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Swallowing Hurt: Conversion, Broken Deity Tiles and Reluctant Forgiveness in Kanpur

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ABSTRACT

This article considers the non-aggressive aftermath of an alleged iconoclasm in a residential neighbourhood of Kanpur. The ‘iconoclasts’ were recent converts to Christianity who were attempting to mark their departure from Hinduism by dismantling the deity tiles on their house. Despite the indignation this caused among their Hindu neighbours, not much ensued. While the lack of escalation may be easy to explain given the local circumstances, this article pays particular attention to how the anger of the denouncer subsided and the role of her growing knowledge about Christianity therein.

KEYWORDS

Christianity; conversion; deity tiles; iconoclasm; India; Hindu nationalism; Kanpur; offence; outrage

In October 2013, one of my fieldwork conversations in Kanpur was suddenly interrupted by a visibly upset Hindu woman demanding to know why someone would want to ‘kill God’. In the rambling sentences that followed, it emerged that her next-door neighbours had just converted to Christianity and destroyed the deity tiles on their house. For this woman, this act was iconoclasm in broad daylight, if not deicide.¹ In the week that followed, she and her Hindu neighbours spent considerable energy pondering how to react, but eventually swallowed their hurt. This article unpacks this seemingly insignificant episode to enhance our understanding not only of why the commotion failed to escalate, but also how the woman’s anger weakened and lost its affective momentum. I argue that, besides having insufficient ‘capacity’ to contact mediators who could take the matter further and a reluctance to upset formerly cordial neighbourly relations, a sudden acknowledgement of why the converts cleansed their house of non-Christian deity images may also have contributed to the surprising concord that followed.

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1. Here I use iconoclasm as a reference to the physical destruction of religious images or temples.

Awareness of others' religious sensitivities

Suggesting that awareness about the doctrinal obligations and abstentions of religious 'others' can help mitigate controversies over religious offence contradicts a substantial body of research. Scholars of religious offence controversies rather tend to emphasise how such awareness can enable deliberate provocation.² From public Quran burnings by Far Right organisations in Europe to Andres Serrano's 'Piss Christ' photograph—or, in India, from throwing severed pigs' heads into mosques to placing one's foot atop a Shiv *ling*—the impression given is that awareness about others' religious sensitivities enhances rather than reduces the risk of escalation. Granted, this may well reflect the reality in polarised religio-political contexts. Nevertheless, we still know little about how such awareness plays out beyond the headlines and in friendlier situations, and the case discussed in the following pages may serve as a useful counterpoint.

Similarly, the few scholars who look into alleged religious transgressions that do *not* spiral into larger controversies³ generally attribute their containment to rather different factors than awareness about others' religious sensitivities. Many allude to the absence of one or several of the conditions known to increase the likelihood of escalation. According to Jeanne Favret-Saada, these include: (1) institutions entrusted to make theological interpretations about impropriety and its sanction; (2) a denunciator with awareness about such interpretations; (3) a 'blasphemer' who can be called out; and (4) an authority able to invoke sanctions.⁴ To this list, contemporary South Asianists might want to add: (5) a political ideology encouraging vigilance; (6) rapid multiplication of the alleged impropriety; (7) a mediator⁵ who facilitates contact with the sanctioning authorities; or, alternatively, (8) a 'democratisation' of the sanctioning authorities.⁶ But there are also scholars who pinpoint other containment factors. Alongside the contributors to this special section, Christophe Jaffrelot discusses the difficulty of mobilising Hindus against offences committed by the Government of India, as in the Ram Setu controversy;⁷ Philippa Williams points to the asymmetric power relations that make it difficult for Indian Muslims to react against transgressions committed by well-connected Hindus;⁸ and Laura Ring adds an interesting gender dimension: based on fieldwork in an apartment building in Karachi, she argues that the women living there—all housewives—were better at enduring the non-resolution of tension than their husbands because their social lives relied heavily on peaceful exchange (*lenā-denā*,

2. This perspective is particularly pronounced in Christopher S. Grenda *et al.* (eds), *Profane: Sacrilegious Expression in a Multicultural Age* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2014).

3. An elaboration of this imbalance is found in this issue in Kathinka Frøystad and Vera Lazzaretti, 'Introduction: Containing Religious Offence beyond the Courts', in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 42, no. 3 (2021), DOI: [10.1080/00856401.2021.1923449](https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2021.1923449).

4. Note the sequence. For Favret-Saada, blasphemy controversies begin with the denouncers, not with the transgressions they call out: Jeanne Favret-Saada, 'Rushdie et Compagnie: Préalables à une anthropologie du blasphème', in *Ethnologie française*, Vol. 22, no. 3 (1992), pp. 251–60.

5. There is a vast scholarship on political mediators or 'fixers' who help citizens approach state institutions. A useful overview is found in Ward Berenschot, 'Political Fixers and the Rise of Hindu Nationalism in Gujarat, India: Lubricating a Patronage Democracy', in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 34, no. 3 (Nov. 2011), pp. 382–401.

6. Mini Chandran, 'The Democratization of Citizenship: Books and the Indian Public', in *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. 45, no. 40 (2010), pp. 27–31.

7. Christophe Jaffrelot, 'Hindu Nationalism and the (Not So Easy) Art of Being Outraged: The Ram Setu Controversy', in *South Asia Multidisciplinary Journal*, Vol. 2 (2008), pp. 1–17.

8. Philippa Williams, *Everyday Peace? Politics, Citizenship and Muslim Lives in India* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015).

i.e. give and take) between neighbours. Even remarks initially denounced as blasphemous eventually passed without further sanction other than muffled critique.⁹ Several of these points are equally relevant for the case I discuss in the following pages. In this case, however, the female denouncer's sudden awareness of the Christian prohibition against images of non-Christian deities may also have contributed, if not in preventing escalation, then certainly in making her anger subside. While the ability to see a situation from someone else's point of view—also known as 'perspective-taking'—can easily be misused to stage provocation, I want to open up the possibility that it can also have the opposite effect. Given the many psychologists and management gurus who advocate perspective-taking as an important skill, this suggestion should not seem too far-fetched even though such cases generally unfold outside the purview of journalists and scholars.

Milanganj, Kanpur, in 2013

The location for the 'killing god' incident was the outskirts of Kanpur, one of the largest cities in Uttar Pradesh. 'Milanganj', as I call this neighbourhood, is enclosed by highways on two sides and a market street on the third. The fourth demarcation is invisible, given how Milanganj's urban sprawl extends all the way to the city centre. Criss-crossing Milanganj by foot reveals a mosaic of residential quarters interspersed with labyrinthine lanes and a few trafficable streets dotted with general stores, tea stalls, roadside temples, betel nut (*pān*) sellers and cows. Its houses vary from shacks to mansions, the majority being two- or three-storey buildings in which tenant families occupy one or several rooms, but share the water taps, lavatories, middle courtyards and roofs. Many of the male residents make their living in one of the factories nearby, or they sell clothes, scooters or items for Hindu worship, repair mobile phones or ceiling fans, or make wooden beds or straw baskets. But we also find bank employees, college teachers and travel agents, most of whom bear upper-caste or Sikh surnames, as well as menial workers of Other Backward Class (OBC) or Dalit backgrounds, which reflects the neighbourhood's economic and social heterogeneity.¹⁰ What one does *not* find, however, are gated communities in which the better-off reside, shielding themselves from the rest despite their growing prevalence in more affluent parts of Kanpur.¹¹

Due to its past as a village area that accommodated Partition refugees and people from the rural hinterland, Milanganj's religious heterogeneity is largely limited to Hindus and Sikhs. When millions of Sikhs and Hindus fled post-Partition violence in 1947, some ended up in Kanpur, where one of the locations they were offered was Milanganj which then still had ample vacant space. Right up to the present, its

9. Laura Ring, *Zenana: Everyday Peace in a Karachi Apartment Building* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

10. To protect the anonymity of the Milanganj people I write about in this and other articles, I cannot provide further details about its cornerstone enterprises and institutions.

11. Deeper discussions of gated communities in India are found in Anne Waldrop, 'Gating and Class Relations: The Case of a New Delhi "Colony"', in *City & Society*, Vol. 16, no. 2 (2004), pp. 93–116; Sanjay Srivastava, *Entangled Urbanism: Slum, Gated Community and Shopping Mall in Delhi and Gurgaon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); and Chris J. Fuller and Haripriya Narasimhan, *Tamil Brahmins: The Making of a Middle-Class Caste* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2014).

affordable rental accommodation, market and transport facilities have enabled a transition to urbanity for villagers opting out of agricultural hardship and feudal oppression. The result is a neighbourhood in which the majority were either OBC Hindus of rural background or descendants of Hindu or Sikh refugees from Pakistani Punjab, though there was also a sprinkling of others.

The dominance of Hindus and Sikhs shows in Milanganj's streetscape. Besides a plethora of shrines dedicated to various Hindu deities, there are also a couple of *gurdwaras* (Sikh temples), but there are no mosques, Sufi Muslim grave shrines (*dargāhs*) or churches. Yet its inhabitants need not venture very far to encounter a greater religious heterogeneity. On the other side of the market street there is a sizeable Muslim population and several mosques; within a two-kilometre radius, there are at least two churches, and three kilometres further away, there are also some well-visited *dargāhs*. So despite living in a largely Hindu and Sikh 'world', religious alterity is never far away, and many Milanganj Hindus are so accustomed to conducting their evening *pūjā* (worship) to the sound of the *azān* (Islamic call to prayer) that they hardly give such sonic intertwinement a thought.

It could be tempting to describe Milanganj as a cosmopolitan antidote to the religious polarisation that increasingly characterises India's political development; and, indeed, I often heard Milanganj Hindus affirm that 'God is one (*Bhagvān ek hai*)' or spotted them in a *gurdwara* or listened to stories about how they had been helped by visiting *dargāhs* in times of deep distress. But few had ever set their foot in a church, visited a mosque or taken part in a Muslim festival,¹² which suggests a limit to their religious inclusivism that would be significant for the 'killing god' episode. Milanganj had also seen its share of religio-political violence. In 1984, it was one of the scenes of the anti-Sikh violence that killed 127 people across the city in retaliation for the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.¹³ During the Hindu-Muslim violence that followed the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 that killed 254 people in Kanpur,¹⁴ Milanganj found itself dangerously close to one of the epicentres. Though Milanganj has largely remained peaceful since then, I often heard residents express fear that interreligious violence elsewhere in the city or the state would spread to Milanganj, though others opined that Milanganj was protected given its proximity to a heavily-secured state institution.

By October 2013, when the 'killing god' episode occurred, such spates of violence seemed distant. Nevertheless, this period was marked by at least four issues that reignited a sense of Hindu self-assertion. Firstly, the grisly interreligious riots in Muzaffarnagar (500 kilometres to the north-west) one month earlier had revived the feeling that Hindus were in danger. One element had been a video that falsely claimed

12. See Kathinka Frøystad, 'Inclusivism and Its Contingencies: Following Temple-Goers in Kanpur', in István Keul (ed.), *Spaces of Religion in Urban South Asia* (London: Routledge, 2021), pp. 24–38.

13. Manish Sahu, '1984 Anti-Sikh Riots in Kanpur: Got Witnesses in 19 Cases Closed by Kanpur Police, Claims SIT', *The Indian Express* (8 Dec. 2020) [<https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/lucknow/1984-anti-sikh-riots-in-kanpur-got-witnesses-in-19-cases-closed-by-kanpur-police-sit-7096094/>, accessed 6 Jan. 2021].

14. Haidar Naqvi, 'Kanpur (UP) December 8, 1992—254 Dead', *Hindustan Times* (3 Nov. 2008) [<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/kanpur-up-december-8-1992-254-dead/story-uGV4h8BANZbfv5wf1BKZQO.html>, accessed 6 Jan. 2021].

to depict the lynching of two Muzaffarnagar Hindus by a Muslim mob,¹⁵ and though more than two-thirds of the 62 casualties were Muslim,¹⁶ it was the video—probably originating in Pakistan or Afghanistan—that most Milanganj Hindus accepted as true. By 2013, many people had just acquired their first smartphone, and the illegal circulation of this video gave them a feeling of having witnessed uncensored proof of the lynching.¹⁷

Secondly, the election campaign that was to catapult the Bharatiya Janata Party's prime ministerial candidate, Narendra Modi, to power in 2014 had just begun. By October 2013, his photo appeared on virtually every issue of the newspaper that landed on my doormat, whether or not he had said anything newsworthy, possibly as a result of paid news.¹⁸ The announcement in late September that Modi planned a massive rally in Kanpur in October was received with enthusiasm. Not only did Modi personify the aspiration to turn dusty Uttar Pradesh into a new Singapore and Hindus into masters of the country, Modi was coming to *their* city and cared about *their* votes. Virtually all the Milanganj Hindus who took an interest in politics placed their future hopes in Modi.

Thirdly, it was the main festive season. Ganesh Mahotsav had just been completed with more fervour than ever before and the Hindus now prepared for Navratri, which would culminate with spectacular public Dussehra celebrations on 13 October. Hindu deities, ceremonies, processions and plays occupied Milanganj's streets, squares and vacant plots for months. Moreover, the gods and goddesses that are worshipped during these festivals were held to be closer to the human realm than usual. To ensure their continued benevolence, it was crucial to ensure an atmosphere of purity and respect, which in turn raised watchfulness for transgressive behaviour.¹⁹

Finally, there had recently been trouble over Christian missionising. Anxieties over Christian conversion are central to the Hindu nationalist fear of minoritisation, and several of India's states had proscribed conversion by the use of force, inducement or other fraudulent means. Though Uttar Pradesh was yet to enact such

15. Rajesh Ahuja, 'Muzaffarnagar Riots: Fake Video Spreads Hate on Social Media', *Hindustan Times* (10 Sept. 2013) [<http://hindustantimes.com/india/muzaffarnagar-riots-fake-video-spreads-hate-on-social-media/story-WEOKBACCOQcRb7X9Wb28qL.html>], accessed 8 April 2020].

16. Bharti Jain, 'Government Releases Data of Riot Victims Identifying Religion', *The Times of India* (24 Sept. 2013) [timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Government-releases-data-of-riot-victims-identifying-religion/articleshow/22998550.cms], accessed 8 April 2020].

17. This was neither the first nor the last time Muslims were wrongly blamed: see, for example, Sahana Udupa, 'Viral Video: Mobile Media, Riot and Religious Politics', in Sahana Udupa and Stephen D. McDowell (eds), *Media as Politics in South Asia* (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 190–205; Taberez Ahmed Neyazi, 'The Politics of the Social Media', in Niraja Gopal Jayal (ed.), *Re-Forming India: The Nation Today* (New Delhi: Penguin Random House, 2019), pp. 524–36; Parvis Ghassem-Fachandi, *Pogrom in Gujarat: Hindu Nationalism and Anti-Muslim Violence in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); and Pragya Singh, 'Power of Narrative: Hindus Did Not Suffer More than Muslims, Yet They Believe They Did', *NewsClick* (3 Mar. 2020) [<https://www.newsclick.in/Delhi-Riots-Hindus-Did-Not-Suffer-More-than-Muslims>], accessed 31 Mar. 2020].

18. For details on the prevalence of paid news, see Vipul Mudgal, 'News for Sale: "Paid News", Media Ethics, and India's Democratic Public Sphere', in Shakuntala Rao and Herman Wasserman (eds), *Media Ethics and Justice in the Age of Globalization* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 100–20; and Akash Kapur, 'In India, Sometimes News Is Just a Product Placement', *The New York Times* (7 May 2010) [<https://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/08/world/asia/08iht-letter.html>], accessed 7 Jan. 2021].

19. Comparable points about the temporality of transgressions are made in this issue by Ute Hüsken, 'Containing Murder in a South Indian Temple', in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 42, no. 3 (2021), DOI: 10.1080/00856401.2021.1924310.

a law,²⁰ Hindu nationalists frequently suspected Christian proselytisation of involving foul play.²¹ Local rumours that were circulating when my fieldwork began some months before the deity tile incident claimed that some American missionaries who had recently been staying in Milanganj had offered Rs10,000 for each signed conversion form they could obtain. The missionaries were apparently chased away by local vigilantes, and that was the end of the story. Though my attempts to corroborate these rumours with the news archives were unfortunately futile, there was wide local agreement about these events, and the message many Milanganj Hindus took home was that one had better keep a watchful eye on possible missionisation.²²

One would perhaps have thought that the local resentment against Christian proselytisation would create obstacles for a fair-complexioned Scandinavian fieldworker such as myself, given that everyone I met in Milanganj initially categorised me as a Christian.²³ Fortunately this was not the case. My choice of a Kali temple as a spatial point of departure, combined with the classic anthropological method of participant observation,²⁴ frequently made me conduct *pūjās* and take an active part in *ārātīs* and *jāgrans*; for my Hindu interlocutors, what mattered was practice rather than assumed inner beliefs. Granted, there was one occasion during which I felt unwelcome: I had just taken a brief field break to go for a job interview, and on my return, I followed the local practice of bringing modest gifts—fake jewellery, lipsticks, T-shirts and caramel gift packs—for those I knew best. When the wife of a senior local Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader, whose grandchildren I had talked to occasionally, learnt that a foreign woman had distributed gifts to temple volunteers, she promptly began to keep her grandchildren away from me in a rather obvious manner. I had no way of knowing what would ensue if her suspicions were shared by her husband, but fortunately, my temple interlocutors came up with excellent advice: I asked for an appointment with the BJP leader, presented my research plans and contact information, and invited him to get in touch in the event that my presence or conduct should ever become a

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20. In 2020, the Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly, led by the hardline Hindu nationalist chief minister, Yogi Adityanath, passed an ordinance—the Uttar Pradesh Prohibition of Unlawful Religious Conversion Ordinance, 2020—to curb the conversion of Hindus to other religions. This ordinance was passed into law in November 2020. Besides targeting aggressive missionising, it attempts to limit conversion to Islam by interfaith marriage, which Hindu nationalists presently construe as ‘love jihad’: Kirti Singh, ‘U.P. Ordinance on “Love Jihad” Criminalises Conversion’, *Frontline* (18 Dec. 2020) [<https://frontline.thehindu.com/cover-story/uttar-pradesh-up-ordinance-on-love-jihad-criminalises-conversion/article33201958.ece?homepage=true>, accessed 8 Jan. 2021].
21. This was also the case in other states, as described by David Mosse, *The Saint in the Baniyan Tree: Christianity and Caste Society in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), chap. 6; Kalyani Devaki Menon, ‘Converted Innocents and Their Trickster Heroes: The Politics of Proselytizing in India’, in Andrew Buckser and Stephen Glazier (eds), *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), pp. 43–54; and Nathaniel Roberts, *To Be Cared For: The Power of Conversion and Foreignness of Belonging in an Indian Slum* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), esp. chap. 4.
22. When a Pentecostal church named Abundant Life Church (ALC) sought no-objection signatures to establish a permanent church in Milanganj in 2019, my Hindu interlocutors were reluctant to sign. It is possible that the missionaries who visited Milanganj in 2013 represented this church, but this cannot be ascertained without further research.
23. This categorisation would be correct in the sense that I live in a Christian-dominated society, which undoubtedly shapes more of my thinking than I am aware of, but wrong in terms of belief. I was raised by agnostic parents, joined the Humanist Association at seventeen, and have spent far more time in Hindu temples and ashrams than in any Christian congregation.
24. Closer descriptions of this temple and my fieldwork are found in Kathinka Frøystad, ‘Alter-Politics Reconsidered: From Different Worlds to Osmotic Worlding’, in Bjørn Enge Bertelsen and Synnøve Bendixsen (eds), *Critical Anthropological Engagements in Human Alterity and Difference* (Cham: Springer International, 2017), pp. 229–52; and Frøystad, ‘Inclusivism and Its Contingencies’.

problem. Other than that, my presumed Christian background did not hamper my fieldwork, and in the ‘killing god’ episode which I shortly detail, it was even treated as a resource, given the way it enabled those with pressing questions to approach me and ask them.

‘Killing god’

The woman who interrupted my fieldwork conversation in the Kali temple that day was a Punjabi Hindu housewife in her forties from the sizeable Khatri community, a non-Brahman upper caste of assumed Kṣatriya descent. ‘Kavita’, as I call her, was one of the numerous pious women who visited this temple every evening. This day she arrived earlier than usual. It was as if she *had* to talk to someone to let off steam and decide what to do. At the root of her agitation was the removal of Hindu iconography from the house of her next-door neighbours in a way she found iconoclastic.²⁵ Kavita did not have anything against Christians. Nor did she have prior grudges against this family. Nor did she even express resentment against their conversion. As a Hindu, she was probably accustomed to people switching gods whenever their *iṣṭadevtā* (favoured deity) no longer delivered,²⁶ though the switch was undoubtedly greater and more unexpected than usual in this instance.

What she found hurtful were two acts. The first was the cutting down of a banner announcing a forthcoming *bhaṇḍārā* (mass distribution of food offerings) in a nearby Durga temple that was to be arranged in connection with the Navratri festival. Such banners are usually put up a week in advance and hung across residential streets with ropes tied to houses or electricity poles. In this case, the workers hired by the temple committee had fixed the banner to the new converts’ house, presumably unaware that they no longer identified as Hindu. One morning the banner was found hanging down from the adjacent house; the rope on the Christian converts’ house had been severed, and the newly-converted family were immediately suspected of being behind it.

The second act left no doubt about who the wrongdoers were. Kavita and the other women in her lane, who spent their days cooking, cleaning and helping their children with schoolwork, suddenly heard the loud sound of chipping. Putting their heads out to see where the sound came from, they saw their newly-converted Christian neighbours chipping away at the ceramic deity tile right above their entrance door. Being a mixed, congested neighbourhood of the kind occasionally analysed as having a tinge of the character that Foucault termed ‘panoptic’²⁷ alerts us to what I term its concomitant ‘pan-auditory’ character: no house alterations, domestic quarrels, or transactions with

25. For reasons I specify later, I was unable to ascertain the converts’ caste backgrounds. Pentecostal proselytisers across the country are mainly known to target Dalits and, in states with a high Adivasi presence, people of Adivasi background. In the likely event that the converts in the ‘killing god’ episode were Dalits, it is worth noting that, given the condition of their home, they cannot have been among the most destitute ones.

26. Cf. Roberts, *To Be Cared For*.

27. Foucault’s analysis of how prisons are constructed to make it impossible to hide has inspired a number of scholars of urbanity. While some use it to analyse securitisation and surveillance, the panoptic dimension I have in mind pertains to how citizens are constantly exposed to one another, as exemplified by Penny Vera-Sanso, ‘Conformity and Contestation: Social Heterogeneity in South Indian Settlements’, in Geert De Neve and Henrike Donner (eds), *The Meaning of the Local: Politics of Place in Urban India* (Oxford: UCL Press, 2006), pp. 182–205; see also Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Allen Lane, 1977).

hawkers or wandering holy men could ever be kept secret from one's neighbours due to the sound these activities emanated.

Deity tiles serve a dual purpose. Originally, they were meant to protect a house and its inhabitants from inauspicious forces. The most popular deity tiles depict Hindu deities, carry words such as *shubh lābh* (roughly meaning auspicious benefit), or display Hindu symbols such as a swastika or *om*. But ever since the devastating Hindu–Muslim riots of 1992, such tiles increasingly mark houses as Hindu-owned to protect them from Hindu nationalist goons searching for Muslims to assault.²⁸ Given Milanganj's close proximity to Muslim-dominated and riot-affected localities, there is hardly a Hindu-owned house that is not marked as Hindu.

The sound that alerted Kavita to the tile's removal and destruction was caused by the tile's materiality and adhesive, which require brief elaboration. Not all protective adornments came in the shape of deity tiles; there were also temporary solutions such as strings of *nīm* leaves, protective *nimbu-mirch* (lemon and chilli) hangings, *rañgolīs* (decorative street patterns) of coloured powder and decorative pots, all of which must be regularly replaced or cleaned. And there were other permanent solutions apart from deity tiles, including painted *rañgolīs* and swastika patterns on fences or gates, the former typically on posh apartment buildings and the latter mostly on upscale properties with courtyards and gardens. In Milanganj, which lacked both these types of dwellings, the most common permanent protective adornment was the deity tile, and a rise in social mobility typically involved the change from temporary to permanent protective house adornment. Deity tiles that would be useless on makeshift homes, unplastered brick houses or rented dwellings were the 'icing on the cake' for families that had just acquired a house of their own and obtained sufficient money to get it plastered and painted. Reaching this stage could take decades,²⁹ and the pride with which some of Milanganj's inhabitants told me that their home was owned (*apnā*) rather than rented (*kirāyā pe*) was unmistakable. With a deity tile fixed onto the house beside or above the entrance door, a home had reached a state of completeness.

Being made and affixed to last, deity tiles were difficult to remove. If fixed onto a wall just before the house is plastered and painted, as in this case, they cannot be removed unless they are chipped away with a chisel and hammer until the tile edges are sufficiently exposed to snap them off the wall. But tiles often break and must be removed in smaller pieces, some of which may fall to the ground and perhaps be stepped on by people wearing shoes. If so, the act would be triply offensive to pious Hindus: on top of the tile destruction, it is disrespectful to touch a deity image with one's feet, let alone while wearing shoes. Moreover, besides taking time, tile removal is

28. As demonstrated by Paul Brass and several other scholars, interreligious riots of this magnitude do not just 'erupt' spontaneously but are meticulously planned and engineered: see Paul Brass, *The Production of Hindu–Muslim Violence in Contemporary India* (Seattle: The University of Washington Press, 2003). I happened to live in Milanganj for three months shortly after the 1992 riots and met several people who told me how Hindutva volunteers from other parts of the city had traversed the locality prior to the riots to identify Muslim-owned houses that were to be targeted: Kathinka Frøystad, *Blended Boundaries: Caste, Class and Shifting Faces of 'Hinduness' in a North-Indian City* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 214–5.

29. In this region, people rarely ask for bank loans. To build a house, they begin by buying a piece of land and then construct their house little by little whenever they have sufficient economic surplus for bricks and construction workers. The house of the person who first introduced me to Milanganj in 1993, for instance, took fifteen years to be completed though the plaster was still pending in 2013 because he suddenly had to prioritise cancer treatment for his wife.

noisy. Able to hear the loud *chip-chip-chip* sounds inside their kitchens, one housewife after another looked outside to see what was going on. It was impossible not to notice that a deity tile was under attack, and that a part of it already lay broken on the ground. For Kavita, this was blatant iconoclasm in broad daylight. The culprit was seen in the act, and bearing witness to such a desecration left her both sad and angry.

Religious specialists may well object that protective deity tiles are not consecrated in the same way as deity figures used for worship, yet this does not mean that they are treated as mere representations. Indeed, their protective quality attests to a certain efficacy and aliveness, which Kavita confirmed by the words she used when lamenting the tile destruction to me in the temple. 'It's okay that they wanted to convert', she said. 'But did they really have to destroy (*tor denā*) their tiles? Did they really have to kill god (*bhagvān ko mārṇā*)? This is god after all (*ye to bhagvān hai!*)' Judging by her choice of words, she conceptualised the tile-breaking as a veritable deicide.

Interestingly, Kavita remained silent about potential other deity figures that her newly-converted neighbours might have had. Many Hindus keep a small temple (*pūjā ghar*) in their homes; such temples have consecrated deity figures but removing them could easily have been done so quietly and discreetly that neither Kavita nor her fellow Hindu neighbours had noticed. In the event that they had come to know anyway, they might well have worried about whether the *mūrtis* had been properly de-consecrated and removed in a respectful manner. But they would hardly have been offended in the same way as when waking up to the severed *bhaṇḍārā* banner and witnessing deity tiles being destroyed. Consequently, the physical properties and placement of religious images can easily trump their purpose and efficacy in giving rise to religious offence allegations. Disrespectful treatment of religious objects in panoptic and pan-auditory localities such as Milanganj thus often creates larger ripples than 'classic' iconoclasm within religious shrines, even if it only affects inexpensive reproductions. Kavita, for one, was certainly fuming.

Affect, indecisiveness and inaction

Affect is an intriguing phenomenon. Many theorists of affect emphasise its half-reflective character, which makes the impulse to act outweigh the cool-headed consideration of other options.³⁰ Judging from Kavita's agitation when she approached me in the temple, this was a fair description of her state of mind right then. The reason why she approached me was clearly to help her make sense of the situation in order to find a suitable way to react. News readers in Milanganj would be familiar with a range of reactions, all of which were becoming increasingly common as Hindu nationalists throughout the country stepped up their vigilance against acts and expressions that could be construed as having hurt Hindu sentiment: one reaction was violence and vandalism, which had become increasingly common due to what Chandran analyses

30. See, for example, Brian Massumi, 'The Autonomy of Affect', in *Cultural Critique*, Vol. 31, no. 2 (1995), pp. 83–109; Nigel Thrift, 'Intensities of Feeling: Towards a Spatial Politics of Affect', in *Geografiske Annaler*, Vol. 86, no. B (2004), pp. 57–78; and William Mazzarella, 'Affect: What Is It Good For?', in Saurabh Dube (ed.), *Enchantments of Modernity: Empire, Nation, Globalization* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 291–309.

as a ‘democratisation of censorship’;³¹ another was public protests, though this option is rarely used alone;³² a third was to initiate legal proceedings for violations of relevant sections of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), in this case s.295 (destruction of sacred objects), s.295A (outraging religious beliefs) and s.153A (promoting religious enmity). Even when plaintiffs have little hope of establishing malicious intentionality—a requirement for all these sections, except s.153A—legal proceedings constitute an effective response given their duration, uncertain outcome and cost.³³ But though the window of possibility had suddenly blown open, Kavita and her Hindu neighbours’ anger came to nothing.

The transition from indeterminacy to inaction was attributable to two factors, the first of which pertains to the pre-existing ties between the denouncers and the alleged offenders. Granted, allegations of religious offence can certainly be directed against persons with whom the denouncer has a prior but fraught relationship. Indeed, scholars of comparable offence controversies in Pakistan frequently point to how the blasphemy laws there are misused to settle scores,³⁴ as famously exemplified by the Asia Bibi case.³⁵ In the ‘killing god’ incident, the denouncers and alleged offenders were next-door neighbours without prior grudges. Not even Kavita claimed to have anything against them. Yet she did not know them very well, could not specify when or why they converted, and claimed ignorance about their caste background despite hinting that it was inferior to her own.³⁶ Clearly, there was no continuous *lenā-denā* exchange between the housewives in her lane that paralleled the sociality in the apartment building studied by Laura Ring.³⁷ Yet Milanganj did have exchanges of this kind. Women often assisted one another on special occasions and gave each other steel boxes containing home-made delicacies. But such exchanges rarely crossed the boundaries of caste and religion. Instead *lenā-denā* ties were limited to housewives who addressed one another using kinship terms such as *bhābhī* (sister-in-law), thus constituting overlapping circuits that spanned far larger territories than a single lane or block. Given Milanganj’s heterogeneity, the sociality within its labyrinthine lanes instead typified what F.G. Bailey termed ‘the civility of indifference’,³⁸ a polite co-existence that

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31. Chandran, ‘The Democratization of Citizenship’. An early example is the series of attacks in the 1990s on art galleries displaying M.F. Husain’s paintings of Hindu goddesses: see Kajri Jain, ‘Taking and Making Offence: Husain and the Politics of Desecration’, in Sumathi Ramaswamy (ed.), *Barefoot across the Nation: Maqbool Fida Husain and the Idea of India* (Oxford: Routledge, 2011), pp. 198–212.
32. Hindu organisations do however organise protests if the alleged blasphemer is beyond the jurisdiction and reach of other sanctions, as when public protests were held in several Indian cities in 2011 against Australian swimsuits sporting images of Goddess Lakshmi on the front: BBC News, ‘Indian Fury over Australian Swimwear Images of Laxmi’ (10 May 2011) [www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-13347763, accessed 13 April 2020].
33. I owe this point to Rajeev Dhavan, *Punish and Be Damned: Censorship and Intolerance in India* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2008).
34. Cf. Paul Rollier, ‘“We’re All Blasphemers”: The Life of Religious Offence in Pakistan’, in Paul Rollier et al. (eds), *Outrage: The Rise of Religious Offence in Contemporary South Asia* (London: UCL Press, 2019), pp. 48–76.
35. See, for example, Jürgen Schaffelchner, ‘Blasphemy and the Appropriation of Vigilante Justice in “Hagiohistoric” Writing in Pakistan’, in Paul Rollier et al. (eds), *Outrage: The Rise of Religious Offence in Contemporary South Asia* (London: UCL Press, 2019), pp. 208–35; and Imran Ahmed, ‘Asia Bibi v. The State: The Politics and Jurisprudence of Pakistan’s Blasphemy Laws’, in *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 42, no. 2 (2020), pp. 274–91.
36. Being mindful about caste prejudice, Kavita followed the common local practice of refraining from specifying other people’s caste backgrounds, but signalled with a gesture and a facial expression that they hailed from a *nich jāt* (low caste). Given her position, this could be anything from a Dalit to an OBC community.
37. Ring, *Zenana*.
38. F.G. Bailey, *The Civility of Indifference: On Domesticating Ethnicity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

occasionally involved small talk but that primarily was characterised by non-interference and non-engagement. To upset such civility between people one had to see every day would have come at a considerable cost.

The other factor that hampered repercussions pertains to the reluctance to find a middleman with sufficient know-how and contacts to take the matter further. As mentioned, the containment of a budding offence controversy is partly explained by a dearth of the factors known to generate such controversies. Scholars familiar with blasphemy controversies in Pakistan might point to the lack of Hindu religious authorities who play similar mediating roles to *imams*, whose judgements are often found to be decisive in determining which transgressions are to be forgiven and which are to be reported to the police.³⁹ And indeed, nobody in Milanganj would think of approaching a Hindu priest about such matters. Not only is Hindu religious authority far more fragmented, Brahman priests must uphold a purity that often necessitates distance from mundane political affairs.⁴⁰ Moreover, the religious authorities at the Kali temple patronised by Kavita would hardly have been of much help.⁴¹ However, scholars specialising on India might point to the possible absence of a local politician, organisational leader or other kind of ‘fixer’ who could find it beneficial to push the case forward. But, in fact, such people were plentiful in Milanganj. Besides the aforementioned BJP leader, the city was home to several activists from the Akhil Bharatiya Vishwa Parishad (ABVP, the student organisation of the BJP), the Hindu Yuva Vahini (the Hindu youth army founded by Yogi Adityanath) and other hard-line Hindu nationalist organisations. Moreover, the pre-election period of October 2013 would have been just the right time for a religious offence controversy to come up to help augment anxiety around threats to Hinduism. To appreciate the reason why no one in Kavita’s lane approached such a middleman, we need to consider the gendered and heterogeneity-related complexities of taking such a step.

Being traditional housewives, the female witnesses had to rely on their husbands to act. Kavita, for one, did not have the right social capital and know-how to initiate action on her own. Furthermore, in such a gender-conservative locality as Milanganj, women acting alone would jeopardise their husbands’ reputation as head of the family. While the husbands agreed that the tile destruction was offensive, they had all been at work when it happened and were thus less shaken than their wives. In principle, this could have enabled a more cool-headed weighing of options, but to gather together the household heads of a heterogeneous residential street for a free exchange of ideas is not as easy as it sounds. Differences of age, caste, class and profession complicate mutual exchange, and collective action would also have required approval from the most senior residents. The Hindu residents in Kavita’s street dilly-dallied over what to do and how to do it for so long that it all came to nothing.

39. Sana Ashraf, ‘Moral Anxiety in the “Land of the Pure”: Popular Justice and Anti-Blasphemy Violence in Pakistan’, unpublished PhD dissertation, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia, 2019; and Asad Ali Ahmed, ‘Contesting and Containing Accusatory Practices in Contemporary Pakistan’, paper presented at the workshop, ‘Containing Religious Offence in South Asia’, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway, 8 June 2018.

40. The desire to keep a distance from politics is not unique to priests, as shown by Arild Engelsen Ruud, ‘Talking Dirty about Politics’, in C.J. Fuller and Veronique Bénéï (eds), *The Everyday State and Society in Modern India* (London: Hurst & Co., 2001), pp. 115–36.

41. One was a rural Brahman priest with little formal education, the other was an illiterate man of Mallah descent (an OBC community that traditionally work as boatmen) who was possessed by Goddess Kali twice a week.

Learning about Christianity

While we now understand why the 'killing god' episode failed to trigger retribution of any kind, there is more to be said about how Kavita swallowed her hurt. To this end, we must also consider her lack of knowledge about Christianity. The reason why she came running to me, possibly the only presumed Christian she knew, was to search for answers to the following questions, which she threw at me in an agitated voice: how could anyone think of destroying their deity tiles just because they had converted? Did they really have to 'kill god'? Is this really how Christians behave? To understand why she asked me these questions, some general remarks about knowledge about Christianity among Hindus in Milanganj and beyond are in order.

Historical accounts of how Christianity has been advanced, appropriated and contested since the rise and fall of the British Empire often give the impression that Christianity is a world religion with which Indians have become deeply familiar. Indeed, most of the reformers, organisational leaders and intellectuals who people these accounts had far greater exposure to Christianity than ordinary Indians, many having obtained their education at Christian schools and interacted closely with the colonial elite. Beyond the elites and urban middle classes, however, familiarity with Christian doctrines and practices has always been uneven and remains so today. Since not even secular schools teach comparative religion in India,⁴² a substantial part of the population still has only a rather patchy knowledge about religious traditions other than their own. For my non-elite acquaintances in Milanganj and elsewhere in Kanpur, Christianity was a religious tradition that 'has its own gods' and a different-looking temple they call 'church'.

The first time this was driven home to me was in the course of my PhD fieldwork in 1997 during a conversation with a labour migrant from rural Uttar Pradesh. As the brightest son of a carpenter (*barhāī*) family, he had succeeded in completing an MA in English literature in between making beds and chairs. His favourite poet was Alfred Tennyson (1809–92), and one day he mustered the courage to ask me a question about Tennyson's cultural context that he had never dared to ask his teachers and fellow students while at college. 'Sister', he asked, 'in Hinduism, a flag is always used, but in Christianity I have seen something like a plus. What is the meaning of this symbol?' Despite his MA in English literature, he had no clue about such a basic characteristic of Christianity as the crucifixion, and knowing that this would be taken-for-granted knowledge at his college, he found it too embarrassing to ask.

In Milanganj, a comparable episode arose with 'Sangita', a Punjabi Hindu housewife of the same caste, age and social standing as Kavita. Once when I mentioned my plans to attend a Sunday service at a nearby church to expand my fieldwork, she lit up and asked if she could join me. She had long been curious to enter a church, she said, but had not yet had anyone to go with. Once we arrived, I went inside to find seats, but Sangita stopped at the entrance. Having removed her sandals, she stood barefoot with her palms respectfully joined in *anjali mudrā* (palm against palm), her eyes fixed on the Jesus statue at the altar, just like when exchanging glances (doing *darśan*) with a

42. Manisha Sethi, 'Religious Education in India: Debates and Experiences', in *Changing Societies and Personalities*, Vol. 2, no. 3 (2018), pp. 249–59.

Hindu deity. When I invited her to enter, sit beside me and have the basics of the sermon whisperingly translated to Hindi,⁴³ she was perplexed. An entire hour? Just for talking? Excusing herself with pressing domestic chores, she departed. For Sangita and many other non-elite Hindus in Milanganj, Jesus was practically like a Hindu deity except for being less familiar and rarely worshipped by anyone other than Christians.

Confronted with Kavita's insistent questions about why her newly-converted neighbours would break their deity tiles and thus 'kill god', I had no option but to improvise an answer. The best I could think of at that moment was to confirm that this is indeed how many Christians behave since the Bible prohibits veneration of any other divine beings than the biblical god. I added that, for Christians, deity images do not embody the ones they depict as much as they re-present them, almost like photographs. So when Christians destroy non-Christian deity images, they do so to demonstrate adherence to their monotheistic faith. Though Kavita would certainly have deserved a more nuanced introduction to Christian thought,⁴⁴ this is approximately what she took home.

Kavita's intellectual shock at 'how Christians behave' reveals that she had not known Christians to act so provocatively before. The convent schools in Kanpur had never required their pupils to renounce their Hindu traditions. The churches across the city were open to everyone, no questions asked. The few Christians in or near Milanganj had not bothered anyone despite being said to 'stick to their own'. Not even the increasingly inescapable Hindutva anxiety over conversion had affected the local understanding that *being* a Christian was all right: it was *becoming* a Christian that was controversial. The eagerness of Kavita's newly-converted neighbours to rid themselves of their 'heretic' idols suggests that they had been converted by Evangelicals, possibly by the American missionaries I repeatedly heard about when my fieldwork began. As anthropologists of Christianisation have shown, Evangelical converts are often expected to make a more rapid and definitive break with their past than converts to other strands of Christianity,⁴⁵ though a closer examination reveals conversion to be 'ongoing and partial' even in Evangelicalism.⁴⁶ The Evangelical expectation of rapid transformation, often referred to as being 'born again', is miles away from the gradual conversion typical of Catholicism. At the frontiers of Catholicism, converts commonly incorporate Christian elements and personas into their existing cosmological universe gradually and in ways that often end up with a lengthy syncretic, if not inclusivist,

43. This was a Catholic church (inaugurated in the 1960s) and the majority of its sermons were in English to cater to a congregation mainly consisting of Christian migrants from Kerala and other South Indian states.

44. For instance, the protective efficacy of Catholic icons indicates that they are more than mere representations, and Catholicism is known to appropriate preceding belief systems and deities, which I return to below.

45. Joel Robbins, *Becoming Sinners: Christianity and Moral Torment in a Papua New Guinea Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Joel Robbins, 'Continuity Thinking and the Problem of Christian Culture: Belief, Time, and the Anthropology of Christianity', in *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 48, no. 1 (2007), pp. 5–38; and Lancy Lobo, 'Christianization, Hinduization and Indigenous Revivalism among the Tribals of Gujarat', in Rowena Robinson and Joseph Marianus Kujur (eds), *Margins of Faith: Dalit and Tribal Christianity in India* (New Delhi: Sage, 2010), pp. 211–34.

46. Diane Austin-Broos, 'The Anthropology of Conversion: An Introduction', in Andrew Buckser and Stephen Glazier (eds), *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), pp. 1–12; and Simon Coleman, 'Continuous Conversion? The Rhetoric, Practice, and Rhetorical Practice of Charismatic Protestant Conversion', in Andrew Buckser and Stephen Glazier (eds), *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), pp. 15–28.

transition phase that may even become permanent.⁴⁷ The recent arrival of Evangelicals, who expected converts to make a radical break with their Hindu past was a novel phenomenon in Milanganj, which added to Kavita's shock at 'how Christians behave'.

Gaining awareness about the motivations behind the tile-breaking made Kavita soften. Though she never insinuated that her neighbours had *intended* to wound anybody's religious feelings (to paraphrase s.297 of the IPC), she now understood their perspective better. Yet the reduction of her anger was riddled with complexities. On the one hand, her religious piety compelled her to forgive them. Forgiveness (*māfi*) is a core value for Milanganj temple-goers and is routinely given for transgressions committed out of ignorance.⁴⁸ Transgressions committed by people who should have known better, as in this case, could also be forgiven given an absence of prior grudges, but required a more active perspective-taking. On the other hand, however, Kavita was hardly immune from the increasingly widespread Hindu nationalist ideal of responding firmly to acts that hurt Hindu sentiment. News reports about legal or violent repercussions flourished in the news media at the time, and Kavita's initial agitation suggests that she too felt compelled to put her foot down. The end result was an awkward double bind that made Kavita swallow her hurt and evade all further questions about the event.

Whenever I met Kavita during my six subsequent field visits to Milanganj between 2013 and 2019, I always asked if I could visit her at home, hoping that this would enable me to see her neighbour's house for myself and possibly meet them and the others who had been involved. Every time she said yes, but asked me to wait for a less busy time. Her reluctance to talk about such a fraught issue within possible earshot of her neighbours is understandable since it could jeopardise their delicate civility of indifference further. Yet she also evaded my questions about this incident within the temple premises, though she frequently chirped away about less sensitive topics. Over time, our persistent inquisitiveness/evasion virtually developed into a ritual: every time I asked how her neighbourly relations were developing, she laughingly responded that they were all right now (*abhī to t̥hīk hai*), before changing the topic. Having swallowed her hurt, it was best to move on.

Would Kavita have been motivated to perspective-taking if the tile-breakers had been Muslim rather than Christian? And would she and her fellow Hindu neighbours have done more to take the matter further in that case? Despite the obvious pitfalls of a counter-factual analysis, I think this is likely. First, the Hindu nationalist demonisation of religious 'others' targeted Muslims more than Christians, their only critique of Christians pertaining to their efforts at proselytisation. Second, the way in which nation- and state-wide religio-political discourses merged with lived experience resulted in a differential 'othering': whereas Muslims represented a 'familiar other'

47. Syncretism, though a debated concept, refers to the many ways in which religious traditions and practices can be interwoven. Inclusivism is a modality of syncretism in which elements from one religious tradition are incorporated into another, as when the Virgin Mary is said to be a Christian form of Goddess Durga: see Rosalind Shaw and Charles Stewart, 'Introduction: Problematizing Syncretism', in Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw (eds), *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 1–24; and Wilhelm Halbfass, "Inclusivism" and "Tolerance" in the Encounter between India and the West', in *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), pp. 403–18.

48. Interestingly, this term is of Arabic origin (*mā' āfa*, to forgive) and I never heard Milanganj Hindus use any Sanskrit-derived equivalents.

whom Milanganj Hindus believed they knew a lot about (mostly negative), Christians largely constituted an unfamiliar 'other'. And third, female refugee descendants such as Kavita frequently expressed deep resentment against Muslims despite striving to live up to the ideals of forgiveness, inclusivism and cosmopolitanism. This resentment found expression in oddly generalised claims that their family had once been one of the wealthiest in their ancestral village, but had had to leave everything behind to avoid the horrible choice between death and conversion to Islam, after which they had worked their way up again with just their two bare hands.⁴⁹ Such resentment, however well-founded in the horrors of Partition, appeared to be amplified by claims to local status, and nothing even remotely comparable was ever said about Christians.

The violence that ensued when a deity poster was allegedly torn down by Muslims in 2015 in another part of Kanpur lends further credence to my inkling that the deity tile destruction is more likely to have brought about repercussions if the tile-breakers had been Muslim. This incident occurred during the same festive season in a year in which the Hindus' Dussehra festival and the Shia community's Muharram procession took place only two days apart. When posters and banners announcing a nightly wake (*jāgran*) dedicated to Goddess Bhagwati were found torn up on the ground,⁵⁰ the Hindus in the area staged protests, threw stones, vandalised property and jammed the road where the Shia mourners prepared for their *tazia* procession. Clearly this turn of events is attributable to the long-lasting Hindu hermeneutics of suspicion against Muslims. Furthermore, Kanpur's Hindus were sufficiently familiar with Shia Muslims to know that though they consider deity images idolatrous, there is no requirement that an entire procession route must be 'cleansed' of them. Even an active perspective-taking would thus only have made matters worse.

Concluding remarks

What can we learn from this deity tile destruction and its lack of a newsworthy aftermath? How could Kavita swallow her hurt after witnessing what she interpreted as an iconoclasm that 'killed god'? While confirming the importance of local mediators in making budding religious offence controversies escalate, it also points to the complexities of neighbourhood heterogeneity, civility and gender, the combination of which produced an unmistakable mitigating effect. Above all, however, it suggests the potential for perspective-taking, here in the sense of trying to understand the intentions of the alleged blasphemer. Given the heavy reliance on news media in the scholarship on religious offence controversies, the cases that tend to attract attention have so far been heavily dominated by incidents in which perspective-taking is used to stage provocations. Though such incidents will undoubtedly continue to give reason to worry in the

49. The generality of these statements probably derives from the trauma of Partition violence. Whenever I attempted to obtain further information about what their parents or grandparents had been exposed to then, my interlocutors were unable to give specifics. Veena Das notes similar silences among descendants of Sikh refugees in Delhi: Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), p. 11.

50. IANS, 'Tension in Kanpur over Jagran Posters', *The Hindu* (25 Oct. 2015) [[thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/tension-in-kanpur-over-jagran-posters/article7802130.ece](https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/tension-in-kanpur-over-jagran-posters/article7802130.ece), accessed 21 April 2020].

future, it is also important to recognise that learning about the avoidances and compulsions of one's religious 'other' can also be put to benevolent use.

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