

Remaking of MEOs Identity: An Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The paper revolves around the issue of bargaining power. It is highlighted with the example of Meos of Mewat that the process of making of more Muslim identity of the poor, backward strata of Muslims i.e. of Meos is nothing but gaining of bargaining power by elitist Muslims. The going on process is continue even more dangerous today which was initiated mostly in 1920's. How Hindu cadres were engaged in reconversion of Meos with the help of princely Hindu states of Alwar and Bharatpur in the leadership of Swami Shardhanand and Meos were taught about their glorious Hindu past. With the passage of time, Hindu efforts in the region proved to be short-lived but Islamic one i.e. Tablighi Jamaat still continues in its practice and they have been successful in their mission to a great extent. The process of Islamisation has affected the Meos identity at different levels. The paper successfully highlights how the Meo identity has shaped as Muslim identity with the passage of time. It is also pointed out that Indian Muslim identity has reshaped with the passage of time due to some factors. The author asserts that the assertion of religious identity in the process of democratisation and modernisation should be seen as a method by which deprived communities in a backward society seek to obtain a greater share of power, government jobs and economic resources.

Keywords:

Meos, backward strata, religious identity, Mewat

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INTRODUCTION

Mewat is a geographical region situated amid the cities of Delhi, Agra and Jaipur. The community which is considered real and original native of the region is called Meo. The Meos identity is multi-dimensional. It has various aspects—religious, social, lingual, literary, economic, political. The religious identity of Meos is a living example of Hindu-Muslim brotherhood. Most of Meos belonged to Rajput families who have embraced Islam four centuries ago. A lot of Hindu customs are still practiced by them, as mentioned in the following lines.

*“Nipje jodha markhna,sau
baatan ki baat,
Dilli kandhe dhaal
jaun,deeng dhara mewat.
Mayad jhoom pe Mito,huyo
hameed shaheed,
Sannu baaki man gayi, holi,
rakhi, eid.”¹*

The tradition of tolerance has been a hallmark of the Meo community since ancient times. Historian-activist Kunwar Mohammad Ashraf wrote repeatedly that inter-community living within the local system of governance formed an alternative to the growing number of communal conflicts taking place elsewhere in India. These traditions of tolerance and of living together had been in existence for centuries. This was, however, no idyllic world of harmonious inter-community living since battle. Conflicts and feuds accompanied by violence were very much a part of it. But these were generally not fought along the lines of religious division and could, for instance, involve alliances of Meo pals and Jat khaps on either side. Further, through a complex process of institution building, norms were worked out on how incessant conflicts were to be conducted and resolved. Traditions of tolerance and the local level management of difference were, however, shattered by the growth of communal politics in the 1930's and 1940's and the partition related violence unleashed a holocaust in the in the form of communal bloodbath. Mewat was the area where Maulana

¹ Deshraj Verma (2015), 'Lord Sannu Mewati ke Dohon Men Mewat-Gaurav' in Musi Khan Balot & P.S.Saharia (eds.) *Mewat ka Itihas aur Sanskriti*, Alwar: Mewat Sahitya Akademi, pp.136-141.

Ilyas had first tried his experiment with the Tablighi Jamaat that was later replicated all over the globe among Muslims. Following the Partition, Meos have become deeply involved in the networks of trans-national Islam and in Jamaat which work among groups in South Asia and in other countries preaching to other Muslims their ideas of what being a “Muslim” means².

But the fact cannot be ignored that the Muslim Meos never forgot the old customs of their ancestors. They were culturally closer to the Hindus of Mewat than to the Muslims of the rest of India. The customs of the Hindus and Muslims combined as integral part of the Meos' cultural heritage. Regarding this, a popular saying is quoted here "*Jat Kya Hindu Aur Meo Kya Musalman*." (Jat what Hindu and Meo what Muslim). Mahatma Gandhi referred Hindu-Muslim unity at the time of Champaran Satyagrah that if each Indian becomes like a Meo, India will be free overnight³.

The people of Mewat love their country. They do not have any other consideration including international Islamic brotherhood. The customs and traditions of the Meos invited the attention of the Muslim theologians in the nineteenth and in the beginning of the 20th century. They were finally led by Maulana Mohammed Ilyas, who started the Tabligh movement in Mewat aiming at religious and social purification and uplift of the Meo community and to make Muslims in general aware of the true Islam.

Meo community is religious not communal. Earlier the Muslim used to wear turbans and *dhotis*, and sport a moustache, that has now changed to skull caps, *pyjamas*, and a beard". Saddiq Ahmad, while interviewed, agreed that people of both faiths have become more orthodox— “Muslim have become more Muslim”, while Hindu have started associating everything from mosque minarets

to biryani with Muslim culture. Due to such issues based divisive politics, tension has been brewing in the area for the past few years. Meos and Hindus had coexisted peacefully for ages and even followed each other rituals, but a hidden agenda now seems to be at work on the ground to disturb this harmony.”⁴

POLITICS OVER MEOS IDENTITY

Historically, it is a well- established fact that the Meos Identity is made up of some ingredients which are needed to be seen independently. These ingredients in Meos identity are determined differently and independently, sometimes by themselves and sometimes by outsiders of Mewat. These main ingredients which are so important to be mentioned and discussed are language, religion, geo-social issues including physical appearance and clothing. Politics over Meos identity has been revolving around some issues in the region. The issues of language, cow protection and of conversion and reconversion of religion were played by different players particularly Arya Samaj and Tablighi Jamaat.

POLITICS THROUGH RELIGION

The Meos society is divided into pals and *gotras* with clear exogamous rules like Hindus. Their descendance from Hindu gods and heroes appear in Meos pals oral tradition as and when in different narrations. For example, '*Palon Ki Bansawali*' establishes their relationship with lord Krishna. In the text is stated the establishment of power over Brij and passing it over to Raja Ram Singh. Five powerful *jadu* (yadav) pals i.e. *Duhlot*, *Chirahlot*, *Diamrot*, *Pundlot* and *Nai Nasr*, are described to be from Krishna lineage. On the other hand, four Meo pals consider Arjuna their ancestor and genealogically aligned to Mahabharata. Other pals i.e. Meo Kachhawaha Rajputs established their relationship with Lord Ram. They are described as the grandsons of Raja Ram Chander and claimed to be destroyer of bad

² Prem Chowdhary (1996), 'Contours of Communalism: Religion, Caste and Identity in South-East Punjab', *Social Scientist*, Vol. 24, No.4/6, pp.132-163.

³ Hashim Amir Ali (1970), *Meos of Mewat: Old Neighbors of New Delhi*, New Delhi: Oxford & IBH Publishing Company, p.63.

⁴ Saddiq Ahmad Meo, a local writer and Patron of *Mewat Vikas Sabha* & Vice-president of *Haryana Dalit Sahitya Akademy*, Nuh, 14/11/2018.

men (*kachhavaha Rajput ka pota janai ku bas kiya diya durjan ke gota*). The other pals named Dhingal and Singal Pals belong to the *Raghubanshis*. Moreover, their gotras are like other castes of the region from Hindu religion⁵.

In the last quarter of last century, both states of Alwar and Bharatpur had forged networks with pan-Indian Hindu organizations who have been working for cow protection, Hindi language and social reform. The Arya Samaj branch was dominated by *Parja Mandal* mostly in these states which was established in 1920 and 1910 respectively, though it (*Parja Mandal*) was active earlier also.

Shudhi movement which was considered as a reaction to forcible conversion to Islam was activated by Swami Shardhnand. Attempts were made to reconvert Muslim Rajputs, Gujjars, Meos and Malkans. It is estimated about two lakh people had undergone Shudhi in Agra and Mathura areas before Moplah revolt. As reaction to Sudhi movement, all Indian organizations like Tabligh and Tanzim began their activities in Mewat. These organizations were to reclaim the reconverted Hindus. Hindu Maha Sabha endorsed Shudhi movement in 1923. Birlas, the noted business leaders, assisted it. There was great religious fervor reflected in both contemporary players of identity politics. The Mullah and Maulvis used to go to the people and say, you stay with us, '*khuda ki baat main, and Akal ki dakhali nahin*' (reason has no role in the matter of God). Countering this, Hindu organisations used to shout slogans '*Pat hoja Hindu phir banegi khir*' (become Hindu and we'll make rice pudding) and '*salan ved parhne lage able Koran hoy jab masjid main 'srutigan*' (Mosques will resound with Vedic chants when readers of Quran study the Vedas) and they used to sing:

“*Nahin gayä dharma gäyoñ ke katvane se,*

*Nahiñ gayä dharma chini
safed khāne se,*

*Nahiñ gayä dharma vaishyon
ke ghar Jane se,*

*Phir bhaiyoñ ke mel melap se
kaho kaise dharma jatā ha.”*⁶

(Religion was not lost by the slaughter of cows. Religion was not lost with the eating of white (refined) sugar. Religion was not lost when prostitutes' homes were visited. So, tell how the meetings of brothers can lose religion?)

The songs had great effect. The problem only arose when no Hindu was prepared to marry the daughters of the Muslim Rajputs. After the assassination of Swami Ji by a Muslim, it was countered by Arya Samajis stating, “*Swami ka balidān kar gaya suddhi ka ailañ*”⁷ (The martyrdom of Swami will be a call for Shudhi).

Actually, both Alwar and Bharatpur state adopted the Arya Samaj agenda in their course. On the one hand, they indulged in social reforms regarding social evils like child marriage and prohibition of widow remarriage before Sharda act was passed. On the other, Arya Samajis were contesting missionary efforts of conversion of Jatavs through upliftment of untouchables in Bharatpur. They focused on education and their access to temples and wells. It is observed that the era should be known for good works including building of palaces in Alwar and setting up of panchayat boards for the villages and ban on hunting.

POLITICS THROUGH LANGUAGE

Mewati, without specific script, is the spoken language in the region. It is considered a dialect. The language is written in both Persian-Arabic and Devanagiri scripts. With composition of Rajasthani, Brijbhasha and Haryanvi, Mewati language is spoken over by more than 1600000 people. With the passage of time, the language has lost its luster. The reason for the decline of Mewati language can be traced back historically to the role of Arya Samaj in the region.

⁵ Hashim Amir Ali (1970), *Meos of Mewat: Old Neighbors of New Delhi*, New Delhi: Oxford & IBH Publishing Company, p.39.

⁶ Shail Mayaram (1997) *Resisting Regimes: Myth, Memory and Shaping of a Muslim Identity*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, p.67.

⁷ Opcit.p.68.

An important development that took place in later 19th century India was the question of linguistic identity which brought “the first systematic division between the Hindu and Muslim elite”. Maharaja Kishan Prashad of Banaras and many others began to demand that the court language be changed to Hindi in Devanagari whereas Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and others insisted on Urdu written in Persian script.⁸

In the present times, language is again being used as an agent of identity politics. The Haryana government in order to show its concern for the Muslim minority has initiated the policy of Urdu promotion through the recruitment of Urdu teachers. As compared to other regions of Haryana, there is some presence of Urdu language in Mewat because of madrasas education. The recent policy of Haryana government to recruit Urdu teachers in government schools has created job prospects for the educated but unemployed youth in the Meos community. This step of the government has not lured the majority of Meos as they do not use Urdu in day-to-day communication but still, they appreciate it, as this policy will provide some employment to the largely unemployed youth. A local Meo writer and retired engineer from PWD, Saddiq Ahmad Meo says “*Vaise toh Meo ka Urdu se koi khas lena dena nahi ha, par phir bhi hum sarkar ki is policy ka swagat karte hai, kyonki ishse kum se kum kuchh Meon ko to rojgar milega*” (Though we have nothing to do with Urdu language, still we welcome government policy as it provides employment to at least some Meo youth). Moreover, this policy of government will promote the influence of Tablighi Jamaat in the Mewat region and efforts of Tablighi Jamaat of Islamisation of Meo Identity will find justification here also. (Saddiq Ahmad, Retired Engineer PWD, Nuh, 14/11/2018)

Meo literature is divided in several categories such as Hamd and Na't (Effusions in praise of God and the prophet respectively), Ratwai (Mystical exploration resembling the ghazal in form), Chaturai (Epics and songs describing wars and conquests), Rasia (Romantic love), Brehriat (Poetry of nostalgic longings and pain of separation from the beloved), Baramasi and Bramasa (songs composed by women for men and vice versa), Phundi or Muharrami (Dirges sung in Moharram) and Kahmukarianian (Riddles and puns) in addition to folk songs sung at various occasions. The literary contribution of most of the Mewati poet is categorised as folk songs because there are mainly communicated from generation to generation through only memory and recital. The Meos take strong objection to such classification of their literary heritage.⁹

In most narratives, Bansavali and other text like *tarikhs* (Meos own authored text), the Mewati language is used in much wider context. Moreover, their *Mirasis* authored texts and titles like *Panch Pahar ki larai*, *Dhamukar ki larai*, *Kaulani ki larai* links with a larger Indic tradition where *larai* is used to stitch episodes together. It is also observed in the region that only elder speaks Mewati while younger generation knows only Urdu.

Two examples are usually quoted generally which highlight the rich and hybrid culture of Meos. First, like the love story of Sohni-Mahiwal and of Heer- Ranzha of Punjab culture, a love story of Dariyav Khan Meo-Sashi Badni Meeni, is prevalent in Mewat. On various occasions especially in marriage functions, songs are sung. Second, in the same manner, Meo's version of Mahabharata, *Pandun Ka Kara* is also prevalent in Mewat. The epic is usually sung by Meos Miarasis in five parts on different occasions. Moreover, by Jaggo people, a Hindu local caste,

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⁸ Asghar Ali Engineer (1991), Remaking Indian Muslim Identity, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol.26, No.16, p.1036.

⁹ Hashim Amir Ali (1970), *Meos of Mewat: Old Neighbors of New Delhi*, Oxford & IBH Publishing Company, New Delhi, p.70.

maintain the records of ancestral lineage (*Bansawali*) of Meos also.¹⁰

In the series, the story of *Chrag-a-Mewat*, Hasan Khan Mewati, also inspires the people towards Hindu-Muslim unity. Hasan Khan Mewati is considered a hero to be followed in Mewat, a warlord of the then Mewat who supported Rana Sanga at the time of Khanwa battle against Baber. It is said, despite being Muslim by name and persuasion by Babur to leave Rana and support the Muslim brotherhood, his loyalty was not disturbed even an inch and he was killed in the battle fighting with a foreign invader.¹¹

Meo text is produced and reproduced with an aim to highlight their own tradition of co-existence i.e. the feeling of brotherhood between Hinduism and Muslim. '*Pandun ka kara*' is their own version of the great epic of Mahabharata and they are equally respectful to the same also. Their response may be understood as their implicit respect to the Mahabharata clan whom the Meos regard as the ancestors of their own lineage.¹²

Moreover, their culture flowing through literature is a mix of the two (Hinduism and Islam) as well as of Sunni and Shia Islam. The story of the Hindu-Muslim encounter then was told very differently in these oral traditions. The authors, performers and audience are, thus, Muslim. At the level of popular religion there is an entwining with *Vaishnavism*, *Shaivism*, and the highly heterodox *Nath tantrik* tradition. It is interesting that Meos oral beliefs and traditions are full of *qissas* or *dastaans*. An example to quote is the following,

*"Pap karo teeno gaya
Dharam, Karam aur bans,
Teeno teela dekhle, Rawan,
Kairu aur Kans"*.¹³

¹⁰ Partap C. Aggarwal (1966), 'A Muslim Sub- Caste of North India: Problems of Cultural Integration', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.1, No.4, p.159.

¹¹ Anchal Meena (2015), 'Mewat Ki Sanskriti' in Musi Khan Balot & P.S.Saharia (eds.) *Mewat ka Itihas aur Sanskriti*, Alwar: Mewat Sahitya Akademi, 239.

¹² Hashim Amir Ali (1970), *Meos of Mewat: Old Neighbors of New Delhi*, New Delhi: Oxford & IBH Publishing Company, p.18.

¹³ Chhanga Ram Meena (2015), 'Mewat Ka Krishak Jiwan Aur Meo-Meena Sambandh' in Musi Khan Balot &

(By committing sin, one loses all three- Righteousness, deeds and clan. Look at the three examples of Rawan, Kaurav and Kans) Actually Meos literary status is that of stories and sacred lore. Moreover, they also have high regard for Sanskrit language.

*"Sanskrit bhaasha sada, ha
sabsu dhanwan,
Sannu sabse purani, guni
janan ki khan"*¹⁴.

(Sanskrit language has always been the richest. It is the oldest and mine of virtuous people)

Meo's poetry is often fragmented. At one time, Mirasis praised Maharaja Jai Singh for the construction of canals and palaces built by him. And on the other, it takes a sympathetic position towards Rajputs and is antithetical to Jats. As an exception, some Meos under the influence of Tablighi Jamaat abandoned singing, considering it as an un-Islamic activity. The dominant tone of Meo poetry is patriotism.

*"Sannu nidhadak jaat ha,
charan aur mirasi,
Sach kahan bin na rahe,
bhale lage phansi"*¹⁵.

(Charan and Mirasi are the fearless among the Meos; they cannot help saying truth, though it may lead to capital punishment)

There have been two poets i.e. Charndaas and Laldaas who have been fighting for awareness and against blind faith. Sant Charn Dass wrote 14 writings. Two sisters namely, Sahjobai and Dayabai were his disciples whose poems are based on love. Jodhraj wrote '*Hammir-Raso*' which is based on *veer-ras* and *Sharangar-ras*.

The Mewat region has also been the cradle of literary illuminaries such as Sadullah Khan, known for his translation of the Mahabharata into Mewati, Khakkay, Ewaz, Daddo, Nabi Khan, Chander Bhan and Rajah. The most famous name

P.S.Saharia (eds.) *Mewat ka Itihas aur Sanskriti*, Alwar: Mewat Sahitya Akademi, p.113.

¹⁴ Deshraj Verma (2015), 'Lord Sannu Mewati ke Dohon Men Mewat-Gaurav' in Musi Khan Balot & P.S.Saharia (eds.) *Mewat ka Itihas aur Sanskriti*, Alwar: Mewat Sahitya Akademi, p.137.

¹⁵ Opcit.p.144.

among these poets is Abdur Rahim, Khan-Khanan. A famous poet of Bhakti movement Rahman's father is believed to be a Turk and his mother was a Mewati. His parents had literary bent of mind. He was born and brought up in Alwar.

*"Rahiman dhaga prem ka,
mat toro chatkaye.*

*Tute se phir na mile, mile
ganth par jaaye."*¹⁶

(Rahiman, beware. Sunder not the thread of love. It cannot be re-tied, and if retied, you cannot hide the knot.)

The irony of fate is that Mewati language in which almost all the above- discussed writings have been written, is on the verge of extinct. In present time Hindi language is the main medium of literary expression. As result, the Mewati identity reflected through its language is under eclipse.

POLITICS THROUGH SOCIETY

Meos original social identity is the identity of unity and of brotherhood, which has been slowly fading with time as the impact of Tablighi Jamaat, has tilted it towards Islam. As a result, they are a society of backward, communal, and criminal-minded people. "In the past 67 years, there has not been a single riot here and even during minor scuffles, there has been no casualty. Yes, there are criminals in Mewat, but they are in other districts as well. Considering the level of literacy and backwardness, we see less crime here as compared to other districts of Haryana" (Advocate Noor, District court, Nuh,13/8/2018).

Powlett said they were 'lax about forming connections with women of other castes and accept their children into the Meo community. But they are very strict in their social rule regarding their own daughters, as they never marry them outside Meo community.¹⁷One of the reasons for not educating the Meonis (Meo women) is that

many Meo think that education will spoil their girls and educated Meonis will marry outside their own community. This will jeopardize the tradition of the community²⁵. "*Thakuron ne dole de diye...aaj vo kahan, hum kahan. Ekbaar Akbar baadshah ladki ko le gaye the...saare mev jake vapis le ke aye the.*"¹⁸(Thakurs have given their daughters in marriages to Muslims. Today, look where we are and where they are)

They practice Hindu customs and follow traditions, which they have inherited, from their forefathers. Though the Meos were converted to Islam during the Delhi Sultanate period (1206-1526), for nearly five centuries the Meos enjoyed the privileges available to both the Hindu and the Muslims. After the partition of India in 1947, the pace of the process of Islamisation of Meos increased. The main reasons include the stiffened attitude of the Hindu society toward the Meos. At the time of partition, many Meos were forced to flee their villages. When they returned after a considerable period, they found that "they have lost their monopoly over the ownership of land". Moreover, the land abandoned by emigrant Meo was allotted to the local Chamars and Sikh refugees from West Pakistan. The Meo also realized that the Brahmins, the Sikhs and even the Chamaars seriously challenged their political dominance.¹⁹

In the aftermath of partition violence, the Meos have a common feeling that their expulsion from Hindu society was permanent. Moreover, some lower Hindu sub-castes injured the pride of Meos by discriminating against them. The second reason for alienation of Meos from the Hindu society was the decline of *Jajmani* system. The mutual give and take arrangement in the *Jajmani* system had bounded the different castes in a village within narrow local boundaries. But the disintegration of this system and the frequent contacts with the town led to the process of wider integration of

¹⁶ Hashim Amir Ali (1970), *Meos of Mewat: Old Neighbors of New Delhi*, New Delhi: Oxford & IBH Publishing Company, p.71.

¹⁷Yoginder Sikand (1995), 'Meonis of Mewat', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.30, No.10, p.491.

¹⁸Based upon the interview with Mr. Rafiq Ahmad, Advocate, Rupraka Village, 12/11/2018.

¹⁹ Pratap C. Aggarwal (1969), 'Changing Religious Practices: Their Relationship to Secular Power in a Rajasthan Village', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.4, No.12, p.548.

different castes in a village. The Meos realized that the only groups outside Mewat, which were willing to accept them socially, were the Muslims. As a result, their wider integration in the society was caste in a Muslim mould²⁰.

They believe in caste rather than religion as the bottom line of their society and is a category of recognition (Identity).

“Yadhapi jag darun dukh
nana,

Sab te kathin jati apmana”²¹.

(Though there are various miseries in this world, the most unbearable one is the insult of caste). Contrary to Islamic considerations, they describe self and others in terms of caste rather than religion.

Ibbetson also mentioned this culture of unity among Meos. He says, “In religion’, the Meos profess a happy combination of Hinduism and Islam, but in practice they worship countless godlings or symbols such as *Siani, Mangti, Lalchi, Salar Masaud* and his flag”²². Moreover the founding of a new village to them is also involved with the setting up of five *pirs*.” An illustration that highlights Meos sincere dedication to their age-old beliefs and social customs is related to a *pir* named Chraklot Meos who is famous in Mewat.

The social identity of Meo community has gradually become Muslim under the influence of Tablighi Jamaat but the fact is that they have not embraced Islam *in toto*. “*Hinduon wale riti riwaj ab kam ho gaye hen. Kuchh riti riwaj jase kanya daan, jas ke tas hain. Got- pal ko sab maante hen. Bahut rare case hoga, jab muslimon men sadi hoti hogi. Mev pahle Mev hen, Muslim baad men. In maamlon men to tabligh nahi parte, faaltoo men shayad jhagre ka dar lagta ha unhe*” (The Hindu

traditions and rituals have declined now. Some rituals like maiden’s gift are intact till date. All believe in *Gotra* system. Marrying in Muslims is an exceedingly rare case. Meos are first Meos then Muslims. Tablighs do not interfere in these practices. They perhaps fear of dispute) (Deen Mohammad, Rangala Village, 13/11/2018).

In the 21st century, Brahmins’ presence in Meo community Marriage functions no longer required. Instead Maulvi performs all rituals. Meher/dowry is decided, and all rituals are performed as per the Islamic tradition including Nikah. Only some rituals like *Chak Pujan, Sehra* on the forehead, *Milni, Muh Dikhai*, rituals of *Bhat* and *Tel-baan* continues to exist from the Hindu past.

With the passage of time, the practices of celebration of Hindu festivals are avoided while the Muslim festivals are celebrated with great enthusiasm. Considerable numbers of Meos can be seen in Friday prayers of mosque instead of Hindu shrines on festive occasions. Now they have stopped studying and reciting the Hindu epic such as the Ramayan and the Mahabharat. Their attitude towards cow has changed to the extent that “many younger Meos would now eat beef, if available.”²³

ETHNICITY IN MEOS IDENTITY

It is recognized that to stop infighting among different Meo groups, a division of fifty-two gotras and twelve pals were made to maximize their strength against external enemies somewhere during Akbar’s reign (1556-1605). These Gotras and Pals have their own Choudhries who used to be important figure at the time of marriage and other function and in panchayat. Moreover, at the time of Sarv-Meo Panchayat, these all *Chaurdhries* represent their group i.e. *Gotras* and *Pals*. Chaudhary Yashin Meo Khan was head of this panchayat at one time. After Yashin, Chaudhary Tayyub Hussain, Yashin Meo Khan’s elder son, was the head which is shifted to his

²⁰ Shail Mayaram (1997), *Resisting Regimes: Myth, Memory and the Shaping of a Muslim Identity*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, p.46.

²¹ Avinash Chander Nagpal, Rakdulari Makhacha (2015), ‘Mev Sanjhi Sanskriti ki Virasat evm Pahchan’ in Musi Khan Balot & P.S.Saharia (eds.) *Mewat ka Itihas aur Sanskriti*, Alwar: Mewat Sahitya Akademi, p.243.

²² Shail Mayaram (1997), *Resisting Regimes: Myth, Memory and the Shaping of a Muslim Identity*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, p.46.

²³ Partap C. Aggarwal (1969), *Changing Religious Practices: Their Relationship to Secular Power in a Rajasthan Village*, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.4, No.12, p.548.

elder son i.e. Chaudhary Zakir Husaain nowadays. Thus, Meos are known by the Gotras and pals within their community²⁴. Ethnic identity is not therefore, merely a question of self-ascription, but it means being marked by an ascription that is recognizable by others.

Contrary to the formation of a distinct community, Tablighi Jamaat believe in universality of the Muslim community without the consideration or demarcation of Jati (caste) or communitarian boundaries. Meo society, however, still believes in and follows their age-old tradition of the division along caste while Islam does not believe in such philosophy. In this regard, a Meo poet has rightly remarked, *Goto so bhai, Baaki sab asnai* (one of same gotra is brother, all others are relatives). Though they believe in Islam, but their ethnic structure is like that of Hindu caste society. Meos claim high-caste Hindu Rajput descent. This may be true for some of them. Meos belonged to many different castes and not just to the Rajputs. Major Powlett observed in the second half of the 19th century that "Meos are now Musalmaan in name but their village deities are the same as those of the Hindus". One of the Meo belonging to Rupraka remarked that Tabligh people do not touch any issue of conflict and they think that we will not leave this tradition at any cost. Some decades ago, a Meo was asked his name at Jaipur and he replied that it was Fateh Singh. He was told: '*nām badal do, pahchān ki bat hai*' (change your name; it is a matter of recognition). The episode suggests also how contemporary Meo identity has been increasingly defined in this century by forces external to it. Identity thereby involves a displacement of self-representation by the other. In popular understanding names must be clear-cut and ethnically identifiable. From the statist perspective, likewise, identity had to be defined in either/or fashion. 'Ambiguous' identities were invariably 'confused' and could

not be the basis of a loyal subject hood required by the modern state²⁵.

Thus, the Meo community continues to maintain a strong sense of ethnic identity quite distinct from other Muslims. They do not marry Muslims having different ethnic identity. In matters of Islamic law, too, such discrepancies are glaring between theory and the practice. Thus, although the shari'ah gives considerable inheritance rights to Muslim women, women in Meo community are almost nowhere allowed to exercise these rights. While under the shari'ah her husband should pay dower in the form of *mehr* to the bride at the time of marriage, the practice is precisely the reverse among Meos just like in the Hindu society. Dowry is rapidly becoming a major social evil among the Meos today, driving the parents of many girls into penury and debt.²⁶ "*1920 se lekar sau saal beet gaye, ye (Tablighs) mev ko Musalmaan to bana nahi paaye. Mev aaj bhi Mev hen, aur ye kya karenge.mev log apni parmparaon men kisi ki nahi maante... kuran me to beti ko property men hissa dene ki bhi baat ha.*" (Even after hundred years of efforts since 1920, Tablighi Jamaat has not been successful in conversion of Meos to Islam. What can they do? Meo people love their tradition and stick and stick to their customs. They do not listen to anybody regarding their traditions. The *Kuran* endorses a daughter's share in the ancestral property but Meos do not.) (Mohammad Noor, Advocate, District Court, Nuh, 14/11/2018)

CULTURAL ASPECTS AND POLITICS OVER MEOS IDENTITY

Meos tales were composed by different *Mirasis* (bards) working for various Meo Pals orally in the late 18th or early 19th century. As per the stories/songs told by these *Mirasis*, Meos consider themselves true son of soil who have defended their land right from Balban to the British and this resulted into massive destruction of property and lives born by them. "*Hum baaber*

²⁴ Hashim Amir Ali (1970), *Meos of Mewat: Old Neighbours of New Delhi*, New Delhi: Oxford & IBH Publishing Company, p.52.

²⁵ Shail Mayaram (1997), *Resisting Regimes: Myth, Memory and the Shaping of a Muslim Identity*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, p.44.

²⁶ Ibid.

ki aulad nahi hen...mugalon se ham lade hen-mare hen, apni jaan ki parwah nahi ki des ki khatir,apni aan ki khatir”²⁷(we are not off springs of Baber. We have fought Mughals. For sake of our country, we did not care for our lives, for our honour). They are depicted as a community which cannot tolerate the subordination even if they have to give their lives. *Dariya khan, Ghurchari Meo Khan* and *Panch Pahar ki Larai* are some of the popular tales. Those who had migrated to Pakistan after the ‘great migration’ of 1947 still follow Pal system and marry as per Gotra system.

Though there is a sense of new Islamic spirituality in Meos but in general, they have limited influence of the ideology of Tablighi Jamaat and of Deoband. For example, marriages, Gotra system, *fatiha* (death) rites, reciprocal gift giving, and practice of dowry is contrary to the above-mentioned ideologies of Tablighi as well as of Deobandi. Only a few people give importance to Shariat law while most of Mewatis follow their own customary way of justice. Among Meos, daughters do not have share in ancestral property, which is divided among sons only. Traditional Meo panchayat as well as village panchayat enforce customary law instead of Shariat law. Many Meos like to hear *Mirasis* and their narratives despite Tablighs opposition. At the time of marriage, instead of going to *Pathans/ Miyans* (Muslim), Meos marry within their own community. This not only creates networks but also kinship bonds are strengthened which brings a sense of belongingness among them. Meos observe Gotra system at the time of arrangement of marriage but all other rituals are now performed as per the Islamic way with minor deviations. Meos believe that they are direct descendants of Krishna and Rama even as they claim to be among the unnamed prophets of God referred to in the Quran. Generally, Meos follows Islamic law of inheritance like other communities of the region. As per their custom, younger brother or a cousin marry the widow of the deceased by a

simple *Nikah*. In addition to that, like Hindu community, they leave three *gotras* i.e. their own, Mothers and of Grand Mother’s. Another dimension to it, they compete with other *gotras* at the time of dowry to their daughter, which pose burden on the poor Meos. Violation of these kinship rules is considered incestuous. There are some instances of in-within gotra marriage where cross -cousin marriages Maulvis sponsored around 1960s. These three cases of Utawar, Rupraka and of Ghasera were targeted by community wrath. Those marriages were boycotted and Maulvis were attacked. Body of one Maulvi was butchered and was ploughed over. Since then, none has interfered in the Gotra system²⁸.

The effect of Tablighs may be seen in the social practices among Meos. For example, Rama-Kishna was common form of greeting among Meos especially in the morning which is now replaced by ‘*Slaamalikum*’. The word ‘Singh’ is replaced by Muslim names. For example, Fateh Singh is altered by Fateh Khan. More people may be seen with beard in recent years. They wear *lungi* instead of traditional wearing of langdar dhoti. The traditional dress of *ihasi, ghagri* and *jumardi* is altered by ‘*adab ka salwar* and *khusni* or shirt which covers whole female body²⁹.

Muslim women in conservative families confine themselves to housework and heavily drape themselves when going out but the burqa is almost non-existent in Mewat. This is because, barring the ploughing of the fields, almost all the agricultural work in Mewat is performed by the Meonis in the full gaze of 'strange' males, helped only very occasionally by their men folk. Obviously, this would have been impossible if they were to wear the burqa and remained confined at home. In this context Mayaram (1997:265) quotes a Meo peasant as saying that the local mufti of the village mosque who teaches that women should be kept at home in strict

²⁷ Based upon the interview with Mr. Liyakat Ali, Teacher in Rupraka Village on 12/11/2018.

²⁸ Aijaz Ahmad (2013), Mewat: A Retrospective, Ghaziabad: Sahitya Sansthan, p.21.

²⁹ Anchal Meena (2015), ‘Mewat Ki Sanskriti’ in Musi Khan Balot & P.S. Saharia (eds.) *Mewat ka Itihas aur Sanskriti*, Alwar: Mewat Sahitya Akademi, p.241.

pardah himself makes his own wife work in the fields³⁰.

The Meo community is opposed to female education as vested interests and some semi-educated Maulvis drive them towards this parochialism. The Tablighi preaching is that girls should not be sent to the high schools and universities for higher education. Moreover, they should not be allowed to come in open and should follow strict *purdha*. Thus, by the time the Tablighi Jamaat was launched in Mewat, there were Meos who were able to identify culturally with the message of Muslim brotherhood. Education gradually brought in its wake an increasing redefinition of Meo identity, an awareness of their increasing marginalization, and a growing familiarity with Islam.

The prohibition of singing and dancing by Tablighi is irritative to Meos basic culture especially to *Mirasis*. They publically say that if we stop singing, playing *Dholak*, who will pay us? It is our profession through centuries as well as our habit and just mere *batchit* (merely talking) cannot support us financially. Constant attempts are made by *Mirasis* through their large number of creations about Meos battles with Mughals, Rajputs and regional princely states of Jats in Alwar and Bharatpur which have impact on Meos identity to an extent. The Meo women despite Tablighi prohibition frequently sing and dance on various occasions. In the Tablighi Jamaat's refusal to acknowledge women's singing and dancing as modes of self-expression, there is an implicit construction of the woman's body as erotic³¹.

Healing to Meos is associated with goddess. To them *Shitla* is the goddess of smallpox. On the other hand, *Khawaja Garib Nawaj* is considered as *pir* of *pirs* and as the protector of the poor. Moreover, the place is referred to as fulfiller of dreams and *Mansha* (desire). Though the healing powers are devoted to goddesses most of the time,

but *pir* is also mentioned for the same purpose in one another narrative called *Alakh pir*. The *pir*, a *guru* of Nath Panth, is referred to for his healing powers and is recognised among Meos that the water of his well possesses a particular efficacy with respect to kidney stones. These traditions/rituals are flown through *Mirasis* in their epic, *aallahas* and the way of their story telling³².

Among local fairs, after *Shah Chokha*, the *Chudh Sidh melas* (fairs) is also immensely popular among peoples of all communities despite religious line. The *Chudh sidh* fair, held on the full moon night in the month of *Phagun*, is a major event on *Shivratri* in the rural countryside of Mewat. One of the narratives called *Gurchari Meo Khan* describe Mahadev temple in Jhirka as a *tirth* (pilgrimage) for Meos. For them religion was not a mere matter of pronouncing an identity. For them gods were on earth, constantly intervening in human crises. On the other hand, Shiva temple is considered as Hindu site in all colonial and princely state records. Moreover, the temple is described as a site which used to protect two bandits Meo brothers from the police persecution of the Alwar state.

Islamisation process faced resistance in the early days, since it was affecting Meo society to a considerable extent in their rituals, myths, and gender roles. Tablighs were opposed publicly and even physically assaulted. Moreover, due to Mohammad Ilyas association with Mohammad Niaz, the allegation of taking over by Deobandi ulemas came to gain ground in people's opinion. It was feared that the on- going process will throttle Meo culture including of pilgrimages and fairs among them. Their landholdings will be fragmented due to many sons in the family. But Meo life has been transformed due to this preaching of Tablighs and Meos admit the same also. It is usually commented that "*adhi bat main hamne Islam apna liya lekin jo hamare aam rivaj hai unmain nahin*" (We have adopted Islam in half the matters but only to the extent it does not affect

³⁰ Yoginder Sikand (1995), 'Meonis of Mewat', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.30, No.10, p.491.

³¹ Anuradha Mathur (2015), 'Mewat Kshetr ki Sanjha Saskriti aur Badalta Paridarshya', in Musi khan Balot & P.S. Saharia (eds.) *Mewat ka Itihas aur Sanskriti*, Alwar: Mewat Sahitya Akademi, p.108.

³² Ibid.

our traditional practices). The cultural aspect of Meos identity highlights that the influence of Islam is limited on their cultural practices which are to a great extent Hindu in their nature. With exposure to the western cultural values through globalisation, the young Meos are truly little influenced by the process of Islamisation. The following lines of 'New Meo Times' also illustrate this fact; "No one can beat the Meo boys in matter of fashionable clothes, but in matter of Islam they always lag the rest. When it comes to participating in the Friday prayers, they are the last to attend. However, when it comes to drinking alcohol and loitering around, they are right at the top³³."

POLITICS AND MEO IDENTITY POLITICS

It is felt in Mewat that Meos managed to reside in India at the time of Partition in 1947. It is well known fact that during the time of Partition, Gandhi ji arrived in Mewat at Ghasera village and requested them not to migrate from India and assured them full respect and security. It was their respect to the Mahatma and their loyalty to the nation that they are very much present here as a victim to be ruled, some among them would argue.

Political culture of the Meo is dominated by some elements which make a gap between the people and the government/ ruling elite of the region as well as of state and national fame. Though there is universal franchise in India but due to some *thondas* (local political elites) common people are not able to contact/meet the big leaders directly. Moreover, acting as self-mobilisers they take the credit of their votes/support in the eyes of big political leaders and earn some laurels in return for themselves. It is clear from the voting behaviour of the Meo in last elections that voting pattern is mostly the same. Voting behaviour of Meo people shows that the issue of being Meo or non- Meo exists in the politics of the region but there is hardly any communal consideration in the

elections³⁴.

The democratic political system has hardened the lines which divide religious and ethnic group. The political parties consolidate people into religious and ethnic group for political advantage³⁵. On the other hand, the Tablighi Jamaat provides key Islamic symbols around which Meo politicians seek to garner Meo votes in a political system where communities generally tend to vote together in bloc. In this regard it is interesting to note that the vast gatherings that the Tablighi Jamaat holds periodically in Mewat, which attract thousands of Meos, provide the Meos an arena for the display of strength, a symbol of assertion of considerable political import in a context wherein the Meos find themselves a beleaguered minority. "*Ek gaon bhi aisa nahi jisne shahadat nahi di ho... Hashan Khan Mewati ki aguwai men ladte hua, ek hi jagah do hazar log mare gaye, baber se ladte hua, jab yahan ke raja ko fansi pe chadhaya gaya tha. Hum desbhagt log hai, humen apni kaum pe fakr he, is desh ke liye humne jaan di hen... azad hind fauj mein bhi.... azadi ki baaki ladai mein bhi.... hum apna vatan chhod ke kyon jayen...*" (There is not a single village that has not witnessed martyrdom. In the leadership of Hasan Khan Mewati, two thousand people were killed at one place while fighting with Baber when the king of Mewat was executed. We are patriot people. We are proud of our community. We have sacrificed our lives for this country in different battles of independence, in Aazad Hind Fauj also. Why should we leave our country?)" (Fazruddin Besar, Sarpanch, Sakras Village, 13/11/2018).

As discussed earlier, politically, Meos regional identity was targeted by dividing them into three states namely Haryana, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. This diversity of administration has not helped their brotherhood. Their age-old unity has been divided. Their representation in Lok Sabha becomes tough with the demarcation of the

³⁴ Shubhra Pant (2019), 'In Mewat, These Influencers Can Swing the Poll', *The Times of India*, May7.

³⁵ Partap C. Aggarwal (1969), 'Islamic Revival in Modern India: The Case of the Meo', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.4, No.42, p.1680.

³³ New Meos Times, Alwar, April 1, 1995.

boundaries of the Lok Sabha seat. As a result, they are divided between Faridabad and Gurgaon parliamentary constituencies of Haryana state.

Moreover, politics of Mewat is dominated by some family feuds including the family of Yashin Meo Khan. "Mewat voters go for the candidate not the party", said Slamuddin. "People voted for Zakir Hussain when he was with Congress, they voted for him when he was with BSP (Bahujan Samaj Party) and they voted for him when he shifted to INLD (Indian National Lokdal)". Hussain is incumbent legislator from Nuh, one of three assembly constituencies. On the other hand, Firozpur Jhirkha is with INLD while Punhana voted for an independent candidate to the Vidhan Sabha. "*Ab do-char saal se test paas karke naukri milti hai, pahle to kuchh bhi nahi tha. Do hi parivaron ki chalti thi-ek tayyab hussain aur ch. Khurshid.... Garhmantri tak pahunchi, kisi ke liye kuchh nahi kiya. Aapne- apne parivar ke liye kaam kiya.*" (For the last two- four years, it is possible to get job based on test, there was nothing earlier.

ECONOMIC ASPECTS OF MEOS IDENTITY

Economically, Meos identity is the identity of a poor person in general since people are dependent on two occupations i.e. agriculture and labour. Agriculture is the mainstay of the people, which is dependent on rainfall since irrigation facilities are frugal. Moreover, certified quality seeds are not used. Use of fertilizer, the most important, is exceptionally low mainly because of risk of failure of crops and due to poor socio-economic status of marginal and small farmers. The occupation of agriculture in Mewat seems to be untouched by Green Revolution. Factors like small cultivations, low productivity, minimal modern irrigation facilities, and drought at regular intervals drive the poor and innocent Meo into high debts in the hands of Jain and Hindu *Bania* moneylenders. "We have no option but to sell our produce to private agents who are offering Rs.3300 to 3500 per quintal. It is unfortunate that the farmers are being forced to sell their produce

at distressed rate in full knowledge of Hafed and marketing board officials", said Ramphal, a farmer³⁶. The present-day situation of Meo farmers has not changed considerably in the last century. As the annual administrative report of the government of the Punjab (1916) noted:

"The condition of the Meos is rapidly becoming hopeless. They live so literally from hand to mouth, carelessly contracting debt for marriages, funerals and petty luxuries even in average years that when a year of drought comes they are thrown on the moneylender who can make with them whatever terms."³⁷

The record shows that an important incident of conflict between money lenders and Meos took place around 1932. Some Meo farmers were blamed and convicted for the same. In revenge Banias and Mahajans became the target of mob violence. This incident distanced the Meos and Hindu Banias. Another incident in the same year that contributed to the transformation of Meo identity to Muslim one was the no-rent campaign wherein all the Meo collectively refused to pay the revenue of *kharif* season as their crops were damaged due to flood. Meos' resistance was considered as anti -state and anti -Hindu. Maharaja Alwar always supported the Hindus through their organisations and suppressed the Meos.

An important reason for borrowing money by the Meos is the much prevalent dowry system among them. Dowry-system in Meos has become a tyranny for poor parents who cannot afford it. Mainly two factors are responsible for the persistence of this practice. First, the reputation for lavishness which the Meos have inherited from the days when an individual acquired wealth by loot and robbery and the community beguiled them into sharing it with others. The second factor contributing to this practice is the inter-gotra rivalry and competition. The individual must

³⁶ Sumedha Sharma (2018), 'Mewat Farmers: Kept out of Mustard Procurement', *The Tribune*, March 21.

³⁷ Shail Mayaram (1997), *Resisting Regimes: Myth, Memory and the Shaping of a Muslim Identity*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp.108-110.

uphold not only his individual status but also the status of his gotra against that of gotra in which his son or daughter is married³⁸. “We have separate Meo personal Law boards here and our property is distributed among male children only which become justification to the dowry system among Meos. This is tribal law in real sense... why we are not treated like tribals then..? we have same customs, traditions, Gotras and everything with Meenas which are treated as tribe and given ST status, then why not Meos” (Fazruddin Besar, Sarpanch, Sakras village, 13/11/2018). The problem is aggravated due to widespread illiteracy, lack of modern education and social backwardness of the Meo community.

The Jamat prohibits Meo people from participation in Melas (fairs) which are immensely popular in Mewat held at places associated with Sheikh Musa, Shah Chokha, Bharti Hari and Lal Das. Even near Nuh a large mela assembles on Teej festival. But Meos are restricted from using such occasions for the purpose of rural development³⁹.

Meo culture is masculinist and the Meo people derive a sense of worth from being men with pride. A low standard of living and high level of pride are the chief characteristics of the Meos. These two have combined to their exploitation by moneylenders. For the maintenance of status, they usually mortgage their land to the local moneylender known as *Bohras*. This reduces them to the necessity of working as landless laborers without the chance or hope of ever recovering their land. Despite poor economic condition, Meos are large-hearted people who believe in the Hindu philosophy of *Atithi devo bhav*. While conducting interview with the Meo people, the researcher was impressed by the generosity of local people including a local tea vendor. “*Chai-pani hamaara farz ha. Aap hamaare mahmaan hen. Chai ke paise kyon len, le nahi sakte.*” (It’s our duty to serve you

hospitality, you are our guest. Why to take the price of tea, cannot be taken.) (Abdul Mazid, Tea shopkeeper, Malai Village, 12/11/2018). The Meo community considers the ornaments an indicator of economic prosperity. They have just started to understand the significance of money as only a few people have accounts in banks⁴⁰. Moreover, they prefer to borrow money from traditional money lenders (*bohras*) to taking loans from modern banks and other financial institutions. This also reflects the little importance that banking system has in the lives of Meos⁴¹.

Due to the preaching of Tablighi Jamaat, give and take of money as loan is prohibited. Meos, therefore, cannot take *taccavi* and loan from community development blocks because they will have to pay interest on such account which is a great sin for them. In modern society like that of today it is simply inconceivable to do away with the bank, insurance corporations, and other institutions of the credit. Moreover, the lack of education and knowledge of skilled work add to the woes of Meos. Their Muslim identity also restricts their participation in fairs held regularly at Mewat, which can be an additional source of income for them.

DEVELOPMENTAL PROCESS: MEOS VIEWS

It is to be understood that Meos identity, though positive in some cases, negatively affected the going on schemes and programmes in the region. Their straight forwardness sometimes is understood their resistance, though they are not against any programme or state authority. Moreover, the effect of Tablighi Jamaat or their being Muslim has to some extent become irritative to the developmental schemes. After examining the culture and cross sections of the Meo society, some views of Meos version of the story of development in the region emerge.

³⁸ Yoginder Sikand (1995), ‘Meonis of Mewat’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.30, No.10, p.490.

³⁹ Hashim Amir Ali (1970), *Meos of Mewat: Old Neighbours of New Delhi*, Oxford & IBH Publishing Company: New Delhi, p.73.

⁴⁰ Hashim Amir Ali (1970), *Meos of Mewat: Old Neighbours of New Delhi*, New Delhi: Oxford & IBH Publishing Company, p.75.

⁴¹ Ibid.

The intensity of backwardness in the Meo society has been increased due to Islamisation process supported by Tablighi Jamaat. Many welfare schemes initiated by the state government have failed to meet their objectives in Mewat region because of the lukewarm response of the Meo people. Immunization programme faced a challenge in the region since it was understood negatively in the community. The medicine used in the Pulse Polio Programme (PPP) may affect the fertility of the people and it is initiated by the state to control the population/strength of the Meo community. Though some aware people of the region/community adopted it and tried to convince the people in general that scheme is neither meant for the Mewat region specifically nor it is for Meo people only, but the programme was affected by the rumour in the region.

CONCLUSION

Tablighi Jamaat movement in Mewat has metamorphosed Meo identity. Originally, the Meos were Hindus. The process of Islamisation initiated by Jamaat has brought Meos closer to Muslim identity, as defined by the religious leaders. A close study of their identity reveals that they have not given up Hindu customs and beliefs which makes Meo identity a unique combination of co-existence of two faiths i.e. Hinduism and Islam. Moreover, for Meo people, caste is the basic unit of division of society rather than religion. The outside world perceives Meo identity as Muslim identity, which has negatively affected the process of development in the region. The Muslim identity has also made Meo people to distance themselves from some developmental schemes and programmes. Though with the passage of time, the influence of Tablighi Jamaat has receded in Mewat region, there are instances when the Muslim identity of Meo people as perceived by the outside world has brought the charge of terrorism against them. This has further alienated the Meo people from the development process.

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