LIVING FOLK RELIGIONS

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BHAIRAVA, HANUMĀN, AND THE DEIFIED DEAD

A Material Study of Vernacular, Official, and Folk Registers of Living Hinduism in Vārāṇasī, North India

Seth Ligo

Introduction

In the study of living Hindu traditions, multiplicity is to be expected. A single site, story, person, or deity can be important to multiple traditions, or to a single tradition in multiple ways. Paying attention to multiplicity and the many networks that pass through a single phenomenon enriches and illuminates our understanding of Hindu worlds as they actually exist and function—that is to say, as they are lived, rather than as they are prescribed or described in an abstract, ideal form. In the past, scholars of South Asian religions have often reduced multiplicity to a binary of 'little' and 'great' traditions[1] in an effort to make sense of variation within a religious system. This bifurcation tended to privilege the hierarchical, unitary, and textual 'great' traditions, of which 'little' traditions were incomplete, corrupted, or contaminated derivations. A matriarch's household ritual might, for example, have been seen as a modified and simplified version of a textually prescribed priestly rite.

The little/great model parallels the descriptive work of American Folk Studies pioneer Don Yoder, who traced the use of the label 'folk religion' as the binary complement of 'official religion' (69). Yoder's student Leonard Primiano famously challenged his teacher's reification of the folk/official divide, arguing that there was effectively only one religious register: the vernacular. Official religion, argued Primiano, is an abstraction, perhaps gestured toward but never actually lived in the real world. On the other hand, he contended that folk religion as the religious activity of the masses or as a counterpoint to official religion fails to recognize that individuals constantly negotiate and interpret their own beliefs and actions in response to specific contexts (Primiano 45–51).

The present study illustrates the importance of Primiano's call to focus on individual, contextual, vernacular religion while demonstrating the importance

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of recognizing distinct folk and official registers. Here, I take folk religion not to be the generic religion of the masses, but of a particular, limited population—a folk. Official religion in my account is not an unrealized abstraction, but a concerted political and social effort to emphasize and homogenize select elements of a religious tradition. Awareness of these registers facilitates the present study of Bhairava—a protective Hindu deity who is terrifying yet also beloved—in the context of the north Indian sacred city of Vārāṇasī. Bhairava's correspondence with other protectors, namely the deified dead (former community members who have taken on supernatural status, here exemplary of the folk register) and the Hindu god Hanumān (here exemplary of the official register), demonstrates the complexity of vernacular religion, and the enduring utility of 'folk' and 'official' categories.

Vārāṇasī—A Multi-layered City

To understand vernacular religious processes of contextual negotiation and interpretation—what I will refer to as reckoning—in Vārāṇasī, we must first be aware of the city's own context and history as a sacred site in broader Hindu sacred landscapes. Jutting from the western bank of the Gaṅgā (Ganges River) in northern India, Vārāṇasī (a.k.a. Banāras or Kāśī) lies some twelve hours' road journey from New Delhi to the west, Kolkata to the east (each ~420 miles), and Kathmandu to the north (~220 miles; there are mountains), making it an important hub along routes connecting these political, economic, and religious centers. A tradition as variegated as Hinduism has no single heart, but Vārāṇasī—semi-submerged in a river that is a living goddess, cradled in the Ganges Basin, in the middle of the historical territories of the Pala and Gupta empires, and participating in trans-regional sacred networks (such as those of the *Jyotir Liṅgas* and the *Śakti Pīṭhas*)—is an important and thoroughly integrated feature of Hindu sacred geography. Though touted as timeless, this importance was first codified in the seventh- to ninth-century *Early Skanda Purāṇa*, which presents Vārāṇasī as a sort of crown jewel of north Indian sacred geography. In addition to featuring in broader networks of sacred sites, Vārāṇasī also came to incorporate those sites and networks by proxy, a process well under way by fourteenth-century addition of the *Kāśī Khaṇḍa* (*Section on Kāśī*, i.e. Vārāṇasī) to the *Skanda Purāṇa*. Today, the *Kāśī Khaṇḍa* and similar compendia are cited as authoritative registers listing the sacred mountains, rivers, cities, temples, and even continent-spanning pilgrimage routes present in the city by proxy. It follows that the potency and efficacy of those sites are also present, and it is commonly held that a pilgrimage to Vārāṇasī is effectively a pilgrimage to the entirety of Hindu sacred territory. Merely entering the city is said to remove the residue of one's past misdeeds, no matter how heinous. With one's karmic sebum sloughed, liberation is immanent.

Given Vārāṇasī's trans-regional—even global—importance, one might presume the city to be clearly structured and organized, its contents corresponding to precise descriptions present in the Purāṇas and other compendia, and its

sacred geography demonstrative of Hindu theology and cosmology (see Singh's *Banāras Region, Towards the Pilgrimage Archetype*). This is overwhelmingly not the case (see Ligo). As noted above, Primiano argues that 'what scholars have referred to as "official" religion does not, in fact, exist,' meaning there is no individual or group that lives entirely, and exclusively, in keeping with religious ideals (45). We can extend this claim to posit that no city exists in complete conformity to ideal prescription. There are, however, efforts to quite literally construct an official sense of sacred space, and by extension an official Hinduism, in Vārāṇasī. Here the official is not an abstract ideal, but a curatorial program reflecting a certain religious and social reckoning, intended to assert a homogenous, pan-Indian Hinduism. Exemplary of such efforts is the Kāśī Viśvanātha Corridor, inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, which carves through the city from the banks of the Gaṅgā to its most famous temple, Viśvanātha Mandir.[2] The corridor increases and directs pilgrimage traffic to reinforce a particular politicized understanding of the city: namely that the city has a single essence, and that it is the unrivaled, official heart of Hinduism. Modi was elected Prime Minister twice from the Vārāṇasī constituency, and this, along with his celebration of the corridor project, present him as champion of the country, the city, and by extension, official Hinduism.

But Vārāṇasī is also blanketed in hundreds of small shrines and temples, the majority of which focus on local deities, or local iterations of more mainstream gods and goddesses (see Haskett; Singh, *Banāras Region*). Despite the prominence in guidebooks and pilgrimage traffic of a few temples of trans-regional importance, it is these smaller shrines that constitute the vernacular religion of the residents of Vārāṇasī, and truly inform and shape its sacred landscape. Vernacular religion is not religion as it 'could' or 'should' be, but as Primiano puts it, '…religion as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it' (44). He is careful to note that the vernacular is not just a rebranding of the 'folk' (42), but rather a corrective to the limited scope of what can be addressed in the study of folk religion (51). With the 'official' disrupted and the 'folk' discarded, Primiano urges scholars of religion to acknowledge that the vernacular is all there is, and all there ever was. And yet the vernacular is never homogenous. What do we do with a highly diverse, coincidental religious context such as that of Vārāṇasī, where the vernacular—whether it be in language or architecture or religion—can change from one street to the next, and one generation to the next?

The following case study of Deurā village at the city's periphery, and consideration of Bhairava networks in Vārāṇasī more broadly, demonstrate the importance of recognizing at least three distinct but interrelated registers composing an expanded understanding of vernacular religion, registers we will refer to as folk, vernacular, and official. The vernacular is still preeminent, but it is broadly shaped by its interaction with the folk, and these folk and vernacular registers are made more distinct by interventions of the official, which wishes to co-opt them.

Bhairava, the Deified Dead, and Hanumān in Deurā Village

There is a site in Deurā village, on the southwestern edge of Vārāṇasī, where folk, vernacular, and official registers of lived religion clearly coincide. Adjacent to a large pond, the site is just inside the Pañcakrośī Yātrā, a pilgrimage route marking the border of Vārāṇasī's sacred territory (see Singh's *Toward a Pilgrimage Archetype*; Gengnagel's *Visualized Texts*). It is difficult to precisely date the site's three prominent features, but the relative chronology is clear. The newest and largest is a ~25-square-foot marble temple dedicated to Hanumān, a simian deity famous for his devotion and heroism in the great Indian epic the *Rāmāyaṇa*. A plaque records a consecration date of 2007. Significantly older and smaller is a shrine containing Unmatta (wild) Bhairava. About three feet square and five feet tall, the shrine is topped by a rectangular pyramid with slightly convex sides, and the whole structure is painted vermilion. This shrine form is very common, and appears throughout Vārāṇasī. A small placard identifies the shrine's occupant as the Unmatta Bhairava mentioned in the *Kāśī Khaṇḍa*, the addendum to the *Skanda Purāṇa* that lists sacred sites in Vārāṇasī. The third and oldest feature sits in the open: a four-foot-tall conical form with a small niche cut into one side, painted the same vermilion as the Unmatta Bhairava shrine. This is a *satī sthāla*—a place (*sthāla*) where a woman was ritually immolated on her late husband's funeral pyre, a process referred to as committing *satī*.[3] Such a death can be seen as extraordinary, heroic, and tied to a specific place, meaning instances of s*atī* meet the criteria for the 'deified dead' who remain present in and connected to their communities post-mortem (Coccari 'Bīr Bābās of Banāras' 253; 'Protection and Identity' 132). *Satī Mā Kī Jay*, or Victory to Mother Satī, is written along the base below a sketch of a woman in white, the color of widowhood.

This site must be considered in relation to the nearby village of Deurā. Its proximity to water and placement just beyond the village's border makes it a viable site for cremation, and its position at the turnoff from a main thoroughfare that leads to the village proper makes it a site warranting protection. *Satīs*, like other instances of the deified dead, are historical persons who remain connected to their communities. They have the potential to terrorize or protect, depending on the quality of care offered by their community (Coccari, 'Protection and Identity,' 130, 132, 139). They are hyperlocal, unique deities, and it seems that this is Deurā's own *satī*, still actively propitiated for protection.[4] Tied to a single population, irreproducible, and non-transferrable, this *satī* and other instances of the deified dead are folk deities in a direct and literal sense.

The function of protection at this site extends to the presence of Unmatta Bhairava and Hanumān. Though neither is local or unique like the *satī*, both are protectors, especially of boundaries between the wild and the domestic. This, and their association with the liminality signaled by traditionally peripheral cremation grounds, makes their position here at this crossroads by a cremation ground on the perimeter of Vārāṇasī quite fitting (Lutgendorf 185, 238, 313). But at what register or registers of lived religion do they protect? If both are

vernacular, are they equally so? The context, form, and presentation of these examples prove telling.

The Deurā instance of Unmatta is unusual among Bhairava *mūrtis* (enlivened statues) in Vārāṇasī. His spread and bent legs, and his hands clasped to his chest, are reminiscent of *bīr bābās* (heroic, potentially hazardous male instances of the deified dead) and other hyperlocal protectors. Two other *bīr bābās* appear along the roadway in the immediate vicinity of this site. It is likely that this *mūrti* was originally a *bīr*—perhaps paired with this *satī* in a protective dyad—before being reinterpreted as Unmatta Bhairava (cf. Coccari 139). The clearly later construction of his enclosing shrine[5] and application of a label referring to the *Kāśī Khaṇḍa* support the reading of this *mūrti* as part of a hyperlocal folk register that has now been included as part of the citywide vernacular register of the Pañcakrośī Yātrā.

Further, as Unmatta, this *mūrti* is one of the Aṣṭabhairava: eight Bhairavas that protect Vārāṇasī (Ligo; Sukula; Sarasvatī 132–133). But this Bhairava literally stands apart—he is significantly farther afield than any other of these eight. As such, he straddles—a posture suited to his stance—folk religion in Deurā and vernacular religion that stretches through Vārāṇasī. The Pañcakrośī circuit pulls this folk form into the city's orbit, and as a member of the Aṣṭabhairava, he extends vernacular sacred networks to the city's frontier. Ultimately, Unmatta Bhairava protects both Deurā and Vārāṇasī. The folk and vernacular elements of his role are distinct, but coincide in a manner that is mutually reinforcing rather than contradictory.

Unlike the hyperlocality of *satīs* and other instances of the deified dead, and the local and regional scope of Unmatta and other Bhairavas, Hanumān's association with the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the worship of Rāma, has resulted in traditions of representation and veneration spanning South and Southeast Asia. In the past few decades, Hanumān has experienced a striking rise in popularity in India (Lutgendorf 3–33).[6] In addition to appearing as an ideal devotee[7] and guardian of boundaries, he has become a guardian of Hinduism itself—a final distinction that has developed in conjunction with a rise in Hindu Nationalism (cf. Ray and Dube 181; Peabody 378; Alder).[8] The recent installation of his temple in Deurā coincides with this wave of increased interest in Hanumān, and the association with current political, national sentiments is affirmed by the names of two politicians—Radhe Shyam Gupta and Rajkumar Pal, both members of the BJP[9]—on the dedication placards to the temple. This is further aligned with Vārāṇasī as Modi's proclaimed home district, and the appearance of PM Modi himself in advertisements along the Pañcakrośī route which celebrate him as 'Blessed Narendra Modi, Prime Minister.' Here Hanumān is not only transregional: he is national.

If the case site in Deurā were treated as a nexus of vernacular religion without reference to 'folk' or 'official' differentiating registers, much of the history and dynamic interplay present there would be missed. Instead, I have presented three different strata, from the hyperlocal folk serving as foundation and anchor, to

the official which reaches out nationally and even echoes internationally. The vernacular mediates and envelops these two, likely sharing taproots with the folk while offering both connection and challenge to the official. As we will see, Bhairava exhibits many elements we can consider folk while doing palpably vernacular work. At the same time, Bhairava offers an alternative to Hanumān, with his more ferocious, wild (*unmatta*), and potentially horrifying forms reminding us of the spectrum of supernatural presence in Hindu landscapes beyond the relatively sanitized,[10] circumscribed Hanumān that is deployed by those seeking to articulate and enforce a sort of official religion.

To be clear, my reference to these elements as 'strata' does not imply hierarchy, as the official is neither superior nor authoritative. Rather, this geological metaphor signals the chronological layering of these elements at this site in Deurā. It also reminds us that these upper, more recent, and here larger and more lavish stratum can obscure preceding or parallel elements, the consideration of which is crucial to the understanding of vernacular religion as a whole.

Bhairava, Hanumān, and Bīr Bābās—The Folk, the Vernacular, and the Official in Vārāṇasī

Having identified folk, vernacular, and official registers in the example of Deurā, the same framework proves useful to the analysis of sacred space and living religion in Vārāṇasī more broadly. While Deurā is the clearest conjunction of representatives of these three registers, there are clear coincidences throughout Vārāṇasī. These are signaled by the copresence of Bhairava, Hanumān, and/or *bīr bābās* (common instances of the deified dead). There is frequent parallelism in the placement and pairing of some of these figures. For example, Saṇkaṭ Mocan, Vārāṇasī's most famous Hanumān temple, lies just south of the Asi river, which serves as the city's southernmost border. Lāṭ Bhairava, standing on a platform believed to have been a major Bhairava temple, lies just north of the Varaṇā river, which constitutes the city's northernmost border. A bridge crossing the Asi river in the south is guarded by Sahodar Bīr Bābā, while just inside the confluence of the Varaṇā and the Gaṅgā to the north we find Bābā Bhainsāsura, a fusion of a *bīr bābā* and folk iteration of the buffalo demon famously slain by the goddess Durgā.[11] Both Hanumān and Bhairava appear in direct correspondence with *bīr bābās*. In the neighborhood of Baḍī Piyarī, 1008 Kāla Bhairava and Caukhaḍi Bīr Bābā appear shoulder to shoulder and share the same mask iconography. Not far from the Kāl Bhairav Mandir, the most trafficked Bhairava temple in the city, the shrine of Jhaṇḍī Bīr Bābā is decorated with an image of Hanumān subduing a demon. Inside, the *bīr* takes the place of the sun, with a small Hanumān leaping toward him.

Having noted these correspondences and coincidences, let us think about Bhairava's relationships with Hanumān and *bīr bābās* in greater detail. The association of Hanumān and Bhairava is not coincidental nor recent. Both have fangs, both wield clubs, and both straddle the boundary of the wild and the

domesticated. They are therefore ideally suited protectors of boundaries between those worlds, between us and them, and between the 'sacred' space of a temple and the 'profane' space of a street outside. They guard goddess temples together in the Panjab, and appear at the edges of Rajasthani villages (Erndl 4; Lutgendorf 238). Jain mustachioed heroes Gaṇṭhakārṇ Mahāvīr (associated with Hanumān) and Nakoda Bhairava display strikingly similar iconographies. What sets these two apart, then, with Bhairava maintaining the full range of the vernacular, including the folk, while Hanumān becomes official? A material consideration of their iconography is instructive. Bhairava appears in a wide range of iconic and aniconic forms, many of which are described below. Though there are occasional aniconic Hanumān *mūrtis* slathered in tel-sindūr and representative of the folk register,[12] the majority conform to two types: heroic, standing Hanumān, and a leaping or flying Hanumān carrying Mt. Droṇagirī. This collapse of iconographic variety comports with the homogenization that is an intentional effect of the broader process of articulating Hanumān as an official, national presence.

While the rise of a national, official Hanumān might be the result of emic, even vernacular trends, it is also clear that there are nationwide efforts to assert an official Hanumān, defender of a nationalist Hinduism. An official reckoning of Hanumān is inherently a political tool, one that recasts the vernacular and folk while presenting a sanitized protector who has none of the potentially troubling, heterodox elements of Bhairava, *bīr bābā*, or *satī* traditions, as described in greater detail below. A compelling and explicit example of the displacement of Bhairava in favor of Hanumān appears in the context of the Jūnā Akhāḍā, or Old Regiment, a monastic, ascetic, and martial Hindu order dating back some nine centuries and originally called the Bhairavī Akhāḍā after their tutelary deity. Now, in their headquarters in Vārāṇasī, the largest and most lavish shrine is dedicated to Hanumān. The Jūnā Akhāḍā are often counted among mendicant groups active in the protection of national Hinduism, and conversations with members confirm their self-identification as protectors of Hanumān and 'Sanāntana Dharma,' a rebranding of Hinduism as the world's original, global religion.

Though the official register might wish to remake vernacular Hinduism according to its own reckoning, the example of Bhairava and his strong association with the folk register through examples of *bīr bābās* provides insight into other echelons of religious reckoning. It is common to find Bhairavas and *bīr bābās* appear alongside one another at crossroads and along borders, with some apparent overlap or reinterpretation of certain *mūrtis* themselves, as seen in the case of Unmatta in Deurā. Both Bhairavas and *bīr bābās* also participate in masking practices that obscure the line between these iconographic categories. The installation of pressed metal masks over *mūrtis*, frequently to provide a face for an otherwise aniconic form, seems to only happen with figures related to folk registers: Bhairavas, *bīr bābās*, and *devīs* (goddesses).[13] In the case of Bhairava and *bīrs*, the similarity is striking, as these masks usually depict wide-eyed, mustachioed faces, and are often iconographically identical. Many Bhairava sites, including Lāṭ, Daṇḍapāṇi, Rudra, and even Kāl, are instances of masks affixed

to otherwise aniconic stone. The example of B*ā*b*ā* Bais*ā*sura, mentioned above, also shares in this iconography, in this case the pressed metal mask appearing atop what is apparently a *bīr* cone.[14] This correspondence is not limited to Vārāṇasī: Koḍamdesar Bhairu (a variant of the name Bhairava) in Rajasthan is a large cone identical to those of *bīrs* and *satīs*, the aperture on the side having been identified as a mouth into which offerings are placed.[15]

The folk register is typified by hyperlocality and non-transferability. As we have seen, while there may be many instances of the deified dead that are similar in form and function, each is unique: each is understood to be the metaphysical repercussion of an historical person, and to have a relationship with a particular population, that is to say a particular folk. Even when a population is displaced, as happened in the case of the construction of Banāras Hindu University just to the south of Vārāṇasī, the *bīrs* remained in situ. To this day, members of these displaced populations regularly returned to tend to these metaphysical members of their communities (Mahanta).

Bhairavas demonstrate local specificity similar to that of the deified dead, and distinct from the more homogenous forms of Hanumān now common across India. While they share iconography with *bīrs* in Vārāṇasī, Bhairavas across South Asian landscapes are highly individual and easily recognizable. Famous instances of Kāl Bhairav in the cities of Kathmandu, Vārāṇasī, and Ujjain are strikingly different in their appearance, placement, and overall demeanor. In Vārāṇasī, there is frequent reference to a Purāṇic episode in which Bhairava severs one of Lord Brahmā's five heads, wanders outcaste for twelve years, and is liberated upon entry into the sacred city, demonstrating Vārāṇasī's sacred *kṣetra* (territory) removes the karmic effects of even the most heinous deeds. Once in the city, Bhairava becomes its guardian and regulator, as are *bīrs* for their communities. He is, in a sense, the *bīr* of Banāras (Vārāṇasī). Nevertheless, he maintains this tension of insider and outsider, of folk and urban, evident in his iconography and ritual veneration. Associated with skulls and cremation, and accepting of transgressive offerings, Bhairava is terrifying as his name suggests (Bhī+Rava, lit. Cry of Fear), and yet he is beloved. A description of some of the more transgressive rituals at an otherwise friendly neighborhood Bhairava temple illustrates the tension that Bhairava maintains, framing a final consideration of his role in the articulation of sacred space.

Baṭuk, Krodhana, and Unmatta Bhairavas

An example drawn from the most popular of Bhairava's neighborhood temples—that of Baṭuk (Little Boy) Bhairava in Kamācchā—illustrates the way in which his networks maintain folk elements while exemplifying vernacular religion. While Baṭuk is worshipped as any prominent neighborhood deity would be for the safety and flourishing of the surrounding population, a small ancillary shrine tucked away in the complex serves a specialized, crucial purpose. There, a sizable

mūrti of Krodhana (Angry) Bhairava is flanked by a small statue and an empty sconce. The empty sconce echoes *bīr* traditions of leaving an empty space to signify the presence of a member of the deified dead. The small statue is identified as Unmatta Bhairava. Though Unmatta Bhairava in Deurā is labeled as the official site according to the *Kāśī Khaṇḍa*, this instance of Unmatta Bhairava in the Baṭuk Bhairava complex is an approved proxy featured in more contemporary pilgrimage guides, perhaps to skip the hours-long trip out to Deurā (Ligo 180). Here, we see a vernacular reinterpretation of the location of Unmatta Bhairava, and even a vernacular doubling. Rather than a simple shortcut, fabrication, or deviation from a textual tradition, this is an example of maintaining the folk within the context of the vernacular, functioning not for the sake of simplicity but as a sort of holographic or cinematic dual presence: as film and projection, each complete.

There is a further layer of interaction with Unmatta Bhairava in the Baṭuk Bhairava temple complex which is particularly fascinating: each Tuesday night, a Tantric *pūjā* (ritual worship service) is dedicated to him. Featuring the smallest Bhairava present in the complex, this *pūjā* ties everyday neighborhood religious life to a ritually, physically, and historically marginal tradition. The ritual in question involves the temporary reconsecration of the left side of the shrine space directly in front of this Unmatta Bhairava with *yantras* (empowered geometric diagrams) drawn on the floor with a combination of Gaṅgā water, white liquor, and *sindūr* powder. The *pūjā* involves hand gestures, the recitation of mantras, and consumption of the *pañcamakara*, five ritually taboo substances in direct tension with, and considered taboo by, purportedly normative, textual, 'official' Hinduism. Many ounces of white liquor are consumed in the process, and once the rite is completed, and the temporary sub-shrine disassembled, the *pūjārī* (ritual specialist) steps out into the alleyway—still well within the temple complex—for a cigarette. He insists that all other participants join him.

While Bhairava, even childlike Baṭuk, is known to accept alcohol as an offering,[16] the consumption of alcohol and the rest of the *pañcamakara*, even the smoking of cigarettes, would usually be highly inappropriate within the temple complex. On Tuesdays, this activity is not only accepted, it is expected. It is a vernacular reinterpretation of a prescriptive distinction between left- and right-handed paths, between the orthodox and the heterodox, between the mainstream and the marginal. While Bhairava's general acceptance of alcohol complicates the assertions of orthodoxy, this Tantric process intentionally complicates prescriptive norms. The location of Unmatta Bhairava in Deurā in a marginal cremation ground further ties this practice to left-handed Tantric practices. These practices, it has long been theorized, reflect indigenous practice that has found new purchase and meaning in a wider Hindu context. This would mean, then, that it reflects the influence of the folk in the vernacular. The vernacular, then, is not the category into which all lived religion falls, but rather the means by which folk and other elements are interpreted.

Conclusion

Bhairava, reproducing the folk and resisting the sanitized official, is positioned ideally to represent the vernacular. This may be changing in the case of certain Bhairavas, however: in mid-January, 2022, images of Kāl Bhairav dressed in a police chief's uniform 'for the good of the country' were circulated on Facebook. It is not clear whether this apparently novel presentation is a reflection of a longstanding association of Kāl Bhairav with the nearby police headquarters, or the result of increased national sentiment in the current political climate, particularly following visits by PM Modi to the temple. It is likely the result of both. Nevertheless, the distinctness of these three registers, and their utility even in assessing elements and currents in religious reckoning, stands. In arguing for the maintenance of folk and official strata in the consideration of vernacular religion I am not arguing for the reinstatement of the model presented by Don Yoder, with the folk being a derivative localization of the official. Rather, the official is a reduction, or flattening, of the folk. Official versions of Hanumān and Bhairava, sanitized and co-opted, would lose much of their range of representation and relevance. Understanding that the official is often a reduction and homogenization of the folk offers a corrective to misleading arguments that the folk and the vernacular are gestures of resistance to the official by marginalized, folk populations (contra Sax; Freeman).

I close with a consideration of the way even prescriptive, 'official' registers of religion are ultimately products of the vernacular.[17] In Vārāṇasī's Kāl Bhairav temple—the most famous Bhairava temple in the city and by some accounts one of the most important temples in all of Vārāṇasī—there is inscribed above the door to the sanctum sanctorum a Sanskrit verse in praise of Bhairava. Noticing some eccentricities in the Devanāgarī inscription, I asked my friend and interlocutor, Manoj, who keeps a stall in the temple and sells sacred souvenirs and blessings, what the inscription said. Glancing briefly to confirm I was indicating the inscription above the door, he looked directly at me and recited the verse perfectly, in clear Sanskrit. He cited it as coming from the *Skanda Purāṇa*. But there are at least two reasons to be curious about this claim. The first is that I have at least so far been unable to find that verse in any version of the *Skanda Purāṇa*. The second is that what he recited was not what was written above the door. To be sure, the verse he shared with me was what was *supposed* to be written above the door, but the actual inscription was laced with errant letters and ligatures, completely disrupting the meter of the verse and making it all but illegible. When I pointed this out to Manoj, he was surprised. He had always known what was written there, and never needed to read it. For him, the recited verse was what the inscription said. He had negotiated his religious context and extended his vernacular authority to fill the position of the inscribed, textual, architectural official.

Notes

1 The 'great' and 'little' dichotomy is often attributed to Robert Redfield, cf. *The Little Community* (1956), an ethnographic work on Mexican society. Mckim Marriott, a student of Redfield, applied these terms to Indian society in *Village India, Studies in the Little Community* (1955). Louis Dumont and David Pocock deploy these terms in their introduction to the journal *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol. 1 (1957). Gananath Obeyesekere engages this discourse in his study of Sri Lankan Buddhism "The Great Tradition and the Little in the Perspective of Sinhalese Buddhism" (*Journal of Asian Studies* 22, 1963). Milton Singer continues the application of this dichotomy in the Indian context in *Structure and Change in Indian Society* (1968), and the framework is still used in 2021 (e.g. Banibrata Mahanta, "Transformed Heroes").

2 https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/what-is-kashi-vishwanath-corridor-project-explained-in-5-points-2648407; https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/kashi-vishwanath-corridor-project-how-bjp-is-casting-pm-modi-in-hindu-queen-ahilya-bai-holkars-mould/articleshow/88247567.cms; https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/pm-modi-inaugurates-kashi-vishwanath-dham-in-varanasi-key-points/articleshow/88250072.cms.

3 Named after the goddess Satī, who in Purāṇic mythology self-immolated due to great anger or shame, the practice of *satī* has a contested history and has been expressly illegal in India since 1829. Since 1987, it has been a criminal act to glorify the practice, but these historical sites are still actively venerated.

4 Vārāṇasī is also called the *mahāśmaśān*, or the great cremation ground, and *satī* stones can be found in many places throughout the city. These small stones typically feature male and female forms, and should not be confused with *satī sthālas*, which are large, conical, feature only the *satī*, and signal the continuing presence of the deified dead.

5 The feet of this *mūrti* are below the level of the shrine floor, suggesting the structure came later.

6 A YouTube video of the Hanumān Calisa, a praise song, has 2.5 billion views. https://youtu.be/AETFvQonfV8.

7 A role exemplified Hanumān's 'sacred heart' images in which he tears open his own chest to show Sītā and Rāma, objects of his perfect devotion, emblazoned upon his heart.

8 This can be observed in an uptick in militant Hanumān imagery, from calendar art to vinyl wraps for SUVs.

9 The Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian Peoples' Party), frequently aligned with Hindu Nationalism, to which PM Narendra Modi belongs.

10 Though these processes are often referred to as Sanskritization, that is to say put into keeping with 'official' register Sanskrit texts, they are usually more a process of sanitization, or comportment with current sensibilities of propriety, regardless of Sanskrit textual contents.

11 In this fusion, he appears to guard against himself while embodying protective and harmful potentialities of Bīr Bābās, as well as their frequent pairing with female sources of metaphysical power. cf. Coccari, "Protection and Identity," 139. This site also features a *satī* stone.

12 A mixture of oil and pigment. For related folk practices, see White.

13 Even goddesses associated with transregional exemplars of the divine feminine are still frequently tied to local, neighborhood, tree-centered goddess traditions and ritual practices. See the essay by David Gordon White in this volume.

14 The linking of Bhairava to Baisāsura is commonplace in Maharashtra. See Sontheimer, 26, 32.

15 https://goo.gl/maps/8b2u5BGgXenQoTkg8. There is a nearby stele of a male hero figure labeled Kālā Bhairu, at once eliciting Kāl Bhairav and other Bīr steles.
16 On his birthday, Baṭuk receives gift baskets containing Cadbury's bars and fifths of Johnnie Walker Black.
17 Purāṇas also make vernacular 'official.'

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