

11-1999

# Images of the Body in the Life and Death of a North Indian Catholic Catechist

Mathew N. Schmalz

*College of the Holy Cross*, [mschmalz@holycross.edu](mailto:mschmalz@holycross.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://crossworks.holycross.edu/rel\\_faculty\\_pub](http://crossworks.holycross.edu/rel_faculty_pub)

 Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Missions and World Christianity Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Schmalz, Mathew N. "Images of the Body in the Life and Death of a North Indian Catholic Catechist." *History of Religions* 39.2 (1999): 177-201.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Religious Studies Department at CrossWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religious Studies Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of CrossWorks.



Images of the Body in the Life and Death of a North Indian Catholic Catechist

Author(s): Mathew N. Schmalz

Source: *History of Religions*, Vol. 39, No. 2, Christianity in India (Nov., 1999), pp. 177-201

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3176392>

Accessed: 25-07-2015 15:34 UTC

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *History of Religions*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

*Mathew N. Schmalz*

IMAGES OF THE BODY  
IN THE LIFE AND  
DEATH OF A NORTH  
INDIAN CATHOLIC  
CATECHIST

I. A WHITE CLOTH

In the North Indian diocese of Varanasi the priest leading the charismatic retreat motioned for Ghūrā Master to be brought to the stage. Ghūrā Master's head was shrouded by a long white cloth, and his eyes were covered by dark glasses, which were necessary not only to protect him from the blazing heat but to shield him from the curious gaze of people in the crowd. Ghūrā Master was led to the microphone mounted on the podium and then he began his testimony with his Hindī deep and strong.

Ghūrā Master introduced himself by saying that he was a member of the caste that both Hindus and Muslims despised: a Camār, an untouchable

Names of living persons who appear in this article have been changed to protect their anonymity. Translations of Ghūrā Master's songs are my own and are based on transcriptions of my tape-recorded interviews with him. Quotations attributed to Ghūrā Master in the article also derive from my interviews with him. This article draws from research presented in my doctoral thesis, "A Space for Redemption: Catholic Tactics in Hindu North India" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1998). Fieldwork was conducted between January 1995 and May 1996 and was supported by grants from the United States Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad Program (Fulbright-Hays) and the American Institute of Indian Studies (AIS). I would like to thank Dr. P. J. Lavakare of the United States Educational Foundation in India and Dr. Pradeep Mehendiratta of AIS for their generous assistance. I would also like to acknowledge the guidance of Dr. K. N. Mishra of Banaras Hindu University as well as the patient translation assistance of Dr. M. R. Pandey. In the United States, I would like to thank the following scholars for their guidance throughout my research and writing: Professors Wendy Doniger and Frank Reynolds of the University of Chicago and Professor Francis X. Clooney, S.J., of Boston College. I would also like to thank Professor David Lorenzen of El Colegio de Mexico, Professor Eleanor Zelliot of Carleton College, and Dr. Linda Hess for reading this article in its various stages. Of course, I alone remain responsible for any errors of fact, interpretation, or translation. Finally, thanks to Mrs. Krissy, Maxi, and Jude.

tanner and field laborer. In his youth, he joined the communists who were fighting for the poor and oppressed. But he eventually met a priest who told him that if he truly wanted to defend the poor, he must do so peacefully and renounce violence. Ghūrā Master then became a Catholic Christian and worked to spread the gospel. He soon earned the title “Master” in recognition of his position as a catechist and teacher of Catholic belief. He recalled how much the people of his village loved him and held him in such high esteem that they elected him headman, or *pradhān*. But when he won reelection by a wide margin, the village’s wealthy landowners began to grow concerned. Ghūrā Master then paused and recounted how he was sleeping outdoors one night five years earlier only to awake screaming in agony. The landowners, with members of “his own people,” had conspired against him and poured acid over his body, leaving him blind and disfigured. When Ghūrā Master said this, a great cry went up from the audience and many women raised their hands in charismatic style and began to pray in tongues. To many of them, the story of an untouchable leader being brought down by the landowners was all too familiar. As the cacophony of glossolalia rose from the crowd, Ghūrā Master also opened the palms of his hands and raised them to the sky. He then proclaimed that he had forgiven his attackers and that even in his blindness he understood how God is an “ocean of mercy” who fulfills all desires.

Ghūrā Master says he wears a cloth to cover his face in order to protect himself from the “hatred” of society. Indeed, some understand his untouchable body as defiling while others see his scars as marks of his own depravity. But Ghūrā Master is also aware of how his body has become emblematic of an idealized Christian narrative of redemption. Indeed, an article about Ghūrā Master’s talk appears in a Catholic newspaper under the title “The Acid That Could Not Burn the Soul.”<sup>1</sup> In reporting Ghūrā Master’s testimony, the article implied that there was another reality in which the physical marks of suffering point to the possibility of salvation. Of course, Ghūrā Master himself quite consciously draws on Christian narrative tropes by identifying his irenic response to the acid attack with the crucified Jesus who forgave his executioners. Ghūrā Master’s body thus becomes a locus of contestation between competing understandings of the body’s significance as a social and religious symbol.

Ghūrā Master did not live to hear the stories of violence against Indian Christians that gained international attention in the early months of 1999.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sri Ghūrā Paul, “Vah Tejāb jo Ātmā ko Jalā nā Sākī,” *Vacan Sudhā* (Varanasi: Divine Printers, 1995), p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> See Tunku Varadarajan, “Deadly Zeal in India,” *New York Times* (January 11, 1999); Celia W. Dugger, “Attacks on Christians Unsettle Rural India,” *New York Times* (January 23, 1999), “47 Suspected Militants in India Charged in Missionary’s Death,” *New York Times* (January 25, 1999), and “India’s Christians: A Double Standard,” *New York Times* (February 19, 1999).

But as a victim of violence himself, Ghūrā Master was quite aware of the complex resonances elicited by the violent disfigurement of the still-living body. To explore the implications of such violence, this article will specifically examine the tactics of representing and interpreting the body in the life and death of Ghūrā Master, the communist activist and Catholic catechist. Beginning with Ghūrā Master's life as he related it to me, we will see how he portrays himself as a courageous political leader by emphasizing his own bodily power. But in the aftermath of the attack against him, his body becomes a symbolic pivot not only for the conflict between untouchable Christians and high-caste landowners but also for the divisions within the Catholic community itself. In the context of these struggles, Ghūrā Master sings songs of the *nirguni* poet Kabīr to deny prevailing social values while simultaneously relating Kabīr's vision to Christian understandings of redemption. In so doing, Ghūrā Master revalues the meaning of his own body by imaginatively washing clean the stains of untouchability and sin. Yet this tactical interpretation of the body is finally turned against Catholicism as Ghūrā Master uses images of the body prevalent within North Indian culture to launch a fierce critique of the profligate body of Catholicism and the hypocrisy of its religious life. To consider images of the body in Ghūrā Master's life then is to consider the society in which Christianity, untouchability, and violence have become intimately linked.

I will argue that precisely because Ghūrā Master's body evokes multiple resonances, its meaning becomes subject to competing tactics of interpretation. In this most crucial sense, examining the images of Ghūrā Master's body touches on broad themes in contemporary academic discourse surrounding the body and its relation to society. Yet in considering the nexus between the body and society in Ghūrā Master's life, it is important not to reduce Ghūrā Master the person to a passive emblem of social and religious struggle. Ghūrā Master has a voice, and it is a voice that often sings of the body through the symbol of the cloth—the white cloth of his turban, the dirty cloth that covers his scarred face, and the thinly woven cloth of his body that waits to be washed clean. As we will finally see, the cloth of Ghūrā Master's body becomes a shroud, and it is in his death that we can understand his life as a very real and often tragic struggle marked by suffering and abandonment.

## II. A WHITE TURBAN

Ghūrā Master's life begins with the image of the turban, the sign of his status as a political and caste leader. In initially considering his communist activism and eventual conversion to Catholicism, we will see how he presents himself as a bold untouchable leader. Within this portrayal, Ghūrā Master's body assumes a prominent place, and it is the power of his body that will open our discussion of his life and death.

## COMMUNIST AND CATHOLIC

When Ghūrā Master recalls the early years of his life before his conversion to Catholicism, he remembers the filth of life as an untouchable. Around the year 1930, he was born into the untouchable Camār caste in a Hindī- and Bhojpūrī-speaking village about one hundred miles north of Varanasi. He was given the name “Ghūrā Rām” to protect him from the evil eye, since a first name that means “dung heap” would hardly attract the covetous gaze of demons. Living in a colony removed from the main village, his family, like all members of the Camār caste, was prohibited from using the community well and was forced to drink water from the nearby Ganges River. Men could not wear the *dhoti* below their knees and were not allowed other adornments associated with high status. Yet what Ghūrā Master remembers most is the stench of hides that hung over his section of the village. In Ghūrā Master’s youth, many members of the Camār caste still practiced their traditional vocation and removed dead cattle, using the hide to make sandals and often eating the flesh of the animal along with other carrion. Besides leather work, many also labored in the fields at the command of the landowners—often without remuneration of any kind. Theirs was a harsh life well encapsulated by the Bhojpūrī saying, “Only Camārs know the true nature of the autumn heat.”

The 1950s were a period of intense communist activism in eastern Uttar Pradesh. Because he believed that the ruling Congress Party only served the interests of Brahmans and the landowning Bhumihār caste, Ghūrā Rām decided to join the Majdūr or Labor Party, a local subdivision of the Communist Party of India (CPI). Ghūrā Master worked with a small cell of Communist activists who would organize field laborers. Central to their strategy of political action was the use of violence in addition to other forms of resistance: they participated in “land grabs” to divest landlords of their holdings, closed courthouses in protest of government food distribution policies, and confronted local acts of intimidation with violent resistance. As Ghūrā Master recalls, they drew inspiration and tactics from their Brahman communist leader Sarjū Pāṇḍey, who coined the famous slogan, “If someone shows you a staff, you show him a lance.”

In 1968, Ghūrā Rām met a Catholic priest named Father Premrāj, whose mission in the nearby village of Śāntinagar had worked in partnership with local Communist groups during the famines of the mid-1960s. During one meeting, Premrāj told Ghūrā Rām how Jesus washed the feet of his disciples before he was put to death. This affected Ghūrā Rām deeply. Foot washing was one of the traditions of his caste, and all guests who arrived at his house would have their feet washed by his wife and then be given water and jaggery. Because they were Camārs, women would serve as midwives and would have to wash the feet of the high-caste ladies they served, often cleaning up their feces as well. That Jesus would so humble

himself to wash the feet of his disciples meant that the Christian God had truly come to overturn social divisions of distinction and hierarchy. And so Ghūrā Rām converted to Catholicism and chose Paul as his baptismal name. He soon became a catechist and traveled to instruct his fellow Catholics along with organizing his Communist constituency. When he is described as an atheistic Communist who suddenly converted to Catholicism, Ghūrā Master simply says: “I wasn’t against religion, I was simply a Communist and a Catholic.” For him, the passion of Jesus and the sacrifices of his Communist comrades were all part of the same struggle for human liberation.

#### A WHITE TURBAN

If Ghūrā Master understands his conversion to Christianity as a continuation of his struggle against social injustice, then it is the overall theme of power that shapes his life narrative. Most specifically, it is the image of his own robust and powerful body that often becomes the evocative center of his recollections. He recalls how he stood alone when he confronted a local landowner and how he boldly strode up to the chair of the judge to taunt him when he was held in contempt of court. He often humorously remembers local Bengalis trembling before him, since they feared his broad shoulders and the staff he would carry with him on his journeys. But what Ghūrā Master recalls most vividly is the turban he wore as the head of his caste brotherhood. As *chaudhari*, Ghūrā Master would preside at weddings, discipline violators of caste law, and demand a share of the profits from tanning. When he was installed as his caste’s leader, his feet were washed before he was invested with his turban. His stature only grew when in 1980 he became the area’s first untouchable to gain the office of *pradhān*, the headman of the village council. In those days, Ghūrā Master recalls, villagers within a hundred-mile radius would call him comrade. Ghūrā Master’s body was then a proud royal body that stood forth in sharp relief against the background of untouchability and caste struggle.

#### III. THE DIRTY CLOTH

Ghūrā Master had been headman for nearly a decade by the hot night of June 4, 1990. He was sleeping on his rope bed, which he had moved outside from his two-room brick house. Thinking back to that night, Ghūrā Master remembers the light cool breeze blowing off the Ganges as he fell asleep looking at the moon. When he awoke to the searing pain of acid burning his flesh, there was no one home to hear his cries of pain. When he was finally taken to a hospital in Varanasi, his condition was described as a case of “acid burn adhesion” in which his eyelids were bonded closed, fused with the skin bordering his eye sockets. His ears and nose were

severely damaged, with one ear almost entirely burned off and one nostril closed. His lips were badly blistered and his neck, chest, and back terribly scarred. Some would liken his appearance to that of a candle scored by lines of melted wax.

If Ghūrā Master's body had once commanded respect and fear, the attack against him was most certainly intended to elicit a quite different response. But in considering the various interpretations of the acid attack, we find not consensus but contestation over the meaning of the scars marking Ghūrā Master's face and chest. Indeed, Ghūrā Master's blind and disfigured body becomes a symbolic locus for a variety of contending interests and interpretative tactics. Within this context, the scars of Ghūrā Master's body do not constitute some kind of somatic grammar but instead evoke discordant resonances that reflect the power relations of the surrounding social field. Yet for this very reason, the body of Ghūrā Master must be continually constructed by interpretation, just as it was acted on by physical force.

“WHEN RĀM'S ON THEIR LIPS, A KNIFE'S ALONGSIDE”

During his ten years as headman, Ghūrā Master vividly recalls his battle with the landowners. Often he had to go to the local police station to protect constituents who faced arrest and extortion as part of the landowners' efforts to maintain untouchable subordination. In spite of this constant intimidation, Ghūrā Master says he was able to distribute the largesse of his position to the neediest families in his village: he built three paved roads to ensure access to wheat fields and wells, had ten brick homes constructed for the poor, and had fifteen hand pumps installed to increase the supply of drinking water in the area. As Ghūrā Master's support and reputation grew, the landowners feared a local alliance of the untouchable castes solidified by Ghūrā Master's leadership. To forestall this potential insurgency, a downing administrator offered Ghūrā Master a mutually beneficial political alliance. But Ghūrā Master observed, the landowners often “show you a ball of brown sugar and then hit you with a clod of dirt.”

As he was struggling with the landowner, Ghūrā Master's relations with the surrounding Catholic community were becoming strained. The ten Catholic families in Ghūrā Master's village made their living largely through tanning, manual labor, and sharecropping. The local Catholic mission would provide loans to these families so they could begin to earn a livelihood beyond the level of subsistence. According to Ghūrā Master, a Catholic villager named Yesudās had taken out a loan to buy a sewing machine in order to expand his shoe-making business into tailoring. He borrowed Rs 2,000 from the mission's cooperative credit union and refused to pay back the money. Ghūrā Master publicly confronted him on this matter and earned Yesudās's enmity. During this time, Yesudās's aunt had become the mistress of a landowner in the village. When Ghūrā Master



eventually exposed her, he only deepened the resentment of Yesudās's family. Ghūrā Master also had a disagreement with the family living adjacent to him. According to Ghūrā Master, he had always been close to the family and had even arranged the marriage of their son John Masīh. But when he became *pradhān* their amicable relations changed and Masīh's family unsuccessfully resisted Ghūrā Master's efforts to have a road made to the Ganges because it cut across their land. Masīh was quite close to Yesudās, who lived close by in a hut built of mud and thatch.

After returning from the hospital, Ghūrā Master says he learned that there were many hands in the attack against him. According to him, it was Masīh, along with Yesudās's aunt and nephew who actually threw the acid on him, and it was Yesudās who had planned and organized the attack. The land-owning administrator also had a crucial but unspecified role in the plot. But, as he consistently insists, he never gave the name of his attackers to the police because he had forgiven them. Nonetheless, Ghūrā Master remains vigilant since many of the suspects are his own neighbors. When Yesudās and Masīh would visit to exchange pleasantries, Ghūrā Master would comment, "When Rām's on their lips, a knife's alongside."

#### GOD'S HANDWRITING

Ghūrā Master's interpretation of the attack against him is not the only one that exists in his village. Masīh, Ghūrā Master's neighbor and a reputed perpetrator of the attack, presents a much different interpretation of the events leading to Ghūrā Master's downfall. Interestingly, Masīh is quite open about the rumors concerning his involvement and admits quite readily to having been detained by the police for a time. But, Masīh often asks, why should he be the exclusive focus of suspicion—after all, whenever a tyrant is brought down, there must be many hands behind it.

Masīh presents his version of events in explicit contradistinction to Ghūrā Master's portrayal of himself as a noble and courageous untouchable leader. As Masīh explained, Ghūrā Master in fact used his moneys as headman for personal gain. Not only did Ghūrā Master build a water pump on his own property, thus ensuring control of the local water supply, but he also disproportionately distributed resources to women who were open to his sexual advances. Chief among these women was Yesudās's aunt, the very woman whom Ghūrā Master claims he exposed as the mistress of a local landowner. Given the nature of his transgressions, it was only a matter of time before Ghūrā Master would be made to pay for his misdeeds.

Masīh never identifies the human instruments of this harsh form of justice. Instead, for Masīh, what is essential to realize is that the scars and burns marking Ghūrā Master's body are signs ultimately made by a divine hand. When one approaches Masīh's two-room hut, one immediately sees numerous biblical passages written in bright pink paint on the dried mud

walls. For Masīh, the Christian God is a God who writes, who inscribes his will on the world and on the human body. Indeed, members of Masīh's own family bear the markings of God's chastising script: Masīh's grandfather suffered a compound fracture of his wrist in a threshing accident, and Masīh now interprets his grandfather's crippled hand as divine retribution for a hateful nature; Masīh's son lost part of a finger in another accident, but its real cause was the child's disobedience; Masīh, too, bears a scar to remind him of his own misdeeds, for while he was cutting vegetables, his eyes moved toward an attractive young woman and he sliced his index finger down to the bone. If Ghūrā Master presents his injuries as the emblems of caste oppression and the greed of his fellow Catholics, Masīh sees them as a writ of divine justice.

#### AN UNTOUCHABLE BODY

Ghūrā Master and Masīh's interpretations of the attack most immediately arise from internal struggles within the Catholic community. But the acid attack against Ghūrā Master has a broader resonance within a community rent by caste conflict. Arjun Rāi is a landowner whose family lives in Ghūrā Master's village. One day in the company of a friend, he referred to Ghūrā Master as "a real mother fucker." He then explained how members of Ghūrā Master's extended family had planned and carried out the attack in order to protect their wives and daughters from his sexual advances. On hearing this charge of incest, Arjun's companion said, outraged, "That's a *vile* thing to do!" Arjun then spit and said, "That's what he is!" He was making a play on words, for the Hindi word for "vile" (*nic*) also means "low" (*nic*). It was in Ghūrā Master's nature to be vile since he was low—meaning of low caste.

Arjun's comments reflect widely held perceptions of untouchables. There is a saying in eastern Uttar Pradesh that translates simply as "Caste nature never changes, whatever it may be." Caste merely reflects and acknowledges a group's innate characteristics, and untouchables are such for a reason. In the village Ghūrā Master and Arjun call home, an old Bhojpurī saying is repeated quite often: "The Camār jackals are quite clever, they run to a looting and scatter from a beating." To fear, to run, to betray one another is simply in the Camār's nature. Untouchables are not regulated by the duties that bind the higher castes. When they do rise to a level of power, as Ghūrā Master did, they cannot possibly succeed—after all, according to another Bhojpurī proverb, "A leech taken out of the water can't live in the mud." Their sexuality knows no restraint—adultery, incest, and rape are commonplace in high-caste portrayals of untouchable life. According to Arjun, what happened to Ghūrā Master was a simple outcome of caste nature asserting itself. The Camārs devoured the untouchable body of Ghūrā Master like the jackals and carrion eaters they are.

## CONSTRUCTING THE BODY

The tactics of representing and interpreting Ghūrā Master's disfigurement elicit crucial issues in academic considerations of the body. Within the broad field of scholarly reflection on the body's significance, an important theme remains the body as medium that can be disciplined, shaped, or disfigured to convey socially significant meanings.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, there can be no doubt that the acid attack against Ghūrā Master was designed to inscribe a social message on his body. The acid attack is an all-too-frequent form of vengeance in North Indian society and one that is particularly associated with sexual transgression. In a popular Hindi film, for example, a woman avenges herself on the man who raped her by pouring acid over him as he sleeps. Within North Indian Hindu culture, one of the implicit assumptions underlying such an act would be that the appearance of the body represents an "index" to the condition of the soul.<sup>4</sup> A plump and robust body would indicate spiritual health and well-being, while a disfigured or rotting body would be a sign of moral decay.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the burn scars of acid, not so dissimilar to the lesions of leprosy, would then be a much more fitting emblem of sexual debauchery than castration or other similar forms of bodily mutilation. Such a disfiguring punishment also surely befits an untouchable who moves beyond his station in life and proudly shows his face in the company of the higher castes. Blindness, too, has its resonances, for it can be understood within the framework of karma as the result of any number of transgressions. Perhaps pointing to this connection, a tea shop owner near Ghūrā Master's house observed simply, "No, a blind man can never be good."<sup>6</sup>

While it is crucial to understand Ghūrā Master's body as a nexus of social forces, it is also important not to limit its meaning to a single underlying code that is reflexively and consistently deciphered by its would-be interpreters. In his discussion of the nature of symbolism, Dan Sperber argues strongly against such semiological views of symbolism by calling attention to how symbols differ from words in a language. Sperber observes

<sup>3</sup> For general overviews of the body's treatment in academic discourse, see John Blacking, "Towards an Anthropology of the Body," in *The Anthropology of the Body*, ed. John Blacking (London: Academic Press, 1977) pp. 1–28; see also Thomas J. Csordas, "Body as Representation and Being in the World," in *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self*, ed. Thomas J. Csordas (London: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 1–23.

<sup>4</sup> "Index" is the word Jonathan Parry uses to describe the connection between body and soul in contemporary Hinduism. See Jonathan Parry, *Death in Banaras* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 170.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* My comparison of Ghūrā Master's scars to the lesions of leprosy follows Parry's analysis.

<sup>6</sup> If the tea shop owner's comments were based on karmic theory, then it would conform to observations about the use of karma in popular Hinduism as a theory that is often contextually applied along with other understandings of misfortune. On this, see L. A. Babb, "Karma in Popular Hinduism," in *Karma: An Anthropological Inquiry*, ed. Charles F. Keyes and E. Valentine Daniel (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), pp. 163–84.

that not only are symbolic meanings radically underdetermined but that symbols themselves can neither be paraphrased nor confined to a single grammar.<sup>7</sup> Most telling, Sperber maintains that culture in and of itself does not provide an overall algorithm or key for decoding symbolic materials. Certainly, in the case of Ghūrā Master's body, what we find is neither a single grammar that encompasses its meaning nor a code that can be uniformly deciphered. Instead, we have a variety of evocations that his body elicits quite beyond the presumed intent behind the acid attack itself. In certain Christian contexts, such as the charismatic prayer service mentioned earlier, Ghūrā Master's body is likened to the scarred body of the crucified Christ. Not altogether dissimilar to this Christian interpretation are the views of Ghūrā Master's Communist comrades who consider his disfigurement yet another mark in an untouchable history that has always been written in blood. In his home village, however, his disfigurement is often considered to be a reflection of his innate nature as an untouchable, or a divine punishment for his tyranny, or even a sign of the fruits that his karma now demands he reap. Ghūrā Master's body then is not a text with a grammar that can be read or decoded. Instead, it is a symbol that evokes a variety of discordant resonances that reverberate through the surrounding social field.

It is because Ghūrā Master's body cannot be contained within a single framework of meaning that his body itself becomes an object of contestation between a variety of interpretative tactics. Accordingly, the truth reflected in the theories about the attack concerns not what actually happened that night but the perceptions and power relations that structure life in the villages that Ghūrā Master served as Communist leader and Catholic catechist. Immediately apparent are the mirror images that the Catholics and landowners have of one another. Ghūrā Master speaks of a woman carrying on an affair with a landowner in the area while Arjun accuses Ghūrā Master of raping members of his own family. In one view, the landowners are sexually licentious because of the power of their high status while, in another view, untouchables are promiscuous because of their low status. Masīh's version of events highlights the divisions within the Catholic community itself and how Ghūrā Master's own weaknesses led to his downfall. Indeed, Masīh's interpretation of Ghūrā Master's life makes him emblematic of the failed hopes of these untouchables who converted to Catholicism in the hope of moving beyond poverty and caste. Catholicism, then, is intimately connected to the themes of greed, caste, and sexuality that seem to dominate reflection on Ghūrā Master's disfigurement. That these themes manifest themselves so forcefully in the various

<sup>7</sup> Dan Sperber, *Rethinking Symbolism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975). For a helpful discussion and vigorous critique of Sperber's understanding of symbolism, see E. Thomas Lawson and Robert N. McCauley, *Rethinking Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 68–77.

interpretations of the attack against Ghūrā Master shows how much he himself has now become part of a competing series of collective representations. In such an environment, it is perhaps not surprising that interpretative tactics assume a function similar to the violence that was originally used to mark Ghūrā Master's body.

#### A DIRTY CLOTH

Publicly, Ghūrā Master counters the rumors surrounding him by identifying his own suffering with that of Christ on the cross. In this way, Christianity becomes another tactic of interpretation to be deployed in a context of caste and economic struggle. More often than not, however, when he leaves his home, he covers his face with a cloth stained from its repeated use. As we will soon see, the image of the dirty cloth becomes central to Ghūrā Master's effort to revalue his own bodily condition. In an original song Ghūrā Master composed about his situation, he reflects on the constraints that society and his blindness have imposed on him. Yet he also obliquely refers to his baptismal namesake, Paul, who was blind for three days before his conversion brought light back into his eyes. In this sense, perhaps, Ghūrā Master does not understand himself as a martyr but as a sinner in need of redemption:

So now save me God  
 Oh Lord, come sit by me  
 Because the hunter is aiming his arrows at me  
 There's sadness for me on both sides, quickly save my life  
 So now save me God  
 I'm like a fish writhing without water as my life slips away  
 Everyone is laughing  
 After spreading rumor and insult  
 I am a sinner wandering without a path  
 Oh Jesus, come and save me  
 You are great, a great ocean of mercy  
 As you gave Moses  
 Give me the knowledge of the Ten Commandments  
 Show me the ray of light  
 Oh God Jesus, save me  
 Satan has surrounded me by the power of lust, anger, pride, and greed  
 But you alone are the boatman for the boat of Paul.

#### IV. A CLEAN CLOTH

In the aftermath of the attack, Ghūrā Master would spend much of his time alone, sitting on his rope bed while the rest of his family attended to their daily routine. In these hours of solitude, Ghūrā Master would often sing to himself the songs attributed to the great North Indian mystic Kabīr. Kabīr belongs to the *nirgun* tradition, a countertradition to caste Hinduism

that focuses its devotion on a formless God without attributes. Not only do Kabīr's songs, called *bhajans* in Hindī, exist as part of a North Indian tradition of social protest in their denial of caste but they also radically devalue the significance of the phenomenal world. For Ghūrā Master it is here that the image of the cloth appears again, for Kabīr likens the entire body to a thinly woven cloth. By relating his body to the symbol of the cloth, Ghūrā Master reimagines his own bodily experience without the marks of untouchability and sin. Indeed, through a kind of symbolic improvisation Ghūrā Master connects the *nirgun* tradition of North India to the sacramental vision of Catholicism, for it is the water of Christian baptism that finally washes clean the dirty cloth of the human body.

#### A THINLY WOVEN CLOTH

When Ghūrā Master would talk about his specific injuries, his efforts to discern their meaning would often enter obliquely into more general discussions about sexuality and the body. Sexuality, for example, was a constant theme in his recollections of his fellow catechists, for he would often describe them, using the English word, as “characterless” to indicate their loose morals. Sex is indeed dangerous if for no other reason than that it drains a man's vital fluids. Ghūrā Master would often explain to me that a man who has never had sex or ejaculation, including nocturnal emission or “night-fall,” would live forever. Such a person's forehead (*lalāt*) is clear of wrinkles and shines brightly, presumably because semen is often understood to be stored in the head, and, thus, any depletion would be readily apparent in a person's appearance.<sup>8</sup> In making these observations, he would often wonder about the problems that a body presents because it is both so necessary and so dangerous. With characteristic Bhojpuri word play, Ghūrā Master would often explain that the body is not something for *kām*, a word that can mean both work and sexual desire. By this he meant that the body is both useless, for it inevitably declines physically, and also that the body should not be the object of desire, because sexuality more than anything else can lead one astray. This is the dilemma of having a body, for it is used, and indeed must be used, for both work and pleasure. The problem of the body is central to a song attributed to Kabīr that Ghūrā Master often sings:

Why are you saying “Kabīr, Kabīr?”  
Control your body  
Keep the five elements in check

<sup>8</sup> On the theory that semen is stored in the head, see Wendy Doniger, *Women, Androgynes and Other Mythical Beasts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 45–46. On the connection between semen retention and immortality in village culture, see Morris G. Carstairs, *The Twice Born* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967), p. 78.

That's Kabīr  
 Kabīr stands in the marketplace  
 And wishes everyone well  
 Friends with no one  
 Enemies with no one  
 A cloth, soaked in the name of the Lord  
 A thinly woven cloth  
 What is its warp and woof?  
 Of what strand is it woven?  
 A thinly woven cloth  
 The *ingalā* and *pingalā* are its warp and woof  
 The *ingalā* and *pingalā* are its warp and woof  
 Woven with the *śusumna* strand  
 A thinly woven cloth  
 The eight petaled lotus is the wheel  
 Spinning five elements and three strands  
 A thinly woven cloth  
 It takes God ten months  
 And carefully he makes it  
 Men, women, and holy men cover themselves with it  
 They put it on and they dirty it  
 A thinly woven cloth  
 Kabīr puts it on carefully  
 And keeps it just as it was.

This song is probably the most popular of all songs attributed to Kabīr, and the version Ghūrā Master sings is largely in modern Bhojpurī.<sup>9</sup> Because of its contemporary language, it is not surprising that the song does not appear in the three standard collections of Kabīr's verses—the *Bijak*, the *Granthavali*, and the *Adi Granth*—while it is included in most modern Hindī collections of Kabīr.<sup>10</sup> Kabīr here likens the body to a cloth that humans must wear carefully lest it become stained by accretions of karma. Yet it is not simply the physical body of which Kabīr speaks. Instead, the song concerns the subtle body of yogic theory, a mystical body coextensive with the gross body. The *ingalā* and *pingalā* are the two channels (*nadī*) that irrigate the subtle body, crossing the *śusumna nadī* that runs the

<sup>9</sup> For an excellent discussion and translation of this *bhajan*, see David Lorenzen, *Praises to a Formless God: Nirguṇī Texts from North India* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1996), p. 208. Ghūrā Master's version, which I recorded, transcribed, and translated, is slightly different and includes the line "soaked in the name of the Lord," which does not appear in the versions Lorenzen mentions.

<sup>10</sup> See Kabīr, *Bijak*, ed. Bana Scheba (Darabhanga: Kabira Vicora Pracra Sangha, 1989), and *Granthavali*, ed. Syam Sundar Das (Kasi: Nagaripracrini Sabha, 1959). On Kabīr in the *Adi Granth*, see Nirmal Das, *Songs of Kabir in the "Adi Granth"* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1991). Lorenzen has researched the appearances of this most popular *bhajan*. According to him, outside his own translation and in this article, it appears in English in J. Das, ed., *The Kabir Voice* (Surrey, B.C.: Kabir Association of Canada, 1991).



length of the spine. This yogic imagery has a complex symbolism, for the left *ingalā* channel represents the feminine and is associated with the moon and the river Ganges.<sup>11</sup> The right channel, the *pingalā*, is masculine and is connected to heat and the sun.<sup>12</sup> The *śusumna*, however, is neuter and is related to fire and lucidity. The three channels of the subtle body intersect and meet at the base of the spine, in the cave where the serpent Kundalini resides. This intricate weave becomes even more dense as the spinning wheel of the heart combines the five elements of earth (*prīṭvi*), water (*jal*), fire (*āg*, *pāvak*), air (*vāyū*, *samir*), and ether (*ākāś*, *gagan*). These elements then meet with the cosmic qualities of *sāṅkhya* theory: lucidity (*sattva*), darkness (*tamas*), and passion (*rajas*). What emerges, as David Lorenzen observes, is an image appropriate to Kabīr, the weaver saint.<sup>13</sup> The human body, in both its subtle and gross forms, becomes like a thin blanket woven from the metaphysical threads that constitute the very fabric of the universe.

While Ghūrā Master is aware of the metaphysical implications of Kabīr's imagery, he focuses on the physical body in his interpretation of the song. He recognizes that the *ingalā*, *pingalā*, and *śusumna* are the channels of the mystical body that weave through the person as warp, woof, and guiding thread. But when he discusses the symbolism of the cloth, Ghūrā Master relates it not only to the physical body in general but to his experience of his own body. For Ghūrā Master, the cloth of Kabīr's song represents the physical body: the body's pores and wrinkles resemble the fabric of linen, silk, or cotton. When he explains this, Ghūrā Master's fingers often trace the acid scars along his chest. To his touch, the raised and intersecting lines of the burns felt similar to the fold and weave of a cloth. This cloth, however, is not simply woven by the three strands and five elements. In a confusing but interesting conflation of images, Ghūrā Master maintains that there are actually nine elements that make up the person, including greed (*lobh*), anger (*krodh*), agitation (*mad*), and lust (*kām*). Within Kabīr's religious vision these are the four elemental vices that ensnare the person. For Ghūrā Master, however, these emotions are themselves akin to physical elements, like fire or ether, woven into the human person by the breath. Although here he departs from what generally would be recognized as consistent with Kabīr's philosophy, Ghūrā Master's idiosyncratic interpretation of the song does reflect his own bodily experience. Every breath for Ghūrā Master requires effort since his mouth and nose were so severely damaged by the attack. Because the flesh on his neck never healed properly, his head is always tilted

<sup>11</sup> Jean Varenne, *Yoga and the Hindu Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 161.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Lorenzen, p. 208.



down into his chest, making his breathing heavy and labored. It is not surprising to hear Ghūrā Master say that, in the act of breathing, humans become stained by sin because they weave into their bodies the very qualities that lead them astray. Trapped in his body by blindness, which some would say was caused by his desire for sexual pleasure, Ghūrā Master is reminded with every breath that the body is something that must be tamed.

The filth of the human body is intimately related to the filth all humans hold within their thoughts. In another *bhajan* Ghūrā Master sings, Kabīr taunts his audience by asking how the cloth, understood as the subtle body, became stained. The human body is likened to a house with ten doors.<sup>14</sup> Each door represents a body orifice—two eyes, two ears, two nostrils, the mouth, anus, urinary tract, and the “third eye” in the middle of the forehead. Ideally these doors are locked, and there are two guards who stand constantly on watch in the form of wisdom (*budhi*) and discernment (*vivek*). So, how did the cloth become dirty? Did a thief sneak in or did the stain originate from the inside, from the person’s own undisciplined mind? In the previous *bhajan*, Kabīr remarks that the five elements must be controlled. Here the bodily openings are the points of concern. One of the primary goals of Hatha or Kundalini Yoga, to which Kabīr often alludes, is precisely to close the bodily orifices in order to control the vital winds within the body and thus discipline the restless mind.<sup>15</sup> Significantly, when Ghūrā Master began to identify the ten doors on his body, he pointed to his eyes, nostrils, and ears, all of which had been severely damaged and some even closed by the scarring. Within Ghūrā Master’s blindness, then, lies the possibility of transformation since it forces an inward journey of mental discipline. In singing this song, Ghūrā Master is perhaps contemplating how the darkness that he finds so painful also holds the possibility that the cloth, trapped in the physical body, might still become clean and infused with the love of the Lord:

How did the stain get on the cloth?  
 How did the stain get on the cloth?  
 Well, it’s on the peg, inside the house  
 And the cloth covers the peg  
 And there are ten doors to the house  
 And there are locks on all ten of them  
 So how did the stain get on the cloth?  
 How did the stain get on the cloth?  
 And the house has two guards

<sup>14</sup> This is a common image in Kabīr’s poetry. See Brahmajit Gautam, *Kabir Pratik-Kosh* (A concordance of Kabīr’s symbolism) (Dilli: Hindi Pustak Bhavan, 1990), p. 33.

<sup>15</sup> On Hatha or Kundalini Yoga in Kabir, see Charlotte Vaudeville, *Kabir* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 1:132; see also Harzariprasad Dvivedi, *Kabir* (Bombay: Hindī Granth Ratnaker, 1964), pp. 44–52.

Who always stay awake  
 So did a thief sneak in  
 And mark it before he fled?  
 How did the stain get on the cloth?  
 How did the stain get on the cloth?  
 So everyone's tried to clean the cloth  
 And after washing it, they've gone crazy  
 Everyone's tried to clean the cloth  
 And gone crazy after washing it  
 Kabīr says, Listen brother renouncers  
 It's infused with the love of God.

CHRIST THE WASHERMAN

For Kabīr, the cloth of the human body is thinly woven and stained by accretions of karma. For Ghūrā Master, this image of the cloth holds meaning because it resonates within his own bodily experience. Within the interplay of these images and association, Jesus Christ becomes the washerman who cleans the cloth that is the body of his devotee. In an original composition in Bhojpuri, Ghūrā Master reflects on the true riches of Christianity, riches that come from the holy water of baptism:

Our wealth is the holy water of Jesus  
 Someone's wealth is a house  
 Someone's wealth is a granary  
 Someone's wealth is the fruits of the orchards  
 But our wealth is the holy water of Jesus  
 Someone has become rich by theft and tanning  
 And someone has become rich by bribery and hoarding  
 And someone's wealth is the strength of his body  
 And our wealth is the holy water of Jesus  
 And someone has become rich by opening a shop  
 And someone has become rich by renting his home  
 And someone has become rich through factories and workshops  
 But our wealth is the holy water of Jesus  
 So many rich people came to hear the preaching of the Lord  
 And after hearing his preaching  
 They went crazy  
 They went away saying these are people  
 Who have renounced everything  
 But our wealth is the holy water of Jesus  
 To hear the sermon of the Lord, all the disciples came  
 But Paul is caught in the boat of *Ghūrā* the catechist.

It is significant that Ghūrā Master's primary association with Christianity is cleanliness. After his conversion to Christianity, he remembers that members of the higher castes did not refuse to eat with him as before.

Constantly, Ghūrā Master would emphasize how the higher castes believed Christians to be “cleaner” than Camārs. It is unclear to me to what extent the social ostracism of untouchables was relaxed after their conversion to Christianity. When this did happen, it seems to have been largely due to the fact that economic assistance from the church allowed them to abandon occupations such as tanning that were associated with their untouchability. Often, as we have seen, higher castes make no distinction between Catholics and untouchables. What is significant, however, is that Ghūrā Master draws on Christian imagery to reimagine his own identity. The holy water of Jesus not only washed away his sin but, in his view, removed the stain of caste. When Christ died on the cross, he accepted the sinful pollution of humanity on himself. When Christians eat his body, the Eucharist cleanses them by absorbing and transforming the internal filth of their own iniquity. Sin and pollution are thus merged and conflated, related to each other as dharma and karma are connected. In this sense, baptism is not only a sacrament in a Christian sense but a *saṃ-skāra* in a Hindu sense, a ritual act McKim Marriot has likened to a “polishing.”<sup>16</sup> Hence, conversion to Christianity is a social tool, not used so much to lessen the distance from caste Hindus but to imagine an identity no longer connected to untouchability. Seen against the background of his use of Kabīr and the *nirguṇ* tradition, perhaps Ghūrā Master’s Christian imagery is then designed to show the very impossibility of a formless divinity, since if religious vision is to become social vision, it must inevitably be incarnated.

In considering such views, it would be tempting to describe Ghūrā Master’s religious views as syncretic—a blending of two religious traditions into a new religious vision. But instead of a merging of *saguṇ* Catholicism with North Indian *nirguṇ bhakti*, what Ghūrā Master does is use both tactically around a symbolic pivot. For Ghūrā Master, the body is a thinly woven cloth, a cloth that recalls other images of the cloth in his life, whether the turban that once marked his status or the cloth that covers his scarred face. These images of the cloth are then symbolically related to Christian baptismal imagery. Drawing on Sperber once again, we could say that in confronting his blindness and disfigurement, Ghūrā Master follows a complex and idiosyncratic string of symbolic associations to reimagine his own bodily condition. Because this process is improvisational, Ghūrā Master does not systematically relate the body-cosmology of Kabīr to Christian beliefs in the afterlife or discuss underlying connections between *saguṇ* and *nirguṇ bhakti*. Instead, he probes different religious images according to his relation to the social field and his own

<sup>16</sup> On this description, see McKim Marriot, “Constructing an Indian Ethnosociology,” in her *India through Hindu Categories* (Delhi: Institute for Economic Growth, 1990), p. 17.

bodily consciousness. The very fact that his body does not have a fixed place within a particular grammar of perception allows, or even necessitates, such a fluid process of symbolic evocation and association. That his overall religious vision is adaptable and pragmatic in no way makes it less Christian, Ghūrā Master would often assert. To explain what he meant, he would employ yet another proverb: “Mix with all, meet with all, and take the name from all, but live in your own village.” To this he would add, “We’re Christians, after all.” In the end, as long as you know where you live and where you are going, it does not matter where you stop along the way.

#### V. A THINLY WOVEN SHROUD

In light of the foregoing discussion, it would be tempting to consider Catholicism as a kind of random element that Ghūrā Master employs not only to destabilize conventional images of his own body but also to reimagine a new identity for himself beyond the strictures of caste and disability. But Catholicism does not exist as an autonomous entity somehow disengaged from the social and economic struggles that have so characterized Ghūrā Master’s life. Instead, Catholicism is very much a part of the social field in which its Christian imagery is deployed. In what follows, we will consider how Ghūrā Master once again reimagines his own body, this time in contradistinction to the avaricious and prideful “heat” of the body of Catholicism. Such a final turn of body imagery emphasizes that the body cannot be reduced to an inert status in which its meaning is statically circumscribed by discourse or violence. Instead, it is the very fluidity of the body’s meaning that invites efforts to create or control it. But for Ghūrā Master, this contested interplay of association and interpretation finally ends with his death and his vision of his body covered by a thinly woven shroud.

#### THE PROFLIGATE BODY OF CATHOLICISM

When Ghūrā Master sings the songs of Kabīr, he takes part in a broad North Indian tradition of social protest. Just as the songs of Kabīr often deny the overall importance of the phenomenal world, so, too, do they treat specific claims to holiness with suspicion. As an untouchable Camār, Ghūrā Master would sing *nirguṇ bhajans* to ridicule Brahmanical claims of status and rank. While this is the explicit focus of a song attributed to Kabīr, for Ghūrā Master its resonance extends to the Roman Catholic priesthood and its pretenses to sanctity:

Devotees of God and religious books are stupid fools  
 Devotees of God and religious books are stupid fools  
 When whores wear fine clothes

Bordered with fine embroidery  
 While noble women who fast  
 Can't even get rags  
 Who's fine and who's crude?  
 Pimps eat fine food and sweets  
 Along with a nice ball of cannabis  
 But for holy men, a handful of grain is hard to get  
 They can't even fill their jugs with water  
 But all the yogis, renouncers, and ascetics  
 Wear their loincloths loose  
 They don't know the important mantras  
 In vain their locks grow long  
 If everyone's got to go naked  
 Then who's great and who's small?  
 Kabir says, Listen brother renouncers  
 A whip's going to come down on your head.

When Ghūrā Master sings this *bhajan* from Kabīr, he reflects not only on the deceptions of appearance but also on the specific hypocrisy of those who proclaim themselves to be “holy men.” When Catholic priests first arrived in Ghūrā Master’s village in the 1950s, they were French Canadian Capuchins. They gave their newly converted Catholics milk, butter, and grain along with clothes to cover their bodies. The initial South Indian priests who followed them continued distributing these material goods. But the later priests decided that such distributions were merely creating a debilitating cycle of dependence, and so the mission turned away Catholics who sought food and clothing for their families. As Ghūrā Master remembers, one priest was beaten bloody by Catholics who demanded the goods they considered rightfully theirs. While this reversal was dismaying enough for Ghūrā Master, his resentment only grew when the church refused to explore the possibility that an operation could restore his eyesight. In Ghūrā Master’s view, the Catholic Church had promised to nurture and transform the untouchable body, but now it had assumed the demeanor displayed by the landowners at the height of their powers. But Ghūrā Master would also add, this reversal should perhaps come as no surprise because “the elephant has one set of ivories for show and another for eating.”<sup>17</sup>

This gap between appearance and reality is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the way the priests and nuns treat their own bodies. When the South Indian priests and nuns first came in the 1960s, they clothed themselves in striking habits of black. Ghūrā felt this was appropriate, not only because the nuns were demurely covered but also because the attire

<sup>17</sup> I would like to thank Linda Hess for suggesting “ivories” instead of the more literal “teeth.”

of the priests was clearly foreign and thus pointed to a reality beyond the local strictures of caste. But strangely, the Catholic Church became “Indianized”—priests and nuns began to wear saffron-colored robes and saris. But although the priests assumed the posture of renunciants, they still rode motorcycles with their hair finely coifed. But what was worse was that they later abandoned vegetarianism. Now the priests and nuns live together in the same mission compound and eat meat to celebrate the feast days of their patron saints. The dangerous combination of male-female cohabitation, meat eating, and sexuality was made clear by Ghūrā Master when he explained that meat eating was appropriate for married couples but not for celibates because meat heats the body and increases sexual desire. According to Ghūrā Master, meat would be appropriate for foreign priests who come from a cold climate and need the heat that meat would provide. But what is most certainly not appropriate is for Indian renunciants to eat meat because they must remain cool and take care lest their bodily humors go out of balance. Indeed, Ghūrā Master would argue that the priests and nuns should limit themselves to a diet of milk and fruit since anything more than this would dangerously heat their bodies. The body of the institutional church is profligate, not “fat” in its luxury but “hot” in its pride and avarice. By contrast, the body of Ghūrā Master exists in a cooling darkness.

Ghūrā Master’s criticisms derive from a broad tradition of Hindu reflections on meat eating and vegetarianism. On one end of the dietary spectrum, meat is appropriate for kings and warriors, whose duty demands that they rule and fight. On the other end of the spectrum, eating certain kinds of meat, especially bovine flesh and carrion, marks others as outcasts. What is most significant in Ghūrā Master’s evaluation of the diet of the priests and nuns is its relation to *ayurvedic* medicine. The body in this conception has a pervading unctuousness; there is no anatomy, only channels through which vital fluids pass.<sup>18</sup> Vegetables and other cooling foods are *sattva*, explicitly associated with the strand, or *guna*, of lucidity and calmness.<sup>19</sup> But instead of adhering to a diet appropriate to renunciants, the priests and nuns consume meat and alcohol, substances respectively associated with *rajas* and *tamas*, passion and darkness. Thus there is a reciprocal interplay between the body’s diet and its spiritual or moral disposition: the corruption and hypocrisy of Catholicism is both caused by and reflected in particular bodily practices. Along with the contested

<sup>18</sup> Francis Zimmerman, “Remarks on Conceptions of the Body in *Ayurvedic* Medicine,” *South Asia Digest of Regional Writing* 8 (1979): 19–20. Zimmerman translates the Sanskrit *snehatva* as “unctuousness.”

<sup>19</sup> In making this observation I am drawing on an excellent discussion of food and its relation to the *gunas* found in Joseph S. Alter, *The Wrestler’s Body* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 119–29.

images of Ghūrā Master's body, images of the body of Catholicism also have their place, for they, too, arise from a ferment of social struggle.

A THINLY WOVEN SHROUD

In criticizing the profligate body of Catholicism, Ghūrā Master draws on body images quite different from those he employs when he reimagines his own bodily experience. In the context of the various suspicions and rumors spread in the wake of the acid attack, Ghūrā Master was particularly concerned to separate his physical appearance from theories connecting bodily appearance to spiritual and moral disposition. Sin, after all, stains the bodily cloth of all human beings. When Ghūrā Master sings Kabīr's *bhajan* that speaks of the three strands of existence, Ghūrā Master does not associate this metaphysic with the innate characteristics attributed to caste or *varna*. In fact, for Ghūrā Master, blindness is not a manifestation of his *tamas*, or darkness, or an untouchable but a reflection of his coolness. Instead of a consistent framework for understanding the body's meaning, what we find instead are tactics of interpreting the body as symbolic associations—all shaped by the fluid but uneven interplay between culture, society, and the idiosyncrasies of human memory and intent. The images of the body, employed by Ghūrā Master or deployed against him, are as shifting as the power relations with which they are inextricably linked.

If the competing images surrounding Ghūrā Master's body tell us anything, then they tell us that the body is not simply an inert medium for meaning. Certainly, the body does exist within a nexus of social forces. But as the Australian anthropologist Michael Jackson observes, when the body is seen as simply a thing on to which social patterns are projected, there emerges a Cartesian split between the knowing subject and the passive body.<sup>20</sup> Within this framework, the body often becomes understood as the object of purely mental operations or as a vehicle for expressing "a reified social rationality."<sup>21</sup> But as shown by the images of the body in the life of Ghūrā Master, the meaning of the body at the very least cannot be translated to a single set of social codes. Instead, there are a variety of ways by which the body is constructed—through violence, through the symbolic associations of religious imagination, or through an understanding of biological properties. But the body is not simply a material entity that exists to be acted on. Instead, the body is living, and embodiment itself is a lived reality.<sup>22</sup> The body moves, adapts, changes, and resists. It is

<sup>20</sup> Michael Jackson, "Knowledge of the Body," *Man*, n.s., 18 (1983): 329.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Here I am following an observation made by Jackson. Jackson himself is also clearly drawing on the phenomenology of M. Merleau Ponty.



for this very reason that the body so often becomes a locus of contestation in order to change or expand the parameters of its existence. Certainly, the images that Ghūrā Master uses to describe his body are as much a result of his own experience of embodiment as they are an active effort to subordinate or reimagine his own physical existence. Of course, the application of disfiguring violence to his body must have also been a response to the lived and changing reality of the untouchable body.

If we speak of embodiment as a lived reality then, for Ghūrā Master, it was a lived reality of pain. There were the rumors and innuendo surrounding the attack and there was the physical pain from skin that would easily blister and crack. Perhaps most painful of all was the fact that he could still sense light in one eye. Many times he asked the church to provide an operation, and each time he was refused. Then in 1996, one priest promised to bear the expenses if an operation could provide Ghūrā Master partial sight in his left eye. Yet when Ghūrā Master was examined by a specialist, it was clear that nothing could be done to alleviate his blindness. In the following months, Ghūrā Master's wife and daughter-in-law died, and his grandchild was put out of the family for stealing. Ghūrā Master's son, who had refused to speak with him since the acid attack, left home to find work. With no one to take care of him, Ghūrā Master's health deteriorated, and finally, he died. At his funeral, one of his fellow catechists gave the oration and praised Ghūrā Master as a great man while castigating Catholics of his village for blinding Ghūrā Master with acid. But the priest who said the mass made it clear that the words of the catechist fell on deaf ears, and the service itself seemed subdued and perfunctory. Ghūrā Master was then covered with a shroud and buried in a plot marked only by a cross of dried mud made on the raised earth covering his grave.

#### ANTI-UNTOUCHABLE VIOLENCE

If Ghūrā Master had lived to hear the stories of recent anti-Christian violence in India, he would not have been surprised. After all, he would surely mention, such violence claimed his own eyesight. Yet he might disagree with some of the prevailing interpretations of this violence as expressed in the Indian press. Commentaries on anti-Christian violence have linked it to resurgent Hindu nationalism, to allegations of coerced conversion and even to the rise of the Catholic Sonia Gandhi to political prominence.<sup>23</sup> To these assertions, Ghūrā Master might remark that the homes and churches of wealthy Catholics remain untouched in states such as Kerala, Goa, or Tamil Nadu where the Church has steadily accrued power

<sup>23</sup> See Samar Halarnkar and Uday Mahurkar, "Burning the Cross," *India Today International* (January 11, 1999); and Uday Mahurkar and Sheela Raval, "Politics by Other Means," *India Today International* (January 25, 1999).



for centuries. Surely, Ghūrā Master would argue, the issue of anti-Christian violence is more complex than the name suggests.

Ghūrā Master would understand violence against Christians as yet another manifestation of caste violence, waged by the landowners against the poor. Violence against Christian untouchables in Gujarat becomes anti-Christian violence and makes its way into the *New York Times*.<sup>24</sup> The fear that often motivates such violence is not a hatred of Christianity per se but a fear of how the opportunity to become Christian might change local relations of power. Against this background, Ghūrā Master might find it painfully ironic that in his own case his identity as a Catholic Christian was only acknowledged by the Catholics themselves and in a context that would seem to reveal the underlying greed and opportunism of these Catholic converts from untouchability. While Ghūrā Master might link violence against Christian untouchables to an overarching Catholic narrative of crucifixion and redemption, he would hasten to emphasize that Christianity has inserted itself into a social context shaped by caste, poverty, and oppression. In such an environment, religiosity becomes intimately related to issues of subordination and resistance. These, of course, are the themes he emphasizes in his own personal narrative. There are those who would say that to make Ghūrā Master an emblem of religious or social struggle is to ignore how his own personal failings led to his downfall. But whatever perspective one chooses, it is clear that Ghūrā Master's body was always an untouchable body.

#### CHRISTIAN DREAMS

For Ghūrā Master, singing songs was the way he attempted to recreate his lived reality. Through these songs, whether his original Bhojpurī compositions or the *bhajans* of Kabīr, he wove his bodily experience into the changing symbolism of the cloth. It was the white cloth of his turban that signified his power, and it was a stained cloth that shielded his scarred face. It was the dirty cloth that represented the sinful flesh in Ghūrā Master's interpretations of the songs of Kabīr, and it was Christ who cleaned this cloth with the purifying water of baptism. Finally, it was a thinly woven shroud that covered Ghūrā Master at his death.

In a song that Ghūrā Master would often sing, the image of the cloth appears again but this time in relation not only to the living body but also to the life after death. The song speaks of the time when a bride must leave her natal home to be with her husband. This image evokes the inevitability

<sup>24</sup> To be fair, it is important to mention that the *New York Times* correspondent Celia W. Dugger has also written articles specifically addressing untouchability; most recently, see Celia W. Dugger, "In India, Lower-Caste Women Turn Village Rule Upside Down," *New York Times* (May 3, 1999).

of death; for just as a bride has no choice but to leave her parents' home, so humans have no choice but to die. The song then records the bride's lament since her dirty bridal sari means that she has already lost her virginity. So, too, does the individual worry about the stains on his body and soul that would make it difficult for him even to recognize his beloved, who awaits him beyond death. And so both the bride and the dying soul fear the journey they both know they must take. The white cloth, the veil, and the shroud, then, are all symbolically linked in the contemplation of death. For Ghūrā Master, especially poignant were the song's introductory lines. The devotee's love for the guru is likened to a partridge's love of the moon. In North Indian folklore, the partridge is said to live on moonbeams and to eat fire. The partridge gazes continually at the moon, hoping that it will fall so he can eat it. With such desire, all devotees must look at the true guru as they travel the long distance to meet him. Recall that the last image Ghūrā Master saw with his eyes was the moon. In commenting on the song, Ghūrā Master would often say that with all the desire of a partridge gazing at the moon, he craved to see the face of Jesus. He did not know whether he would see his transfigured Lord beyond the veil of death, and so he prayed that it would be in the light, before his open eyes:

The image of the guru is like the moon  
 The devotee's eye is like the partridge  
 The devotee's eye is like the partridge  
 Gazing at the guru  
 Gazing at the guru  
 Oh, I'm not going to my husband's house  
 My veil is dirty  
 Oh, I'm not going to my husband's house  
 My veil is dirty  
 Seven miles of sand and twelve miles of darkness  
 Three hundred and sixty miles covered by water  
 I can't do it  
 Oh, I'm not going to my husband's house  
 My veil is dirty  
 What will my beloved be like?  
 What about his home?  
 How will I recognize my darling?  
 I'm hungry for virtue  
 Because my veil is dirty  
 I'm not going to my husband's house  
 All around the neighborhood  
 They're packing my things from my father's house  
 Bundling them up for my in-laws  
 Oh, but I'm hungry for virtue  
 Because my veil is dirty

I'm not going to my husband's house  
Yes, but some day everyone's got to go to the beloved's abode  
One day everyone's got to go to the beloved's abode  
Kabir says there are seven days in the week  
And on one of those days, it's sure to happen  
Oh, but my veil is dirty.

*The College of the Holy Cross*