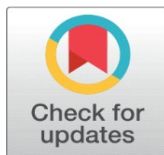
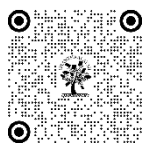


EXPLORING THE MYTHS AND REALITY OF SALASAR BALAJI

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ABSTRACT

Oral stories/folk narratives have been passed on from generation to generations in order to preserve culture and history. Myth and mythology have always been at the heart of India's culture. In this process of passing on traditions, the myths originated in particular time periods have changed their forms and are being moulded according to contemporary needs and demands. The paper focuses on one such site of cultural and historical significance in the northern part of India- Salasar. It has now become one of the most popular religious and cultural sites. The place has rich oral history and is surrounded by various myths associated with Balaji in Salasar. The present paper aims to explore the prevalent myths enveloping this site and to analyse that how this place has acclimatised in accordance with the contemporary times and culture and thrive as popular mythical and miracle place.

Keywords: Myth, Reality, Salasar Balaji, Hanuman

1. INTRODUCTION

Myth and Mythology go hand in hand in the Indian culture. Myths are generally described as oral narratives which have been in circulation around a particular space for a considerable amount of time that they then get acknowledged as common facts by the residents and visitors of that particular space. On the other hand, mythology refers to the written history regarding religion or gods. Myths are often complimented with mythology. India has a rich oral and cultural history and one gets accustomed with hearing about myths and mythology from an early age in any Indian household. Vaishnavite cultural myths have a strong hold on the mind of the most of India's middle class especially in the northern part of the country. Therefore, the contemporary religious power structures focus on the strengthening of these myths in order to have control over the masses. Myth and reality are often intermingled to create new facts in order to increase the number of devotees/ visitors to a particular place. Salasar in Rajasthan (India) has now become one of such places which are famous for the miraculous deities who promise to fulfil the wishes of the devotees. The visitors of Salasar now are mostly pan Indians, though initially the visitors were from the nearby regional areas. The deity of Balaji of Salasar is popular in surrounding rural areas as Hanuman. This Hanuman of Salasar is very earthy, just like a common local who keeps beard and is bound to the 'dharti maa'. He is famous for its miraculous healing properties and is a giver of job, success and wealth – the normal day today boons of a common man expected from any god, divine soul.

One thing which is common to the religio-cultural places in the northern part of India is their development as popular places for pilgrimage. The development and fame of these places can be traced after the independence of the country. Religious places like Kashi, Vrindavan, Ayodhya, Rishikesh, etc., have now become popular pilgrimage places among masses. Salasar Balaji comparatively is a newly emerged religious site but now is developing into a popular all India religious center. Balaji of Salasar in Rajasthan (India) is a different form of Ram devotee God Hanuman. Now, Hanuman is mostly seen only as a devoted servant of Ram but here in Salasar Hanuman in the form of Balaji becomes an independent god granting miracles and wishes of the devotees. The development of the village and the temple of Salasar Balaji gained pace around 1990s when the Marwaris (Indian business community) of this area started to contribute actively to the development of the area. Rufin Jeremy Saul (2013) in his *Gods of the Modern Era* discusses the development of the shrine of Salasar Balaji and the active contribution of the Marwari families for the temple development. He also talks about the identification of Salasar Balaji as a lineage deity by the Marwari families of this area who went far from their hometown for better opportunities. Hence, after being successful coming back and paying homage to their lineage deity for constant and uninterrupted growth and success.

2. SALASAR AND BALAJI: MYTH AND REALITY

Salasar is a village in the Churu district of Rajasthan in India. Saul (2013) in his dissertation “*Gods for the Modern Era: The Rise of Miracle Shrines in Northwestern India*” discusses that the north-western part of Rajasthan has been evolving as a state with miracle gods. The state caters to be the house of various local gods and goddess, a few among them are known and are renowned popularly as miracle deities. People from throughout the northern part of the country flock in millions per year to pay homage to these deities. The village of Salasar houses one of the so-called miraculous deities of the north-western part of Rajasthan, commonly known as Salasar Balaji. The village has now turned into a town as the fame of Salasar Balaji is crossing the state boundaries. In conversation with the locals, it was found that the change in the structure of the temple is relatively recent. They claim that earlier the deity was housed in a small cell near a sacred tree and the area around was filled with wilderness that very less people visited the shrine. The locals consider this increase in the fame of Balaji as one of the deity’s miracles spread around. They say that before the late twentieth century the fame was limited only to the nearby areas but now Salasar Balaji is known throughout the country for his miracle granting abilities.

R. Jeremy Saul (2012) also discusses this change in the popularity of the local deity of Salasar in his paper “*When One Hanuman is not Another Hanuman: A case of Salasar Balaji*”. He says one can trace the emergence of Salasar Balaji as a popular miracle deity of Rajasthan from the 1990s. The area was earlier majorly inhabited by the Marwari community. They left the region in search of better opportunities and became successful. The Marwaris (the trading classes of this region) then started visiting back their hometown and felt the urge to pay homage to their lineage deity and with them slowly the myth of the miracle deity of Salasar spread. The shrine of Salasar Balaji has now been associated with the Marwaris of Rajasthan who have flocked away from their homeland in search of better business opportunities. They claim Salasar Balaji as their lineage deity and pay homage to him every year through distinct rituals so that Salasar Balaji will grant them all the success and good health. As Meera Nanda (2009) also mentions in *The God Market*, the boon in the economy of India and especially with the increasing resources of middle class started this new trend of creating the nation as a Vaishnavite nation. More and more people of the middle classes started visiting shrines and the miracle deities, offering donations and doing rituals so that they can get more benefit in their work and to get good health. It is not wrong if one says that if these deities stop performing these miracles people will stop flocking in these shrines dedicated to the miracle deities.

One of the most popular myths in Salasar is the origin story of the idol of Salasar Balaji. Saul also discusses the story of the origin of Balaji in the 1754. The story goes like this that there lived a man named Mohandas with his sister Kanhi Bai. Mohandas was a great devotee of Hanuman. Once Hanuman came to his house as a beggar but was sent away by his sister and when Mohandas got to know this, he went after Hanuman and brought him back to his house and fed him churma (local Indian home-made sweet of roasted flour, sugar/jaggery and clarified butter). The idol of Hanuman was discovered by a man in his field. Then Hanuman came in the dream of a local King and asked him to send the idol to Salasar and then the King made arrangements to send the idol to the village of Salasar through bullock carts and the temple to be built where the bulls will stop by themselves. The story is still narrated in the similar manner and one can find small pamphlets regarding the history of Salasar Balaji in the souvenir shop near the temple of Salasar Balaji. The cart is also preserved in the same temple and is said to be the original cart that carried the idol to the village of Salasar.

Hanuman and Balaji in Salasar are now considered as one and the same deity. Whereas the local people consider Balaji to be their local deity whereas Hanuman to be a more mainstream god. Lutgendorf (2007) in his *Hanuman’s Tale: The Messages of a Divine Monkey* also talks about how over the centuries Hanuman has become now a mainstream god. The amalgamation of the stories surrounding Hanuman have led him to have an individual identity for itself. Therefore, the merging together of both Hanuman and Balaji, as Saul also discusses in his paper, have led to a strong hold of the deity over the masses. Hanuman is generally seen only as the devotee of lord Ram but Balaji being an independent deity possess more power and authority. The coming together of both the images have led to making of a deity who is both humble and easily pleased. The increase in the number of devotees of Balaji has a similar mindset. After talking with the pilgrims who visit Salasar Balaji it was found that for them there is no differentiation between Hanuman and Salasar Balaji. The pilgrims think of them as two different forms of Hanuman and believe that Balaji is the god of Kali

Yuga as he is easily pleased and gives one strength to fare through this immoral world we are living in. Morality and chastity have long been associated with Hanuman. He is considered as a Brahmachari, one who never marries and an eternal servant of Lord Rama. He is said to be a possessor of eight siddhis¹ and nine nidhis², as mentioned by Lutgendorf in his book. The stories revolving are many, the majority of which deal with his powers to grant miracles and to provide relief from spirit possessions.

The two Balaji – Salasar Balaji and Mehndipur Balaji – as Saul discusses in his dissertation, seem to be the branches of Hanuman if one follows the stories as mentioned by Lutgendorf in his book. The Salasar Balaji is a miracle granting deity whereas the Mehndipur Balaji is the one who provides relief from the possession of evil spirits. The two Balaji however different, are considered to be the manifestations of a same deity – Hanuman. Both the scholars also talk about the increase in the number of branches of the same temple of Salasar Balaji. Saul (2022) in “Merchants, Ritualists, and Bifurcated Hanumans” describes it as the increase in “Salasar-oriented temples in the northwest”, which serve as rest stops for those coming to visit the main shrine and also nowadays in temples “A small image of Salasar Balaji may be installed near a canonical main Hanuman image” (374). On talking with the locals, it was found that they do not like the idea and mention that the real power resides in Salasar only. Whereas, the visitors however are happy with the idea as they do not have to come so far to have the darshan of the deity.

Another interesting thing to note about the Balaji of Salasar is the deity itself. Along with the miracle granting powers, it is the visual representation of the Salasar Balaji which makes the deity different from the rest of the Hanuman idols all over the country. When one visits the temple of Salasar Balaji, one encounters a very different image of Hanuman, the idol consists of a large head with beard and moustache which is very uncommon figure of Hanuman, the monkey god. The story goes like this that the devotee first saw Hanuman in the guise of a brahmin having beard and moustache and thus requested the deity to appear in the same form. The appearance of Hanuman in this form has led to the establishment of a new identity for Hanuman as Salasar Balaji, an independent deity which grants boon to those whose seek his blessings. Whereas Hanuman is commonly seen as only a servant of Lord Ram or as a demigod who does not have any individual identity for his own self. The popularisation of the local deity has led to an amalgamation of the identities of these two and hence the creation of a deity which is identified both as Hanuman and Balaji at the same time. The increase in the number of miracles has also led to the establishment of new shrines and idol of Hanuman and Salasar Balaji across the country.

The myths related to Salasar Balaji are not only restricted to the idol but the whole temple premises. One of the popular myths amongst the pilgrims is the coconut tying ritual. After entering the temple premises one can find that there is a huge tree standing in the hall. The tree is covered in the sacred thread and along with that one can find a lot of coconuts tied near the railings and the tree. On inquiring more about this ritual from the temple committee, priests and the pilgrims, it was found that if a devotee wants its wish to be fulfilled then s/he ties a coconut here in the temple premises and prays to Balaji to grant them their wishes. It is believed that by doing this, a person's wishes will come true if the wishes are truly dedicated towards the deity. It is also believed that the water from the well in the temple premises has also magical healing properties. While talking about the local deities in Rajasthan, Saul in his paper discusses the relevance of wells and their association with magical healing and local deities. These myths and stories have led the influx of more and more pilgrims to the shrine of Salasar Balaji. The path to the temple from the bus stop is filled with shops only. One can find different books and other souvenirs being sold around the temple. The town seems practically absent and one find only market around the temple.

The temple and the town have now become a religio-commercialised space. Not only the space surrounding the temple has turned into a market but the temple premises is divided into sections according to the monetary status of the pilgrims. There are facilities or VIP (very important persons) darshans, special rituals and prasad sewas available in the temple. One can skip huge queues and have better darshan of the idol if they can donate more. It appears as though the pilgrims try to appease the deity by offering him more so that Balaji can keep granting their wishes and give them success and good health.

3. CONCLUSION

Salasar like many other sites of Popular and religious pilgrimage has now gained the attention of the visitors and one can find a number of hotels around Salasar. The temple premises are completely surrounded by the market and no natural landscape of the town can be seen. Balaji is highly revered by the pilgrims as the great god of kali Yuga who has seen all ages and provided protection to everyone who seek his help. However, true devotion seems now absent as everything revolves around charity and donation in an around the temple premises. The people of Salasar claim that the priests of the temple use the donation to their benefit. Whereas, the temple association denies such claims.

Salasar Balaji has been established as a miracle granting god for several centuries now. After the Covid-19, the locals and visitors have mentioned an increase in the number of people visiting the shrine as everyone wants themselves in good health and as Balaji is believed to possess the miraculous powers of healing people. The oral/folk stories of miracles are in circulation and get conveyed through the devotees and the people who visit there. The miracle granting power of Salasar Balaji has made the shrine a major centre of attraction for the pilgrims. The emergence of Vaishnavism in Rajasthan has also played a major role in this process as it made the connections between Salasar Balaji and Hanuman firmer and thereby helping in the maintenance of this myth that the local deity of Salasar Balaji and Hanuman are the two forms of the same god. Thus, propagating the image of the local deity of Salasar to a bigger

scale. The merchant class of Salasar and the surrounding areas have also played a major role in establishing the position of Salasar Balaji as a lineage deity. Certain rituals like the coconut tying ritual is also one of the famous rituals at the temple through which one can get their wishes fulfilled easily. Hanuman, believed to be a god taking care of all the human problems in the present times, the locals say, has provided the devotees with easier ways to material/professional success and good health. They claim that Balaji is easily pleased through offerings and prayers and thus, one can have all the blessings of Balaji even by once visiting the temple premises with pure devotion.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

NOTES

The eight siddhis refer to the eight types of divine knowledge (Anima, Mahima, Garima, Laghima, Prapti, Prakamya, Isitva, Vastitva) which Hanuman possesses and has the power to grant it to their devotees.

The Nav Nidhis refers to nine different types of treasures (Padma, Mahapadma, Nila, Shankha, Makara, Kachchhapa, Mukunda, Nand, Kharva) which are possessed by Hanuman.

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