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The Indian Case of Coexistence: Pir Baba ki Dargah, a Living Tradition of Ganga-Jamuna Tehzeeb

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Abstract

This research project delves into the intricate tapestry of multiculturalism and religious coexistence in India through the lens of Pir Baba's Dargah (shrine built over the grave of a revered saint) in Haryana—an enduring testament to syncretic traditions. The dargah, much like other Sufi shrines across the subcontinent, functions as a liminal space where Hindu and Islamic cultural practices seamlessly intertwine, epitomizing the essence of *Ganga-Jamuna Tehzeeb* - a civilisational confluence that symbolizes the syncretic fusion of traditions associated with the two dominant faiths of the region. Ritualistic observances at the shrine illustrate this unique fusion, where the veneration of Pir Baba through the offering of *chaddars* (sacred cloths) coexists with Hindu customs such as the lighting of *diyas* (oil lamps), and the presence of images of Hindu deities within the sacred precincts. The *dargah* emerges as a space of social transcendence, where caste hierarchies—deeply entrenched in North Indian society—momentarily dissolve, particularly during *bhandaras* (communal feasts) that reaffirm the inclusive ethos of the shrine. Notably, despite the relentless encroachment of urbanization, faith in the sanctity of this dargah has only intensified, expanding its prominence as a spiritual and cultural hub that continues to draw devotees from at least 14 neighboring villages, reaffirming the resilience of pluralistic traditions in an evolving socio-political landscape.

Introduction

Just a stone's throw away from the snazzy campus of O.P. Jindal Global University lies a place still untouched by the furrows of time. The holy shrine of Dada Sayyid, also colloquially known by the local residents as "Pir baba ki Dargah" has withstood the urbanisation attempts brought in by the new projects since the early 2000's. While the surrounding landscape is still undergoing a rapid transformation, the *dargah* remains a constant spiritual refuge for the people of the surrounding fourteen villages. It is a site of faith and tradition, true to the politico-cultural fabric of the "Idea of India"—fraternity, plurality, and secularism.

This research project "The Indian Case of Coexistence: Pir Baba ki Dargah, a Living Tradition of Ganga-Jamun Tehzeeb" was conducted by our team of five members spearheaded by

our Supervisor, Prof. (Dr) Khinvraj Jangid, in support with the Manara Institute of Coexistence, Abu Dhabi. We took up the shrine of Dada Sayyid as the ethnographic site, due to the significance of *dargahs* as the embodiment of the epitome of religious coexistence and interfaith harmony in India. What pushed us towards specifically choosing this *dargah* were the unique and intriguing rituals followed by the devotees, which were even more fluid than the already unorthodox practices of Sufi tradition. We will be expanding more on this in the later sections of the paper.

In order to produce this study, we conducted an immersive fieldwork of 60+ hours, where we involved ourselves with the local practices and rituals, spent time observing the site and taking notes. Gradually we started engaging with people, recording their oral testimonies and local lore. We interviewed the person who has been the caretaker of this *dargah* for a little more than four decades and recorded the accounts of a diverse group of devotees who visit the dargah regularly. What struck us was not just the presence of people belonging to different communities and faiths under the roof of a common religious place, but also the fact that these devotees carried out unique rituals as per their own “*shraddha*” or “faith” without any interference from the others. In the same room, you are sure to witness a few people venerating before the tomb of Pir Baba with folded hands, while a few offering namaz in another corner.

What makes it remarkable is that these practices persist without any conscious efforts to promote harmony, which is often witnessed in Western nations. Here the idea of coexistence exists organically, without these people having any cognizance of the fact that the mundane practices carried out by them are what the researchers and policy experts spend years studying in order to formulate “the idea of coexistence” and how can it be implemented to achieve stability.

This project has been a collaborative effort, with each researcher coming from a diverse background, bringing with them unique perspectives and expertise.

1. Prof. (Dr.) Khinvraj Jangid (Supervisor): Dr Khinvraj Jangid is Professor and Director of the Centre for Israel Studies, OP Jindal Global University, Sonipat, India. He is an Adjunct Professor (current academic year) at the Azrieli Center for Israel Studies (MALI), The Ben-Gurion Research Institute for the Study of Israel and Zionism Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel. Interested in the role of leaders, he is leading new research comparing India and Israel through their shared ideas of nation-building and statehood in post-colonial Asia. He holds PhD in West Asian Studies

from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. His PhD work was selected for the prestigious international Sylff Award (2009-2012) by the Sylff Association, Tokyo Foundation, Japan. He is a Summer Institute for Israel Studies (SIIS) Fellow with the Schusterman Center for Israel Studies, Brandeis University, USA. He is Comper Fellow at The Elizabeth and Tony Comper Center for the Study of Antisemitism at the University of Haifa, Israel for 2024-2025.

2. Aryamaan Banerjee (M.A. student): Brought up in the south Indian state of Kerala with Bengali as his mother tongue, languages, and people showed him the first instances of how co-existence can take place without assimilation. In terms of academic credentials, an engineering background in electronics and computer science, a short past in theatre performances and his present course in Diplomacy, law and business, he intends on working in the confluence of technology and international relations. Multidisciplinarity being the core of his existence, this project adds impetus to his overall set of skills and understanding of the multifaceted ways of looking at co-existence.

3. Mahira Sharma (M.A. student): Hailing from the crown of India, the state of Jammu and Kashmir, a place with a distinct demographic structure and a complex security question has helped shape her worldview to a great extent. Witnessing the instances of political and religious strife from an early age and turning politically mature at the crucial time of the abrogation of Article 370 piqued her interest in the study of sectarian and religious conflicts. This project was a unique accretion to her academic pursuits, adding an aspect of Peace studies in addition to her specialisation in Conflict studies.

4. Jigyasa Maloo (M.A. Student): a final year master's student from Jindal School of International Affairs, O.P. Jindal Global University, she has a strong interest in the field of peace, conflict, and security. She hails from Guwahati, Assam, in northeast India, with ancestral roots from Rajasthan in Western India. Both states have a rich cultural diversity and traditions which is reflected in her everyday life. This project has enriched her understanding of India's longstanding tradition of coexistence and tolerance. The first-hand experience at the site offered crucial insights into community bonds and religious harmony, deepening her appreciation for India's intricate social fabric.

5. Aditya Gulati (M.A. Student): a master's student in Diplomacy, Law, and Business at O.P. Jindal Global University. Hailing from Prayagraj—the sacred confluence of the Ganga and Jamuna—his

roots are deeply embedded in the essence of Ganga-Jamuna Tehzeeb, a symbol of unity and coexistence. Through this project, he has gained valuable insights into the evolving dynamics of coexistence in India and the enduring spirit that binds diverse communities together.

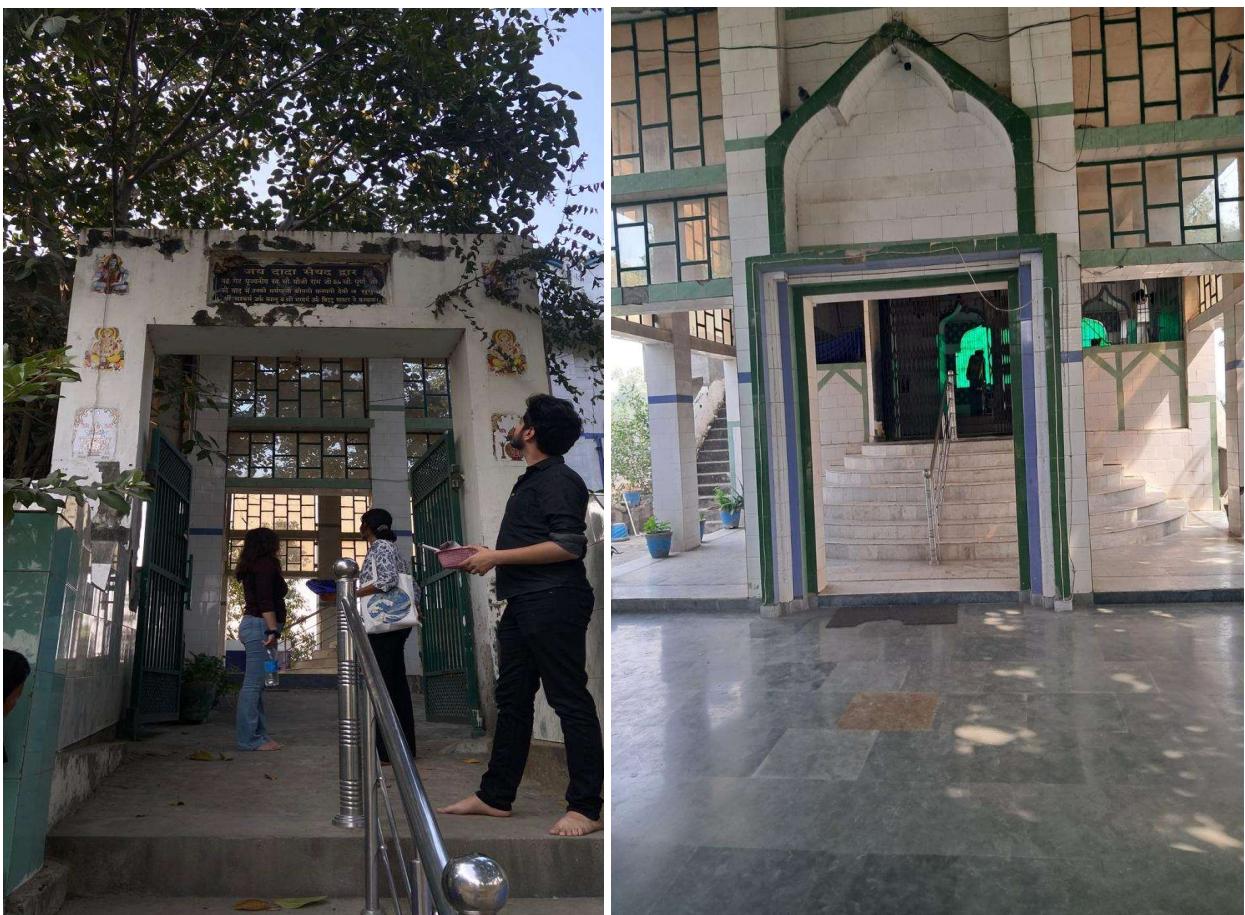
6. Harshita Khaund (M.A. Student): a final year master's student in Diplomacy, Law, and Business at O.P. Jindal Global University, she hails from Assam - a region shaped by the legacy of the Ahom dynasty and the vast Brahmaputra River. Rooted in a landscape known for its layered histories, spiritual diversity, and everyday practices of coexistence, she brings to this project a lived understanding of pluralism. Her engagement in this project has deepened her reflections on the need to preserve inclusive spaces in today's India.

Biography of the location

Pir Baba's Dargah, commonly referred to as Pir Baba ka *Mandir* (place of worship) is located in the Delhi National Capital Region (NCR), on the outskirts of Sonipat city. The nearest railway station is Harsana Kalan, with Rathdhana being the closest village. The Dargah is a spiritual center for people from fourteen surrounding villages, including Jagdishpur, Rathdhana, Bayanpur, Lehrara, Kalupur, Jatheri, Lawanspur, Joshi Jat, Harsana, Badh Malak, Ahmadpur, Nathupur, Saboli, Bandepur. These villages exhibit a blend of agricultural, industrial, and rural livelihoods. Over the years, the *dargah* has gained popularity due to increased charitable donations and growing faith among devotees, leading to infrastructural developments.

The origins of Pir Baba remain disputed, with no definitive historical record of where he came from or what led to his veneration. Most followers associate with the *dargah* through word of mouth, with stories of miraculous fulfillment of *mannats* (votive offerings) and divine interventions reinforcing the faith in Pir Baba's spiritual power. The construction of the *dargah* evolved gradually, shaped by donations in the form of money, tools, materials, and community efforts. Patronage from more influential people has also played a role in its expansion, with the latest addition being the construction of a shed over the common space. During the *bhandara* or other development initiatives, people contribute their skills, businesses, and tools to aid in the functioning of the dargah. Unlike many other prominent dargahs, such as those in Ajmer or Nizamuddin, Pir Baba's Dargah does not have a tradition of *qawwali* (devotional music performed at Dargahs) performances or Sufi musical gatherings.

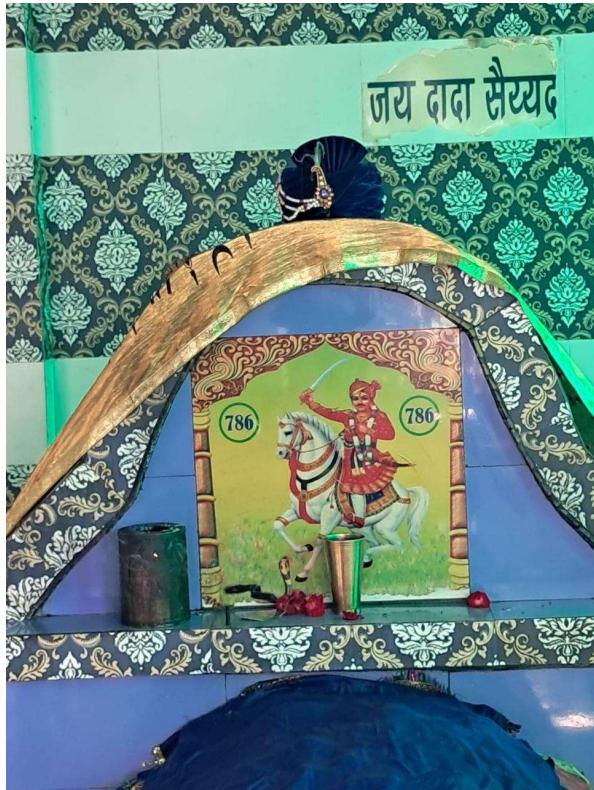
Dargahs in India, such as the Hazrat Nizamuddin Dargah in Delhi and Ajmer Sharif in Rajasthan, generally follow a syncretic architectural style blending Islamic and indigenous influences. They typically consist of a central tomb, an enclosing structure with a prominent dome, and a courtyard that serves as a gathering space for followers. These shrines often incorporate Persian, Mughal, and local architectural styles. Pir Baba's Dargah, which started as a simple grave near an open drainage, has undergone significant transformation. It is now housed within an enclosed structure exhibiting Islamic architectural elements. The entrance comprises two access points, one from the front and another from the right.



Two entrances to the Dargah

Upon entry, followers ascend a set of stairs leading to the central tomb, which is adorned with Arabic inscriptions alongside Hindi translations. The tomb's orientation from the South-East to North-West is consistent with the architectural traditions of Islamic shrines. At the foot of the tomb lies an embossed design of feet, while at the head is an image of Bhure Khan, or Dada Sayyid,

depicted in regal attire riding a horse. The presence of the number "786" on the walls, signifying *Bismillah al-Rahman al-Rahim* ("In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful"), highlights the sacred nature of the site. A key feature of *dargahs* is their association with water elements, believed to hold purifying and spiritual significance. Right next to Pir Baba's Dargah lies a stepwell or *baoli*, it has a date tree growing near the tomb, which devotees claim has existed alongside the shrine for over 40 to 60 years, adding to the mysticism surrounding the site.





Inside the sacred chamber of Pir Baba – featuring a confluence of Hindu-Islamic rituals

Dargahs in India serve as centers for spiritual healing, community gatherings, and devotional acts. The traditions observed at Pir Baba's Dargah align with these broader cultural practices. *Mannat*, or votive offerings, is a deeply ingrained tradition at the *dargah*. The word '*mannat*' derives from the Persian and Arabic traditions and signifies a vow or request made to a saint in exchange for divine intervention. Devotees tie threads or place letters on a designated tree in front of the tomb to make wishes, a practice common in many *dargahs*.



Wishes in the form of letters tied with sacred thread on a tree

Offerings include incense sticks (*agarbattis*), flowers, and *chaadars* (sacred cloths) placed over the tomb, signifying devotion and respect. *Prasad*, a consecrated food offering, also plays a role in the rituals, blending Hindu traditions with Islamic customs. The annual *bhandara* (communal feast) at Pir Baba's Dargah mirrors the *Urs* tradition, marking the death anniversary of a Sufi saint, though here it is an event of community congregation rather than a formal *Urs*. The *bhandara* is a large-scale offering where all villagers contribute food, time, or money, and the major dish prepared, *laddoo* (a sweet), symbolizes communal unity. The lighting of an eternal lamp beside the food storage area reflects Hindu ritualistic elements, as similar practices are found in temples where lamps are kept burning as symbols of divine presence.



Community members preparing laddoo for the bhandara

Dargahs in India frequently embody a confluence of Hindu and Muslim traditions. Pir Baba Dargah exemplifies this syncretism in multiple ways. Many *dargahs* are frequented by both Hindus and Muslims, where followers make offerings and seek blessings, similar to practices at Ajmer Sharif and the Mahim Dargah in Mumbai. The presence of Hindu deities' images within the *dargah* demonstrates the overlap between traditions. Hindu followers often relate Pir Baba to their own spiritual figures, fostering interfaith reverence. The *bhajan*-like tune (Hindu devotional song sung in praise of a deity) of the chants dedicated to Pir Baba further reflects Hindu influences, demonstrating how cultural and religious traditions interweave in practice.



Hindu and Islamic writings on the walls and Hindu offerings including *agarbattis* (scent sticks), and flowers

The term *pir* (Persian for “elder”) refers to a Sufi spiritual master who guides disciples on the mystical path toward divine realization. In South Asia, *pirs* have historically held a revered status, with their *dargahs* serving as pilgrimage sites for devotees seeking intercession, blessings, and healing. Unlike orthodox Islamic practices, Sufism encourages the veneration of saints as intermediaries between the divine and human realms, which has led to the widespread presence of *dargahs* as sites of devotion. Pir Baba’s spiritual legacy, passed down through oral testimonies, aligns with these broader Sufi traditions. The *dargah*’s growing influence is attributed to stories of miracles, such as the widely recounted event of an overturned taxi near the shrine where all passengers emerged unharmed. Such narratives reinforce faith in the saint’s protective powers and contribute to the *dargah*’s significance.

The *dargah*’s significance is deeply intertwined with the lives of its followers and caretakers. Yameen Khan, a dedicated custodian of the dargah for the past 40–50 years, has been responsible for maintaining the sacred site.



Conversation with the custodian

Krishan Saroha, a major donor and core committee member, oversees the annual *bhandara* and ensures its smooth execution. Aaseem Chahal, an industrialist and a devoted follower, constructed a *mazar* (shrine) near his factory, inspired by his faith in Pir Baba. Dilawar, a retired army personnel, visited the dargah for 41 consecutive days as part of his spiritual practice, while Salim, a local resident, compiled a list of villages from which devotees arrive, highlighting the *dargah*'s broad influence. These testimonies illustrate the dargah's enduring social and spiritual role, where faith transcends religious boundaries, fostering a shared cultural identity among diverse communities.

Pir Baba's Dargah exemplifies the architectural, ritualistic, and syncretic elements that give us the Indian definition of coexistence. The *dargah*'s evolution from a humble grave to a well-structured sacred space that has withstood the test of time as well as religious strife, underscores the influence of community devotion, interfaith traditions, and spiritual reverence. By bridging Hindu and Islamic elements, the dargah continues to serve as a testament to India's rich and diverse religious landscape. The narratives, rituals, and annual gatherings reaffirm its role as a living, breathing spiritual center where faith, tradition, and collective memory converge.

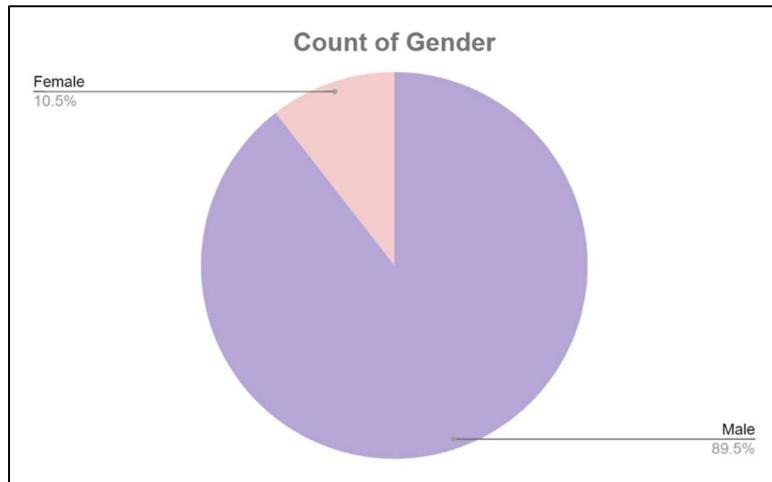
About the followers

A qualitative approach was adopted through semi-structured interviews to understand the cultural significance and religious coexistence at Pir Baba's Dargah. Given the diverse footfall at the shrine, random sampling based on convenience was utilized to engage with followers from different backgrounds, professions, and age groups. A cumulative of **19 visitors** were interviewed for the purpose of research, which sought to understand the belief systems, ritualistic practices and socio-cultural dimensions of the *dargah*'s influence.

Demographic Profile of Interview Respondents

Gender -

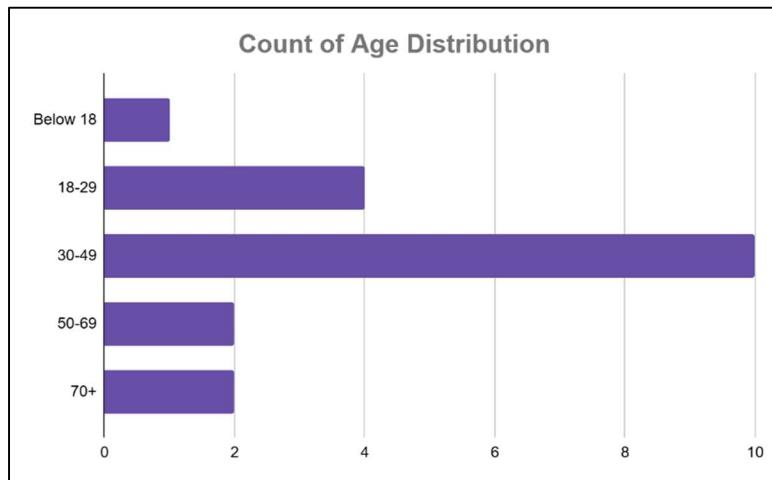
The gender profile of interview respondents is captured as follows:



Out of the 19 individuals listed, **17 identify as male and only 2 as female**, indicating a **highly gender-skewed sample with nearly 90% male representation**. This disparity suggests potential gendered patterns in shrine visitation or public religious participation within this context.

Age distribution -

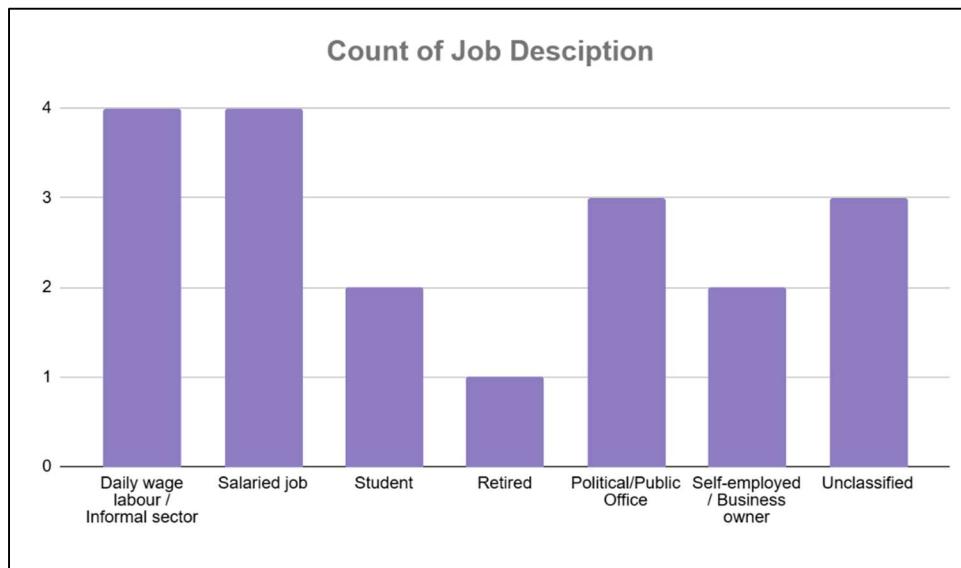
The age distribution of interview respondents is captured as follows:



The age distribution shows a **dominant concentration in the 30–49 age bracket**, comprising **10 out of 19 respondents (over 52%)**. This is followed by **18–29 (4 individuals)**, **50–69 (2 individuals)**, and **70+ (2 individuals)**, with **only one respondent below 18**. The data suggests that **middle-aged individuals form the core participant group**, indicating that shrine engagement may be strongest among working-age adults.

Job description -

The job descriptions of interview respondents is captured as follows:



The occupational data reflects a **diverse but evenly distributed profile**, with **daily wage labour/informal sector and salaried jobs each accounting for the highest share (4 individuals each)**. Political/public office (3), unclassified (3), self-employed (2), and students (2) follow, while only one respondent is retired. This suggests that engagement with the dargah spans a broad socioeconomic spectrum, with a notable presence from both formal and informal sectors.

Overall, the gender, age and occupational profile data reflected the socio-economic diverse respondent base, largely rooted in rural livelihood. It illustrates how older generations and youth are involved in preserving the living tradition of Pir Baba. Furthermore, the occupational variety, from daily wage labour to salaried job, demonstrates the shrine's accessibility and transcends economic divides.

A Shrine of Many: Uniting 14 Villages

The site bustles with followers, worshippers, and visitors gather here in devotion, every Thursday. People from diverse socio-economic backgrounds - Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, or any marginalized community, from nearby and distant places, are drawn by the dargah's spiritual significance. According to the custodian of the shrine, Yameen Khan, there are "14 villages associated with the

dargah”. In the district of Sonipat, Haryana (which is now part of the national capital region, NCR Delhi, these are the names of the villages -

Jagdishpur, Rathdhana, Bayanpur, Lehrara, Kalupur, Jatheri, Lawanspur, Joshi Jat, Harsana, Badh Malak, Ahmadpur, Nathupur, Saboli, Bandepur.

Sonipat has a population of 1.4 million, of which over 95% follow Hinduism and more than 3% adhere to Islam. Approximately 68% of the population resides in rural areas as per the 2011 census (Population census). This demographic coverage similarly translates into the 14 villages. One of the respondents said, “80 % of the people in the 14 villages are Hindus, while the Muslim population are concentrated in 3 to 4 villages.”

The interaction with the followers at the *dargah* on Thursdays (a venerated day for prayer) provided insights as to what draws people to this sacred place and why they return time and again. Many followers have been associated with the *dargah* for years, coming regularly. One worshipper stated, “It is a generational practice”, while another shared, “It is a ritual of his family to visit the place every Thursday.” The stories and folklore passed down over the generations continuously charm distant visitors.

A recurring theme in the interviews was the steadily increasing prominence of the *dargah*, despite the forces of urbanization, rapid industrialization and communalization of majority-minority relations in the surrounding area. The shrine has become a spiritual hub for at least 14 surrounding villages as listed above, drawing devotees from both rural and semi-urban settings. Most followers of this place are farmers, low-wage workers, self-employed youth, semi-professionals, carpenters, plumbers and masons. The majority of them are Hindus of lower castes, and some even come from the *Dalit* communities (historically marginalized social group and the lowest circles who are untouchables).

Many respondents articulated their belief in the miraculous power of the shrine, attributing personal successes and life transformations to prayers offered at the *dargah*. This enduring faith-driven expansion highlights the ways in which spiritual spaces adapt and grow despite socio-economic changes. According to the custodian of the *dargah*, there was an instance when a JCB machine had been instructed to demolish the structure, likely as part of an urban development

project and widening roads in the area. However, those who were present at the site reported that divine forces manifested, preventing the demolition from taking place, reinforcing the deeply held belief that the shrine is protected by unseen forces, further solidifying its sacred significance among devotees.

Additionally, the shrine's reputation for fulfilling *mannat* is strengthened by personal accounts of miracles. One of the most widely cited instances involves a woman beyond childbearing years who was able to conceive after offering prayers at the *dargah*. Stories such as these circulate widely among devotees, deepening their faith and encouraging a growing number of followers to seek blessings for their personal aspirations. These narratives passed down through word of mouth, contribute to the shrine's ever-expanding spiritual legacy, transcending generations and geographical boundaries.

A Personal Devotion: The Intermingling of Faiths

A distinctive feature of the *dargah* is its fusion of Hindu and Islamic devotional practices, reflecting the ethos of *Ganga-Jamuna Tehzeeb*.

- Islamic Practices: The laying of *chaddars* over the shrine and the recitation of Sufi prayers are common among devotees. Many pilgrims seek blessings from the saint, believing in the *dargah*'s spiritual potency in fulfilling wishes.
- Hindu symbols: Simultaneously, the shrine exhibits Hindu ritualistic elements, such as the usage of temple-bells at the entrance of the shrine, lighting of *diyas*, the offering of flowers, and the presence of Hindu deities' images within the premises. This blending of traditions illustrates how the shrine transcends religious divisions, fostering a shared spiritual identity.

People visit seeking peace, solace, and divine intervention - whether in need, unwell, worried, or burdened. The *dargah* thus becomes more than just a place for worship - but of hope, healing, and community. According to them, the *dargah* has a powerful healing capacity, seeing it as a place where prayers are fulfilled, and plights are alleviated. The idea of "*mannat*" is deeply embedded in the belief system of the worshippers, also reflecting the spiritual power associated with the sacred place. A tea stall owner nearby shared her connection to the *dargah*, saying, "I find peace

in dargah and my prayer for the success of the tea stall has been answered.” Another worshipper strongly believes, “the place takes care of my family in my absence.”

The state of Haryana and adjoining northern-western states of India is a region historically characterized by caste and religious fault lines; this site has become an epitome of inclusive spiritual space among the locals where barriers of caste, class, and religion dissipate. For lower castes, economically disadvantaged and inter-state migrants, the *dargah* serves as a sanctuary - an avenue to freely engage in rituals and practices without the constraints of traditional religious sites, caste-based hierarchies, and discrimination. Families, men, women, young and old alike find peace within its walls.

Socio-economically, diversity emerges among the respondents who included working professionals, business owners, retired personnel, and rural villagers, all of whom engage with the shrine in unique ways. Some followers have built small *mazars* (shrines) near their places of residence or businesses, demonstrating their deep spiritual attachment. The shrine thus serves as more than just a religious center; it functions as a space where personal and communal spirituality converge, reinforcing its significance in people’s everyday lives.

A very distinct practice by the regular worshippers has been bringing their prayer basket containing *diya*, *agarbattis*, and *parshad* (sacred food offering), instead of buying from vendors outside the dargah. While showcasing the personal nature of their devotion, it also underscores that faith is expressed in all its myriad forms transcending societal dogmas and hierarchies.

Breaking Barriers: A Shared Communal Feast

A strong personification of coexistence and inclusivity is the annual *bhandara* held in February. The event is organized by a dedicated group of core committee members responsible for gathering people and ensuring its smooth execution.

It is organised usually in the second week of February every year and this year it was on 13 February. People of thirty-forty castes and communities (called 36-*Kaum* in local parlance) visited with a footfall of thousands of visitors. Notably, it was extolled by one of the core committee members - “this is a form of social gathering more than a religious concept.” Moreover, a true

essence of social harmony is evident not only in the large and diverse gathering but also in the collective preparation of food including *laddoo* by the community members, who work side by side irrespective of caste, class, and religious identity. This ethos of coexistence, mutual respect, and unity is further exemplified during the communal meal - a shared experience where everyone eats on the floor served by others, reinforcing the value of equality, tolerance, and togetherness.

Despite its resilience, the dargah is not immune to the socio-cultural anxieties of the current times in India, where rapid urbanization and industrialization threaten many rural ways. Many interviewees expressed concerns over rapid infrastructural development encroaching upon sacred spaces. The risk of displacement, loss of historical relics, and commercialization of spiritual traditions pose significant challenges. However, strong communal attachment and faith-based preservation efforts continue to uphold the shrine's status as a cultural and religious landmark, resisting erasure even in the face of modern development.

The Idea of Coexistence: Ganga-Jamuna Tehzeeb in India

What is the Indian idea of co-existence: three major ideas/traditions

The Indian idea of coexistence is deeply embedded in its historical, cultural, and philosophical traditions and manifests a commitment to diversity, pluralism, and harmony. Indian principles such as “*sarva dharma sambhava*” (equal respect for all religions) and “*vasudhaiva kutumbakam*” (the world is one family) underscore the interconnectedness of humanity as well as of various faiths advocating for a global ethic of inclusivity (Frawley, n.d.). These principles have guided India’s social, political, and cultural fabric and fostered coexistence since eternity. Post-independence in 1947, standing at the crossroads of religious division, the country chose to hold the beacon of inclusivity. Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first Prime Minister, envisioned a secular state for a religious society. His conception of a composite culture sought to harmonize India’s diverse religious and cultural traditions to ensure that no single community gets to appropriate the state or its symbols (Singh, 2014). Rather than seeking uniformity, he believed that India would be more united in its diversity and that India had the spiritual and intellectual strength to accommodate and celebrate the differences. This is also enshrined in the fundamental rights given by the constitution, which legally guarantees and protects the religious and cultural rights of individuals and communities (John, n.d.).

The term “coexistence”, which has become a salient feature of Indian society, is largely expressed through three major traditions/values: *Ganga-Jamuna Tehzeeb*, *Mel-Milaap* (act of getting together), and *Bhaichara* (brotherhood).

Ganga-Jamuna Tehzeeb, in simple terms, refers to the syncretic fusion of Hindu and Islamic cultural elements. The phrase refers to the confluence of two revered rivers, *Ganga* and *Jamuna* (two major rivers of North-Central India). *Tehzeeb* is an Urdu expression for manners/mannerism. The phrase symbolizes the seamless fusion of two distinct cultures, predominantly Hindu and Islamic, to form a rich, multidimensional, and unparalleled tradition (Lal & Lal, 2022). This cultural tapestry is defined by pluralism and thrives on shared elements and ideologies by uniting people of different faiths to create a society that flourishes in inter-mingling (Chari, 2018). This is what India truly stands for. Indian historian, Rana Safvi, referred to the phrase to highlight that the two cultures, like the two rivers, keep their distinct identities, without letting one subsume the other (Safvi, 2014). Similarly, the concept of *Mel-Milaap* highlights the pragmatic dimensions of coexistence, where communities collaborate in daily life by prioritising collective wellbeing through religious and cultural practices (Robinson, 2005). *Mel-Milaap* tradition is particularly pronounced in rural India, where interdependence and mutual support are integral to social cohesion. The principle of *Bhaichara* (brotherhood) further reinforces India’s commitment to coexistence. Rooted in the idea of kinship and solidarity, *Bhaichara* transcends caste, creed, and religion, and promotes a sense of shared identity and responsibility. Together, the traditions remind people of the incomparable unison they share across communities and are evident in shared festivals, common *Hindustani* dialect (which evolved over time as a blend of ancient Hindi and Urdu languages), and artistic expressions (“Tracing Evolution,” 2015).

Sufism and Socio-religious transformation

Sufism has historically been central in promoting socio-religious transformation in the Indian subcontinent shaping practices and interactions across religious boundaries. As Rahmatullah (2014) outlined, Sufi *dargahs* have functioned as sacred spaces embodying peaceful coexistence, where Hindu and Muslim devotees share spiritual experiences and rituals. The concept of ‘*barakat*’ (prosperity, spiritual blessings) associated with Sufi saints attracts people from all faiths, as seen

in major *dargahs* like Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti's shrine in Ajmer and Nizamuddin Auliya's dargah in Delhi (Rahmatullah, 2014).

Moreover, the historical evolution of *dargahs* in India illustrates a pattern of religious synthesis rather than exclusivity. As Heitmeyer (2011) notes in her study on Sufi *dargahs* in Gujarat, many shrines remain contested spaces where localized religious practices challenge rigid theological doctrines. While there has been a rise in communal majoritarian identity politics in India since the 1990s, Sufi shrines continue to resist binary classifications of Hindu and Muslim identities, instead fostering a more fluid, practice-based religiosity. The site of our research project, Pir Baba, is an extension of this tradition and thought which continues to foster co-existence and promote tolerance in society even if the politics ride on communal divisions.

Further expanding on the integrative potential of Sufism, Kostovski (2018) highlights how Sufi practices inherently accommodate cultural and religious pluralism. According to his analysis, the flexibility of Sufi teachings - especially their emphasis on compassion, humility, and inner spiritual purity - offers an appealing spiritual framework across diverse communities. This universality allows Sufism to thrive in heterogeneous cultural landscapes such as that of North India, enabling Sufi shrines to become vibrant centers of peaceful coexistence, drawing together followers irrespective of their specific religious doctrines (Kostovski, 2018).

Two internationally known sights of co-existence

1. Dargah Ajmer Sharif

The Ajmer Sharif Dargah, revered as the shrine of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti, a mystic scholar of 12th century popularly known as *Gharib Nawaz* (Benefactor of the Poor) is a quintessential example of religious coexistence in India. Located in Ajmer, Rajasthan, the *Dargah* is a spiritual center which transcends sectarian boundaries and attracts millions of devotees annually from Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian, and other religious communities (Desk, 2024). The syncretic tradition is rooted in the teachings of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti who advocated for the principles of love, compassion, and universal brotherhood (Viitamäki, 2008). The title *Gharib Nawaz* represents the saint's legacy of serving the marginalized, a principle that continues to guide the *Dargah's* ethos.

Central to the *Dargah*'s practices is the ritual of *ziyarat* (pilgrimage), in which devotees come to the shrine and offer *chaddars*, light incense, and present flowers to the buried saint. The practice of *qawwali* is integral to the spiritual experience of the devotees which fosters a sense of collective devotion among them (Nizami, 2007). The annual *Urs* festival, commemorating the death anniversary of *Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti* (founder of the Chishti order), is the most significant event at the shrine. The festival is held annually for six days and transforms the entire city of Ajmer into a vibrant celebration of spirituality. During the event, thousands of devotees across all the religions and communities gather to pay homage to the tomb, and the rituals of the *langar* (community kitchen) and *fatiha* (prayers for the deceased) are performed to reflect a shared cultural heritage (Sikand, 2003; Singh et al., 2023)

Ajmer Sharif Dargah is not only a spiritual hub but also a beacon of India's cultural richness. Its ability to attract devotees and tourists from across communities underscores its significance as a living testament to India's pluralistic heritage. In an era of increasing religious polarization, the *Dargah* continues to inspire a sense of shared spiritual identity.

2. *Nizamuddin Dargah*

The Nizamuddin Dargah in Delhi stands as a symbol of syncretic spirituality, transcending religious boundaries and fostering a shared devotional culture. Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya (1238–1325), a Sufi saint of the *Chishti* order (a Sufi spiritual lineage), preached universal love and inclusivity, attracting followers from diverse backgrounds. His teachings shaped India's spiritual landscape, and his shrine continues to be a center of multi-religious devotion. This paper explores the historical significance of the *dargah*, the rituals of its pilgrims, and its role as a space of religious coexistence.

Historical Significance and Reverence of the Saint

Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya's influence was deeply tied to his rejection of material wealth and social hierarchies, making him popular across communities. As a disciple of Qutbuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki, he expanded the Chishti *silsilah* (order) in Delhi, establishing a *khanqah* (hospice) in Ghiyaspur, which soon became a center for spiritual seekers (JETIR, 2021). His impact was such

that even rulers and poets, including Amir Khusrau, became his followers, and after his death in 1325, his tomb became a major pilgrimage site (Rahmatullah, 2014).

Over the centuries, successive rulers contributed to the *dargah*'s expansion, integrating Mughal architecture and inscriptions that reinforced its religious and cultural importance (JETIR, 2021). The presence of noble tombs, including that of Amir Khusrau and Jahanara Begum, further elevated the shrine's prestige. Even today, Hazrat Nizamuddin is revered as a spiritual guide, with pilgrims believing in his miraculous ability to fulfill prayers (mannat) (Rahmatullah, 2014).

Pilgrims, Rituals, and Devotional Practices

The *dargah* attracts pilgrims of all faiths, illustrating its inclusive nature. Devotees bring *chaddars*, flowers, and incense, offering them at the saint's tomb as an act of reverence (Snyder, 2011). Many visitors believe that prayers made at the shrine are always answered, reinforcing their faith in the saint's spiritual presence (Rahmatullah, 2014).

A defining feature of the *dargah* is its musical and ritualistic traditions. The Dua-e-Roshni, an evening prayer where devotees' light lamps, symbolizes spiritual enlightenment and divine blessings (JETIR, 2021). The famous Thursday qawwali sessions, performed in the courtyard, are not just artistic expressions but spiritual offerings that bring devotees into a state of ecstasy, *haal* (New Age Islam, 2024).

The shrine also sees syncretic practices, where Hindu devotees light *diyas*, tie sacred threads, and bow in reverence, seamlessly integrating their traditions into the Sufi devotional space (Rahmatullah, 2014). Such rituals highlight how Nizamuddin Dargah functions as a shared spiritual sanctuary, beyond religious divides.

The Dargah as a Site of Religious Coexistence

The inclusive ethos of the *dargah* has made it a key site for interfaith harmony. Unlike doctrinal religious institutions, Sufi shrines welcome all, offering a neutral space for spiritual solace (Rahmatullah, 2014). Even in moments of communal strife, the *dargah* has remained a place of reconciliation. During Partition in 1947, for example, it served as a sanctuary for displaced individuals of all religions (JETIR, 2021).

One of the most striking instances of religious coexistence at the shrine is the annual *Basant Panchami* celebrations. Though traditionally a Hindu festival marking spring, it is celebrated at Nizamuddin Dargah with mustard flower offerings, yellow garments, and Sufi devotional music (New Age Islam, 2024). This exemplifies how Sufi traditions absorb elements from diverse faiths, reinforcing India's pluralistic ethos.

Despite these traditions, the dargah faces modern challenges, including urbanization and communal politics. Efforts to commercialize religious spaces and redefine them along exclusivist lines threaten the syncretic identity of the shrine (Heitmeyer, 2011). However, the continued presence of multi-religious pilgrims highlights the resilience of Sufi traditions in preserving coexistence.

A Call to Action: Safeguarding Sacred Spaces of Coexistence in the Face of Rising Religious Nationalism

Within a society shaped by neoliberal aspirations and digital individualism, sacred spaces such as the Pir Baba Dargah in Sonipat carve out zones of affective community, relational worship, and intergenerational memory. Far from being anachronistic relics, these sites offer alternative imaginaries of belonging - ones that resist the atomization characteristic of urban modernity. The story of this study shares that the Pir Baba Dargah is not merely a shrine; it is a dynamic cultural and spiritual commons that foregrounds pluralism, interdependence, and embodied faith.

Importantly, the inclusive ethos of the Pir Baba Dargah is not incidental - it is a form of quiet resistance against the homogenising thrust of majoritarian nationalism. Religion is often an easy emotional push button for political groups that seek electoral fortunes. As noted in a New Delhi Times editorial (2021), Sufi shrines in India have long resisted singular definitions of identity by embodying a "resonant pluralism," welcoming caste-oppressed Hindus, Muslims of diverse sects, and even non-believers. The persistence of this pluralism, particularly in a region like Haryana—often portrayed as socio-politically polarised—reasserts the shrine's relevance in the face of communal fissures and urban erasures. It demonstrates the socio-cultural resilience of Indian society, which can endure a political phase of communal discord.

Modern urban life in India is often marked by what sociologists' term "liquid modernity"—a context wherein relationships are fleeting, identities are self-styled, and communal bonds are increasingly transactional. Yet, within the bounds of the Pir Baba Dargah, what one encounters is a form of lived religiosity that is inherently collective. The rituals of *mannat*, the bringing of homemade *parshad*, and the act of lighting *diyas* are not merely devotional acts but performative gestures that inscribe faith within a shared cultural fabric. As Snyder (2011) notes in her ethnographic work on Sufi shrines, these gestures are "embodied articulations of relational memory," connecting the individual to a broader spiritual genealogy.

Furthermore, the relational structure of the shrine resists neoliberal logics of commodification. Unlike corporatised religious events or pilgrimage circuits designed for consumption, the Pir Baba Dargah thrives on reciprocity, not revenue. The offerings are mostly homemade, the labor of organizing community feasts is voluntary, and spiritual legitimacy arises not from institutional sanction but from the sustained faith of the devotees.

In conclusion, the Pir Baba Dargah offers not merely a spiritual experience but a cultural grammar of co-existence. In a time where religion is increasingly mobilized as a tool of exclusion and fear-mongering, this dargah functions as a sacred common—sustained by ritual care, communal memory, and a theology of proximity. It resists the fragmentation of the present not through confrontation, but through the quiet, enduring labor of spiritual kinship. Recognizing, researching, and preserving such spaces is not merely a scholarly responsibility but an ethical imperative in times of escalating polarities.

Conclusion

Pir Baba ki Dargah offers a profound testament to the long-standing ethos of coexistence in India – where diverse identities and faiths converge organically. This unstructured yet deep-rooted pluralism exhibits that tolerance, respect, equality, and harmony are not institutionalised but emerge naturally from everyday interactions and lived experiences practised by the locals for decades and even centuries. It is more than just a local site but mirrors a microcosm of the intricate social fabric in India; where spiritual devotion and religious diversity coexist despite socio-economic barriers. The *dargah* becomes more than just a place of worship, a symbol of shared belonging transcending physical and material rigidity. Lessons from the *dargah* are that harmony

cannot be enforced or institutionalized from above. It occurs from people-to-people interactions, shared cultural and religious spaces, and appreciation and encouragement of local festivities and traditions.

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