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**The City as Secular Space
and Religious Territory**
Accommodating Religious Activism
in Urban India

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The City as Secular Space and Religious Territory

Accommodating Religious Activism in Urban India

Introduction

This [Temple] is an illegal construction, a typical case of land-grabbing. People do this to get power and earn money. This is not the right type of temple [...] 99% of the temples are constructed illegally [...]. The people don't build houses but temples because they know that in this case no one can do anything against it and they can simultaneously earn money with it. Behind the shrine they can build their house in peace. All this happens because people are uneducated.¹

This statement by a top bureaucrat in the Bhopal administration summarises a widely felt sentiment among urban planners in India. For many bureaucrats, temples are nuisances, traffic obstructions, acts of land-grabbing, or means of political assertion that contribute to inter-religious tensions. By contrast, builders, trustees or worshippers defend temples as spaces of divine manifestation, as responding to religious needs and providing space for religious festivals and community activity. In this article, I use the case study of the establishment of a controversial goddess temple in Bhopal to shed light on a fundamental rift between two ideal-type approaches to the city – as a secular place and as religious territory. This is an abiding theme of my research on urban temples, which was undertaken in Bhopal, the capital city of the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, over a total of twenty months between 1995 and 2001.²

Indians appreciate the notion of cities as planned places, the organisation of which is influenced by multiple concepts, systems and institutions, such as the city's master plan, a capitalist land market, building by-laws, or urban

1 Employee of Bhopal's City Administration, Interview, November 6, 1996.

2 This paper is based on material collected over a total of 20 months of immersive fieldwork in the Indian city of Bhopal (Madhya Pradesh) in the period between 1995 and 2001. During research I mapped informal temples in the city of Bhopal, and researched the history of and ritual activity at two major temples, the Durga Temple at Peer Gate and the Kali Temple at Pul Pukha. I spoke to and formally interviewed members of the temple committees, regular visitors, religious authorities, people from the surrounding neighbourhoods, members of the police force and the administration, as well as politicians and political activists.

infrastructure. However, many also insist that in addition to these human institutions, gods and goddesses have agency and impose their own will on the city. In dense neighbourhoods, the idea that humans must satisfy the desire of divine agents leads to tensions that are hard to resolve.

By taking a close look at the coexistence of a planning perspective and a spiritual reading of the city, this paper addresses a topic that has only recently begun to attract some attention from scholars of urban public religion.³ In India, the continuously growing strength of Hindu nationalist tendencies has prompted researchers to explore in much detail the multiple intersections between politics and religion, and how these shape urban cohabitation.⁴ Less explored is the critical conflict between bureaucratic rationality and public expression of belief in divine agency that occurs in conflicts over shrines, mazars, temples, mosques, and occasionally churches. The city administration's position vis-à-vis informal/illegal religious sites is informed by complex reasoning, and may be an expression of antipathy to or sympathy for particular political projects or organisations.⁵ In this article I will focus on concerns about urban spatial order and the response of bureaucrats to the provocation of mushrooming urban sites of worship.⁶ A city littered with informally constructed sites of worship upsets notions of modernist urban planning, because the sites contribute to the widespread problem of unregulated urban growth,⁷ and more specifically, are visible

3 José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

4 Edward Anderson and Arkotong Longkumer, "'Neo-Hindutva': evolving forms, spaces, and expressions of Hindu nationalism," *Contemporary South Asia* 26, no. 4 (2018); Julia M. Eckert, *The Charisma of Direct Action: Power, Politics, and the Shiv Sena* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Thomas Blom Hansen, *Urban Violence in India: Identity Politics, 'Mumbai', and the Postcolonial City* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001); Ursula Rao, "'Inter-publics' Hindu Mobilization beyond the Bourgeois Public Sphere," *Religion & Society* 2, no. 1 (2011).

5 Ursula Rao, "Eine Frage des Glaubens: 'Illegale' Tempel und der Kampf um die Gestaltung des urbanen Raums in Indien," *Sociologus* 50, no. 2 (2000); Ursula Rao, *Negotiating the Divine: Temple Religion and Temple Politics in Contemporary Urban India* (Delhi: Manohar, 2003); Ursula Rao, "Partition in Contemporary Struggles over Religious Spaces in Bhopal," in *The Partition Motif in Contemporary Conflicts*, ed. Smita Tewari Jassal and Eyal Ben-Ari (Delhi: Sage, 2007).

6 The majority of religious buildings in India are constructed gradually without formal permission. In the eyes of the administration, this makes them illegal constructions, while worshippers would see them as legitimate and thus necessary and justified. In a religious reading of the city, the legal/illegal dichotomy does not appear to be a useful way of judging the religious sites, since they are associated with the will of non-human actors.

7 Gururaja Budhya and Solomon Benjamin, "The Politics of Sustainable Cities: The

evidence of belief in divine intervention. To urban planners, the city is structured by human intention, while religiously attuned people insist that the agency of gods and goddesses must be taken into account alongside human needs when organising urban neighbourhoods. By analysing the social negotiations that shape compromises between these two approaches, this paper characterises a style of governance that defends the principle of secularism by carving out spaces of exceptions. In these spaces of exception, a human-centred understanding of territory is partly suspended to allow for the construction of buildings that, according to believers, emerge in direct response to divine intervention.

To allow for an in-depth understanding of the contextual embedding of such negotiation, I chose a case study of the contentious establishment of Bhopal's famous temple to the Hindu Goddess Durga. My discussion of this case illustrates the practices and procedures the administration adopted to arbitrate in the dispute surrounding the temple.⁸ In this dispute, the city administration carefully moved back and forth between religious and secular discourse, maintaining a fragile distinction between religion and non-religion, while interlacing them in practice. The Durga Temple is located at Peer Gate, one of the entrance gates to the famous grid-shaped old city of Bhopal, which serves as a bazaar area and is also the location of the Jama Masjid (Friday Mosque). In this densely populated part of Bhopal, land is scarce and highly contested. Every major building activity is noticed and easily read as a social assertion, whether it be by a rich business family, a caste group or a religious community. This applies in particular to new sites of worship, which in a multi-religious society easily fuel tensions between Hindus, Muslims and the administration, because what to some is use of a valued site of worship appears to others as an act

Case of Bengare, Mangalore in Coastal India," *Environment and Urbanization* 12, no. 2 (2000); Ranu Desai and Romola Sanyal, eds., *Urbanizing Citizenship: Contested Spaces in Indian Cities* (Delhi: Sage, 2012); Janaki Nair, *The Promise of the Metropolis: Bangalore's Twentieth Century* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005).

8 The conflict at Bhopal's Peer Gate concerns questions of religious devotion and political Hinduism. Here I highlight the devotional aspect. For a detailed discussion of the political dimension of the controversy, see Rao, "Partition in Contemporary Struggles." For a discussion of the relation between spiritual inclination and Hindu nationalism, see Rao, "Inter-publics' Hindu Mobilization."

of aggression against other religious groups, a manifestation of irrational belief, or a tactical move to encroach on public land.



Durga Temple, Peer Gate Crossing, Bhopal

The Durga temple is an example of such complex multi-directional negotiations. From the beginning, this Hindu temple's anti-Muslim bias was apparent from the attitude of the members of its founding committee who openly expressed their desire to marginalise Muslims in the inner city of Bhopal. Equally, the successful establishment and formal installation of this embattled temple would have been impossible without the activism of a large group of pious individuals who gathered spontaneously at Peer Gate to pray to the Goddess Durga. These people, who were not part of the core group investing in the temple, rallied behind the construction of the establishment of an auspicious place of worship. To prevent riots or violent clashes between believers and the police, or Hindus and Muslims, the city administration had to carefully arbitrate in the dispute over the temple, taking into consideration both its own interest in implementing the law and activities associated with a Hindu pantheon. The city administration was aware that for devout Hindus the world is populated with non-human agents who are experienced in acting in this world and bestowing blessings on faithful devotees, while punishing evil-doers. To command respect and arbitrate effectively, the city administration had to take seriously this understanding of the

world, while insisting that they – and not a goddess – have the authority to allocate land for a temple. To work towards a resolution, bureaucrats accounted for and accommodated religious belief within their planning, and suspended their secular reading of urban space for a specific time and place.

I propose an analytical differentiation between secularism as an *idea* and secularism as a *practice*. Secularism as an idea makes a conceptual distinction between religion and non-religion when looking at society; secularism as a practice is a technique of rule for intervening in society and negotiating the relationship between the religious and non-religious. In this paper, my focus is on secularism as a practice. *I am not asking what secularism is, but how it is done.*

While in India, the state is separate from religious institutions and grants religious freedom, there are multiple examples of the state directly intervening in religious matters or arbitrating between religious groups. While the Indian notion of secularism as ‘equal respect for all religions’ has been debated extensively in political philosophy,⁹ there is much less research on the operationalising of the concept of secularism on the ground, beyond a few select examples, such as the notorious Ajodhya controversy¹⁰ or the contentious debates about the existence of separate civil laws.

In these debates the potential bias of state institutions in favour of one religious community often figures prominently. There has been less research on the bureaucratic practice of arbitrating between religious groups, or balancing religious and non-religious interests, which is part of the ordinary flow of everyday life in India. This throws up multiple challenges since every act of arbitration or interference might be interpreted differently by different social groups. In this situation, state agents are hard-pressed to maintain the image of neutrality and struggle to establish a widely accepted politics of fairness.

9 Rajeev Bhargava, ed., *Secularism and its Critics* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998); Rajeev Bhargava, *The Promise of India's Secular Democracy* (Delhi: Oxford University Press India, 2010); Akeel Bilgrami, “Two Concepts of Secularism: Reason, Modernity and Archimedean Ideal,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 29, no. 28 (1994); Anthony Copley, “Indian Secularism Reconsidered: From Gandhi to Ayodhya,” *Contributions to South Asia* 2, no.1 (1993).

10 For a recent publication, see Manoj Mate, “Constitutional Erosion and the Challenge to Secular Democracy in India,” in *Constitutional Democracy in Crisis?*, ed. Mark Graber, Sanford Levinson, and Mark Tushnet (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

The case of the Hindu Durga Temple in Bhopal involved forging a compromise that members of all affected communities would accept as just, fair and appropriate. As Hindus wanted to build a Durga temple in a location that Muslims opposed, there was a need for arbitration by neutral outsiders. Defined to mean ‘equal respect for all religions,’ the commitment to secularism obliges state institutions to take seriously the needs of all religious communities, which in this case included assertions by people who believe in divine intervention. What should be done when the purported will of a Hindu deity interferes with the interests or rights of another religious community? Should the state be required to shift registers and accommodate the alleged will of the Goddess, even though non-believers would frown on such a practice and accuse the administration of giving in to superstitious beliefs? In the following, I will present how Bhopal’s secular city administration resolved the tension between Hindus and Muslims, and in doing so analyse secularism as a practice. Here, secularism describes a particular set of actions that inform political practice.

Multiple Secularities and Religious Space

By introducing the concept of *Multiple Secularities*, Monika Wohlrab-Sahr and Marian Burchardt¹¹ developed an analytical tool for speaking about various contextual ways of distinguishing religious from non-religious domains. Thereby they can account for multiple institutional differentiations and conceptual distinctions, which might differ significantly from the particular European experience of secularisation or secularism. Linked to the Enlightenment, modernity and accompanying political struggles, the term ‘secularism’ signifies the ideology of separating church and worldly rule in European history, as well as the push towards privatising religion. In a post-colonial order, it is also associated with European imperialism and its effects on societies across the globe. However, in the history of religions across the world, many different ways of drawing boundaries between religious and

11 Monika Wohlrab-Sahr and Marian Burchardt, “Multiple Secularities: Toward a Cultural Sociology of Secular Modernities,” *Comparative Sociology* 11, no. 6 (2012).

non-religious domains have prevailed. Calling these “secular dynamics,”¹² Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt seek analytical language to speak about such instances comparatively:

In order to make visible what we regard as the foundational effect of secular dynamics, namely the social construction of the boundaries of religion, we pursue a strictly analytical understanding of secularity. This social construction is the outcome of contestations over the way in which religion is culturally defined, socially and legally delimited, politically regulated and spatially as well as temporally arranged.¹³

According to Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt, secular dynamics respond to reference problems, or specific social challenges that prompt reflections on the public role of religion, which in modern nation states might be concerns over individual freedom, national integration, inter-religious relations or institutional independence.¹⁴ This sociological view on religion serves as a useful lens when analysing the official meaning of secularism in India. Taking into account the continuing prominence of public religion in the everyday life of India’s multi-religious society, secularism became understood as ‘equal respect for all religions’ (*sarva dharma sambhava*). This definition emerged gradually during India’s struggle for independence from British colonial rule and serves as a reminder to honour a long tradition of religious tolerance. As a political ideology, it militates against two alternative political models: India as a Hindu nation¹⁵ and the European concept of secularism as separation of state and religion.¹⁶

In practice, the notion of ‘equal respect’ means that the state is tasked with protecting all religions. State institutions should function as neutral authorities, arbitrate between religious communities, preserve religious

12 Monika Wohlrab-Sahr and Marian Burchardt, “Revisiting the Secular: Multiple Secularities and Pathways to Modernity,” *Working Paper Series of the HCAS “Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities”* 2, Leipzig, September 2017, 6.

13 Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt, “Revisiting the Secular,” 6.

14 Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt, “Multiple Secularities.”

15 The notion of India as Hindu Nation has several roots, prominently among them the saturation of the movement’s figurative language with symbols and concepts borrowed from a Hindu religious universe, as well as, in the political realm, the two nation theory, according to which Pakistan is imagined as a Muslim nation and India, in contrast to this, as the home of Hindus.

16 See for example Bhargava, *Secularism and its Critics*; Bilgrami, “Two Concepts of Secularism.”

peace, and ensure that the needs and desires of every religious community are taken into account.¹⁷ The non-partisan approach of Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of independent India, firmly anchored secularism as a political principle informing governance in India and established trust in the secular credentials of the state. The approach was confirmed in 1976 when the adjective 'secular' was included in the preamble to India's constitution. However, despite an official commitment to secularism, the political class is not free from doubt. Belief in the state's neutrality remains fragile and there are many instances when it has been called into question. There is the notorious debate about separate civil laws for religious groups, the disturbing chain of events in the Shah Bano case, the opening of the Babri Masjid for Hindu worship and the subsequent demolition of mosques by radical Hindus.¹⁸ Beyond accusations of wilful manipulation of religious sentiments or incitement of violence, there are other troubling concerns during the operationalisation of the concept of 'equal respect.' Here I focus on the predicament of divine agency.

Among other things, Hindus believe that humans have a relationship with deities who directly act in the world.¹⁹ Deities are able to impose their will in ways that breach social norms or cause conflicts between social groups. While some people insist that the state must respect such beliefs, others argue that the notion of divine agency is mere superstition, or worse serves as façade to hide acts of political manipulation. These differing perspectives become particularly problematic when claims of divine intervention are used to hurt the members of another religious community, as occurred in the case detailed below. In these contexts, the ideal state steps in as a pacifier. It then might face the predicament of having to taking seriously the clashing claims emerging from incompatible ontologies. While many Hindus experience the intervention of deities, others interpret

17 There are also more specific tasks. In absence of a universally accepted religious authority for Hindus, state law codified in the Hindu code bills regulate family affairs of Hindus, such as marriage, divorce or adoption.

18 A. A. Engineer, ed., *Babri-Masjid Ramjanambhoomi Controversy* (Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1990); Jan-Peter Hartung, *Ayodhya 1992-2003: The Assertion of Cultural and Religious Hegemony* (Delhi: Media House, 2004); Arun K. Patnaik and Prithvi R. Mudiam, "Indian secularism, dialogue and the Ayodhya dispute," *Religion, State and Society* 42, no. 4 (2014).

19 Diana L. Eck, *Darshan: Seeing the divine image in India* (Chambersbury: Anima, 1981); Christopher J. Fuller, *The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India* (Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1992).

the world in materialist terms. This is true also for advocates of a politics of 'equal respect', revealing the commitment of secularism to Enlightenment thinking.

The notion of 'equal respect for all religions' assumes the possibility of a neutral position. Governing institutions are conceived as operating from outside any specific religious universe, which enables them to take on a neutral position, judge fairly and adjudicate claims. This is in line with a tradition of liberal thinking that is well-illustrated in Habermas²⁰ idealised framing of the role of religion in deliberative democracy. Tracing the emergence of the public sphere in Europe from the eighteenth century onwards, Habermas sees democracy as founded on reasoned debate upheld by educated citizens who negotiate the interests of the polity.²¹ Religions can play a constructive role in public deliberations, because they provide solid bases for formulating ethical standards, and thus should be heard. However, for religious believers to be taken seriously in public debates, they must use a language of universal reason. Religiously founded ideals can be rendered valid if they are made accessible to non-believers through a process of translation. Here, the public sphere remains a very specific and narrowly defined social arena in which people meet as equal participants under the condition that they adopt a common hegemonic language to become effective political agents. While some celebrate Habermas' repositioning as an invitation to develop new forms of public religious debate,²² or even a public theology,²³ many others question the cultural neutrality of the notion of a secular public sphere,²⁴ and reject

20 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Enquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992 [1962]); Jürgen Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere," *European Journal of Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (2006).

21 In the original formulation, he is unconcerned with religion, which he believed would lose importance or be relegated to the private domain, and then revisits this assumption in the mid-2000s, when it is apparent that religious engagement has persisted as well as the desire of religious institutions to influence politics.

22 Craig Calhoun, Eduardo Mendieta, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, eds., *Habermas and Religion* (Maden, MA: Polity, 2013)

23 Jaco S. Dreyer and Hennie J. C. Pieterse, "Religion in the Public Sphere: What can Public Theology Learn from Habermas's Latest Work?," *HTS Theologies Studies* 66, no. 1 (2010).

24 David Zaret, "Religion, Science, and Printing in the Public Sphere in Seventeenth-Century England," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992); Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber, eds., *Religion and Media* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

the reductionist view of religion as solely comprising ethics and reason.²⁵ Judith Butler²⁶ argues that historically, the public sphere has emerged from within a Christian Protestant context. Thus, it already encompasses particular religious traditions, while locating other religions outside the public sphere. She adds that religions might exist in proximity without sharing a space for defining common ground. Coexistence might then be possible only through accepting a right to alterity.

Butler's formulation provides an important starting point for analysing what I call the *practice of secularism*. This differs from an ideal-type definition of secularism as a principle. The official notion of Indian secularism as 'equal respect for all regions' embraces a liberal approach akin to Habermas' notion of public religion, and frames the problem of religious co-existence in terms of the need for maintaining symmetry between religious communities. It presupposes that interests are made intelligible in the universal language of reason and then weighed against other interests. Such an understanding of the problem leaves no space for the notion of divinities as capricious agents who directly intervene in this world and must be respected not just by believers but also by the leaders of a secular nation. Officially, a bureaucrat cannot act at the behest of a god or goddess. Yet, in practice, they give in to projects undertaken in the name of non-human agents under certain circumstances. Hindus – or other religiously minded people – are given a right to alterity within clearly defined limits delineated by the state on the basis of a compromise between all human stakeholders.

Below, I will explore one such process of delineation that allowed a secular administration to maintain its integrity while accommodating belief in supernatural powers within the realm of urban planning. The controversy not only encompassed a clash of interests between Muslims and Hindus, but also concerned the ontological status of temples. For some, temple buildings are mere architecture that should be fitted

25 Nicholas Adams, *Habermas and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Antoon Braeckman, "Habermas and Gauchet on Religion in Postsecular Society: A Critical Assessment," *Continental Philosophy Review* 42, no. 3 (2009); Austin Harrington, "Habermas's Theological Turn?," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 37, no. 1 (2007).

26 Judith Butler, "Is Judaism Zionism," in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, ed. Judith Butler, Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, and Cornel West (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2011).

harmoniously into the urban setting. For others, they are delicate power centres that must be approached with respect and caution. The pragmatics of urban management compels decision makers to reckon with beliefs in divine agency, which from a materialist point of view is irrational, while keeping in mind the principles of urban management and arbitration between religions. Indian secularism faces an internal tension. Grounded in principles of the Enlightenment rationality, it must accommodate the non-rational side of religion in order to respect religious sentiments.

Negotiating Sacred Space

At the entrance to Old Bhopal's bazaar area, near Peer Gate, visitors encounter a sparkling marble structure dedicated to Our Lady of the Curfew (*darbar curfew mata ka*). It houses a statue of Durga, who, as is evidenced in the inscription on the marble beam over the entrance, is firmly associated with the controversy that hit the city during the establishment of this temple. The events are part of the city's public memory and easily surface when a probing anthropologist seeks to find out more. In the years between 1998 and 2001, while I listened to the various versions of this history, I learned about Hindu aggression, Muslim domination and Bhopal's history. I was also told of administrative wisdom and police neutrality, and, finally, I heard about fear of the goddess and divine agency. The fate of Durga at Peer Gate was eventually decided by motivating all stakeholders to work out a compromise between political desires, secular ethics, and devotional experiences. The following re-collection of events is accompanied by narrations of various layers of meaning that shape a temple's history.

The trouble started during the autumn festival of Navratri in 1981. At this auspicious time of the year, Hindus honour the goddess Durga²⁷ on nine consecutive nights at temporary shrines erected in multiple locations across the city. For weeks in advance, Navratri committees busy themselves with preparations to impress the crowds and compete with other shrines during this spectacular festival. The Peer Gate Durga committee participated every year, and in 1981 installed an expensive statue carved from Rajasthani

27 In some temples or regions other incarnations of the goddess, e.g. Kali are also honoured.

marble at the centre of Peer Gate crossing instead of the usual mud-crafted image of Durga. The act was suspicious. People reasoned that no committee would discard an expensive statue they had painstakingly brought from Rajasthan in the usual ritual way after the end of the worship. The head of the district administration, the Collector²⁸, recalled that the activities at Peer Gate drew attention, and complaints from Muslim neighbours poured in almost instantaneously. In an interview, the Collector remembered that “the Muslims place strong trust in the administration so telling them that I would do something was enough to calm them down.”²⁹ The Collector had the shrine inspected, called Muslim leaders and begged them to calm the community. In return, he promised to find a solution as soon as the festival was over. He first wanted to see whether the statue was indeed to remain on the spot. Moreover, he was concerned that immediate action would disturb the peace of the festival and fuel religious tensions.

On the tenth day, after all temporary shrines other than the one at Peer Gate had been dismantled, the Collector acted on his promise. He recruited a priest to help him to remove the statue in a night-time mission. Under the cover of darkness, a religious procession was organised to lift the image in a ritually prescribed manner and carry it to an alternative site, a temple near the big lake. He also passed an ordinance that restricted the right to assemble at Peer Gate. Despite this precaution, the next day “hell broke loose,” remembered a police officer who fought in the front line of what became a battle that lasted several days. During the festival, temple committees across the city had been informed about the new temple and many people had planted saffron flags in honour of the goddess. When news broke of the clandestine removal of Durga, people flocked to Peer Gate and, ignoring the directive restricting the right to assemble, started a marathon of uninterrupted prayer and devotional singing (*bhajan*). Freshly appointed to his first major position and determined to show strength, the Collector called in the police to enforce the ordinance. The police officer Kamal Singh remembered shouting, protest and flying stones and all the hardship it took to clear the place.

28 The Collector or District Collector is an Indian government official and a member of the state bureaucratic cadre (Indian Administrative Service, IAS). He or she is the principle revenue officer of the district, the head of district administration and works in collaboration with the superintendent of police to maintain law and order in the district.

29 Interview, February 3, 1997.

At 7:45 p.m., we got the order to clear the crossing. We assembled 250 men. The Collector took one street, I took another. It was night and the operation was difficult. With a jeep [...] we entered the lane [...]. The [police] men followed us in a jail van. This way they felt secure. We cleared one barricade after the other and secured the area and returned to Peer Gate. It was like war. It was difficult to keep the men under control. A boy, for example, threw a stone. Some men then pulled him out from the house and started beating him. In the end we had to save the boy. Then there was Mishra, my right-hand man, he wanted to be extra brave and got hit on the head by a stone. After that the police went wild. They were afraid [...] Besides the fear the policemen are all religious [that is: Hindu, U.R.] so you had to convince them that the operation was necessary. But fortunately in Bhopal the police force are mostly secular [...] That time I had an excellent gunman, Amar Singh. After I got out of the jeep someone threw a rock, and he jumped and pushed me aside. The rock then landed on his foot and he had to be rushed to hospital. That was a dangerous situation, not that I would have got killed, but... By 9:40–10:00 p.m. we had cleared the lane.³⁰

Once the crowd had been dispersed, the Collector imposed a curfew in a controversial move. Considering that nothing serious had happened yet, the measure seemed a disproportionate restriction of personal freedom. However, despite internal opposition, the Collector stood his ground, arguing that after a major causality an eruption of violence would be unstoppable. He then called upon respected senior Hindu and Muslim leaders of the city who began negotiations along with the head of the temple committee and representatives of the city. Stakeholders were seated in a comfortable room, supplied with meals and made to stay until a solution was found, which apparently took two days and a night. The city representatives suggested that a place somewhere else in old Bhopal could be assigned for the construction of the temple, but the Hindus insisted on Peer Gate. After long and heated discussions, the parties agreed that the temple should remain on the crossing, although not in the middle of the street but to one side. A space equivalent to four shops (10 feet by 12 feet) was allotted for the Durga Temple. As compensation for the destruction of the original temple, the municipal corporation agreed to prepare the foundations for the new building. They also agreed that the statue should not immediately be taken to the new spot. Instead it was to be re-installed in its original place at the middle of the crossing, whence the committee members would transfer it to the new ground. In return, the Durga Temple

30 Interview, Police Officer, Police Headquarter, April 3, 1997.

Committee agreed to refrain from any further agitation and to help restore an atmosphere of peace and goodwill in the city.³¹ On October 15, 1981, the temple was officially inaugurated and it stands as a sign of the benevolence of the Lady of the Curfew, and as a symbol of the strength of a Hindu community, representing a ‘victory’ against the secular administration and Muslim neighbours.

As indicated by these narratives, people who watched the emergence of the Durga Temple from close-up emphasise the Hindu-Muslim dimension of the project. In Bhopal, this is set against the sense of disempowerment of the Hindu majority in the Muslim princely state of Bhopal, such that Hindu struggle for a visible presence in the Old City is celebrated as correcting a historical legacy. Along with Muslims, the city administration was sternly against the construction. The spacious Peer Gate crossing had been built in 1971, ten years before the Durga Temple, to improve connectivity between old and new Bhopal through an arterial road that cuts across the heart of Bhopal’s historical centre. During construction, many heritage buildings and homes of influential Muslims had to make way, creating a traffic corridor that stands as a material sign of Bhopal’s changing character. After India’s independence, the former princely state joined the union and Bhopal was turned into the capital of what was to become the state of Madhya Pradesh, and an influential centre of power. Although the Union Carbide gas tragedy of 1984 casts a long shadow over the city, overall Bhopal’s rapid urban development is seen as a success story, and has turned Bhopal from a former capital of a Muslim kingdom into a major state capital dominated by Hindus. For those envisioning India as a Hindu nation, this development must be marked by religious signs of triumph, ideally at the most visible spots in the city.³² As a person committed to a secular vision of India, the Collector opposed a “communal”³³ reading of the urban landscape and stood his ground. He valued Hindu-Muslim

31 Agreement signed on October 11, 1981.

32 Syed Ashfaq Ali, *Bhopal: Past and Present* (Bhopal: Jai Bharat Pub. House, 1987); P. N. Shrinivastav and S. D. Guru, *Madhya Pradesh District Gazetteers: Sehore and Bhopal* (Bhopal: Directorate of Gazetteers, Department of Culture, Government of Madhya Pradesh, 1989).

33 “Communal” here is used in a specific Indian sense of the term. The *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* defines it as “3. of or relating to rival communities, esp. the communities of India.” (William Benton, ed., *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: G. C. Merriam, 1971), 460.)

cooperation and was committed to modern urban planning, in this case, seeking to maintain efficient flow of traffic at a typical bottleneck.

Listening carefully to the narratives of witnesses, there are other dimensions to the establishment of the Durga Temple beyond the story of a neutral state seeking to pacify politically motivated religious communities. The goddess emerges as an agent to be reckoned with. She needs to be handled with care, attracts donations of flags from across the city and might react furiously if disrespected.

While the Peer Gate activism had definite political overtones, its success was contingent on the support of a large community of believers, who experienced the presence of the goddess in myriad ways and had their respective personal reasons for favouring the temple, or shying away from opposing it. The conviction of believers that goddesses act in this world complicated the task of restoring communal peace and compelled the secular government to take note of the potential will of non-human actors. A carefully operating Collector in Bhopal showed respect for religions by taking seriously claims to divine agency, or at least people who believed in divine agency and giving them a voice in the process without compromising the administration's secularity.

Enshrining the Divine in the City

My study on the Hindu religious infrastructure of Bhopal started with a survey of Hindu temples to provide context for selecting case studies and understanding the character of urban religion. A map in hand, I was systematically scanning the streets of Bhopal to create a register of religious buildings and found the task unexpectedly difficult. Was I looking for large buildings, or road-side shrines, or even anointed stones or sacred trees? As I began to speak to people, seemingly apparent differences between these places melted away. Locals call all these places, regardless of their size, *mandir*³⁴, which is conventionally translated as 'temple.'³⁵ While wayside

34 There are, of course, other vernacular terms used across India, however they do not necessarily give away much with regards to the distinct socio-religious characters of different religious spaces (Borayin Larios and Raphaël Voix, "Introduction: Wayside Shrines in India: An Everyday Defiant Religiosity," *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* [Online] 18 (2018), <https://journals.openedition.org/samaj/4546>).

35 See also William Elison, "Site, Sight, Cite: Conceptualizing Wayside Shrines as Visual

shrines and large temples are visually and organisationally distinct,³⁶ they share a common feature. Devotees speak about them as auratic locations that anchor deities in a place, and by doing so transform the place, filling it with their blessing. The twenty-six-year-old Mumbai actress, Shivani – interviewed by Osterberg³⁷ – finds a modern metaphor to explain the phenomenon.

[S]hrines are like certain spots where the Wi-Fi is good.' Smiling, [Shivani] explains that you can connect with Hanuman wherever you are but just as a Wi-Fi connection is better in certain places than in others, shrines are places where the connection of Hanuman is stronger.³⁸

Temples and shrines provide people with an opportunity to 'take darshan.' This phrase connotes the act of receiving divine blessing by being beheld by the deity.³⁹ It requires little more than stepping into the field of vision of a deity and often devotees perform a small gesture of polite greeting, concentration or repentance when face-to-face with the image of a god or goddess. Delving into the history of various temples, it becomes obvious that most are built illegally without building permit and have emerged gradually, growing from small wayside shrines to become major temples

Culture,' *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* [Online] 18 (2018), <http://journals.openedition.org/samaj/4540>. There is no clear demarcation between temples and wayside shrines, which in the literature are also called footpath or pavement shrines. Temples and shrines often grow and popular wayside shrines with a patron may well turn into a full-fledged temple (Vinayak Bharne, "Anointed cities: The incremental urbanism of Hindu India: The Emerging Asian City," in *The Emerging Asian City: Concomitant Urbanities & Urbanisms*, ed. Vinayak Bharne (London: Routledge, 2013); Vinayak Bharne and Krupali Krusche, *Rediscovering the Hindu Temple: The Sacred Architecture of Urbanism of India* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012); Eliza F. Kent, "Bus-Stop Sami: Transient Temples in Urban South India," *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* [Online] 18 (2018), <https://journals.openedition.org/samaj/4554>; Rao, *Negotiating the Divine*; Yasumasa Sekine, "Sacralization of the Urban Footpath, with Special Reference to Pavement Shrines in Chennai City, South India," *Temenos* 42, no. 2 (2006)).

36 Small wayside shrines, may well turn into full-fledged temples when they are very popular and many modern temples started initially as small sacred sites and gradually grew through patronage and donations (Bharne and Krusche, *Rediscovering the Hindu Temple*; Parvis Ghassem-Fachandi, "The City Threshold: Mushroom Temples and Magic Remains in Ahmedabad," *Ethnography* 13, no. 1 (2012); Rao, *Negotiating the Divine*).

37 Anna C. Osterberg, "The Role of Roadside Shrines in the Everyday Lives of Female Devotees in Mumbai," *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* [Online] 18 (2018), <https://journals.openedition.org/samaj/4565>.

38 Osterberg, "The Role of Roadside Shrines," 11.

39 Eck, *Darshan*.

through numerous additions built as the sites became popular and drew large sums of donations that were invested in constructing, extending and beautifying them.

Typically, temples are associated with divine agency. Believers are convinced that deities seek a home in the world and do so by magically appearing in certain spots. *Svayambhu* (or divine self-manifestation) is evidenced by a strange elevation of the asphalt, the sudden appearance of a stone that turns out to be a lingam, the phallus of the Lord Shiva, or the surprising emergence of a termite hill as an indicator of a Snake Goddess.⁴⁰ People also notice the twisted branches of a tree describing the upper torso of the elephant-headed God Ganesh.⁴¹ While deities often ‘appear’ on their own in this way, sometimes the help of humans is required to secure their presence in this world. A pious person might speak about the goddess paying him a visit in a dream, asking him to search for her image at a particular juncture or install a statue to mark her presence.⁴² A local resident might plant a neem tree (*tulsi*) and install an object to mark a spot reverberating with divine energy. Once established, shrines and temples resist demolition. The city administration does not touch them for a variety of reasons, which might include fear of public frenzy, the wrath of the deity, or support for the religious or political project of devotees.

A number of studies explore social reasons for the popularity of the prolific number of sites for worship. Shrines and temples provide busy urbanites with places to fulfil daily religious duties.⁴³ They foster a meaningful and inclusive local and national identity.⁴⁴ They present women with an excuse to loiter in public and experience relief from domestic

40 Diana L. Eck, *Banaras: City of Light* (Delhi: Penguin Books, 1993 [1983]); David L. Haberman, *People Trees: Worship of Trees in Northern India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Christian Haskett, “On Varanasi’s Tiny Temples,” *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* [Online] 18 (2018), <https://journals.openedition.org/samaj/4524>; Kent, “Bus-Stop Sami”; Sekine, “Sacralization of the Urban Footpath.”

41 Haberman, *People Trees*.

42 Kent, “Bus-Stop Sami”; Rao, *Negotiating the Divine*.

43 Ghassem-Fachandi, “The City Threshold”; Alexander Henn, “Crossroads of Religions: Shrines, Mobility and Urban Space in Goa,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 32, no. 3 (2008); Borayin Larios, “From the Heavens to the Streets: Pune’s Wayside Shrines,” *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* [Online] 18 (2018), <https://journals.openedition.org/samaj/4549>.

44 Uma Kalpagam, “Secularism, Religiosity and Popular Culture: Chennai’s Roadside Temples,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 41, no. 43/44 (2006).

chores or oppressive homes.⁴⁵ They are the weapons of the weak who wish to protect their informal shelter from demolition in unaffordable megacities.⁴⁶ They are a source of income for religious entrepreneurs.⁴⁷ Or, in the dismissive words of city planners and some upper-class residents, they are the mischievous activities of crooks who exploit the gullibility of citizens to grab land, make money and gain status.⁴⁸ This social function of religious sites can also be noted in stories with political overtones, such as that of the ageing ascetic seeking a place to settle down permanently, or women's need for nearby places of worship.

In practice, religious experience and social motivation amalgamate to produce the force that results in the successful establishment, maintenance and continuous growth of a temple. This is true also for a project with strong political overtones, such as the Peer Gate Durga Temple project, as is apparent when listening carefully to the many small stories about the nitty-gritty of pacifying the communities. For many, uncertainty about Durga's divine will lurks beneath the narration of a communal clash. While the Collector confesses not to believe that gods and goddesses punish people for handling statues, he knows that many people do and that ordering employees to collaborate in the exercise of preventing an illegal temple can backfire.

The committee member tried to appeal to my Hindu sentiments. However, just because I am a Hindu, I was not willing to decide in their favour. They kept saying "you are a Hindu from the East where everyone prays to the goddess. You should understand". However, I responded that there are no permanent Durga Temples. Yet, there are many Kali Temples, but Durga does not stay. She comes for nine days and then leaves.⁴⁹

Throughout, the Collector acted cautiously in order to maintain his authority and also convince adherents of the goddess. He argued that he was acting as a bureaucrat and not a Hindu, and simultaneously assured that building a permanent temple was unlikely to be the explicit will of the goddess. Secularism as respect for all religions was complicated in this case because the clear political interference by Hindu nationalist forces

45 Osterberg, "The Role of Roadside Shrines."

46 Sekine, "Sacralization of the Urban Footpath."

47 Kent, "Bus-Stop Sami."

48 Rao, *Negotiating the Divine*; Sekine, "Sacralization of the Urban Footpath."

49 Interview, Central Secretariat, January 6, 1997.

could not be clearly distinguished from an opaque divine will. Onlookers wondered whether this was communal politics, or the goddess using fierce supporters to manifest among her beloved followers. The Collector played down the religious angle to avoid offending Durga. He abstained from the inauspicious act of disrupting a festival and, importantly, recruited a priest to remove the statue in the traditional manner and by following rituals as prescribed by Hindu sacred writings. He also organised a festive parade with music for the re-location of the goddess.

I went to action only when after Dashera the statue had not been immersed into the water. I had the whole temple destroyed at night – no stone was left. The statue was lifted to another temple with due respect. I had engaged a pundit who did the puja and we carried the statue to another temple at the big lake.⁵⁰

Publicly, his actions were criticised by the committee, yet, they must have made an impression, since I did not once hear accusations against the Collector of interfering with religion or offending the goddess. The clandestine removal led to an escalation during which the goddess was invited once again. A photograph was used as a substitute for the statue, firmly anchoring Durga's auratic presence in the place. This maintained a sacred centre for ongoing devotional singing and prayer. The Collector was keen to remove the image, but faltered. When he asked the security guards to take away the image, they pleaded with him, saying: "Please, Sir, do not make us move the picture. The wrath of the goddess will hit us." At this point in the interview, the Collector looked at me and posed a rhetorical question: "Did I want to be held responsible if the children of these people had an accident the next day that was interpreted as divine punishment?"⁵¹ He then emphasised that he would have not lasted long in his position had he offended the sentiments of the Hindu majority. The police officer Kamal Singh touched on a similar subject when he remembered with horror having to motivate Hindu policemen to fight in a dangerous battle against their brothers and sisters in faith, who might have had a legitimate cause. Here too doubts about who was acting – the committee, Durga, or both in conjunction – caused anxiety. Imposing a curfew was a way to avoid putting citizens at risk and triggering stories of divine interventions, and thus paved the way for negotiations.

50 Interview, Central Secretariat, February 3, 1997.

51 Interview, Central Secretariat.

I wanted to see what Hindu women would have to say about the developments at Peer Gate. In India, many middle and lower class women in particular tend to think of politics as a male domain, yet, they are keen on auspicious places of worship near their home and thus often initiate temples, or support their stabilisation.⁵² To find out more about their views, I joined a group of women who congregated every morning at the feet of the Peer Gate Durga to chant devotional songs. One by one, I got to know the more regular devotees, visited their homes and learned about their lives through long conversations with them and a whole series of family members. Asked about the controversy at Peer Gate, many said that they had held their breath when a curfew was declared. They avoided making clear statements in favour of any political party and kept a distance from Hindu fundamentalist groups. Yet, they remembered having favoured the establishment of a temple from the beginning, because they wanted a site for Hindu worship near their home. It helped them to fulfil their duties as housewives and mothers, while also finding time for necessary religious activities. For them, time at a temple was a relief and part of their duty.

The day of these middle-class housewives starts early at 5 or 6 am with a short prayer at their house shrine. Next, these women busy themselves with family chores; they cook breakfast and lunch for all family members, and send them off to school and work. There is time for a bath and then a break which is devoted to the goddess. In many private conversations in their homes, women explained to me in much detail that the goddess protects their families, and sometimes they added with a gleam in their

52 The movement of women in India is highly restricted and monitored. Feminist literature is littered with examples of the sense of policing women endure. Public space is perceived as male and women cross it only to reach a legitimate destination, such as work, the homes of relatives, or the steps of the temple. I regularly heard women telling me that no-one could object to them going to the temple. They did it out of free will and sometimes, while they egged each other on to finish their singing and rush home to resume their duties, they dragged their feet and stayed for a bit longer. "What will you say when you come home?" I asked and was told: "My husband will be home and shout at me for being late, but I will say that I had work at the temple. That disarms him. What can he say against praying? It is a sacred duty!" Women afford the liberty of a daily temple routine when it is easily accommodated into the flow of life. "We cannot travel far! We needed a temple near the house," was what I heard whenever I spoke about temple construction and why the city was strewn with temples and shrines and also why the Durga temple was needed. See for example Reena Patel, *Working the Night Shift: Women and India's Call Centre Industry* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010); Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan, and Shilpa Ranade, *Why Loiter? Women & Risk on Mumbai Streets* (Delhi: Penguin, 2011).

eyes that going to the temple means freedom. Due to the historical layering of the city, the old town had few temples, and none of them were devoted to the goddess. They perceived a gap. More than a wayside shrine, a temple gives comfort, access to regular rituals, draws together a community and provides a home for the believing. Female solidarity was apparent at the peak of the protest. Women congregated to sing *bhajans* as a statement of empowerment. This was a form of gender politics that was deeply entwined with devotional longings. At the feet of the goddess, women found peace and freedom.

Respect for religion involves taking different religious and social commitments seriously. This is difficult when interests clash and bring fundamental differences between religions and inconstancy in the multifarious universe of Hindu traditions to the forefront. In Bhopal, the Collector operationalised secularism as equal respect for all religions through a clear division of labour. His intervention was firm, while also circumventing any direct involvement in religious or ritual acts. He pacified Muslims, called in the police, had Hindus arrested, imposed a curfew, and compelled religious leaders to negotiate. The statue was moved by a pundit, the policemen abstained from removing the image of Durga, and the religious leaders negotiated an agreement on the location of a Durga Temple.

Interviews with a series of leading individuals from the city's administration, who spoke about negotiating the establishment of temples in public space, illustrate that decision makers can draw on a well-established script. Each one had stories to tell about Hindu temples, or religious sites of other religious communities that appeared overnight. Some of these were conceived as nuisances, because they occupied busy locations, emerged in sensitive spots or infringed on recreational spaces. They were typically dealt with by destroying the profane parts, leaving the naked statues. In some case, the religious sites underwent repeated construction and demolition before a truce was reached, with an informal agreement on what was considered an acceptable size. In the case of the Peer Gate Durga, the anger of the Muslim community complicated matters, and forced more intricate efforts to retain a separation between religion and state while showing equal respect.

Conclusion

Studying temple construction unearths a foundational predicament of Indian secularism, which is not typically discussed in debates concerned with individual freedom and communal harmony. While the secularism debate often focuses on questions of fairness, and whether state institutions are free of bias, it leaves unexamined the underlying assumption that human beings have the power to define the meaning of religion and its position in public life. How does one accommodate the claim to divine agency? In this article, I have argued for an expanded understanding of secularism that moves beyond a liberal notion based on Habermas' ideal-type public sphere as an arena for rational argumentation. Secularism is more than an ideal. It is a practice mobilised to solve real-life problems, in this case that of negotiating the use of urban space.

Making use of their right to religion, Hindus have demanded that worship spaces be built on sites identified by their deities. From an alternative point of view, their claim can be questioned. Some treat the belief in divine agency as superstition, while others say that reference to divine will is used to cover up vested interests and thus constitutes a powerful tool in enforcing particular political projects. In a heterogeneous, multi-religious society, it is unfeasible to try and resolve this issue. There is no ultimate position of rationality from which questions about the reality of divine agency can be resolved. Liberal democracy requires arbitration between different interests, which in the case discussed here are rooted in incongruous ontologies. Secularism as a technique of arbitration focuses not on the justification for a demand, but its consequences and forces stakeholders to agree on a shared action plan, regardless of their privately held beliefs regarding the rationality or even the legitimacy of the other's argument.

Such a conclusion shares in the notion that no clear boundary can be drawn between politics and religion. The case of the temple in Bhopal illustrates how a group of politically motivated Hindus, who openly admitted to their goal of seeking to marginalise Muslims in the city centre of Bhopal, were only able to pursue their project due to a particular Hindu understanding of divine agency. Despite their political motivations, the Durga Committee was able to mobilise support for their project across the city due to the tendency of Hindus to respect what they see as the will of

deities. Women in central Bhopal supported the move because it helped develop a neighbourhood in which they could fulfil their religious duty and ensure the safety of their family. Others wished to respect divine will and were motivated by the Goddess Durga's visible desire to support the groups of traders instigating the movement. Rather than break up this coalition, or demand rational argumentation, Bhopal's administration treated the event as an instance of political negotiations that must be decided by the authorities of the affected religious communities together with the administration. By doing this, they ensured that the decision would be communicated back to the respective groups in their own terms, so that believers and non-believers would equally respect the arbitrated resolution.

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