerating and fantasising the attitude of the community towards them by showing how the Muslim rule in the medieval period was very oppressive towards pasis. The pasis were the earlier rulers of that region and had been dethroned and dispossessed by the Muslims. According to the narrative, Muslims consider pasis to be their greatest enemy. It is commonly believed that when the pasis lost to the Muslims they were forced to do jobs like filling water from tanks. This gave them the title Bharpasi. At that time the pasis welcomed

this name since filling water is a respectable Hindu work. They did not realise that this name would later turn into a curse for them. Tremendous efforts were made to divide and weaken the pasis. The Muslims married pasi girls and forced them to change their religion. Under these circumstances the pasis started eating pork that is hated by Muslims and marrying off their children at young ages. Kol lamented that it was unfortunate that due to lack of historical information, these events are not given much importance (ibid: 10-11).

The RSS and their various wings and organisations are creating narratives based on local histories to play the politics of hatred among the dalits and Muslims. These narratives also try to make the pasis believe that the Muslims initiated their marginalisation process. On the other hand, Salar Masood was projected as a cruel person who ravaged Hindu women. Hitting out at the Hindus who visit Ghazi Mian's dargah and pray for the fulfilment of their desires, they repeatedly emphasise that the dargah was once the ashram of Balark Rishi which was razed to the ground by Salar Masood. The dargah was built nearly 300 years later by a Muslim king called Feroze Tughlak. Salar Masood was actually killed nearly 5 kilometres from where his tomb is located. They termed it unfortunate that Maharaja Suhaldeve, the saviour of the nation and the Hindu religion, has been forgotten by the Hindus while they go and pray at the imaginary tomb of a foreign intruder to get their wishes fulfilled.¹⁶

Through these narratives the discursive strategy of the RSS is that firstly they want to paint the myth of Suhaldeve with a Hindu colour. Secondly, linking the myth with pasis is helping to electorally mobilise them. Thirdly, by castigating Ghazi Mian as a Muslim invader who spoiled the culture of this region, they are trying to implant a sense of guilt among the Hindus who visit the tomb of Ghazi Mian to pray for the fulfilment of their wishes. This is helping them to create a divide between Hindus and Muslims. Thus the construction of a Hindutva-oriented communal history of Salar Masood and Suhaldeve can be observed for evoking feelings of hatred against the other community.

The temple of Suhaldeve, which is located in a very remote place near a lake called Ashtavakra Jheel in Jittora, is fully under the control of RSS and their people. The present priest of the temple Shobh Ram Yadav also belongs to RSS. This temple is propagated by them as 'Rashtra Rakshak Veer Shiromani Maharaja Suhaldeve ka Darbar'. Unlike Ghazi Mian, Suhaldeve is not worshipped as a healer and a deity and his temple is not a place where devotees fulfil their desires. He is worshipped as a warrior who protected Hindutva. His statue shows him sitting on a horse holding a bow and arrow. He is wearing the dress of a maharaja with a crown. The statue is located inside a locked iron cage. Suhaldeve's image is also linked with the image of a grand Hindu god. Visuals of cows are made on the walls to show him as a 'gorakshak' (cow protector). On one side of the front wall, there is a painting of Krishna, the cowherd god of Hindu mythology. On the other side, there is a painting of lord Rama. Just below it is a painting of a cow and a calf.¹⁷

Myth Making and Popular Narrative

It is interesting to note that the story circulated by RSS and its various wings is contradicted by the popular narrative of the mostly Hindus devotees who worship Ghazi Mian. Ghazi Mian is not perceived as an intruder, but as a hunter who wanted to settle down here because of the beautiful environs. Suhaldeve was

the king of a local sun-worshipping tribe called bhar. He was a great tyrant and an oppressor of the Muslims and lower castes. When Ghazi Mian arrived, all the people requested him to save them from the oppressions of Suhaldeev. Very reluctantly he agreed, and a fierce battle ensued in which both Suhaldeev and Ghazi Mian were killed.¹⁸ Thus Suhaldeev is looked upon as a villain while Ghazi Mian is a hero. Even today when a strong wind blows it is believed to be the evil spirit of Suhaldeev and an iron chain that is full of magical powers is tied at the front gate of the dargah to prevent the spirit from entering. No one is allowed to enter or leave the dargah at that time (Ishar field diary ibid).

The month-long annual fair at the dargah of Ghazi Mian held in May is organised by the Dargah Committee and Sunni Central Board, Bahraich that was formed in 1902 [Shukla op cit]. On the first Sunday of the month all the people living in the neighbourhood gather there to dip in the water tank called Suryakund (lake dedicated to Sun god) near the dargah. The RSS claims that earlier an idol of Sun god stood there. Thousands of years ago before Salar Masood's advent, big fairs used to be held there during solar and lunar eclipses. Later, the Muslims changed its name to 'Hoz Shamshi', which is the Persian translation of the word 'Suryakund'.¹⁹ Sunday being the day of the Sun, Hindus observe fast and pray to the Sun god. This is the reason why Hindus go there with flags and 'trishuls' (tridents) to pray. It is commonly believed that when lepers bathe in the water of the Suryakund they get cured.²⁰ The RSS, however propagates that, the lake actually belonged to Balarkmuni and it was sanctified by 'rishis' and 'munis' over the ages, which gave it miraculous properties. This is how lepers get cured after bathing in this lake.

Statue, Image and Myth Making

The logical, intellectual and narrative resources which RSS uses are heavily drawn from the narratives created and circulated by Arya Samaj, Ram Rajya Parishad and the Hindu Mahasabha Sangathan that tried to spread ideas of Hindu nationalism derived from socio-religious movements initiated by high caste Hindus [Jaffrelot 1996, p 11]. The basis of the image of Suhaldeev was invented and constructed by a schoolteacher and poet of Bahraich, named Guru Sahay Dikshit Dwijdeen, who, influenced by Arya Samaj, composed a long poem in 1940 based on the character of Suhaldeev called Sri Suhaleevani. The poem composed in 'veer ras' (emotion portraying bravery), projected him as the saviour of Hindu pride against the foreign intruder Salar Masood. Bitter words were used against Islam and Salar Masood, in particular. The poet himself recited the poem in local poetry conferences in a grandiloquent manner with a sword in his hand and a headband around his head. This manner of recitation brought Suhaldeev to life in his chivalrous glory to the audience. A local resident of Bahraich who had attended one such recitation, narrates that this created an arresting image of Suhaldeev in the minds of the audience.²¹ The oral rendition and the printed version, which appeared in 1950, helped to build up and diffuse a heroic image of Suhaldeev in that region. It is interesting to note that in the poem Suhaldeev was not labelled as a pasi king, but was said to be a Jain king who was a passionate anti-Muslim and a staunch Hindu loyalist. Inspired by the poem, the local intellectuals like lawyers, schoolteachers, etc, started writing articles in newspapers glorifying this image of Suhaldeev.²²

The Partition of India and the ensuing communalism played an important role in the reconstruction and transmission of the

myth of Suhaldeev as an anti-Muslim, Hindu hero. After independence, an incident took place in the region, which reinforced the memory of Suhaldeev in the minds of the local people. The Arya Samaj, Ram Rajya Parishad and the Hindu Mahasabha Sangathan had launched a movement demanding the installation of a memorial to Suhaldeev. As a part of this movement, a fair was planned in April 1950 in Jittora, which was supposed to be inaugurated by Joginder Singh 'Sardar Sahab', a local state level Congress leader of Bahraich at whose house Mahatma Gandhi and Nehru used to stay when they visited Bahraich. A stone plaque mentioning the inauguration was also kept ready in an anticipation of the event. But on the day of the function, Khwaja Khalil Ahmad Shah, a member of the Dargah Committee went to the district administration and reported that a communal tension was brewing due to the frenzy created by the Hindu Mahasabha, Arya Samaj and Ram Rajya Parishad around the Suhaldeev issue. He appealed to the administration to prevent the function commemorating Suhaldeev from taking place. The residents claim that Section 144 was imposed on the basis of his appeal. However, Santram Khanna, a Hindu resident of Jittora gathered together a few local residents like Onkarnath Saraf, Kedarnath Asthana, Mathuraprasad Tandon, etc, and instigated them to break the ban. They started shouting slogans like 'Suhaldeev jaga hai, Saiyad Salar bhaga hai' (Suhaldeev has risen, Saiyad Salar has fled), and 'Suhaldeev ne lalkara hai, Surajkund hamara hai' (Suhaldeev has instigated, Surajkund is ours). They gathered a big crowd which then made its way to the Nagar office.²³ The Section 144 had been broken and satyagraha had started. The satyagrahis were put into jail by Baijnath Singh, the city, 'kotwal'. In this tension-ridden situation, the main social worker of the city, Mahadev Prasad Srivastava, who was associated with the Hindu Mahasabha, called a meeting of eminent people of Bahraich like Sri Bholanath Arya, Shyamal Srivastava, Laxminarain Gupta, Padma Chandra Jain, Pyarelal Mishra, Amarnath Puri of the Ram Rajya Parishad and the RSS 'pracharak' Laxmi Chandra Dhawan and formed a Sri Suhaldeev Sangharsh Samiti. It was decided that till the Section 144 was not lifted, batch upon batch of people would be sent to jail. The main markets were shut down for a whole week and batches of residents shouting slogans were sent to jail. Police and administration got together to curb the rebellion. In the meantime, a section of Congress who got influenced by the Hindutva under the leadership of Vaidya Bhagwandeem Mishra, joined this movement around Suhaldeev. They wrote to the government that if the Section 144 was not lifted, the Congress would join the rebellion in a big way. Around 2,000 people went to jail. Buckling under the pressure of the people, the government lifted the section after some time.

The local Congressmen, taking advantage of the situation, organised a big rally in Jittora to inaugurate the Jittora fair and the memorial of Suhaldeev. They commissioned two local painters Lalit Nag and Rajkumar Nag to create the first icon of Suhaldeev. The painting was put on the back of an elephant and taken around the city in the form of a big procession. This painting was installed in Jittora and the paintings of Rishi Ashtavakra, Balmiki, Buddha, Mahaveer and Guru Nanak flanked it. A local raja of Prayagpur donated 500 bighas of land and the Jittora Lake to the Suhaldeev Smarak Samiti. Later, the sculptor Samaydeen of Gonda, sculpted a statue of Suhaldeev based on the painting made by the Nag painters, in which he was portrayed in a chivalrous stance astride a horse. Earlier the statue was made of clay and later it was changed into cement. A temple of Suhaldeev was constructed

around the statue. The first priest was Bibhishan Narain Puri who was associated with the Hindu Mahasabha. Under his leadership the event celebrating Maharaj Suhaldey Vijayotsav, began. In the beginning it was celebrated in the form of 'hom', 'havan', 'puja path' and taking out a victory procession. During Dussehra, a tradition of worshipping weapons was started in which Hindu forces started participating in a big way. The people behind the Suhaldey memorial movement also invented a celebration around the Rajyabhishek of Maharaj Suhaldeyji on Basant Panchami when a big fair started being held on the occasion.²⁴ Between 1950 and 1960 the association began influencing pasis electorally since they were the dominant majority in many legislative constituencies in Bahraich and its adjoining districts. They started projecting Suhaldey as a pasi king who had fought for defending a Hindu Ram Rajya. A candidate called Bala Prasad won the elections from a pasi-dominated reserved constituency called Ikauna between 1952 and 1957 (Kol 2003, op cit, p 15).

In the beginning, although the RSS was involved in the movement, the leadership was in the hands of Arya Samaj, Hindu Mahasabha and the Ram Rajya Parishad. Later, due to the agenda of involving dalits under their fold and the fear of conversion of lower castes into Islam in the Indo-Nepal border after the opening of a number of madrasas in the region, the RSS intensified the move of projecting Hindu warring icons to perpetuate the anti-Muslim hatred and started creating memories of Suhaldey as a Hindu hero against Muslim invaders not only in Jittora, but also in the adjoining regions. The movement had dampened for a few years it picked up momentum in 2001 when the maharaja Suhaldey Sewa Samiti was formed under the banner of RSS. As mentioned earlier, this association aggressively revived the memories and celebrations around Suhaldey by creating new festivals, publishing pamphlets, leaflets and booklets and organising various popular activities so that the narrative of Suhaldey may transmit to the grassroot level. Interestingly, the Raj family, that earlier patronised the Sri Suhaldey Smarak Samiti led by Ram Rajya Parishad and the Arya Samaj and the Hindu Mahasabha, shifted their allegiance to the Sri Suhaldey Sewa Samiti under the RSS. In the stationery used by the Sewa Samiti to circulate information about their various activities, the names of pasi leaders associated with the organisation like Poonam Verma and Padma Sen Chowdhry, were mentioned prominently. In the 2004 elections, they appealed to the voters to vote for the party which had elevated the glory of persons who had laid down their lives in the defence of their motherland, whether it was Suhaldey

or the martyrs of the Kargil war.⁴⁷ Murli Manohar Joshi too, in his address to the pasi community, transformed the myth of Suhaldey into an electoral resource by specifically mentioning that Suhaldey had stopped the conversion of many Hindus to Islam.

As a part of the transmission of Suhaldey in the popular memory of people of UP, various statues of Suhaldey were installed in different parts of the state. The statue installed in Lucknow by the RSS, reflects their urge to propagate an aggressive image of Suhaldey. It is markedly different from the statue in Bahraich installed in the 1950s based on the painting by the Nag brothers. In the Lucknow statue he is shown in as a valiant, militant stance similar to the image of Maharana Pratap. He is wearing an iron armour, an iron headgear, and iron breeches and is holding a spear while a sword is tucked in his waist. On the other hand, the statue in Bahraich depicts him more as a medieval folk hero wearing a crown and holding a bow and arrow. Maharana Pratap is another myth propagated by RSS and the attempt to carve Suhaldey in his image might be a reflection of the desire to homogenise the militant Hindu heroes and their iconography. The residents of Bahraich however believe that the statue of Suhaldey in Bahraich is a true depiction.

The construction of aggressive hatred against Muslims can be clearly observed during the celebration of the memory of Suhaldey by RSS during their annual festival. One form of expression of this hatred is through theatres. Before 2002, the festival was restricted to performing Ramkathas, 'kalashyattras' and 'havan' and taking out processions. In 2002, at a meeting in Saraswati Shishu Mandir, a branch of a school run by RSS all over India to culturally condition young children, it was decided that depicting the life of Suhaldey through theatre would be a more effective medium of transmitting the message of RSS to the masses. The Berunapur theatre company was commissioned to prepare a drama based on the life of Suhaldey. The script of the drama was prepared by Mahiraj Dhawaj Singh a Sangh pracharak with the help of literature and writer Gopal Shukla.²⁶ The drama, when it was performed for the first time during the Suhaldey fair organised at the premises of the Suhaldey temple, evoked a thunderous applause, especially in the scene when Suhaldey chopped off Ghazi Mian's head. Seeing the response of the audience the organisers decided to make the drama a regular feature and make that particular scene even more gruesome and aggressive. This version of drama is used by various other drama companies of the region, which they perform on various occasions. Thus the drama prepared for the celebration of the memory

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of Suhaldev is now emerging as a popular culture of theatrical performance of the region and is helping in creation of popular memory in one religious community against the other.

Conclusion

This article tried to document how local histories are being transformed into powerful tools in the hands of political parties and how dalits are being mobilised by communal forces by the creation of a communal memory through narratives that re-interpret their identity and use their myths in communal ways. The communal imaginings created by interpreting local history of communities is one of the political discursive strategies applied by political forces. In this process they also create their own version of popular culture based on the community myths and by creating narratives, launching celebrations, inventing and making statues, writing popular booklets and leaflets and linking this process with political agitation. The version created by the political parties gradually enter the psyche of the community and become a part of their identities and further lead to their communalisation. This process also shows how a warring history and myth is being created to break the composite history and culture which exists at the people's level and gradually this created history and myth reflects in the popular culture of the region. This results in the emergence of a warring popular culture which does not emerge from within but is imposed from the top which consists of political forces and social elites of the region. This shows that myths, history and memory may be powerful weapons either to communalise people or to make them aware of their own rights and social respect and ultimately strengthening the politics of social justice, equality and social respect of the marginal community. In both the process, the communities are being treated as electoral resource, but in one case they are being used for a divisive purpose and creating hatred against other communities, while in the other, they are being made aware of their rights and being empowered and gaining self-respect. The dalit politics of UP is an example of the latter, in which the BSP consolidated the diverse dalit communities using their myths, memories and legends. An example of the former is that of BJP and RSS who are using the myths and legends of the dalits and communalising them by giving them warring identity against Muslims, which is one of the agenda of Hindutva politics. The creation of a warring identity of Suhaldev that is placed against Ghazi Mian who is a Muslim popular hero is a case in point. This strategy serves to exemplify the compulsions of state centred power politics to dig out myths, legends and heroes of marginalised communities and mould them to fit into their political agenda. [27]

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Notes

[The material presented in this article is based on the fieldwork conducted during the data collection of the project, 'Myth, Memory and Politics: A Study of the Language of Political Mobilisation of Grassroot Dalits', funded by the ICSSR, New Delhi. I am thankful to ICSSR for providing me financial support for the project. I would like to thank the members of my research team Mousumi Majumder and S P Upadhyay for their help with the survey and data preparation.]

- 1 'Maharashtra Ke Do Doctor', cover page of *Panchjanya*, January 24, 2004, Samajik Nyaya issue.
- 2 'Shri Guruji aur Samta aur Samrasta', Dattopant Thengri, *Panchjanya*, April 6, 2003.

- 3 *Panchjanya*, April 6, 2003 and January 23, 2004, Delhi, and various other interpretations of BJP and RSS leaders published in other issues of *Panchjanya* and other publications.
- 4 Invitation letter-cum-pamphlet distributed by Maharaja Suhaldev Sewa Samiti to propagate Suhaldev Memorial celebration, May 2004.
- 5 Muhammed Ishar, field diary, MM, time: 3.00 pm, place: Dargah of Ghazi Mian.
- 6 Sakharam Yadav, field diary MM, place: Bahraich, time: 5.00 pm, April 23, 2004.
- 7 Muhammad Ishar, field diary MM, place: Bahraich, time: 4.00 pm, April 23, 2004.
- 8 *Bahraich: A Gazetteer* Vol XLV of the District Gazetteers of United Provinces of Agra and Oudh: 1903.
- 9 Triloki Nath Kol (1997) and Rajkumar Pasi (2005).
- 10 *Bahraich: A Gazetteer*, Vol XLV of the District Gazetteers of United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, 1903.
- 11 Triloki Nath Kol, op cit, p 2 and also see: *Statiscal, Discriptive and Historical Account of the NWP of India*, Vol VIII Part 2 – Allahabad, Compiled by C D Steel, edited by F H Fisher and J P Hewett, printed at Allahabad, 1884, p 49.
- 12 Leaflet published during the parliamentary election. 2004 by the Bharat Kranti Rakshak Party (BKRP) at 207, Lekhraj Gold Munshi Pulia, Indira Nagar, Lucknow.
- 13 Rashtra Rakshak Veer Shiromani Maharaja Suhaldev: pamphlet published by Maharaja Suhaldev Sewa Samiti, Bahraich, 2003.
- 14 Gulle Abbas Ali, field diary MM, place: Shahabpur, time: 4.30 pm, February 21, 2003.
- 15 Projection of image of Suhaldev as a cow protector is a method that had earlier also been used by RSS to mobilise dalits and backward communities. Vibhuti Narain Rai (1998), *Combating Communal Conflicts: Perception of Police Neutrality during Hindu-Muslim Riots in India*, Anamika Prakashan, Allahabad, p 49.
- 16 See fn 13.
- 17 Field visit to Jittora, Bahraich, April 23, 2004.
- 18 Muhammed Ishar, field diary, MM, time: 3.00 pm, place: Dargah of Ghazi Mian.
- 19 S P Singh, a local pracharak, Chowk Bazaar, Bahraich of RSS; interview recorded on April 25 at 1.30 pm, 2004.
- 20 Ramsnehi, Hospital Road, Bahraich; interview recorded on April 26, at 4.00 pm, 2004.
- 21 O P Agrawal, age 70 years, a local resident of Bahraich; interview recorded on April 24, 2004, at 3.00 pm.
- 22 Shri Shyam Lal Shrivastava, a lawyer and Shri Devi Charan Shrivastava, the principle of a local college, were two such writers.
- 23 Vivid description of this procession was made by O P Agrawal.
- 24 Gopal Shukla (ibid) oral interview with Ram Sneh, age 54 years, on April 25, at 10.30 pm, place Jittora, Bahraich.
- 25 'Path Sanket', the pamphlet published by RSS, April 8, 2004, Lucknow.
- 26 Interview of Gopal Shukla.

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- Thengdi, Datto Pant (2004): 'Hum Ekatama Hain', *Panchjanya*, January 24, p 27.