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Source: *Sociological Forum*, JUNE 2013, Vol. 28, No. 2 (JUNE 2013), pp. 283-307

Published by: Wiley

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43653876>

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Work, Performance, and the Social Ethic of Global Capitalism: Understanding Religious Practice in Contemporary India¹

Vikash Singh²

This ethnographic essay focuses on the relationship between religious performances and the “strong discourse” of contemporary global capitalism. It explores the subjective meaning and social significance of religious practice in the context of a rapidly expanding mass religious phenomenon in India. The narrative draws on Weber’s insights on the intersections between religion and economy, phenomenological theory, performance studies, and Indian philosophy and popular culture. It shows that religion here is primarily a means of performing to and preparing for an informal economy. It gives the chance to live meaningful social lives while challenging the inequities and symbolic violence of an imposing global capitalist social ethic. Unlike exclusive formal institutions that are increasingly governed by neoliberal rationalities, the religious event provides an open and freely accessible yet challenging stage for participants to practice and prove their resolve, gifts, and sincerity. In contrast to the focus on social anomie and the reactionary characterization of contemporary religion in identity-based arguments, this essay demonstrates that religious practice here is simultaneously a way of performing to and performing against a totalizing capitalist social order.

KEY WORDS: capitalism; informality; performance; phenomenology; pilgrimage; religion.

From political science and sociology to anthropology and social psychology, there is a broad agreement across the disciplinary spectrum that the

¹ My research and this article would not be possible without the tremendous faith shown by my advisor, Arlene Stein. In addition, this article has gained much from the feedback from members of the New York psycho-social group, especially, John Andrews, George Cavalletto, Patricia Clough, Joshua Klein, Catherine Silver, and Ilgin Yorukoglu. It also benefited immensely from the excellent feedback from three anonymous reviewers and the editors of *Sociological Forum*. I am no less obliged to the many people who freely, and in good faith, shared their experience and views with me during my fieldwork. And, finally, I cannot even begin to express my gratitude to Bhupendra Singh, family members, Deependra Baghel, Jozsef Böröcz, and a generous friend addressed here as “K,” who made my research possible. In short, anything of merit in this essay is a communal achievement; the limitations are mine alone. The research has been supported by funding from the Rutgers Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, the Rutgers Center for Historical Analysis, and the South Asian Studies Program at Rutgers in addition to the Rutgers Sociology Department.

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growing popularity of religious practices around the globe implies an assertion of collective identity in the face of the inevitable, if rapid, changes of globalization. According to this common conclusion, resistance to change and the moral confusion of social anomie drive a movement toward cultural and religious solidarity (Appleby and Marty 2004; Beyer 2006; Kinnvall 2006; Robertson and Chirico 1985). These prove to be ripe conditions for the politicization of religion and, consequently, inter-group violence (Appadurai 1999). This development is generally characterized as religious fundamentalism, a dogged obstruction of the wheels of history and the progress of modernization. As Bauman (1998) notes with apparent irony, religion promises to “emancipate” from the “agonies of choice . . . those who find the burden of individual freedom excessive and unbearable” (p. 74). The case is historicized and becomes more contextual in area studies literature. In South Asia, thus, the discourse shapes around Hindu nationalism, weaving in postcolonial nationalist anxieties and the history of relations between Hindus and Muslims (Hansen 1999). The core focus on the reactionary character of contemporary religion, however, persists—it represents an unwillingness to change, surmount past affects and prejudices, and face up to new social realities and horizons.

This essay on the Kanwar pilgrimage, a rapidly expanding religious phenomenon in north India, diverges from this reasoning. I find that religion here is primarily a means of performing to, preparing for, and living meaningful social lives amid an imposing global capitalist social ethic; it is also a means to contest its symbolic violence and social inequities. My research shows that these social actors are simultaneously performing to and performing against the excesses of a totalizing social ethic. To better appreciate these findings, I suggest we begin by returning to Weber’s profound observations on the relationship between moral existence, religion, and the economy (Weber 1946, 2002). Other scholars critical of the “religious fundamentalism” thesis have suggested a similar recourse. For example, Martin (2006) argues insightfully that Pentecostalism in Latin America allows a structural negotiation of social change, which is analogous to the role of Protestantism in facilitating capitalism in Europe. Yet, one cannot ignore issues with Weber’s paradigm.

Weber (1946: 289, 1958) not only sees Hinduism as an “otherworldly” religion that encourages a “flight from the world,” but for him mass religiosity anywhere could only be irrational and magically oriented. In this perspective, only virtuoso religion can offer a rational ethic of social life. My findings suggest the contrary. As opposed to the ideologically charged harangue of institutional leaders representing “high” Hinduism, my research demonstrates a strong performative rationality to popular religious practice in the Kanwar (see also Singh 2011, forthcoming). Religious practice critically mediates in the complex play of social relations here—on dimensions economic, political, moral, and sexual. Notwithstanding these issues, Weber’s careful attention to the subjective import of interactions between religion and economy has been instructive for this study. In addition, I borrow from the phenomenological literature and from theories of performance.

Clearly, one objection that may be raised against my inferences is the peculiar nature of pilgrimage as a religious phenomenon. However, I think the reverse argument is more illuminating. Why is pilgrimage so marginal in the sociology of religion literature?³ This literature has been surprising aloof to the insightful observations on religion and social issues in the much excellent ethnographic work on pilgrimages across the globe.⁴ Perhaps, an issue of scale is involved. Theoretical formulations on a global scale, on issues such as “religion and globalization,” have to focus on abstract formulations or on large global events, such as terrorism or ethnic violence. That, however, implies a selection bias. Division of labor and expertise among academic disciplines is another important factor. Where it is scholars in religious studies and anthropologists that do detailed ethnographic work on popular religious practice, including pilgrimages in various societies, the broader discourse on religion and globalization is defined by political scientists and sociologists. More basically, however, I think such neglect of pilgrimages reflects the continuing Kantian biases in Western thought—embodied, ritual practice has no place in theoretical discussions (see Kant, 2008 [1788], 2011 [1794]). Human suffering, the pathos of common existence, is too base a subject to feature in “rational” analyses of religion and globalization. This is precisely the point of this essay’s departure. Thus, I find, on the contrary, that pilgrimage is an excellent site to deliberate on the social and subjective significance of contemporary religion. In India, of course, pilgrimage has long been a, if not *the*, predominant form of popular religious practice.⁵ As a phenomenon that has expanded from a few thousand to millions of participants within the last few decades, the Kanwar pilgrimage from Haridwar is an exemplary illustration of the growing attraction of religious practices.

This article continues with a description of the Kanwar, which is followed by a discussion on theoretical concerns. The core ethnographic section comes next. The final discussion summarizes key points and further elaborates the argument.

THE PHENOMENON

The Kanwar pilgrimage to Haridwar is today India’s largest annual religious gathering, with an estimated 12 million participants in the 2010 and 2011 events (*Hindustan Times* 2011a, 2011b).⁶ At its base, Kanwar refers to a genre of religious performances where participants ritually carry water from a holy source in

³ See Turner (2009) for the many limitations of contemporary literature in the sociology of religion.

⁴ These ethnographies express social concerns as diverse as the trauma of colonization among the Maoris in New Zealand (Sinclair 1992), historical identifications with the suffering of slave ancestors in Ghana (Schramm 2004), economic suffering and social humiliation in Brazil (King 2005), and gendered oppressions in Europe and the Middle East (Jansen and Kuhl 2008; Sered 2005).

⁵ See Bharati (1963), Gold (1988), Bhardwaj (1973), and Eck (2012).

⁶ I use the Anglicized word “Kanwar” to conform to popular usage. However, while the capitalized “Kanwar” is used for the pilgrimage, the appropriate transliteration, “*kānwar*,” is used to indicate the contraption used by the pilgrims to carry the sacred water.

containers suspended on either side of a pole. The pilgrimage derives its name from the contraption, called *kānwar*, and the water is usually carried to distant temples for libations at *śivalingas*.⁷ The source of the water is often the Ganga or rivers considered its local equivalents, and the offering is dedicated to Śiva, often addressed as Bholā (Simple One) or Bhole Baba (Simple Grandfather/Father).⁸ The pilgrim, accordingly, is a *bholā*, and in the vocative, *bhole!* Although there is little mention of the Kanwar as an organized festival in canonical texts, the phenomenon surely existed in the early nineteenth century when English travelers report seeing Kanwar pilgrims at many points during their journeys in the north Indian plains (Heber, 1828; Taylor, 1855).

This article focuses on a specific Kanwar phenomenon, in which Ganga water is collected from Hardwar, the renowned religious city at the site of the river's emergence from the Himalayas. In a fraction of cases, the water is sourced from the glacial origins of the river at Gaumukh or Gangotri.⁹ Although participants carry the sacred water to locations across northwestern India, a central site has historically been a renowned Śiva temple at Purā Māhādeva in the Meerut district of Uttar Pradesh. Colonial records from the late nineteenth century report two annual religious fairs at Purā, each involving several thousand participants. One of these was in February, on the occasion of Śivarātri, the other in July and August during the lunar month of Śrāvāṇa (Atkinson, 1874: 310). The numbers remained in the thousands or thereabout till about three decades ago. There is very little mention of the Kanwar in official records till the 1970s; according to my informants, only a few went for the pilgrimage following on specific vows. Sometime in the late 1980s or early 1990s, however, the pilgrimage to Hardwar in Śrāvāṇa started to grow geometrically. During his 1990 fieldwork in Hardwar, Lochtefeld (2010) reports estimates of a quarter million pilgrims, a number that had tripled by his second visit in 1996 (p. 193). In 2002, the number of pilgrims was estimated at four million (*Hindustan Times* 2006), growing to six million in 2004 (Tripathi 2004), seven million in 2009 (Statesman 2009), and above 12 million in 2010 and 2011 (*Hindustan Times* 2011b).

Young adult or adolescent males of a poor or lower-middle-class background from both rural and urban parts of the contiguous states of Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Punjab make up the majority of the participants. Participants often walk upward of a hundred miles—in some cases, several hundred miles—following extensive ritual codes. Most cover the journey either in flip-flops or barefoot, and many aggravate their travail by various types of ritual rigors. For example, one version called the Khaṛi (Standing) Kanwar is defined by the commitment that the *kānwar* will remain shoulder-borne throughout the journey. In another called the Dandavata

⁷ *Śivalinga* is the iconic representation of Śiva in the phallic form.

⁸ Across India, many rivers are often identified as variants of the Ganga, often with subterranean connections to this great north Indian river (see Feldhaus 2003).

⁹ "Kanwar" in this article henceforth refers only to this particular pilgrimage.

(Prostrate) Kanwar, subjects advance by repeatedly stretching themselves on the ground for a pre-determined part of the journey. Some find the journey easier than others, but, in general, most people either take recourse to pain-reducing medicines or *bhāng* (a cannabis product). In addition to the pilgrims on foot, the phenomenon includes tableaux that illustrate mythic episodes in various art forms, such as sculpture, paintings, and live performances. Regular *kānwar*s are also often decorated with red polyester or georgette strips, garlands, pictures of deities, streamers, tridents, and replicas of snakes, parrots, et cetera.

This essay is based on research involving a year of fieldwork spread over three pilgrimages and visits in between. The fieldwork included 60 in-depth interviews and extensive interactions with participants and their families and communities in pockets of a town and an adjacent village—both about a hundred miles from Hardwar. I also did participant observation in Hardwar, the shrines in the vicinity, and at transit camps. I did the pilgrimage myself in 2011, walking the distance of about a hundred miles between Hardwar and Purā Māhādeva. I was accompanied by a distant cousin, a 19–20-year-old male I will call K in this narrative. We took turns carrying a single *kānwar*, and joined other groups at various points.

THEORY AND ETHNOGRAPHY

In presenting my ethnographic observations, I was faced with a number of alternatives. I have already mentioned that I found the “innerworldly” and “otherworldly” distinction rather ineffective. Somewhat surprisingly, given his multi-dimensional perspective, Weber also insists that religion be treated as a “distinct realm of social life,” which countered my findings (see also Asad 1983). Continuing with classical sociology, some may be inclined to posit social anomie as a natural explanation—particularly in view of the spate of social changes in India in recent decades. This may look all the more pertinent since Durkheim’s ideas of collective representation and social structure have been central to some long and burning debates on Indian society and culture.¹⁰ Moreover, as I mentioned earlier, associated notions of cultural and religious identity are frequently cited in the literature to explain the surge in religious practices in India as well as globally (see, e.g., Appleby and Marty 2004; Beyer 2006; Kinnvall 2006; Lochtefeld 2010; Robertson and Chirico 1985). Then, of course, in pilgrimage studies, Turner and Turner’s (1978) pioneering study of Christian pilgrimages saw pilgrimage as a departure from a differentiated, hierarchical social structure into

¹⁰ Durkheimian structuralism has had an influential status in interpretations of Hindu religion and society through the works of scholars such as Louis Dumont and McKim Marriott. Dumont’s (1970 [1966]) thesis presenting the Hindu society as essentially hierarchical and other-world oriented has been extensively debated over four decades of research and continues to be a contentious topic. The structuralist tradition itself has been criticized for focusing on untenable grand theses to unravel the “mysteries” of Hindu society and religion (see Cohen 1998; Lochtefeld 2010; Hausner 2007).

a fluid, communitarian state. Withstanding many a critique, this exposition continues to be instructive (Coleman and Eade 2004; Morinis 1992). On the other hand, however, there is also evidence to support Eade and Sallnow's (2000) contrasting thesis that emphasizes contestation in pilgrimages.

Yet, my findings were incongruous with many of the propositions of these paradigms. My observations suggest that lack of psychological or institutional integration into a changing moral order, as implied by the notion of "anomie," is an insufficient explanation. Social and moral obligations, lack of economic opportunities, anxieties about the future, sexual anxieties, and social hierarchy were far more important variables than cognitive discomfiture (see also Gaines 1998).¹¹ Moreover, the notion does not translate well to an ethnographic plane. Likewise, my ethnographic data presented little evidence to call these actors, "religious nationalists," "fundamentalists," or "reactionaries;" such categories scarcely speak to their concerns and the textual density of the narratives and practices here. And where the Turners provided an evocative, groundbreaking analysis of Christian pilgrimages, formal notions such as "communitas" and "anti-structure" did not offer sufficient analytical purchase.

Instead, I found that the idiom of *performance*, informed by a range of scholarly and cultural traditions—including, most certainly, Hinduism—allowed a much more culturally and personally meaningful and, I would argue, sociologically substantive representation. Of course, the theater analogy pervades social scientific fields. In sociology, dramaturgy has been the primary resource for the symbolic interactionist tradition. Thus, Goffman's many excellent studies of the staged quality of social interaction, preceded by the foundational studies on the social constitution of the self by Cooley, Mead, and Blumer, have had a defining influence on the evolution of the discipline (see Blumer 1969; Cooley 1909; Goffman 1959; Mead 1934; see also Cerulo 1997). Butler's (1989) celebrated characterization of gender as a stylized repetition of bodily gestures and actions gave this formulation yet another critical edge. On other shores, anthropologists such as Turner and Geertz were attracted to the symbolic significance of rituals and the dramatic manner in which they played out structural facets of non-Western societies, their cultural beliefs, and social divisions (see Geertz 1973; Turner 1974). All these studies are, of course, informed by enduring literary, cultural, and metaphysical traditions and developments in twentieth century philosophical and psychological theories. If anything, this scholarship has systematized dramaturgical vocabulary and observations to produce formal tools for social scientific analysis.

Such systematization of dramaturgical analogy has contributed substantially to the advancement and expansion of modern social scientific research. However, my findings called for a return to the primary metaphor. I found it

¹¹ My problem with the idea of "anomie" is somewhat similar to the questions Gaines (1998) raised in her excellent study of the suicide of the Bergenfield County teenagers in *Teenage Wasteland*. The issue was not that they were not integrated into the moral order; rather, they were perhaps too integrated into the mores and expectations of a totalizing social order, which held little promise. The suicides were more fatalistic than they were anomic.

necessary to directly call on the ambivalence, play, and existential resonances of *performance*. More specifically, my respondents' own narratives reflected self-consciousness of their actions—and, for that matter, existence—as a game, a drama, *līla* (play). This is conditioned by the extraordinary status of this notion in Indian texts and popular culture. The highly ambivalent notion of *māyā*, which conceptualizes existence as play and where boundaries separating the real and illusion, truth and falsehood are continuously shifting and altogether permeable, figures very commonly in everyday discourse in India (O'Flaherty 1986: 117–119; Schechner 2002: 114). This notion of life and social obligations as transitory, “a game, a dream, a sport, a drama,” commonly mediates the encounter with everyday social reality (Schechner 2002: 113–114). Thus, the great Vedantic philosopher, Śaṅkara, argues in his commentary on the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad: “For, evolution in any sense (other than illusion) is not known to us, and is superfluous even if demonstrated” (Śaṅkara n.d. [1894]: 76). At the same time, however, I do not wish to suggest that this consciousness makes Indian popular culture by any means exceptional or different; *performance*, and therefore its apperception, is a trans-historical and trans-cultural fact of human life and consciousness.

In the following ethnography then, the word “performance” is used more to express the participants' own existential relation with the transience and arbitrariness of their life and social circumstances than to draw objective and critical attention to the dramatic or the institutionalized quality of their social interactions. I speak of “performance” not on a cognitive frame to emphasize the staged nature of human action but in an existential and materialist register, as the fact, the struggle, and lived anxiety of being-in-the-world. Moreover, I use *performance* as part of a pair with *recognition*. On this point, I feel it is important to evoke some of the philosophical issues here.

The term “recognition” has appropriately been so central to modern philosophy. Thus, in Hegel's seminal illustrations in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, it is the dynamics of the encounter with the other, the battle for recognition, which leads to the development of self-consciousness (Hegel 2009 [1807]: 86–92). This dialectic of recognition simultaneously shapes consciousness and constructs the human as a working and therefore historical being. However, if in the Hegelian project, recognition is conceived in the idiom of mastery—whether over the object or the other consciousness—and work recognized only for its historical value in a kind of universal, endless temporality, I would like to attract attention here to a different temporality—one Heidegger illustrated.

This is the finite temporality of being-in-the-world, of concerned human existence alongside others (see Heidegger 1962 [1927]). Instead of conceiving time as infinite in the form of world history, then, this perspective emphasizes the finite life of human beings who witness death all around and are conscious that one's time and the other's time—insofar as the two may be distinguishable—is always at risk. “As soon as . . . [one] comes to life . . . [one] is at once old enough to die” (Heidegger, 1962, [1927]: 289). Heidegger's radical intervention, which relied as much on “Eastern” philosophies as on ancient Greek society, foregrounded the lived paradoxes of ordinary human existence, perhaps for the

first time in Western philosophy.¹² Self-consciousness here is social and existential; being-in-the-world is also being-with-one-another. Sociological theory and anthropological studies have, of course, further demonstrated the many dimensions of social recognition.

It is this phenomenology of being-in-the-world and being with and responding to one another and to social expectations that my use of the terms “performance” and “recognition” should evoke in the following narrative. I believe such a phenomenological orientation also integrates Weber’s primary interest in *verstehen*, participants’ own perception of the significance of their actions; after all, in Nietzsche, a great factor connects Weber with Heidegger.

Even more importantly, Weber’s illustration of the dynamic play between religion and economy is instructive for the following representation. Formal economic institutions obviously provide a hegemonic field for social performance. “Performance” as a figure of achievement and ability, deserving of appropriate rewards and recognition, is a dominant theme in competitive economic life. In recent decades, this liberal capitalist ideology has been indeed imposing itself and increasingly setting the terms for social relations in India, much as it has been doing across the globe (see also Young 1999). Yet, the structure of the economy remains primarily informal, with widespread poverty and more than 90% of workers employed informally (National Commission for the Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector [NCEUS] 2008).¹³ This then fires the necessity of alternate fields, other avenues, to express one’s desires, talents, and obligations and to be recognized as a *self*. Such alternate avenues are critical to self-recognition as well as for maintaining social relationships. Religious performances step up to this challenge.

This essay demonstrates that the Kanwar performances enact as much the concerns of work as the dearth of work; they provide alternative works and other means of recognition. Much as social existence in general requires performance, whether for rewards or to meet social roles or enact relations as well as for mere survival, religious practice here is a continuation of performances that simultaneously complement, compensate, challenge, and play with mundane social life. To draw again on a popular cultural idiom, religious practice here operates as another *karma-bhūmi*, field of action or performance.¹⁴ One is as likely to see a repetition of the imperatives of the social order as its disavowal, as often the continuities of normal social cleavages as the production of new communities; as clearly the subject’s sufferance of the symbolic order as a subject

¹² See Heidegger’s (1971 [1959]) *On the Way to Language* for a brief look at his “Eastern” connections.

¹³ The NCEUS (2008) defines informal employment as consisting of “those working in unorganized enterprises or households, excluding regular workers with social security benefits, and the workers in the formal sector without any employment/social security benefits provided by employers” (p. 3). According to the data based on the 2004–2005 National Sample Survey (NSS), out of a total working population of 457.5 million, 422.6 million, that is, 92.4% is informally employed (National Commission for the Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector [NCEUS], 2008: 4).

¹⁴ On the different but morally equivalent fields of action and toil potentially available for life practice in Indian metaphysics, see Patrick Olivelle’s (1993) excellent thesis on the origins of the *Asrama* system.

finding her *jouissance* beyond it. In short, the social conditions and the existential struggles of the participants play out radically in these performances before/of/after the deities. Withdrawing conceptual concerns somewhat to the backstage, I will now move on to the ethnography. The following narrative begins with events and observations during the journey and then progressively weaves reports from the interviews.

WALKING STEADILY

This was the morning of the third day of our journey. We had spent the night on the median of a highway, the *kānwar* hanging by a signboard next to us. I kept waking to ensure the *kānwar* was safe; I also knew K went to sleep very late. That was a fundamental imperative of the pilgrimage—one could not allow the *kānwar* to be breached in any manner.

K, I thought, had been uncharacteristically lethargic that morning. By the time we started it was already past 10 a.m. At this time, most Kanwar participants would have covered a significant leg of their journey for the day and would be preparing to rest before it was too hot. I realized that K had been consciously procrastinating so that a group of acquaintances, several miles behind, could catch up with us. I acquiesced to waiting; however, after two hours, when I realized they were making a stopover much before they reached us, I could see the whole day vanishing and reasoned with K that we leave, especially since they were to head on a separate route from the very junction where we waited. K had been adamant, an attitude I found surprising at that time—only later would it occur to me that those seasoned pilgrims were well equipped with *bhāng*, which K had been starved for in my company. Submitting to my perseverance, however, K lifted the *kānwar* and wagered in displeasure, “Let us see, brother, how much you will walk!” Albeit I now wish K had told me the reason, that afternoon I was relieved to be back on track.

With his brisk pace, K soon disappeared with the *kānwar* as I trudged in the background carrying our belongings. Coming out of the town of Mujaffarnagar, the route merged into the wide national highway, which had been cleared for the pilgrims, save some local traffic one side of the median. Although a sizable portion of pilgrims had separated from Mujaffarnagar, we were on the main stream headed toward Delhi. Giant blisters covered the sole of my left foot—watery pockets had developed between the skin and the flesh covering my heel and toe. Besides, my ankles were swollen and knees almost locked, sending intermittent streaks of sharp pain. Thriving on ibuprofen, however, I went steadily at a reasonable pace keeping an eye out for K and our *kānwar*. The afternoon sun was at its worst, burning as much through the sky as off the tarred surface beneath. Few pilgrims remained on the road; most had found shelter, whether in the many makeshift roadside restaurants, the transit camps, or under the trees. “*Bhole*, where will you be doing the libations?” I asked a group of young men as I passed by them. “In Delhi,” they replied. Walking on, I joined a middle-aged

man, a skilled construction worker (*mistri*) by profession. I enquired how long he had been on the road. "I left Hardwar on the afternoon of the 24th," he replied (the same day we did). As the conversation continued:

There were several younger people with me, they left the day after. They were curious why I was leaving so early. I told them "You will all be on *bhāng*. . . . You will take long breaks, and then you will gallop like horses. I don't do *bhāng*; I prefer going at a steady pace." These people bring the *kānwar* and then they limp around for weeks in all kinds of gait. I am back to work the next day, without a sign. Then they are shocked at my endurance. I walk at a steady pace—neither too slow, nor fast.

Responding to another of my queries on the wish behind the pilgrimage, he would say, "No, I didn't ask for anything . . . except for peace and happiness in the family." He reminded me of another man of the same age group, I had known last year—also a skilled construction worker (*mistri*). I had hired him from the bus-stand in the town for a renovation job for my parents' house. The bus-stand was a central place where workers gathered every morning. Small construction work generally involves a *mistri* and one or two unskilled or semi-skilled assistants (*beldār* or shoveller); the going rate for the *mistri* was \$4–5/day, for the *beldār*, \$2–3/day. A client proceeding to their station would inevitably be surrounded, hustled by workers speaking over one another, offering their services. Exhorting and occasionally pulling the person in their directions, they point to one or the other of the *mistris* sitting on a roadside prop—a bicycle and a small tool-bag beside him—for leading the work. The *mistri*, usually a more aged person, may himself accost the client but, more often, protective of his position as it were, he looks with hope but waits patiently in expectation of being approached. The crowd usually thins out before noon—those unable to find a job returning home disappointed, hoping for better luck the next day. A desperate few linger around in the afternoon in hope of a stray opportunity.

An amiable, even-tempered man and an able and trustworthy worker, the *mistri* worked with us for several days before informing one evening that he would be leaving for the Kanwar. "I will stop by after the Kanwar (in a week's time)," he told me, "I will complete the job, if you should still need me." We had about a fortnight's work left, but he was aware that, rapidly running out of vacation time, I could not wait for his return. If there was any minor loss of opportunity here, he seemed unaffected by it; like all the previous years he had been bringing the *kānwar*, this was a pre-ordained choice. Although without the opportunity of an extended interview I knew little of the personal histories of either worker—and thereby of possible affects embedded in their pasts—the Kanwar here seemed a mandatory departure from the chores, the struggle, the banality and temptations, and perhaps the humiliations of everyday life. It was a sovereign time in the unmediated proximity of the Absolute. One of my elderly respondents expressed this imperative explicitly. A frail but sprightly man in his 60s, he was part of a large, joint family (that included his children and grandchildren) and worked as a security guard at a hostel in a nearby town (about 6 miles from his residence), to and from which he cycled under perilous highway traffic conditions every day. "I tell them in no uncertain words," he said, referring to

his family, “I will bring you every penny from 11 months of earnings, but one month, ah! will always belong to Bhole Nāth.”

Where Weberian ideal types have habituated many of us to think in exclusive terms, especially where it concerns the putative “flight from the world” character of Eastern religions—Hinduism being often cited—it would be a misperception to think of the Kanwar pilgrim’s departure in such a manner. This is not a flight from the world; rather, it addresses the world. It engages the world, gets a purchase on it, precisely through transcending it. *The pilgrimage is a social intervention*. In the above cases, the pilgrimage may be seen partly as a time—a place, occasion, and medium—to delimit and to rejuvenate from an existentially overwhelming, distressing, almost inhuman (or, perhaps, all too human) life of labor and suffering. For these men of a mature age, it helped reaffirm faith in long-held values and, in the middle of a phenomenal surfeit of commodities, images, and expectations, in the goodness of a temperate life. Traces of the paradoxical social significance of the pilgrimage of these veterans may be found in its resonances, at an earlier life stage, in the religiosity of Kamarpal—where the contradictions are less reconciled or are more animated.

ŚIVA’S WORTH

I met Kamarpal late in the journey at our final overnight stopover, a few miles from Purā Māhādeva. Next day, the 13th of the lunar month of Śrāvana, would be the first day of libations. We had decided to do the libations in Purā on the 13th, since we were already close. Besides, the prospect of libations in the Purā temple on the 14th was daunting. There would be enormous crowds with multiple queues extending over a mile, and stampede-like situations had been frequent in the past, despite hundreds of police officers engaged in crowd control and organization. Following a common practice, we would do the libations of the 14th at a neighborhood temple in our town.

For the overnight layover, we laid our plastic sheets in the open inside the compound of a local power station, which was relatively secluded from the turmoil and the loud music on the street. In addition to the block of electricity pillars and the office building, the compound included dozens of deserted houses with parched, cracked roofs and shrubs sprouting out of their splintered walls. This was a fate that the petty bourgeois, utilitarian rationality of these houses made for department employees shared with many public housing projects throughout the countryside. Although the small inhabited pocket of the compound had been cleaned, the wild growth in the vast deserted stretch seemed to have proliferated in the monsoons. No sooner did we ease on the ground than frogs started to come leaping over us. K did not like the sign; “Next, it will be a snake,” he said. He climbed one of the broken houses to check the terrace, but did not find it encouraging. Instead, we decided on eventually shifting to a couple of raised concrete platforms nearby. I was still lying on the ground, however, when a group of pilgrims spread their plastic sheets next to us. “These people

call me their guru,” Kamarpal, a medium-built, personable man in his early 30s introduced himself a while later.

There were four or five other men in the group, all much younger than Kamarpal. “If I am to be the guru, I tell them,” he said, “there will be no *bhāṅg* on the way. . . . We will do the libations at Purā on the 13th, followed by the village temple on the 14th.” As the conversation continued, Kamarpal would tell me, “I have always been a devotee of Bhole Nāth. I am a *mistri* . . . married, have two children—a girl and a boy. God has gifted my hands with a skill; with these hands I can support my family,” he said, trying to communicate an amount of worker’s pride. Kamarpal’s account showed an effort at self-motivation; it betrayed an anxiety to maintain moral courage and personal integrity amid unfavorable conditions. “One of my brothers is a police inspector, another is an insurance officer. My father was also a government servant. I am the youngest—the only black sheep in the family!” he said, with a smile in expectation of my solidarity. “I tried everywhere, but have not been able to find a proper job. I will get one though; my *guruji* says, ‘you will have success eventually; only, it will be late coming—there is a lot of struggle to your life.’” Kamarpal’s guru is a retired bank manager in Delhi, who was recommended to him several years ago.

I had told the referee, the guru must be a devotee of Bhole Nāth. Initially, I was wary, since *guruji* worshipped Gorakhnāth. But he pacified my doubts by informing that Gorakhnāth was Śiva’s *avatār*. He is a very accomplished man; he has made a temple in Delhi . . . and has supernatural powers. It was only last year that my brother was hospitalized for a long time because of a serious issue. . . . We were all very worried. I went to *guruji* in Delhi to seek his help. He said, ‘Don’t worry! He will be well by tomorrow.’ Indeed, my brother recovered miraculously over the next few days.

Kamarpal’s family members do not take kindly to his faith. “My brothers and father are inimical to my faith in Bhole Baba. They rebuke me for it regularly; ‘So, the “Baba” will deliver you?’ they say [deridingly].” Conscious of the paradoxes here, Kamarpal continued, with an ironic smile, “Even this time, when I was leaving for the Kanwar, my father stepped up to me, ready to hit—he hurled the choicest invectives. He abused Bhole Baba too.”

Kamarpal’s story demonstrates the struggles of existence in an economically poor but deeply hierarchical society. On one side is a hegemonic social order defined by an accumulative, “this-worldly” rationality, evident not only in a dominant bureaucratic or capitalist ethic in the secular sphere but also in the form of the nineteenth century Hindu reformist movement, the Arya Samaj. Aimed at a revival of a “rational” and “authentic” ancient Vedic Hinduism in light of the colonial encounters with European monotheism, this movement has left a particularly strong impression in this area (see Bayly 2012). Although I did not find an opportunity to verify it with Kamarpal, it is likely that his family was influenced by Arya Samaj.¹⁵ On the other side is the case of a person injured

¹⁵ I remember vividly from about two decades ago, how my grandfather—an Arya Samaji from a village close to Kamarpal’s—had sharply, and very unexpectedly, reprimanded a young relative who had ventured to enthusiastically describe his maiden Kanwar journey (a rather rare act in those days) to the old man, hoping for a pat on the back.

by this dominant ethic, and his recourse to Bhole Baba, the generous One, and the pilgrimage, as much to seek assistance in the dominant order as to find a different, absolute imaginary order as well as a niche sociality. Even as he struggles against the symbolic violence of a dominant social ethic, Kamarpal continues to perform and aspire for roles in the dominant order. Here, he seems to be in line with the commonly reiterated precept, “You must not relinquish your own responsibility; God will only help those who are willing to help themselves.”

Kamarpal’s predicament exemplifies Lacan’s brilliant figuration of the manner in which the symbolic, the imaginary, and the Real constitute, and are involved in, one another—like a Borromean Knot! “The trinity. . .—one and three in a single stroke” (Lacan 1998: 123). If the symbolic here is the dominant order (a rationality represented through the father, the brothers, and the market), and the imaginary is the character and mythology of Śiva as well as the ego-ideal, the guru (the bank manager, a person accomplished both in the symbolic and the imaginary order; an aspect which also translates into Kamarpal’s own ideal ego as a guru to others), the Real then is the traumatic, perhaps continuous encounter of these forces in Kamarpal’s particular historicity, which has been animating the more than dozen pilgrimages he has made as well as the everyday experience of living. In the Lacanian schema, then, the moments of the pilgrimage, the investment in Bhole Baba and the pilgrimage rituals, has a partly hysterical structure (Lacan 2007). It is the split, barred subject (\$) impelled by a traumatic core, the *objet a* (a) approaching the subject’s signifier (S1) in the symbolic system, by trying to expel the dominant symbolic order (S2)—as far as possible, for a brief yet compulsive period. Say, for the time of the pilgrimage or, equally, the time when he looked at his skilled hands with apparent pride (see Fig. 1; also see Lacan 2007: 31–38).

FIELDS OF PERFORMANCE, FIGURES OF RECOGNITION

If in this brief interaction with Kamarpal, one witnesses a relatively frayed relationship between the field of the pilgrimage and the social order, in other cases—despite the differences—this interaction may be far more cordial. “It was more than twenty years ago, still a teenager, that I first went for the pilgrimage. Ever since, I eagerly wait for this time of the year. . . . I anyway like walking. I walk a lot. . . . That is how I spend my time. I can walk the whole day.” Thus, one of my respondents, Shyam, narrated his fondness for the Kanwar. “I had been worshipping Bhole Baba since childhood and then happened to go for the Kanwar. . . . I entered the game early,” he concluded with a flourish. After all



Fig. 1. The hysteric’s discourse.

these years of Kanwars from Hardwar, the previous year he found a companion to go up to Gaumukh, the glacial source of the river 160 miles upstream from Hardwar, at the roof of the Himalayas. “The harder you work, the more you have to gain. . . . I can’t think of a pilgrimage merely from Hardwar anymore, it has to be Gaumukh.” Repetitively and delightfully describing the astonishing experience of an avalanche that almost wiped them off at the river source, he would continue, “The revered Ganga showed us her terrific form. . . . Huge boulders and massive snow surged out of nowhere at an unimaginable speed. The river took away one of our bags, we barely escaped. . . . When we told others of this near death experience, they would say, ‘But you went there to see the Ganga’s true form, didn’t you? That’s what She showed you then.’ . . . They were right!”

Shyam has a job that pays for his labor, a paltry \$100 a month. Coming from a Brahmana family, for Shyam, religious practice is a normative activity, and although members of his family insist he limit his religious observances to home, the pilgrimage is far too much of an attraction for him to follow their advice. In the labor and rewards of the pilgrimage, the phenomenal excesses of this journey, its repetitions and the terrific aspects alike of Śiva and the Ganga, Shyam seems to find his *jouissance*.¹⁶ It is as much a negation of the flatness of everyday life as it is a continuation, accentuation of the symptom, the walking, which is his peculiar way of traversing the world. What remains a symptom year long transforms into the central performance—with all its rewards in *jouissance*—during the pilgrimage.

If for Shyam, however, part of the power and effect of the Kanwar has been its recurring quality, for his partner in this audacious journey involving 260 miles of walking, a majority of it in the mountains, this was a first pilgrimage. Yaspal had been a volunteer caretaker of the small village temple for many years before he quit after “some resentful villagers” cast aspersions on his integrity. The responsibility of receiving returning pilgrims at the temple and attending to their ritual and commensal requirements had prevented Yaspal from himself going for the pilgrimage all these years. On this inaugural journey itself then, he collaborated with Shyam—a veteran, earnest pilgrim—on a demanding encounter with the great goddess at the source. “The Ganga has always held a special attraction for me; after all, in our lands, She is the only manifest One.” But there was a pensive touch to Yaspal’s description of his religious attitude.

The temple duties meant a lot to me. I was not pleased with this loss of responsibility. That was how I contemplated spending my life. . . . in the service of the temple and its deities. I had refused marriage and family life as well; however, when my married, younger brother died a few years ago, my parents coerced me into marriage.

Only briefly would Yaspal mention the avalanche in Gaumukh, although he had lost his bag and money to it. Instead, the protracted time with the goddess, its mighty phenomenal effects seemed more an avenue for solace after the long and much reminisced association with the small, peaceable village temple.

¹⁶ See O’Flaherty’s (1981) excellent *Śiva: The Erotic Ascetic* for phenomenal descriptions of Śiva.

A person with a conspicuously contemplative aspect, Yaspal told me several stories of his experiences tending to the temple idols and the visitations of the deities in his dreams. “Only the saints,” he would continue, “can experience the *spirituality* of the world, the true phenomenal effect of existence, in their daily living; most of us only get glimpses of it in our sleep.”¹⁷

Not all pilgrims, however, subsist in the moderation we find in the above cases. In other instances, the correspondence between the normative attitudes of the pilgrimage and the dominant social order can be much more abrupt, and their differences, even when they supplement one another, much more explicit. A veritable majority of Kanwar pilgrims are young men taking their first steps in adulthood. In highly challenging and uncertain economic conditions, amid a mad rush of likewise vying numbers, where the prospects of stable and respectable employment or life course are faint and illusive, these are daunting steps by all means. This anxiety-laden experience is further intensified by expectations and desires provoked by the continuous spectral presence of a global array of aspirations and commodities, which are indeed expertly coded to tantalize and provoke (see Singh 2012). For many then, the demands and the joys of the pilgrimage provide another, voluntary and accessible field of performance. This is an open field, a field without any gated entries or institutional embargoes, and yet, a demanding and arduous field in which to practice and prove one’s resolve and gifts in a setting that often gains a competitive edge. At the same time, it is the field of the Absolute, and, although families like Kamarpal’s are not uncommon, the pilgrims are usually assured that their labor and good faith will be recognized by their dear ones. Here, recognition from the family is particularly crucial, since it is from the claims and expectations of the family that the most emotionally swaying and insistent—at times, nagging—demands emerge.

A couple of miles before the power station, we decided on a break at a tube-well in the middle of sugarcane and paddy fields. Removing my blistered, swollen—in brief, indisposed—feet off a pair of ill-fitting shoes and saggy socks, I limped into the water pool. After a day of drudgery in muggy weather, the pleasure of sinking in a copious stream of refreshing water rivaled, and multiplied, the relief of being close to the end of the journey. I had been relishing the water for a while, with K taking time off in the sugarcane fields, when a group of slender young men—the oldest of them perhaps no more than 18 or 19 years of age—dropped anchor at our station. Drinking off the water spout, they wished to join the pool. The eldest got into a brief conversation with me, even as another group of adult men took rest on a prop by the adjacent room. He continued the conversation, telling how they had walked today from the highway junction, about 25 miles away, with barely a break. In the flow of this moment of pride he could not resist a wager: “No offence to the Baba’s grace, *bhole*, but I am ready to bet that none in this procession of pilgrims could beat us. I believe we could outpace anyone to the temple.” Not hesitant to acknowledge my own battered condition—which may have partly provoked the hubris—I nevertheless

¹⁷ Yaspal used the English term “spirituality.”

enjoyed persisting with the game. “But,” I said, “my brother might be willing to take a dare.” As he inquired of his whereabouts, I pointed to K, who was just coming out of the sugarcane fields and must have appeared a worthy rival. When he drew close, I informed K of the wager. “What is at stake?” K asked him with a straight face. Now dismissive of the challenge, he replied, “Nothing, *bhole* . . . only, may whoever makes it first also offer their libations first.” K was unimpressed. The situation turned normal; after a brief lapse into mirth, the solemnity of the occasion dawned. One of the pilgrims who had joined later had overheard the claim. Nursing two large blisters on one of his toes, he remarked to his colleagues, “The *bholas* there claim none can beat them to the temple.” The others nodded somewhat unapprovingly but seemed to take it in good humor. “This is my third pilgrimage,” he continued, “I always get these blisters. . . . They are always at the same spot.” Later, K would boast to me privately regarding the wager, “I’d have turned him into a whirling gig, but what is the point of damaging one’s body.”

Referring to their own behavioral lapses, two brothers I interviewed— young men working in the liquor business—would say, “Sometimes, you have a dream or an event which reminds you of an oversight, of a misconduct. . . . You fold your hands and ask for Bhole’s forgiveness, and try to be careful thereafter.” However, a competitive pulse and an anxiety of social performance in the middle of uncertain and arbitrary conditions could be seen in the very register of their religious experiences. In league with an uncle—whom they idolized as a brilliant and astute person, who, although educated only up to primary school, had successfully negotiated the challenges of liquor retail—the two brothers had become part of a real estate and liquor retail enterprise. Both were very religious; they had both made the pilgrimage multiple times and were ardent devotees of Sai Baba. This renowned fakir of the nineteenth century with his shrine in Shirdi (Maharashtra) has an extensive following throughout the country. The two brothers thus described their faith in Śiva and Sai Baba and their religious experiences:

The pilgrimage is a lot of joy. It is much fun and pleasure. . . . One gets immersed in the flavor of Bhole. We never had *bhāng* ourselves, though some of our friends did. . . . No alcohol, of course, but *bhāng* is Bhole’s ritual gift. [One recites: *Bhāng* and *dhatūrā* on his body;¹⁸ his neck adorned with snakes; day in and day out; Bholā drinks cups of *bhāng*] . . . Bhole Baba has always granted us everything we asked. . . . If you ask with true faith, Baba will certainly grant it. . . . Of course, God will not come to you to claim that He fulfilled your desire. It is for man to understand that.

For much of our conversation, the brothers spoke in tandem, in a rapid, agitated tempo projecting on the deities an often impetuous, transferenceal relationship. On one occasion, for example, the younger had a dream:

It was about 8 p.m. in the evening, and I had slipped into slumber, when I had a dream. . . . I saw Sai Baba standing there, he as if shook my legs to wake me up. “You had promised to visit Shirdi, after the contract was announced, . . . but you did not come.” [Now speaking over one another] We had promised to visit Shirdi, after the contract, . . . once

¹⁸ *Dhatūrā* or thorn apple is known both for its poisonous and hallucinogenic properties.

we were free. The very next day, immediately, we took the train to Shirdi. . . . No seats were available, . . . but we sat on the floor, and later paid the ticket collector five times the fare to get seats.

Sai Baba is well known for the miraculous assistance he provides to his devotees. But in the desire of the brothers, craving after an uncertain success in social conditions where there is much to chance and at an age with a lot at stake, where the gap between success and failure is as yawning as it is fickle and arbitrary and where everything depends on a little luck, a little help—a hardly recognizable divine hand, so to speak—I got the sense of an anxious resort to supernatural assistance. And although the brothers appeared to be workaholics, single-mindedly pursuing success under anomic circumstances, it was on the deities that they seemed to transfer their anxieties.

During the pilgrimage, in general, I found that a competitive banter was common when the pilgrims rested, after suspending their *kānwar*s aside, a conversation I could not conceive taking place with the *kānwar* shoulder borne. Thus, on the first day itself when a pilgrim we met *en route* said he would be doing the libations 200 miles away in Vrindavan, my colleagues—who were proud of their strides—later privately expressed their incredulity, questioning how he could possibly make it with his “sluggish pace.”¹⁹ In fact, many of my respondents portrayed a sense of achievement in their ability to make the journey in a short time. Amma, an elderly woman I interviewed, for example, a veteran who had mentored several younger women on the pilgrimage, took pride in claims to make the journey in a short time but for the encumbrance of the novices. Likewise, she rarely shied of boasting of her leadership skills, for example, in breaking through police cordons to facilitate shorter and preferred routes for pilgrims who would follow her cheering, or her ascetic faith and endurance in avoiding any indulgence during the pilgrimage and living merely on chai and homemade sweets she would carry. But Amma too had her rivals.

“That woman had a rough time this year; she was bedridden for almost two weeks,” Shamli told us dismissively. Shamli was a young and vivacious married woman who lived close to the one-bedroom worker’s quarter in which Amma lived with her son’s family.²⁰ Shamli herself lived with her family in a tiny shack, badly flooded by rain water this monsoon, in a slum called the Harijan Basti, since most residents belonged to the “untouchable” community, traditionally and rhetorically identified with sanitation work.²¹ Shamli’s although, as she told us, was a Brahmana family. She worked as a full-time maid at a middle-class house, while her husband—an alcoholic whom she had finally been able to persuade into abstinence after many years of effort—usually scoured for casual, unskilled work. Shamli had been going for the

¹⁹ We were unaware that in many parts, the libations continue the whole month of Śrāvana.

²⁰ These quarters had been occupied by former workers after the closure of the local mill and were now traded through transactions in an informal economy.

²¹ “Harijan” (God’s People) was a term popularized by Mahatma Gandhi as a substitute for the various derogatory labels often used to describe the “untouchable” community in colonial India. The term has had a controversial career, interpreted positively by some and criticized as “condescending” by others (see Shah 2001). “*Basti*” means a settlement.

pilgrimage for 8 or 9 years with her friends; this year, however, she brought the Khaṛi Kanwar. The Khaṛi (Standing) Kanwar is a demanding version of the pilgrimage, defined by the rule that the *kānwar* will not rest; the person carrying the *kānwar* must remain upright through the length of the journey. Thus, the brief relief the pilgrim could obtain would be from companions willing to stand with the *kānwar*, while she rested.

Several years ago, my daughter's leg was struck by polio. She had a prolonged fever, and she came out of it with one of her legs become thin as a twig. I kept her in the private hospital for 15 days, but to no advantage. The doctors were helpless. I beseeched Baba to heal my daughter . . . promising she will bring him a Khaṛi Kanwar. We made the journey this year; this is the first time I was confident she would be able to pull it off. . . . She is, of course, very young, so I carried the *kānwar* most of the way. Her brother helped me a lot; he would stand with the *kānwar* for hours, allowing me a nap. The father, however, did not; . . . he never missed his sleep. He had tried hard to dissuade me, saying it would be too strenuous, but I remained firm and told him, "I will do it, why are you bothered?" I was back to work the day after the pilgrimage. I will be doing another pilgrimage next year to make a pair.

In addition to the annual Kanwar pilgrimages, Shamli visits regularly a famous temple of Baba Mohan Ram in Bhiwadi (Rajasthan), about 75 miles from her town. She lights an oil lamp there on the second day of every lunar month as part of the rituals. ("The journey is inexpensive; to and fro, it only costs \$2 by train"). One of the major references of Shamli's religious practice—one she shares with several of her friends and perhaps a certain social class in general—is a delinquent, alcoholic partner. This situation not only leaves the burden of family maintenance completely on the woman but also suppresses any hope of a better future. And yet, amid the pain and drudgery of life, the promise of the future is the primary, perhaps the only viable, source of inspiration. "I have been praying to Mohan Baba for a better house, and requesting that the kids' father abstain from alcohol, and be more responsible. He used to be an alcoholic . . . but is now reformed." The future here is the solace of the present. The priority of the future in this experience of time is in agreement with existentialist phenomenology, where temporality is figured in the unity of a future that constitutes the present in reference to a having-been (Heidegger 1962 [1927]: 378). As the becoming of the future, the present is the active shaping of the world in the form of work. A temporality that renounces this anticipatory character, this care for the future, usually has little patience with work. "My husband was a complete alcoholic; he would rarely work, and not give us any money—now, however, he has quit drinking, and he turns every penny in." "Yes, every penny," rhymed the kids, laughing. "I give him the pocket money from my own hands. . . . He went to Mohan Baba twice with me, and took an oath not to drink again. . . . He cannot drink anymore. . . . If he does, he throws up," she said, confidently reposing faith in an automatism of response.

The deity here mediates among the subjects and their temporal horizons; the work of the deity makes the foci of a community among otherwise divided subjects. One may think of the "throwing up" either as possession by the deity, as Shamli seems to imply, or the subject's registration of the prohibited behavior

as an alienation from the ethical subject of the word addressed to the deity and to the cherished dreams and hopes of one's loved ones.

Shamli's paradoxes echo in her description of her friend who lives close by and works in a factory in another town. "We have been going together for the pilgrimage all these years. The poor fellow leaves at six in the morning after preparing meals for everyone, and returns at eight in the evening to more drudgery. Her husband is an alcoholic . . . but he has quit now. 'We will not take you for the pilgrimage with us, if you drink,' we have warned him." These performances in a different, radical temporality as though generate hope and community—and therefore work—in an otherwise disillusioning and alienating, if not punitive, social order, which holds scarce promise. "Their father rested for a day, but when I have no rest myself, how could I allow him to rest any longer," Shamli had continued, underlining her motivation to improve her situation. Beyond the push on the family, her excellence during the pilgrimage was, of course, for Shamli, an evidence or assertion of her own performance. It was a means of self-encouragement; excellence here was an indication, a continuation of her excellence in daily life—an inference that likewise echoed from the unusual fortitude of her friend.

Where the ability to pull off the pilgrimage in relative comfort was regarded as commendable—as much a sign of one's ability as of good faith—inordinate problems were frequently traced either to a lack of good faith (although those who suffer obviously give little credence to such an explanation) or to inconsiderate acts of family members back home. Thus, when one of the women in her group got lost and went through a rough time in finding her way back home alone, Amma blamed her bad faith. "At one time in the journey, she said she was going looking for water, but when we interrogated her later, she admitted to being at the public feast nearby." "She succumbed to greed," Amma continued, "and therefore lost the correct path." This message of moral rectitude is usually glossed as sincerity of faith; thus, inability to follow rituals properly and lack of sincere faith may be blamed for physical problems during the pilgrimage, when not excused for lack of habit, practice, or lifestyle.

More commonly, however, physical suffering is explained by analogies to the inconsiderate acts of family members. Thus, blisters in the wayfarer's feet were an effect of bread thrown on a hot pan in the kitchen at home or from the frizzle when frying food. Beating clothes when washing or, worse, the bad *karma* of hitting a stray or domestic animal could hurt the pilgrim. As a respondent narrated, "One of my friends suddenly felt as if something had hit him; we called his home; his little brother had just hit a dog with a stick." Another: "My friend had a hard time, he had ulcers all over his feet. . . . When we asked after returning, we realized his mother had continued to fry food, and wash clothes as usual." Pilgrims would usually call home to tell their families when they would be lifting the Kanwar so that they could refrain from such activities thereafter. Thus, for example, in Hardwar, a disabled, emaciated middle-aged man (both his legs were paralyzed by poliomyelitis) borrowed our phone to ask his mother to refrain from frying food as he prepared to carry the Kanwar on his

hand-driven tricycle. Likewise, K advised me several times to call home for this safeguard; rather skeptical in this respect, however, I evaded what appeared to be a self-indulgent demand.

Although women feature in the pilgrimage, as mentioned previously, a majority of the participants are young men, and many of the common motifs reflect this social characteristic. Thus, the pilgrimages—that often begin at a very young age—are, for many, the first steps into maturity, on the road away from home, and the above expectations seem to carry over the solicitude of the family, particularly of doting mothers. They vindicate the proof of a home; the promise of security. If the pilgrimage is where he sets out to perform—and, short of many alternate avenues, will continue to perform both his drive and dejection for years to come—if this is where he will ceaselessly prove his sincerity, good faith, and apparent competence in meeting his promise and the family's expectations, such expected sacrifices from the family may be deemed as demands or demonstrations of recognition. In the field of the pilgrimage, in this chosen and open site of action, the pilgrim will likewise showcase and be recognized for many of her niche talents.

It is a captivating sight to watch on the *ghats* (river banks) of Hardwar scores of pilgrims diligently decorate their *kānwars* during the festival. In a majority of cases, a partly decorated or bare frame is purchased from the market—this includes two small baskets attached to a bamboo stick with an arch made of split bamboo at the top. The pilgrim would then decorate the frame with ribbons, streamers, garlands, and pictures and insignia of deities. At times, plastic replicas of snakes and parrots—the former a sign of Śiva, the latter regarded a pleasant creature, also a sign of felicity—are tied to the ends of the stick. Although one may be critical of the cheap, even tasteless quality of some of the generic decorative items—“Yes, one has to put on all this trivia!” one remarked—pilgrims prepare their *kānwars* with delicate care. The baskets are laid with *kusha* grass [halfa grass] in which the *Gangajal* (Ganga water) is kept, either in many tiny bottles or a couple of bottles, containing about a quart of water each, on either side.

Those surer of their skills go to great lengths to craft special *kānwars*; many such veterans lead groups of pilgrims as mentors or gurus. They often bring the basic frame of the *kānwar* with them, prepared at home, leaving all decoration to the time of the pilgrimage. A particularly popular structure this year was of a *śivalinga* seated on a large platform, with a snake's hood shading over it, and surrounded by pillars—all made with colorful, embroidered silky cloths stretched around frames. Usually, pictures of Śiva, Pārvaṭi, or Gaṇeśa would be mounted in front, with a vessel for lighting incense, and the whole structure would rest in the middle of two solid poles, which required four to carry. In some cases, a small pump and battery would be hidden below the structure to artfully provide a continuous trickle of *Gangajal* [Ganga water] on the *śivalinga* and to illuminate the *kānwar* with string lights at night. I could not find an opportunity to interview a guru making the decorations—it would have been imprudent, and impossible, to interrupt their intense absorption in the work. But I watched closely on several occasions as one of these veterans brought up a

fine piece of work out of a bare structure minutely attending to every detail, their pride in their work resonating in the pride and admiration of other group members attending on the master's craft and helping as apprentices. More than once, we were informed by an apprentice, "The guru is a master at his work; he has been doing this for more than a decade—he likes to do every bit of it with his own hands." Although conscious of the strangers' attention, the guru would keep attending to his craft.

RELIGION AND THE "STRONG DISCOURSE"

Instead of otherworldly "flight from the world," this research found the religious way here to be an alternate medium of existence, a possibility or search for sovereign subsistence. It operated as another field for enacting one's being human, being alive, or being someone in the context of an alienating, dehumanizing symbolic order. The pilgrimage, I found, intervenes in the social order through the very figures and moments of transcendence. It provides a field for the participants to address their desires and immediate social responsibilities and perform to the unique challenges of an economically destitute yet very hierarchical society, increasingly dominated by a liberal capitalist social logic. This is an open field, one without any gated entries or institutional constraints, and yet, a challenging and productive site to practice and prove one's resolve, gifts, and good faith.

In his insightful study of Protestantism, Weber found that the Protestant religious ethic and practice conditioned the subjective orientation to work. It was in work and through evaluating each other in terms of capital accumulation and behavioral propriety that the Protestants morally and socially engaged themselves in the world.

Today, the ethic and accumulation of capital is, of course, the only game in town. In a global social order increasingly governed by neo-liberal ideology, capitalist economic institutions have become the only regular, legitimate option for "work," almost the only socially legible text to demonstrate one's ability and moral sincerity. As Bourdieu pointed out in a compelling analogy with the imposing power of the psychiatric discourse in the mental asylum, the neo-liberal discourse has all the features of Goffman's "strong discourse" (Bourdieu 1998; Goffman 1961). This is "a type [of discourse] which is almost impossible to combat and whose 'realism' is difficult to question because . . . it represents the co-ordinated actions of all the forces which count, all forces which combine in giving reality the shape it has" (Bauman 1999: 28). Despite its imposing presence and authority, however, this remains an exclusive game, with only a selected, disciplined few allowed in. It is in the context of such exclusions and their overwhelming effects on being in the world that, I have argued, these religious performances should be considered.

These performances demonstrate simultaneously the features of social existence that find wide expression in the contemporary economy and others it

barely acknowledges. For example, the competitive banter, Amma's self-praise of her leadership, the exchanges by the tube-well, the frequent wagers, the careerist motivations of the brothers in the liquor business, all these show the competitive dimension of social relations. At some level, these performances reiterate the economy, its expectations. They often do so in anxious anticipation, or preparation, I would suggest, since many of the participants are at the threshold of adulthood, a life stage where "serious" performance should soon be delivered. Conscious of the heavy odds stacked against a predictable career in the organized economy, this sociality is also practicing for the unpredictable expectations and norms, the scarcity, and life consequences of the informal economy (on informality, see Böröcz 2000; Polanyi 1957).

Not everyone, however, is young or male, nor is competitiveness the primary attitude. The labor, the pain, the resolve, and the moral fortitude demonstrated here is also a performance of the suffering of everyday life, a demonstration of one's unrecognized excellence and of the will to persist and deliver on responsibilities to one's loved ones. With all its wasteful expenditures and excesses, it is also a festive celebration of life at the margins of the economy (see Kristeva 2002: 425–430; Singh forthcoming).

While the economy is obviously a dominant force in the participants' lives and, consequently, has been a recurring figure in the above narrative, by no means does it exhaust life orientations. The artistic works, the labors of the journey, the identification with Śiva, the phenomenal appeal of the river goddess, the many opportunities for showing one's tastes, talents, and predilections, and the communitarian sociality address timeless concerns of human existence. But then, the iron cage has scarcely any patience or place for such desires and imperatives. The religious performances simultaneously prepare for, challenge, and cavort with this totalizing social and economic order.

As I argued in the introduction, contemporary scholars are surprisingly unanimous in seeing the contemporary global popularity of religion as a reactionary assertion of cultural identity in the face of social change and modernization. While I have refrained from an extensive exegesis of this discourse, my research findings suggest that this proposition advances a normative, uncritical understanding of capitalism (see Singh 2011). It puts the focus on cultural issues without attending properly to social and existential suffering and implicitly assumes liberal capitalism as a final, universal, and, in the end, justified game. My research drawing on classical theory instead demonstrates the deep significance of religious practices in allowing ordinary subjects to face and to live meaningful social lives amid an imposing global capitalist order. It also asks for renewed attention to the many literary and metaphysical connotations of the dramaturgical metaphors. Says Śaṅkara in his *Bhāṣya* on Gauḍapāda's *Kārikā* (3.18):

It may be urged in this connection, that when choice has to be made between the metaphorical and actual sense of words, the latter ought to prevail. We say—no. (Śaṅkara n.d. [1894]: 76)

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