# An Accidental Deity: A New Religious Icon for the Modern Age

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**ABSTRACT**

*This article describes a religious belief, based on folklore but arising within Hindu culture, that has evolved over the last three decades in the Indian state of Rajasthan. It describes how this belief is spreading in North-West India and has moved closer to traditional Hindu customs. The study involves qualitative research, participant observation, and dialogue with devotees and observers who visit the Om Banna shrine. It assesses this adaptive process in a holistic way – from the intersection of anthropology, comparative religion, and folklore. With insights into how people develop new beliefs as a way to accommodate to a changing world, the paper provides a window into modernity and the spiritual-emotional needs of humanity.*

***Keywords:*** *modernity, adaptation, religion, spirituality, Hinduism, Om Banna, deity, India, tradition, anthropology, social psychology, globalization.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Religious expressions are 'manifestations of more than their singular, historical context; they are embodiments of the ongoing, human activity of world fashioning' (Paden 1998: 161). All gods, rituals, myths and sacred times reflect a thematic history, contextualized to global and local history. Religion, therefore, 'is not about facts but a matter of meanings' (Smith 1991: 9). This paper presents the evolving beliefs of people resulting in new icons of worship and rituals in the twenty-first century, ones that are better suited to the needs of the time.

The temple for Om Banna and his 350cc Enfield Bullet motorcycle, popularly known as the *Bullet Baba Shrine*, is located close to the city of Jodhpur on National Highway 62 in Rajasthan, India. The shrine and its legend are closely linked to the changing socio-economy of the region, which is well-known for its heritage tourism and hospitality industry. Handicraft products are part of a growing export market, bringing in new incomes, external goods, and non-local lifestyles. Lying within the sphere of the *Bishnoi* religious community – famous for its ecological beliefs about peace, health, and preservation of life – ethno-ecotourism has become integral to the local economy in the last decade (Upadhaya *et al*. 2022).

For Ramji Chotaram, a young man, whose family runs a family home-stay, the 'past few years are the best years we've seen, with increasing tourism and interest in local culture, craft, and heritage, including our food.' He describes how city-people from across India and abroad now enjoy more rustic pleasures as a new kind of travel experience. This life, once looked down upon, has now become a refuge from the fast-moving problems of modernity and technology. It was Ramji who introduced us to the Bullet Baba Shrine and its deity [*devata*], near the village of Chotila. The shrine is devoted to a motorcycle and its owner.[1]

The shrine is a reminder of how human emotion transformed a contemporary person into a being of veneration in less than four decades, as well as how an important technological part of his being – his motorcycle – also attained apotheosis. It forces us to wonder how the need for a superior being as a safety net evolved from the emotional dependency of humans (Rodrigue 2022). So, from 2015 to 2017 and in 2023, we undertook/conducted a study to better understand this new spiritual space and to place it in a framework of local, regional, and global society. Its aim was not to establish a precise chain of events or

their validity, but it was more to consider the meaning and implications of the socio-cultural phenomenon.[2]

## THE LEGEND AND THE LANDSCAPE

Culturally, this region is home to the Rajput community, known for their martial culture. The Rajput clans have ruled for centuries in the Kingdoms of Mewar, Udaipur and other princely states in North-West India. Om Singh Rathore was the only son of the Rajput Ranbanka Rathore family from Chotila. Known locally as Om Banna, he was just married with a child on the way (*banna* means a newlywed man in the Mewari language). On a cold night in December 1988, on his way from Bangdi (the village of his in-laws) to home, he lost control of his motorcycle, hit a jal tree (*Salvadora oleiodes*), fell into a ditch, and died.[3]

The accident was reported to the authorities in the early morning by travellers, who took his motorcycle to the police station. Officers arrived at the scene later that morning to conduct their investigation. Then the mystery began. The motorbike went missing that evening from the police station and, after a search, it was found at the accident site. Suspecting a prank, the police emptied its fuel tank and locked-up the motorcycle. But it disappeared again and was found in the same ditch at dawn. This was repeated over for several days.[4]

Local people began to spiritualize the events. They came to believe that the motorcycle was blessed with magical powers and that Om Banna's spirit was embodied in it. The faithful describe incidents of an unknown man helping accident victims along the highway and even taking them to the hospital. When asked, this mysterious guardian turns out to look like Om Banna or an indistinct being who vanishes once the injured have reached safety.

Om Banna's family was reportedly unaware of his accident until the next day. He had been close to his grandmother, and, on the night of his mishap, she saw him in her dreams – in pain and seeking help. Later, Om Banna would appear in her dreams as their *Kuldevi* [family deity], an avatar of Nagneshi Mata, who is revered by the Rathore Rajput community (Harlan 1992). These dreams inspired his grandmother to have a memorial built on the spot where he died. Om Banna's son was born after his death and he was the high priest of the temple in 2015.

The Om Banna / Bullet Baba Shrine is laid out as a temple complex along National Highway 62. It sets away from habitations, with the nearest village two kilometres away. The temple lies perpendicular to the main road, between a local *chowky* [police station] and *dharamsala* [pilgrim rest house]. The rest house also serves as an office for the temple-family-trust and manages the complex.[5] The temple has not changed much, but the rest house has grown as have the number of shops around the temple and on the other side of the road.

Today, four jal trees form the precinct of worship as visitors enter the sacred complex. The jal east of the temple entrance (the site of the accident in 1988) is the first object of reverence to which devotees pray. It is a pious spot for rituals, especially for married women, as they tie a sacred thread or bangles on the tree and its enclosure. The women who sell these gifts sit near the tree and share information with newcomers about events and the rituals to be followed.

A couple of roughly-built steps and a pathway conduct visitors to the main complex, which is surrounded by bamboo mesh. This path is adorned with bells and ritual gongs. On the north side of the entrance is a square, thatched enclosure that houses the *havanaagni* [sacred fire], which burns permanently. This structure serves as a *mandapa* [portico] to the main sanctum.

The *chabutra* [sacred platform] of the main shrine contains images of the *devta* [deity] – Om Banna. He is depicted in four forms: 1) A sculpted bust-effigy, 2) A traditional hero-stone funerary motif – as a warrior on a horse with a raised sword in one hand and a javelin in the other, 3) A hero on a horse, and 4) A life-size framed photograph. The temple's priest reports that the photograph was taken only months before Om Banna's death. In it, he wears a traditional turban and suit (Figure 1).

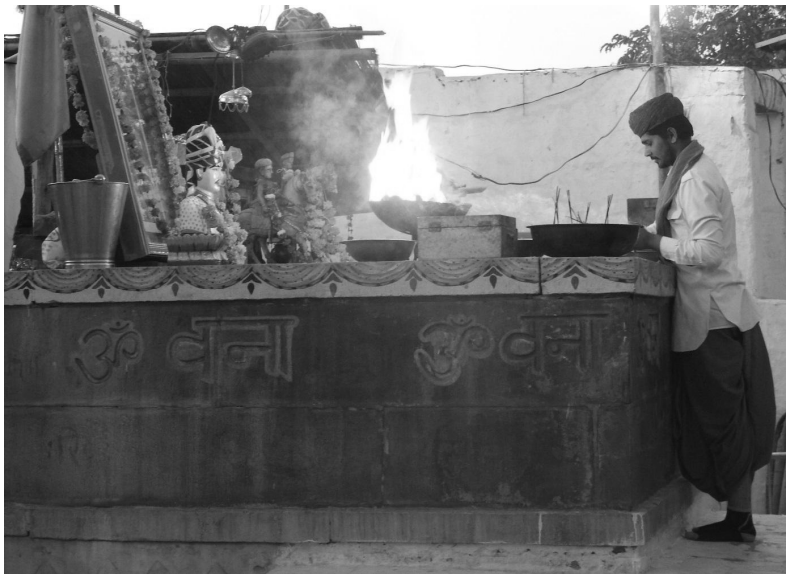

**Fig. 1. Fire altar with attending priest.**
**On the left are effigies and images of Om Banna.**
**Photo by Shweta Sinha Deshpande, 2015.**

These images are visual reminders of this deity's human form and his close association with modern life. The idols depict him in traditional symbology of the Rajputs, as a warrior. The devotees believe Om Banna resides in these idols and that they protect those who believe. East of the main shrine is an enclosed glass case containing the motorcycle. Decorated with the offerings of devotees and believers, the motorbike is as significant as Om Banna himself. Nearby villagers say they hear the bike start-up every day.

Both sides of the highway form part of the larger religious complex. The shrine lies on one side of the road, while kiosks and stalls on both sides cater to the ritual needs of devotees by selling flowers, incense and sweets that can be offered at the shrine, as well as deified images of the young martyr (Figure 2). In one version of the accident, Om Banna was travelling with a friend who survived and reported it to the police. In 2015, the son of this friend ran a photo stall by the temple, where he photo-shopped prints of a deified Om Banna with those of devotees.

**Fig. 2. Shops selling offerings and souvenirs outside the Om Banna Temple. Photo by Shweta Sinha Deshpande, 2015.**

The stalls also sell souvenirs, from key chains, photo frames and magnets to pendants, bracelets and writing pens, all with the embossed image of Om Banna and his motorbike. There are many audio-visual materials, from folk songs in praise of Om Banna to pious *bhajans* [hymns] sung by local vocalists in honour of the deity. Popular religious movies have been produced to commemorate Om Banna's life and are sold on DVDs. These objects aid worship of Om Banna for devotees who live at a distance from the sacred space. Most of the vendors, if not all, belong to the same village as Om Banna himself.

While many opinions exist, what cannot be denied is the deification of Om Banna and his transformation from a mere mortal to a god-figure or *avatar* [incarnation] within the prevalent belief system. A regular retinue of staff works on temple upkeep, along with those who play ceremonial drums and sing devotional songs. Local people, out of their belief in and respect for the shrine, also work as volunteers.

One of the vendors compared Om Banna and his motorcycle to the concepts of a *devta* [Deity or God] and their *vahana* [vehicle], a motif that appears in many Indian belief systems. This shopkeeper had been a young boy when the accident took place, and, as he ex-

plained, religion in every era brought its gods to Earth to take care of the problems of the time. So, for him, Om Banna is a relevant deity, an avatar for the modern age, and his vehicle is modern – a motorcycle.[6] Om Banna and his motorcycle are thus seen as twin deities within Hindu folklore.[7]

Known as the Protector or Patron Saint of the Highway, Om Banna and his motorcycle are especially revered by drivers of buses and trucks that carry people, manufactured products and agricultural produce on National Highway 62. Those who cannot stop, blow their horn thrice in acknowledgment of the divine presence at the site. Locals as well as the police believe that road accidents have been reduced since the shrine was built.

Brijesh Singh Rathore, a member of the temple committee, described the growth of worship and increase of divine interventions attributed to Om Banna. Visitors have swelled to thousands each week. Om Banna is not just the *Protector of the Highway* anymore but a deity to whom people look – when they come with a pure heart. He is said to have appeared to hundreds of people all over India while on their journeys, but prominently near Pali.[8]

Brijesh also reports how other shrines for Om Banna are under construction in Udaipur (Rajasthan) and Andhra Pradesh.[9] Over the last eight years, the number of shrines across Rajasthan have increased to twenty-one, according to *Google Maps*, while local people identify more. These lie along highways and connecting roads, illustrating the spiritual safety network that Om Banna has come to offer.

In less than three decades, the narrative of a road accident in Rajasthan, involving a young man, a motorcycle and a tree, has transformed into an icon worshipped across India. Religion is often perceived as a conservative force that does not change, but the fact is that religion changes and has always changed in response to local and global needs (Eller 2007).

## THE LANDSCAPE AND SOCIETY

Rajasthan is the largest state of India in size and seventh in population. Although landlocked, it has transportation links with north and south Indian states, including maritime ports (India Brand Equity Foundation 2016; Purohit 2013). It also shares a long international border with Pakistan. India's largest producer of cement, Rajasthan engages in much mining and mineral production. Its rich socio-cultural heritage attracts tourists from around the world, with almost 35 million visitors in 2015 and 108 million in 2022 (Tripathy 2023).

This growth has brought mobility, serving as a busy corridor for people, goods, and ideas.


**Map 1. The State of Rajasthan (dark grey) in India.**
**Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons**

The Om Banna temple is located on National Highway 62, which connects the historic metropolis of Jodhpur to the industrial city of Pali, then onwards to Haryana, the national capital of New Delhi, and the population centres of India. So, it is not surprising that such an active web of roadways has produced a new set of deities (a motorcycle and its rider) to address qualms about speed and mobility – a deity seen as better equipped to help travellers than earlier gods.

Devotees from nearby villages believe that a visit to the shrine is important before embarking on a long journey, as the twin deities ensure safety and success in their endeavours. Women often accompany their husbands to tie a ritual thread with bangles on the jal tree or at the enclosure for the sacred fire and pray for their spouse's safety. Among most Hindu households, bangles signify a woman's marital status and the practice is endowed with rich symbolic meaning.

Local people sing songs to worship Om Banna, including *aarti* [ceremonial songs of praise]. A religious *mela* [festival] and *yatra* [procession] is organised every year, at the time of Diwali (autumn),

with a Ferris wheel, food stalls, and other attractions. There has been increasing coverage of this activity at the Om Banna Temple by local and national media. Home-grown audio / visual creativity has also spread on the internet. A recent Google Search brought up over eleven million results, including images, personal blogs, devotional songs, religious and biographical films, and event coverage.

Travelling is feared to contain many unknown dangers, so its perils have evolved – from a lack of knowledge about road changes to anxiety about speed and mobility. There exist traditions in other cultures of having a patron saint of travellers, such as St. Christopher, or the practice of *imam zamin*, where a traveller is put under the protection of *Imam*.[10] These contextualise the legend of the Om Banna to show how religious needs remain the same but finer details adapt with time. The evolution of Cargo Cults, Revitalization Movements and New Religious Movements since the early twentieth century indicate how religion operates as one of the many forces shaping a globalised and globally conflicted world (Beckford and Demerath 2007: 1).

## PEOPLE, FAITH AND THEIR BELIEFS

The shrine today is a ceremonial, spiritual and commercial space that caters to many different groups of people, from devotees and tourists to motorcycle enthusiasts. The fatal accident has significance, not just for the people of the area but for many across the country. This is the result of tourism, mobility for employment, and social media. Interactions with taxi drivers and shopkeepers, devotees and tourists strengthen the idea that most people, whether they believe in Om Banna's godly status or not, were not ready to risk their future by not paying respect to the shrine and its deities. This element of fear and reverence adds to the legend.

Vinod, a driver who took our students to visit cultural sites in the region, revered a framed photograph of Om Banna with flowers and incense sticks in his taxi. He believed praying to this avatar to be the most important ritual before starting his day's work. [11] In hindsight, it is interesting to note we contributed to the narrative of the legend with him. On the return journey from one of our excursions with the students, we did not take time to honour Om Banna and his motorcycle, and then a kilometre past the temple, the car got a flat tyre! Vinod said it was because we did not stop at the shrine.

Baljeet Singh, a Sikh driver from Udaipur, a regular visitor and follower of Om Banna, does not feel that it clashed with Sikhism, as the latter has strong ties with Hinduism. He also emphasised that Om

Banna had more to do with occupation and location than religion – 'he is a deity of the highway' … in particular NH 62 – so Baljeet does not think it does any harm to honk three times whenever he passes.[12]

In contrast, Ashish, a driver in his early thirties from Delhi, did not follow the tradition himself, but he did drive tourists to the temple and narrated the story of Om Banna to sightseers with great reverence.[13] Ashish and others have contributed to the expansion of the belief in Om Banna beyond the local space. Some of these visitors we interviewed included:

• A family visiting with their grandmother who had been critically ill. With a blessing from the shrine, she was able to walk and paid her respects to Om Banna.

• A young woman received her appointment as a government school-teacher and wanted to thank the deity for his blessing; while a young man had come to seek blessings because he was to appear for the state-police exams.

• A mother and daughter came to seek blessings for a government-job appointment immediately after the interview, and, while at the shrine, received news of their selection.

• Two sisters came to ask for support to give them courage and strength to help work out difficulties in the married family-life of their older sister.

Many young couples visit with their families, and brides tie a sacred thread and coloured bangles on the jal-tree to protect them and seek blessings for their married lives. Among these visitors was a young couple, who had married against the wishes of their families and hoped to reconcile with their kin. There are numerous answers as to why people put their faith in Om Banna. One man said he is a devotee because his prayer for a motorbike came true. Another believed his wishes for a marriage became reality after he visited the shrine.

A woman said she believed in Om Banna because of all the other people who believe in the deity and go to his temple – 'they all cannot be irrational.' Beyond faith, others come due to the temple's popularity and legendary power. Martha, an English tourist in her late fifties, was visiting the shrine as a sightseer. She focused on the divine embodied in myths and legends surrounding all religions and believed these stories impact the flow of belief through society.

**Fig. 3. Visitors at the Om Banna Temple.
The jal tree on the right is wrapped in ribbons
and adorned with bangles as offerings.
Photo by Shweta Sinha Deshpande, 2015.**

Pravesh and Saloni, an educated and married couple in their early thirties from Gujarat, were traveling across the state of Rajasthan on their own Royal Enfield motorbike. They were visiting because of how the temple was related to the Enfield, which they adored. For Pravin, a fourteen-year-old boy, it was a shop and business that he ran with his father to earn a living, not a belief in Om Banna that was important. Possibly, a reason for him being so outspoken, apart from his age, was that he is not native to Chotila village.

The emergence of Om Banna as a deity was a product of his time, a result of anxiety from new infrastructure that was emerging forty years ago – with the building of new roads, a need for more safety at higher speeds, and the tragedy of dear ones lost due to accidents. Such issues were emotionally addressed through the worship of Om Banna. His realm of influence since then has expanded to include other kinds of support expected of all spiritual deities.

## RITUAL ANALYSIS

The Om Banna Temple is marked by stark homeliness, but it is endowed with symbols and meanings that richly draw on Hinduism (as perceived today) as well as from the folk traditions of Rajasthan: bells tied to the entrance, orange flags, sacred fire, and music played through an audio system or by local singers to the beat of a *nagara* [drum]. All these traditional symbols invite devotees to participate and contribute in their own ways to the prescribed ritual. Devotees revisit the shrine to offer gratitude and untie the sacred thread, once a wish is fulfilled. The thread is either offered to the fire or carried home.[14]

The faithful and visitors alike follow a set path of first making an offering at the Om Banna shrine on the platform, where the priest mediates prayers and bestows a portion back to the donor (after it is blessed). The path then leads to the encased shrine for the motorcycle, where prayers are offered and donations made to the charity box, while others touch or kiss the case with reverence. There is a path around the shrine for followers to sit, pray and meditate, or to circumambulate both shrines. Many engage in silent contemplation.

Closely emotive in the Hindu form of popular worship, one can see people of all ages, genders and classes engage with the shrines in a modern, cosmopolitan form of worship. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) emphasised the on-going tension between culture, social systems and individuals, and this concept is visible in the new worship of Om Banna.

A devotee can purchase traditional offerings for a Hindu *puja* [ceremonial worship] at the temple: flowers, *kumkum* /*sindoor* [vermillion], incense, *kalava / mauli* [red-yellow ritual thread] and sweets. New offerings have been incorporated too. The most unique is alcohol, as whisky (not country liquor) is sprinkled around the deity. This reflects drinking in a different light, where drunk-driving has been transformed into a religious statement. Within the Indian context, consumption of alcohol as part of a ritual is associated with 'limited' (lesser) deities and only then at special festivals (Pattanaik 2014).

Some stories refer to Om Banna being drunk when the accident happened. According to informants, drinking is a recurring problem in affluent Rajput households, where men are at a loss for productive jobs and suffer from a lack of initiative. This gender-based anomie has been locally attributed to problems of modernity. Alcohol is part of the popular, cultural space, so it is not surprising that it is part of the symbolic offering at the shrine.

There are few other spaces where alcohol appears on the Indian sacred landscape (Sengupta 2006). Globally, a wide variety of traditional mind-altering substances, like cannabis and peyote, have close association with sacred ritual (Schultes and Hofmann 1979). At the Om Banna Shrine, we see the blended ritual that Geertz described (1973), incorporating old and new traditions.

A changing, political economy has led to the demise of local and rural enterprises, with large corporations absorbing local producers. This urban control of industry, tourism and trade has led the rural gentry to grow financially through property sales, but it has removed them from day-to-day business. For men in traditional, upper-class households, this has for many led to a loss of prestige, agency, and self-motivation – they have money but little power.[15]

Religion has more often than not been associated with worldly and other-worldly fears, issues that are basic to both individual and social stability, and well-being. The Indian *socioscape* has been significantly influenced by global mores and aspirations (Sivakumar 2000). These new customs and desires create fears about the pace of life and the need for mobility, which, in turn, build new fears about life and prosperity for oneself and loved ones.

## UNDERSTANDING RELIGION AND RITUAL IN INDIA

Religion provides evidence of socialization and acculturation. It helps fulfil many individual psychological and emotional needs – from comfort, hope and love to relief from fear and despair. It explains causes for rules, reasons for social control in this life and in the afterlife (beyond birth and death), needs for cultural institutions like marriage, language, technology and politics, and why there is sickness and misfortune. Religion works as a social glue for the integration of individuals into a social unit with a particular identity and culture. This fundamental role of religion as a social mediator is highly visible in India.

Almost 80 per cent of India's residents practice a variety of Hinduism, which is a relatively modern configuration of Vedic religion that is ascribed to the second millennium BCE. The spiritual realm of the Upanishads dates to the mid-first millennium BCE and Brahmanical Hinduism to the mid-first century CE. Like most other beliefs, it is not just a matter of facts but of meanings – a corpus of traditions, practices, sacred literature and art that have evolved over the last five millennia, as a result of interactions with the cultures and peoples of Asia and Europe (Smith 1991: 10; Smart 1998). It represents diverse and

plural belief systems that were gradually codified into what is today considered Hinduism.

For religious scholar Ninian Smart, the 'grammar' of Indian religion appears in its many sets of Gods, yoga (self-training), *puja* (worship), sacrifice and mythology synthesised in the earliest religious texts of the Hindus, such as the *Rig Veda*. Interwoven with the philosophical doctrines of *samsara* (the cycle of life), *dharma* (duty), *karma* (action) and *moksa* (liberation) – along with the Upanishadic philosophy of the *brahman* (the sacred / divine power), and the *atman* (the eternal self) – Hinduism continues to guide an Indian way of life.

The Islamic influence and the ensuing Sufi and Bhakti traditions mark the medieval era, followed by the colonial influence and rise of socio-religious reform movements like the Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj … among others. In many ways, Vivekannad's Vedanta philosophy, with its positive approach towards change and modernisation of attitudes, set a path for modern Indian Hinduism that evaluates the principles of caste and excessive ritualism with a focus on spirituality, among others. A dynamic system of beliefs that has evolved over time, the Hindu religion continues to develop and incorporate new traditions. This is true today, as we can see with Om Banna.

The Om Banna Temple is in the sacred context of Rajasthan's spiritual landscape. Hero stones are an ancient Indian tradition and are believed to be an abode of deities, while the *chhatri* is a medieval domed-pavilion, especially seen in Mughal architecture. These artefacts are a 'potent means of commemorating historical Rajput folk deities who serve a variety of social functions among the living … bestow prestige on their ancestors and wider *jati*, and positively intercede in the lives of their devotees' (Bose 2015).

While royal Rajput families have quasi-divine status, a non-royal may be deified too. Typically, a *vir* [martial hero] is worshipped as a *devta* [deity] or *sati* [virtuous woman] and embody the Rajput *dharma* [cosmic order], which, although gender-specific, expresses commitment to self-sacrifice. Deified Rajputs are *lok devtas* [folk gods], accessible to devotees and having the capacity to grant them boons and remove obstacles. Thus, a 'warrior memorial becomes the physical locus of their devotional cults' (Bose 2015: 18–19). The *vir* reside in the *virgati* [the heaven for heroes] and in memorial / religious spaces created by devotees.

Indian religious belief has a long history of assimilating new ideas in support of changing conditions, especially seen in medieval and modern times with Islamic and Western influences (Farquhar in Sharma

1986). Some of these traditions achieved prominence since Independence, such as those of Sai Baba, the Siddha Yoga Movement, and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. Historian and statesman Kavalam Panikkar (1963) identifies such movements as varieties of reformation that have contributed to significant changes in society.

Scholar of religion Arvind Sharma (1986) sees many responses to rapid social change in India that lead to a rise in new religious movements – in the wake of events like English colonialism, increased communication, and technological change. The mushrooming of beliefs, faiths and communities seem to express social aspirations, protest and identity by many Indians. Indeed, modern India has been described as 'a guru factory,' with its many *babas*, *swamis*, *bapus*, *ammas*, and *bhagats* (Qiu 1999).

In their modern forms, such revitalization movements merge new realities with the comforting mores of older sacred systems. Construction of a new religion does not usually happen, but instead there is adjustment of existing philosophy and faith, adapting society to the needs of a changed socio-cultural environment. There is a need to be close to the roots of constructed cultural identities, though it frequently does not reflect fundamentalist attitudes. The meta-narrative in beliefs continues as a lived reality (Lyon 2000; Heelas 1998).

Sociologist Martin Riesebrodt emphasises the need to understand religion in terms of its actions and interactions, which connect to other social systems (Riesebrodt 2003). Intensification of such interconnectedness has reduced the isolation of *little traditions*, and so local and urban ways of life now coexist in a global continuum (Redfield 1956; Asad 1993). The worship of Om Banna can be seen as an 'extrapolation of culture,' which anthropologist Jack Eller (2007: 9–10) describes:

> [R]eligious being(s) and / or force(s) are almost universally 'social,' with the qualities of 'persons' or at least 'agents' of some sort. … humans see themselves, in a religious context, as occupying a certain kind of relationship with being(s) and / or force(s) which we can rightly and only call a social relationship. It is a relationship of communication, intention, reciprocity, respect, avoidance, control, *etc.* … they can be approached and influenced. … They are the nonhuman: the dead ancestors, or 'spirits' of plants or animals or natural objects (the sun and the moon), or natural forces (the wind and the rain), or 'gods,' or impersonal supernatural forces like mana or chi. Yet they interact with us. They are social, because they are part of society. … Indeed,

> religion makes part or all (depending on the tradition) of the nonhuman world human – participants in the norms and values and meanings of culture.

This social process is clearly sketched out in the case of Om Banna and his motorcycle. It is a reality where the greater Hindu gods have given way to icons closer to the current realities of life. We see similar historical instances of this process that have appeared elsewhere in the world. The indigenous North American Ghost Dance and its spiritual offshoots, for example, were a pan-tribal revitalization movement that was also associated with the disruption of traditional lifeways, as with infiltration of Euramerican transportation systems (railways) into tribal lands (Ruuska 2011; Mooney 1973).

Likewise, the ritualization of Om Banna ceremonies has incorporated modern vehicles into the tradition of the *yatra* [procession], in which his effigy is taken out to devotees in a decorated jeep instead of a *ratha* [chariot]. For the *prasad* [food offering], it is not just traditional Indian sweets but a cake especially made for his birth celebrations. This merger of tradition and modernity reflects the changing aesthetics of Om Banna's middle-class followers, which is also visible in new, unpretentious shrines across Rajasthan.

## DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

People do not usually make conscious choices about the ideals of modernity or the process of globalization, but they inadvertently move in these directions as a result of outside influences that they, more often than not, have no power to control or withhold (Arweck 1993; Spickard 2007). The quiet and calm of traditional life has been jolted with novel experiences and aspirations, often bringing apprehension of the unknown.

Today, a young man from a small town needs a well-paying, socially acceptable career as a police officer or an IT professional. Local farmers must ensure that their produce reaches the market and gets the best price, since they hope for their children to go to college. Local vendors have to provide clients with consumables that the mediascape promotes, if they expect to sustain a small business. Young married women need to manage their careers while ensuring that their marriage can sustain the tension between individuality and tradition, along with the aspirations for a romantic modern life. The elderly know they can live a few more years, only if they get medication or surgery in a hospital. Many truck, bus and cab drivers need to get their goods and

passengers to the next destination before sundown. There is a sense of constant mobility, flow and change across people's experiences.

New uncertainties must be pacified with newly conceived powers that may be able to support and protect an individual, family, and community. Just as fear has persisted with the increase of knowledge, many rituals, customs and habits are unchanged, along with traditions that form community identity. A symbol can have multiple and varied meanings for the different people who interact with it. It is a process to be viewed as a survival technique (Durkheim 2015: 37; Turner 1973; Geertz 1973: 89).

At the Om Banna Temple, the ways in which visitors perceive the motorcycle lead to multiple connections. It can represent fear of the speed that the motorcycle affords, fear of the speed that life has changed into, and, in general, psychological stress. It can form a single meaning from one person's perspective, but, when other people see it, they find their own meanings within a variety of symbols. Belief in Om Banna and Bullet Baba reflects relationships between anxiety, hope and religion in the age of globalization.

Explanations have been put forth as to why humans need religion in the first place, but they do not explain why individuals and communities feel the need for new religious deities when millions of gods already exist. Possibly an important reason could be dissatisfaction with and within established religions. The beliefs and practices may have lost some of the emotional and psychological sustainability required in the modern global era.

While people's narratives still abound with miracles performed along the road, Om Banna is evolving from a guardian spirit of travellers to a deity who now has the power to grant wishes and is benevolent in his bequests. Followers worship him, not because they are fearful but because they believe he can help them (Arweck 1993). Om Banna is evolving though; his folk identity being absorbed as a god into the larger Hindu pantheon. He began as an incarnation of *Nagneshi Mata*, the Ranbanka Rathore Rajput family deity, who herself is an incarnation of *Shakti* or *Durga*. Now, he is transcending into a nationally-known god, and we shall see where the process leads.[16]

The Om Banna Temple is under close control by the Rajputs. Until 2017, no Brahmins were involved in the rituals, since the rites were performed only by family members. Om Banna's son was the head priest, responsible for the rituals – in complete sacred vestments at dawn and dusk, offering *aarti* [lights]*, prasad* / *bhog* [votive food] and *darshana* [auspicious viewing of the deity]. He is a well-revered hero

as the son of a God-Being, with strict norms of sacred identity and responsibility, since he was born only two months after his father's accident.

The temple is part of the local folk community, with Om Banna's clan responsible for managing the sacred space. But the shrine now follows traditional Hindu practices. A high-caste Brahmin priest has been recently appointed to perform sacred rituals, and so purity is maintained through the practice of caste hierarchy. There is nonetheless participation by all castes, from vendors selling *puja samagri* [ceremonial wares], musicians playing the *nagara* and *dhol* [drums] with singers, and those responsible for housekeeping. These workers all include non-Rajput castes.

This issue of control could reflect regional efforts to support their tradition against wider norms of Hindu hierarchy. There has been a power-struggle between Rajputs and Brahmins in Rajasthan, where ritual power has not been given to the Brahmins (although they have been part of royal and mainstream religious functions). At the Om Banna temple, these rituals followed Brahmanical principles and forms, but Brahmin priests had been absent.

The diversification and spread of a narrative from a village to other parts of Rajasthan reflects the increasing response of people to a power that is perceived to protect and solve problems. The hero-centric identity of a patriarchal Rajput clan is reinforced, yet the avatar identity of Nagneshi Mata brings in additional devotees, especially women. It is an example of a local folk tradition absorbed into the greater tradition of Rajput Hindu ritual and then into the even larger pantheon of Nagneshi Mata and Shakta devotion system within Hinduism (Flueckiger 2015).

The *Bullet Baba* shrine is a new form of religiosity that has emerged in response to a global upsurge in social tensions. Brought on by unprecedented worldwide connection and increased economic consolidation, rural folklife is now faced with unprecedented marginalization and anxiety. This modern veneration is an innovation of faith in a changed socio-cultural landscape (Bradley 2009: 269–270). It illustrates how societies can improve their socio-cultural life by setting up new codes of conduct, not just for individuals but for the community as a whole.

The shrine provides not just a spiritual culture but supports a material one too. By joining it to an existing belief system – Hinduism in this case – it has divine sanction and comes complete with the underlying ethics and morals of an existing sacred system. It is an elegant

process of engagement and a postmodern religion, with the meta-narrative serving as a lived reality (Lyon 2000). The believers establish a personal communication of devotion through the ritual of tying a sacred thread with their requests to fulfil their worldly and other-worldly desires.

In this case, the religious organization (managed by members of the family) emphasize the need for the Rajput community to grow together by introducing new norms that encourage 'local globality.' Among these new values are equality and freedom to pursue knowledge, as well as reverence for family and family-values, as demonstrated by giving up alcohol abuse, reformed gender roles, education for both men and women, and the need to become part of the world at large – all while preserving Rajput identity. A photo-copied manuscript that describes these values is circulated among believers.

What is especially interesting is the desire to advance into the wider socio-cultural world, which is admired and sought, while combating the fears and anxieties of the world by participation in this new belief system. It also reflects counter-cultural reforms, as the local society moves away from old Rajput norms. As a result, they sustain their community identity while transforming and integrating themselves into modern, global systems.

## CONCLUSION

The last century-and-a-half of cumulative growth in transport, communication, mobility and ideas have brought together 'things that do not belong together, nevertheless live side by side' – in regular, inevitable and inescapable contact as part of everyday realities (Beyer 1993: 2). This illustrates sharp contrasts in lives and practices across communities that perpetuate both a sense of dissonance and deepen aspirations in the global reality of local cultural spaces.

Religion and belief are something in which people participate, a way of living in the world, a blend of universal principles rooted in a local community (Beyer 1993; Bradley 2009). Belief provides a vehicle for change during times of social stress by providing a sacred space through which people can seek answers. This explains the embeddedness of religion in the lives of people and its resilience. Local principles reflect cultural and historical conventions (Otto in Smart 1998: 29). Within a spiritual tradition, there can be thousands of religious worlds.

Religion is not fixed but a dynamic web of shared meanings, used in different ways and contexts: addition, deletion, reinterpretation,

elaboration, simplification, purification, syncretism, and even abandonment (Eller 2007; Gardner 1995). Belief in Om Banna and the Bullet Baba reinvents the form, symbols and icons of faith, while continuing the essential creed of established religion. In this case, Om Banna is embedded in the local clan worship of Nagneshi Mata but is also associated with universal *Shakta* belief, one of the three broad Hindu sects (Paden 1998; Flueckiger 2015).

The followers of Om Banna do not identify themselves as at variance with existing Hindu traditions. They maintain their position within the larger socio-political and economic system by incorporating their locally experienced realities with Om Banna into the Hindu mainstream. It can be understood as a local defence against the anxieties of global aspiration, economic progress, and fast-paced life. Om Banna and his Bullet motorcycle came into being in the larger reality of India's anxiety with modernity and mobility.

As anthropologist William Haviland observed: 'when cold reality offers no hope from the daily frustrations of the cultural deterioration and economic deprivation, religion offers the solution' (2007: 717). This is true for the anxiety felt about the speed and loss of lives on highways as well as frustrated aspirations and progress in Rajasthani society. The degree that drivers identify with Om Banna, along with the women who pray for their spouses, is indicative of this trepidation (Eller 2007).

At the Bullet Baba shrine, the greater Hindu gods have given way to icons that are close to current realities and practical issues of life. In outlying geographies around the world, individuals, families and communities are struggling to engage with the need to grow out of customarily undemanding and unhurried lifeways. The need to keep pace with rapid modernization leads to psychological support in religion. Socio-cultural processes continuously 'produce' and 'reproduce' religion, and the *Om Banna* shrine is an example of such 'production' and 'reproduction' of faith within local and global space. The community of the *Ranbanka Rajputs* stand in solidarity in producing this new symbol of belief and spiritual goods, which are distributed across a region in the process of establishing the iconography and meaning for communities to engage with *Om Banna* and his 350 cc Bullet Motorcycle.

## NOTES

[1] Chotaram, Ramji. Conversation with Shweta Sinha Deshpande, Om Banna Shrine, December 2014.

[2] It is difficult to assemble a precise chain of events in the history of Om Banna and his temple, because it is so entwined in local religio-magical beliefs of devotees. During the field work, the site was visited from morning till evening. Conversations were undertaken with devotees, vendors and people in charge of the shrine. While attention was given to details of people's beliefs and behaviour, it was ensured that their private space was maintained. Interviews were carried forth only after explanation of the research project and with their verbal consent to participate. Most of the data was collected via informal discussion since respondents were often not comfortable with a notepad or a recorder. Points and observations were jotted down as soon as conversations were over to avoid memory lapses or interpolations from elsewhere. Photos further aided description of events and spaces.

[3] Singh Rathore, Brijesh [member of the temple committee]. Interview with Shweta Sinha Deshpande, Om Banna Shrine, 25–26 December 2015. The interview was written down and the data is stored with the author.

[4] *Ibid*.

[5] The temple was moved somewhat in 2012–2013, when the highway was widened. Three *Google Earth* images from 2009, 2013 and 2015 reflect this shift. It was originally closer to the accident site and the jal tree, which remains in its original position. The police station and rest house have been in their present places for at least twenty years, according to local people. The police station has two officers on duty to guard against drinking at the temple.

[6] Agarwal, Ramesh. Interview with Shweta Sinha Deshpande, Om Banna Shrine, 26 December 2015. The interview was written down and the data is stored with the author.

[7] In many Indian traditions, there is a strong link between a god and their *vahana* [vehicle] as with Shiva and his Bull or Durga and her Lion (Khin 2018. Panda and Mohanty 2021).

[8] Singh Rathore, Brijesh [member of the temple committee]. Interview with Shweta Sinha Deshpande, Om Banna Shrine, 25–26 December 2015. The interview was written down and the data is stored with the author.

[9] *Ibid*.

[10] Imam meaning leader, could refer to either Ali, the cousin of Muhammad and the 4$^{th}$ Caliph or to Imam Hussain, the son of Ali and grandson of Muhammad.

[11] Vinod [taxi driver]. Interview with Shweta Sinha Deshpande, Om Banna Shrine, 26 December 2015. The interview was written down and the data is stored with the interviewer.

[12] Singh, Baljit (Sikh taxi driver). Interview with Shweta Sinha Deshpande, Om Bann Shrine, and 26 December 2015. The interview was written down and the data is stored with the author.

[13] Ashish [taxi driver; family name not shared by the respondent]. Interview with Shweta Sinha Deshpande, Om Banna Shrine, 26 December 2015. The interview was written down and the data is stored with the author.

[14] During the study, the experience was of people tying the sacred thread, but not of anyone untying them, though some of the devotees who had come back to the shrine did mention that their pleas had been answered by Om Banna.

[15] While in Jodhpur during the field work, conversations with the female owner of a family-run self-owned apparel boutique catering to women of the upper-class Rajputana clan and tourists mentioned this issue of anomie among Rajput men as did others at the shrine. A member of the organisation that takes care of the shrine, while sharing the code of conduct, also spoke of a lack of purpose among Rajput men in great detail. The Om Banna temple's code of conduct includes duties to a girl child, education of both girl and boy children, avoidance of alcohol or drugs – all needs for a happy family, as principles to be followed for a good life.

[16] Most people interviewed did not yet speak of Om Banna's form being worshipped within the ritual space of the household, which is typical of the Indian folk tradition. Followers engage in buying objects like key chains, bracelets, CDs with devotional songs and calendars, but these are personalised items not established in external ritual spaces.

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