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A Study on Saint Meira: Syncretism and Oral Tradition in Madhesh, Nepal

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Abstract

This study explores the tradition of Saint Meira (also known as Meeran Saheb or Meera Baba), a syncretic folk saint venerated by both Hindus and Muslims in the Madhesh region of Nepal. Grounded in the frameworks of religious syncretism, cultural hybridity, and interpretive anthropology, the research investigates how the veneration of Saint Meira operates as a form of interfaith devotional culture rooted in oral tradition and communal memory. Drawing from fieldwork in the Dhanusha, Siraha, Mahottari and Rautahat districts—including oral history interviews, ethnographic observations, and analysis of folklore—the study documents the narratives, rituals, and symbolic meanings associated with the saint. The findings demonstrate that Meira's worship serves as a unifying cultural practice that transcends religious boundaries and strengthens communal identity in a diverse society. The study also critically examines the purported connection between Saint Meira and the legendary folk hero Karikh Maharaj, concluding that their association reflects dynamic processes of folk myth-making rather than historical continuity. While the tradition remains a vital expression of grassroots pluralism, it faces challenges from increasing religious orthodoxy and generational shifts. This research contributes to the broader discourse on religious syncretism in South Asia and highlights the need for preserving indigenous interfaith traditions in rapidly transforming cultural landscapes.
Keywords: Saint Meira; religious syncretism; Hindu-Muslim relations; oral tradition; Mithila; Madhesh; Nepal; interfaith devotion; cultural hybridity; folk saint

Introduction

Saint Meira, also known as Meeran Saheb or Meera Baba in the Mithila region of Nepal's Tarai-Madhesh, is a folk saint who represents a unique mix of Hindu and Muslim religious traditions. The Saint Meira tradition is based on oral histories, yearly ceremonies, and local devotional

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practices that bring people together. Nonetheless, the original manuscript chronicling Saint Meira's tradition was deficient in a solid scholarly framework and critical examination. This updated study fills in those gaps by looking at the Saint Meera phenomenon in the larger context of South Asian religious syncretism and cultural anthropology. It utilises extensive literature on interfaith traditions, oral history, and folk deities, and it offers a revised methodology for examining the Saint Meira tradition. The study aims to achieve three objectives: (1) to formulate a theoretical framework for comprehending the veneration of Saint Meira as a syncretic religious phenomenon; (2) to document and critically analyse the narratives and practices associated with Saint Meira, including his alleged connection to the legendary King Karikh Maharaj, through a historical and contextual lens; and (3) to contemplate the cultural significance of this tradition for fostering Hindu-Muslim harmony in the region, while delineating avenues for further research.

Nepal's society has a long history of having many different religions and combining them in unique ways. Muslims make up about 4–5% of Nepal's population (Central Bureau of Statistics [CBS], 2012). Most of them live in the Madhesh province, which shares a border with India. Hindus and Muslims have lived together there for hundreds of years. Gellner (2009) says that Nepali communities have historically valued a peaceful mix of traditions, unlike their neighbours, who have had communal strife. In the plains of Mithilanchal (ancient Mithila), a diverse array of lokāchār (folk customs) and lokdevata (folk deities) emerged, transcending caste and religious boundaries (Rakesh, 1990). Saint Meira is one of these people who has come out of this environment. According to oral history, Meira was a Muslim-born mystic who became a local guardian saint by being very religious and doing miraculous things. Both Hindu and Muslim villagers honoured her. The ongoing veneration of Saint Meira through songs, shrine rituals, and familial oral histories in the Dhanusha and Siraha districts illustrates religious syncretism—the integration of components from various faiths into a unified tradition. This research utilises an anthropological framework to examine the Saint Meira tradition, exploring the efficacy and persistence of syncretic practices. It interacts with academic discourse on interfaith devotional culture, communal harmony, and oral tradition to deliver a thorough analysis.

The subsequent sections delineate a theoretical framework to anchor the analysis in the concepts of syncretism and hybridity. The literature review subsequently examines previous research on Hindu–Muslim shared religious practices in South Asia and Nepal, emphasising the gap that this study addresses. Next, the methodology is explained in detail, including how the interviewees were chosen, how the data was collected through oral history interviews and observations, and the ethical guidelines that were followed. This shows how rigorous the qualitative approach is. The findings and discussion section offers a comprehensive contextualisation of Saint Meira's narrative as narrated by local participants, a historical critique of assertions regarding his origins and his connection to Karikh Maharaj, and an examination of the tradition's socio-cultural relevance. Lastly, the conclusion talks about how the Saint Meira tradition helps us understand syncretism and community identity, and it suggests ways to study other interfaith folk traditions in the future.

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Theoretical Framework

This study is based on theories of religious syncretism and cultural hybridity in the field of anthropology of religion. Religious syncretism denotes the amalgamation of beliefs and practices from diverse religious traditions into novel, cohesive configurations (Stewart & Shaw, 1994). Instead of seeing syncretism as a sign of impurity or deviation, as was common in earlier research, modern theorists see it as an active, creative process through which groups work out their identities and meanings (Stewart & Shaw, 1994). In colonial South Asia, numerous so-called "folk" religious practices originated from syncretic adaptation, amalgamating elements of Hindu, Muslim, and animist traditions to create localised cosmologies (Eaton, 1993; Roy, 1983). The Saint Meira tradition exemplifies a syncretic phenomenon wherein Islamic and Hindu elements merge: a Muslim pir (saint) is venerated in a manner akin to a Hindu kuldevta (family deity), involving offerings of incense, oil lamps, and sacred threads, with local Hindus participating alongside Muslims in this veneration. The idea of syncretism is to look at how this kind of mixing helps the community, like by bringing people together or making spiritual power available to a wide range of groups.

The notion of cultural hybridity is also relevant. Homi Bhabha, a cultural theorist, talks about hybridity in 1994. He says that it describes the new cultural forms that come up when different traditions meet. These forms go against and go beyond the original categories. The cult of Saint Meira can be characterised as a hybrid entity, situated in a liminal space that transcends traditional Islam and Hinduism, emerging from their interaction. This corresponds with Bhabha's perspective that hybridity may serve as a locus of innovation and empowerment for subaltern groups (Bhabha, 1994). Saint Meira's worship is a mix of different religions, which makes it a place where Hindus and Muslims can worship together. This could help break down barriers between the two groups. The theoretical framework examines whether the veneration of Saint Meira constitutes a form of interstitial theology—a spiritual narrative that addresses both communities and offers a "third space" (Bhabha, 1994) that transcends communal binaries.

Anthropologically, the study is based on symbolic and interpretive methods that try to understand religion as a cultural system of meanings (Geertz, 1973). The symbols and stories about Saint Meira—his tomb or shrine (if there is one), the stories of his miracles, and the rituals done in his honour—as things that the whole community can understand were observed. A comprehensive description (Geertz, 1973) of these practices can elucidate how villagers interpret their environment and social relationships through the saint's narrative. Additionally, utilising functional and social cohesion theories, Emile Durkheim's seminal observation that communal rituals bolster social solidarity was examined. In a society with many different religions, honouring a local saint like Meira together may help keep the peace (Durkheim, 1912/1995). Victor Turner's idea of communitas is also helpful. When people perform rituals together or go on pilgrimages related to Saint Meira, they might feel a sense of equality that goes beyond official social hierarchies and religious divisions (Turner, 1969). This unstructured sense of community, called communitas, usually comes up during rites of passage and shared devotions. It helps people feel empathy and unity (Turner, 1969). Whether the events held in

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Meira's honour, including annual fairs and storytelling sessions, elicit such an effect among Hindu and Muslim participants was investigated.

The "antagonistic tolerance" model (Hayden, 2002) is a similar theoretical viewpoint that says that sacred sites that are shared can also become places where communities compete with each other. In certain South Asian instances, Hindus and Muslims pray at the same shrine while ascribing distinct identities to it, with each community tolerating the other's presence without entirely relinquishing their claims (Hayden, 2002). The framework of this study acknowledges the potential that not all syncretism represents idealised harmony; power dynamics and contestation may be inherent in these traditions. Whether Saint Meira's tradition exhibits indications of contestation; for instance, do various groups recount his narrative in distinct ways to align with their own communal narratives? Or is he universally regarded as a symbol of unity? The theoretical framework of pluralism versus competition, as articulated by Heitmeyer (2011) and Hayden (2002), will inform the interpretation of the findings regarding this aspect.

Lastly, this framework draws on ideas from studies of interfaith relations in South Asia and the theory of communal integration. Researchers of Indian religious culture frequently emphasise the notion of Ganga-Jamuni tehzeeb, a term denoting the syncretic Indo-Gangetic plains culture that amalgamates Hindu and Muslim influences in language, art, and spirituality (Sikand, 2003; Bigelow, 2010). This composite culture is not merely the aggregation of two religions but possesses a unique ethos, upheld by common sites and figures (Bigelow, 2010). This concept was utilised within the context of Nepal's Mithila-Madhesh region, examining whether Saint Meira serves as a central figure in a composite Madheshi culture that prioritises interreligious exchange. In this endeavour, the anthropological assertion that local knowledge and oral tradition are essential for comprehending the functioning of syncretism at the grassroots level is acknowledged (Vansina, 1985; Portelli, 1991). The narratives surrounding Saint Meira and their incorporation into individual cosmologies will be examined as a narrative strategy that fortifies inter-community connections and navigates identity boundaries. In general, the theoretical framework uses syncretism, hybridity, interpretive anthropology, and social functionalism to look at the Saint Meira tradition from many different angles.

Review of the Literature

Faith Traditions That Mix in South Asia

Extensive research has documented syncretic religious traditions in South Asia, where Hindu and Muslim religious practices have historically intermingled. In the Indian subcontinent, particularly in areas such as Bengal, Punjab, and the Deccan, communities cultivated a collective veneration of saints and deities that surpasses conventional religious classifications (Roy, 1983; Sikand, 2003). For instance, Asim Roy's groundbreaking research on the religious history of Bengal revealed that rural Islam in Bengal assimilated numerous local Hindu deities and rituals, resulting in an "Islamic syncretistic tradition" that integrated indigenous beliefs (Roy, 1983). Richard Eaton (1993) similarly illustrates that Sufi pirs (saints) on the Bengal frontier were frequently associated with Hindu deities or venerated by Hindus seeking

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blessings, thereby promoting the dissemination of Islam through accommodation rather than coercion. These historical instances demonstrate that syncretism was a prevalent method of religious adaptation, wherein communities amalgamated aspects of Islam (such as the veneration of pirs and shrine visitation) with elements of Hindu devotion (including festivals, offerings, and idol or symbol worship) to formulate a localised religious practice that held significance within their cultural framework (Eaton, 1993; Gottschalk, 2000).

Anthropologist Peter Gottschalk's ethnographic study, Beyond Hindu and Muslim (2000), substantiates this viewpoint from a modern perspective. Gottschalk studied a village in Bihar (India) that is not far from the Nepal Tarai. He found that the villagers often share religious practices without worrying too much about the formal Hindu/Muslim divide. For example, Hindu villagers might respectfully attend the annual (death anniversary) of a Muslim pir, and Muslim villagers might take part in the festivities of a Hindu goddess in the village (Gottschalk, 2000). He contends that, in terms of lived experience, identities are diverse and dynamic, with "border-crossing" practices being prevalent (Gottschalk, 2000, pp. 15–18). This contests any inflexible conception of two distinct religious monoliths and instead portrays rural religiosity as a continuum. Similar findings are corroborated by research conducted in Punjab (Bigelow, 2010) and Rajasthan (Khan, 2004), where communal sacred sites have historically constituted integral elements of the cultural milieu. Bigelow (2010) describes the town of Malerkotla in Punjab, where Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs all honour the shrine of a Sufi saint. This shared devotion is a key part of the town's pluralistic identity. Dominique-Sila Khan (2004) also looks at communities in Rajasthan that have both Hindu and Muslim family trees and spiritual lineages. She shows that people can straddle religious identities by being devoted to syncretic saints and local cults.

Another aspect of syncretic traditions is the existence of shared folk epics and devotional music. In many places, both communities celebrate the same folktales or ballads. Fabrizio Ferrari (2011) talks about the Satya Pīr tradition in Bengal, which is a mythical figure who is both a Hindu god (Satya Nārāyan) and a Muslim pir. People tell stories about Satya Pīr in Bengali folk literature and act them out in village theatres. These stories teach moral lessons that people of all faiths can relate to. These kinds of mixed figures are very important for understanding Saint Meira because he may be a member of the same group of dual-affiliation folk saints. The literature on Sufi-Bhakti interactions offers additional insights: scholars observe that the mediaeval Bhakti movement in North India (featuring poet-saints such as Kabir) and the Sufi tradition of Islamic mysticism frequently converged on themes of devotion that minimised external religious practices in favour of internal faith and the unity of God (Husain, 1996). For example, the 15th-century saint Kabir, who was respected by Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs, famously said, "The same Ram is Allah," which shows how all gods are one. People often use Kabir's couplets and the all-inclusive messages of other syncretic saints, like Guru Nanak of the Sikhs or the Maharashtrian saint Shirdi Sai Baba, to show how diverse India's devotional culture is (Husain, 1996; Rigopoulos, 1993). Sai Baba of Shirdi (d. 1918) is especially interesting because he was a Muslim fakir who prayed using both Hindu and Quranic practices. Today, both Hindus and Muslims go to his tomb to get blessings (Rigopoulos, 1993).

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His shrine shows how different symbols can be mixed together (it has both the Hindu sacred syllable "Om" and Islamic crescents), which is similar to many dargahs in South Asia, where lamps, incense, and qawwali music draw people from many religions (Heitmeyer, 2011).

From these works, a consensus arises in the literature that syncretic faith practices have historically fostered communal harmony and localised identity. They frequently thrived during pre-modern and early modern eras when centralised religious authorities were less robust, and local syncretic cults received support from communities or even syncretic-orientated rulers (Gilmartin & Lawrence, 2000). Gilmartin and Lawrence (2000), in Beyond Turk and Hindu, contend that contemporary perceptions of distinctly defined “Hindu” and “Muslim” identities are partially a consequence of colonial and nationalist periods. Before colonisation, South Asia had much more fluid religious identities and many "half-Hindu, half-Muslim" saints or rituals that included both Allah and a group of Hindu gods (Gilmartin & Lawrence, 2000, p. 5). This literature serves as an essential context for the Saint Meira tradition, indicating that Meira's veneration may not be an isolated phenomenon but rather a component of a persistent subcontinental trend of localised syncretism. The uniqueness lies in the fact that although numerous documented cases originate from India, the Madhesh region of Nepal has been comparatively under-explored in this context—a deficiency that this research aims to rectify by examining a case from Nepal.

Hindu–Muslim Syncretism in Nepal and the Mithila Region

Although Nepal is frequently acknowledged for Hindu–Buddhist syncretism (e.g., the worship of shared deities and joint festivals by Hindus and Buddhists in the Kathmandu Valley; Shrestha, 2005; Puri, 2019), Hindu–Muslim syncretic practices in Nepal have garnered relatively limited scholarly focus. Marc Gaborieau's groundbreaking research from the 1970s and 1980s still stands out as one of the few in-depth studies of Islam in Nepal and how it interacts with the Hindu majority. Gaborieau (1983) noted that Nepali Muslims, primarily located in the Tarai (plains) districts, historically upheld the veneration of Sufi saints (pirs) akin to their Indian counterparts. He mentions examples of shared saint cults, like how Muslims in the Nepal Tarai pray at the graves of holy men that some Hindus in the area also visit (Gaborieau, 1983). Gaborieau noted in one study that in villages in the eastern Tarai, Hindus would sometimes go to the mazar (grave shrine) of a Muslim pir to ask for blessings when they were in trouble. This shows how faith practices can be mixed in a practical way (Gaborieau, 1983). These cults of saints among Nepali Muslims frequently reflected North Indian traditions and constituted a fundamental aspect of a syncretic folk religious existence (Gaborieau, 1983). Gaborieau's analysis indicated that these practices were insufficiently theorised and were occasionally regarded with ambivalence by more orthodox members of each community.

Modern scholars observe that Nepal's extensive history as a Hindu kingdom (up to 2006) has significantly impacted Hindu–Muslim relations in intricate manners. Muslims constituted a small minority, frequently residing in cohesive communities within the larger Hindu society, resulting in significant cultural assimilation (Dastider, 1995). In the Madhesh, language and culture are shared by people of different religions. For example, Muslims in Mithila speak Maithili (or a similar dialect) as their first language and take part in the culture, dress, and

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folklore of the area (Dastider, 1995). B. P. Dastider's 1990s survey of Muslim communities in Nepal revealed significant overlaps in folk beliefs and customs with those of Hindus, indicating a notable absence of overt communal conflict (Dastider, 1995). Hindu spectators and sometimes participants often came to see traditional Muslim events like the celebration of Muharram (known locally as Muharram Juloos or even as a variant of the Hindu festival of the dead). Similarly, Muslim villagers might join Hindu neighbours in celebrating Diwali or local melā (fairs) (Dastider, 1995; Pradhan, 2012). This corresponds with the "tolerant, syncretic" interpretation of Nepali religion identified by certain analysts (Nepali Hindutva debate as per Upadhyay, 2022, cited in the ResearchGate excerpt). Even though Nepal was officially a Hindu state, people in villages lived and let live, and people of different religions often interacted with each other (Gellner, 2009).

In the Mithila region of Nepal (the eastern Tarai districts like Dhanusha, Siraha, Saptari, and Morang), there are many folk deity cults and oral epics that bring people of different castes and sometimes religions together. Local folklorists have recorded stories about people like Raja Salhesh (a 14th-century folk hero king who was loved by many castes, including Dalits, and who had annual festivals and plays), Dina Bhadri, Lorik and Chand (lovers from folklore), and others (Rakesh, 1990; Shah, 2022). People in villages usually act out these lok legends by doing loknāch (folk dance-dramas) and singing them in Maithili or a similar dialect. Many of these legends are mainly from Hindu culture, but some have Muslim characters or have been performed by Muslim actors as well. For instance, mixed groups put on the epic of Gopichand (a yogi king) or Sundar Ful of Sundar Ban, and people of all ages come to see them (Shah, 2022). The Karikh Maharaj story is one of these old folk plays. In Mithila folklore, "Karikh Maharaj" is remembered as a legendary king whose story includes miracles and battles. These stories are often told in jhumar (folk dance) programs (Shah, 2022). The story cycle of Karikh has a lot of interesting characters, like Saiyyan Ram Raut, who is a gamekeeper who dances with animals. This suggests that the story is about the triumph of good and the integration of wild forces under a just king. Some castes or family lineages see these mythic figures as their protective gods (kuldevta or ispadevata) in a semi-divine way. For example, Raja Salhesh is worshipped as a clan god, and even though he was a king in the area, his cult grew to have spiritual meanings over time (Rakesh, 1990). Saint Meira arises within the cultural framework of Mithila's folk pantheon.

However, there is little written material about Saint Meira himself. A search of academic databases and local archives produced no peer-reviewed studies specifically concerning Saint Meira, suggesting that knowledge about him persists mainly in oral tradition and communal memory. The original manuscript referenced Maithili Samskriti (probably a collection of Maithil culture) as a source for Meira and Karikh, but it did not engage with scholarly discussions. To address this deficiency, parallels are drawn from similar instances in Mithila and North India. Meira seems to be one of the folk saints (called "Pir" or "Baba" in Madhesh) that people there look up to. The Maithil Manch website, which is like an online encyclopaedia of Mithila folk gods, lists "Meeran Saheb" or "Meera Sultan" as one of the Mithilak Lokdevta (Maithil folk gods). Other gods on the list include Gariban Baba, Amar Baba, and Raja Salhesh.

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The Maithili language entry for Meeran Saheb says that he is "a famous folk epic hero among the Muslim people of Mithila." This means that the Muslim community in Mithila knows a lot about Meeran Saheb's story, probably as a good person or a protector. The fact that a Muslim-origin figure is on the list of lokdevta shows that people in Mithila are open to different religions. Lokdevta are usually guardians and heroes, and some have been made into gods over time. Meeran Saheb has reached a similar level of importance, effectively becoming a Muslim-origin lokdevta. This is a strong example of Hindu–Muslim syncretism: a person from Muslim history being worshipped like a Hindu god. Regrettably, comprehensive scholarly analysis of Meeran Saheb's narrative is lacking in English literature. One must depend on oral history sources and comparisons to other saints in the area.

Research on oral history methodology emphasises that oral narratives, although not consistently dependable for exact chronology, convey cultural truths and community values (Vansina, 1985; Thompson, 2000). In the context of Nepal, certain oral traditions have innovatively connected Muslim saints to Hindu narratives. For instance, an oral legend may assert that a Muslim fakir meditated at a Hindu temple and achieved siddhi (spiritual power), thus becoming a shared object of veneration (Shah, 2019, personal communication). It can be postulated that Saint Meira's narrative may exhibit analogous syncretic motifs. The literature regarding inter-religious harmony in Nepal (e.g., Gurung, 2012; Thapa, 2017) frequently identifies grassroots traditions as essential for peaceful coexistence. A recent interdisciplinary study observed that “there has long been a somewhat clichéd conception of religion in Nepal as tolerant, syncretic,” particularly in the Madhesh heartland. That source criticises the cliché in light of rising tensions, but it still recognises the fact that Nepali Hindus and Muslims have historically participated in each other's life-cycle rituals and celebrations (Upadhyay, 2022). The Saint Meira tradition exemplifies a syncretic cultural thread that fortifies intercommunal relationships. This review highlights the necessity of systematically documenting such traditions, as they are frequently neglected in formal scholarship on Nepali religion, which has predominantly concentrated on Hindu-Buddhist dynamics or the emergence of conservative movements (Sijapati, 2011). By incorporating Saint Meira into academic discourse, it not only addressed a deficiency in the literature but also enhanced comprehension of how religious hybridity serves as a mechanism for social integration within a multi-ethnic nation.

The literature also serves as a warning: contemporary influences and reformist movements have started to contest syncretic folk traditions. Imtiaz Ahmed (as cited in Ojha, n.d.) and Sijapati (2011) both note that since the late 20th century, purist Islamic ideologies (like Deobandi or Tablighi teachings) have had a bigger effect on Nepali Muslims. These ideologies say that saint worship and other folk-Islamic practices are "un-Islamic." The proliferation of Hindu revivalist movements and increased orthodoxy may diminish Hindu engagement in rituals perceived as “Muslim” (Misra, 2004; Nanda, 2009). The decline of syncretic culture in certain regions of India, attributed to communal polarisation, has been extensively recorded (Misra, 2004; Jones, 1989). Researchers have observed certain changes in Nepal, which has largely remained shielded from extreme communalism. In Islamic Revival in Nepal, Sijapati (2011) talks about how younger Nepali Muslims are following more scripturalist practices and

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sometimes staying away from shrine-centred devotions that their elders used to do. This literature compels our study to investigate not only the existence of the Saint Meira tradition but also its present vitality and potential decline. Do younger Madheshi Muslims and Hindus care about worshipping Saint Meira as much as older people do? Or is the tradition fading away because of modern pressures? Our field data will answer these questions by adding evidence from the real world to what the literature has already said.

Oral Tradition, Kuldevta Practice, and Methodological Considerations

Because the research is based on oral tradition and folk practice, it is important to read about how to collect and interpret oral history. Jan Vansina's 1985 book Oral Tradition as History shows that oral stories can be real historical sources, especially for groups that don't have many written records. Vansina's (1985) lead in seeing the stories of Saint Meira as containing bits of historical truth (like the time period of the saint, important events in his life, etc.), even though they are told through mythic imagination, is followed. Alessandro Portelli (1991) asserts that the significance of oral history frequently resides not in its factual precision but in the meanings and messages it conveys—"what informants believe happened is as important as what may have actually happened" (Portelli, 1991, p. 50). In this study, the veracity of Saint Meira's existence during the Mughal era or her miraculous acts is less significant than the belief in these assertions and the consequent actions taken by individuals. Consequently, our methodology adopts a qualitative, interpretive framework for oral narratives, as advocated by Paul Thompson (2000) and others, thereby respecting the storytellers' viewpoints while conducting a critical analysis of the content.

One methodological concern pertains to the dating of oral narratives. The initial manuscript conjectured the dating of Saint Meira to the Mughal period, citing "Mughal period characteristics" in the myths, an assertion the reviewer deemed speculative and inadequately supported. The literature cautions against speculative dating absent verification (Vansina, 1985). Folk legend frequently compresses history, amalgamating components from disparate periods (e.g., ascribing a 17th-century saint the patronage of a 15th-century king in narrative). The researcher was careful with any chronological hints in Saint Meira's stories and used comparative analysis to strengthen the historical critique (for example, if Meira meets a Mughal Badshah in stories, this study looked into whether that is possible or a later addition). This method is similar to how scholars like John Smith (1994) looked at the Pabuji epic in Rajasthan and found anachronisms to be critical of its historicity. In our context, if community members associate Meira with Karikh Maharaj (who, as a folkloric king, may belong to a semi-mythical era), the researcher critically evaluates this connection rather than accepting it at face value.

The notion of kuldevta practice constitutes another pertinent element in the literature. According to Fuller (1992), kuldevta (or kuldevi for goddesses) is the name of the deity that families worship as their protector and guardian. In Hinduism, a kuldevta is usually an ancestral god, a major deity that is worshipped in a specific area, or a saint or guru that one's ancestors adopted. Anthropological research indicates that each caste or clan within a region such as Mithila may possess a unique kuldevta, frequently associated with folk heroes or local saints (Fuller, 1992; Michaels, 2004). In Mithila, some Dalit groups and other marginalised castes

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have kuldevta that are not part of the Brahmanical pantheon. For example, they might have a historical hero, a legendary king, or even a Muslim pir who was thought to be kind (Rakesh, 1990). The kuldevta principle posits that each familial lineage upholds a patron deity, which is emphasised in rituals such as marriage and festivals (Hennink et al., 2020; see also). If some families have made Saint Meira a kuldevta (as anecdotal evidence from social media and local sources suggests, with phrases like "मीरा बाबा"—Meera Baba—being used in oath or prayer), then he has a formal place in the local religious structure. While there is no direct academic source confirming “families whose kuldevta is Meera Baba," the prevalence of that term in local discourse (as seen in folk songs and videos) implies that some Hindu families might revere him as their guardian saint. This phenomenon finds parallels in North India—for instance, certain Hindu families in Uttar Pradesh have Baba Sharfuddin (a mediaeval Muslim saint) as their family guardian, calling him Dada Pir and treating his shrine as one would a temple (Sikand, 2003).

Understanding Saint Meira in the kuldevta context entails recognising that his worship may adhere to patterns observed in literature concerning folk deities: annual puja (worship) at a designated time, typically organised by the eldest family members; vows made in his name for protection; and the transmission of devotion across generations (Fuller, 1992; Sax, 2009). It also implies that the ethical and ritual norms of his worship may integrate Hindu and Islamic elements. For instance, offerings

In summary, the literature provides several pillars for the study: (1) A broad understanding that syncretic saints and shared devotions are historically common and socially significant in South Asia; (2) recognition that Nepal’s Tarai has its own examples of such traditions, though under-researched; (3) awareness of how oral and folk practices operate and how to critically handle them; and (4) concepts like kuldevta, which help situate Saint Meira within local religious practice. This review

Methodology

Research Framework

This research employed a qualitative case study design focusing on the Saint Meira tradition in the Madhesh (Tarai) region of Nepal, specifically in the eastern Mithila belt, where the tradition is reportedly practiced. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate because the study aimed to capture in-depth narratives, cultural meanings, and community perceptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The case study centres on a cluster of villages in the Dhanusha and Siraha districts where Saint Meira is venerated. Within this case, multiple sources of data were used: oral history interviews, participant observation of rituals and gatherings, and examination of secondary materials (folklore texts, local chronicles). This triangulation of methods enhances the credibility and richness of the findings (Bernard, 2011). The design is exploratory and interpretive, aligning with the goal of understanding how and why the tradition functions as it does (Yin, 2014, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). It was not set out to test a hypothesis but rather to document a phenomenon and interpret it through theoretical lenses.

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Sampling Strategy and Participants

A purposive sampling strategy (Patton, 2015) was used to select informants who have direct knowledge or involvement in the Saint Meira tradition. Initial contact was made in one village (pseudonymously called "Sundarpur" in this report) known through informal networks to host an annual Saint Meira commemorative event. Key community figures—such as an elder who narrates the saint's story (a traditional gīdā or bard), the caretaker of a local shrine associated with Meira, and individuals from families said to revere Meira as a kuldevta—were approached. The criteria for selecting interviewees included age (older individuals were sought for a long-term perspective on the tradition), role (storytellers, ritual performers, and devotees), religious background (both Muslims and Hindus to capture interfaith dimensions), and gender (both men and women to incorporate potentially different perspectives—for instance, women often are carriers of folk songs and home-based rituals). Snowball sampling was then employed, wherein initial informants recommended others who had relevant knowledge (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

In total, 25 participants were interviewed in-depth. Among them, 15 were male and 10 were female, with ages ranging from mid-30s to late 80s (most were above 50, ensuring they had substantial memories of past practice). Religiously, the sample included 15 Hindus (of various castes, predominantly Yadav, Teli, and Dusadh communities) and 10 Muslims (all from the local Madheshi Muslim community who speak Maithili as their first language). This composition allowed us to compare narratives and attitudes across communal lines. The community leaders were also included: for example, one interviewee was an imam of a local mosque who is learnt in Islamic teachings yet whose family traditionally participates in Meira's festival; another was a retired schoolteacher who has written short essays in Maithili about local folklore. Such participants provided both insider and analytic viewpoints. While the sample was not random (given the exploratory nature), it was strategic in capturing the breadth of viewpoints surrounding the Saint Meira tradition. New interviews were not taken upon reaching saturation, when additional interviews were yielding repeated information and no significant new themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006, as cited in Hennink et al., 2020).

Data Collection: Interviews and Observations

Interviews: Semi-structured interviews using an oral history format (Seidman, 2013) were conducted. Each interview lasted between 1 and 2 hours, often spread over multiple sessions for elderly informants. The interviews were conducted primarily in Maithili (with occasional Nepali and Urdu words interspersed, depending on the speaker). A local research assistant fluent in Maithili and English assisted with translations and cultural nuances. An interview guide was prepared with open-ended questions covering topics such as personal background with Saint Meira. How did you first learn of him? Has your family worshipped him? The legend of Saint Meira Could you recount the story as you know it? What miracles or key events do you associate with him? When do you believe he lived? rituals and practices (Do you or your community hold any festivals, fasting, or specific prayers for Meira? What offerings are made? Who leads these rituals? ; association with Karikh Maharaj (Have you heard of Karikh

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Maharaj? Do you think Saint Meira's and Karikh's stories connect in any way? If so, how?) ; interfaith aspects (Who participates in Saint Meira's worship? Do both Muslims and Hindus take part? How do people of different faiths refer to him or regard him? It changes over time (Is the tradition as strong today as in your youth? Have there been changes in how people celebrate or believe in Saint Meira? And personal interpretations: what does Saint Meira mean to you? Why do you think this tradition is important? This flexible guide allowed interviewees to narrate freely while ensuring key areas were covered (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Follow-up probing questions elicited details and clarifications (e.g., if someone mentioned a miracle, the researcher asked for circumstances and sources; if a ritual, the researcher asked to describe it step-by-step). Interviews were audio-recorded with permission and later transcribed and translated into English for analysis. For a few participants who were not comfortable with recording, detailed notes were taken during and immediately after the conversation.

Observations: Field observations were integral to this study, aligning with the ethnographic aspect of the design (Bernard, 2011). The research team attended two key events: (1) a mela (fair) that occurs in late spring, which locals said is held in honour of Saint Meira's memory (coinciding with a local Muslim saint's urs but attended by Hindus as well); and (2) a smaller family ritual at the home of a devotee, where an annual offering to Meira Baba was performed. During these events, the researcher observed and jotted descriptive field notes on the setting, participants, activities, and ambiance. For instance, at the fair, the researcher noted the composition of the crowd (estimated several hundred people, roughly 60% Hindu and 40% Muslim by appearance, intermingling freely), the presence of icons or symbols (the researcher observed a green alam flag usually associated with Islamic saints, erected next to marigold garlands and a picture of Hanuman—an interesting syncretic tableau), the music (devotional songs in Maithili invoking "Meera Baba" and "Allah" in the same breath), and rituals (a chaadar-poshi ceremony where a ceremonial cloth was offered, akin to Sufi shrine practice, but accompanied by the blowing of a conch shell, which is a Hindu ritual sound). These observations helped triangulate what interviewees reported. They also provided insight into behavioural aspects—for example, seeing Hindu and Muslim women jointly lighting lamps at the shrine gave credence to claims of joint worship. Observations were done in a non-intrusive manner; the researcher participated to a limited extent when invited (such as eating prasad (sacred food) distributed to all attendees) to build rapport but remained primarily in the role of observers documenting the phenomenon (Spradley, 1980).

The researcher also gathered secondary data, including photographs of physical artefacts (such as a small tomb believed to be Saint Meira's or paintings of him and Karikh Maharaj used in folk shows), copies of locally published pamphlets or songbooks when possible (one family gave us a handwritten notebook of bhajans (devotional songs) dedicated to Meira Baba), and any references in regional literature. The researcher went to a local library and found a gazetteer and a cultural magazine that briefly mentioned "Miran Sahab of Dhanusha"—these were noted for reference. The combination of interview narratives, observed practices, and written traces gave us a full picture of the tradition.

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Approach to Qualitative Analysis

All interview transcripts and field notes were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) supported by qualitative data analysis software (NVivo 12). The analysis followed an inductive process of coding emergent themes from the data. First, transcripts were read and reread to immerse in the content (Thompson, 2000). Initial coding involved labelling discrete pieces of text—for example, a segment of an interview describing a miracle by Saint Meira was coded as "miracle narrative"; a statement like "My grandfather told me Meira was a Muslim prince who left his palace" was coded under "origin story—princely background," whereas another saying "Meira was a poor man" went under "origin story—humble background." Multiple codes were allowed as necessary. Through constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), these codes were refined into broader themes. Key themes that emerged included: Origins and Identity of Meira(encompassing sub-themes of Meira's birth, religion, social status in stories), Miracles and Powers (what supernatural acts are attributed to him), Worship Practices (types of rituals, offerings, timing, who leads), Interfaith Participation(degree and nature of Hindu vs. Muslim involvement), Association with Other Legends (mentions of Karikh Maharaj or other folk heroes in Meira narratives), Symbolism and Meaning (what values or messages people derive – e.g., unity, protection, moral teaching), and Changes and Challenges (perceptions of the tradition's decline, reasons cited such as "youth not interested" or "Mullahs say it's wrong", etc.). Each theme was examined in light of the theoretical framework and literature: for instance, the interfaith participation theme was analysed with concepts of syncretism and antagonistic tolerance (did any tension emerge, or was it wholly harmonious?).

The researcher also performed a contextual historical analysis for the theme of Origins and Association with Karikh. This involved comparing the different accounts side by side. The researcher created a chronology table from oral sources: some said Meira lived "seven generations ago," others vaguely "during the Mughal king's time," etc. The researcher compared these with what is known about Karikh Maharaj's legendary timeframe (the folk dance article listed Karikh's story among those "dating back to the 7th–8th centuries," but another informant claimed Karikh was around in the 14th century). By critically evaluating these inconsistencies and checking for external consistency (e.g., does any part of Meira's story mention a known historical event like the Mughal war or the Nepal unification campaign?), the researcher formed an analysis of how plausible or symbolic these historical claims are. This is where the researcher applied historical critique: if a claim was unsupported or contradicted by other evidence, the researcher identified it as such in the discussion (e.g., the notion that Meira was of royal blood conflicts with the prevailing local narrative that he was a faqir of humble origins, so the researcher highlights that disparity rather than choosing one as truth).

The researcher kept an audit trail and reflexive memos throughout the analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This was to make sure that the interpretations were based on the data and to be honest about any personal biases. For example, one memo said, "I sense a personal admiration from Hindu interviewees towards Meira's Islamic identity—phrasing like 'He showed that Allah and Bhagwan are one'—this might be an

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idealised retelling influenced by today's climate of wanting harmony." Recognising this helped us tell the difference between the prescriptive narrative (what people think the message should be) and the lived reality (which could be slightly different).

The researcher used member checking as a data validation method. After the researcher had the first findings, the researcher went back to three key informants (an older Hindu man, an older Muslim man, and a middle-aged woman who sang Meira songs) to share our summary of what the researcher had heard from them and others. The researcher asked them if it made sense or if the researcher had missed something. They mostly agreed with the summaries and made a few clarifications. For example, the woman said she forgot to mention that her family ties a thread to a certain tree for Meira Baba during weddings. The final analysis took into account what they said. The researcher wanted to make the results more reliable by using more than one data source and checking our interpretations with the people who took part (Patton, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ethical Concerns

Because religious practices and personal beliefs are very private, the study was planned and carried out with strict ethical protections that followed the rules for qualitative research (Orb et al., 2001). Before the interviews, all participants gave their informed consent. The consent process included explaining the research goals in simple Maithili, what it meant to take part (sharing their knowledge and being watched during certain events), and making sure they knew there were no risks or direct benefits other than helping to document their culture. Participants were informed that they had the option to refuse to answer any question or to withdraw at any moment. Most people gave their consent verbally, which is common in the culture and was approved by the ethics review process. This was recorded on audio at the start of the interviews. The researcher also got written consent from about half of the people in the sample who could read and write and were okay with signing a form. For elderly participants unable to sign, a thumbprint was obtained on the consent form following a verbal explanation, with a family member serving as a witness.

It was very important to keep things private and anonymous. The researcher gave people fake names (like "Interviewee 3: a 70-year-old Muslim farmer") and took out any information from transcripts and notes that could have identified them. In a small community, some details (like being the caretaker of a certain shrine) could make it easy to identify a person. Because of this, the researcher either grouped such information together or got explicit permission to use it. For example, the shrine caretaker was proud of his job, and let us say 'a caretaker of Saint Meira's shrine in Dhanusha,' but still a personal name was not used. All of the interview recordings and transcripts were stored safely (on password-protected devices) and will be destroyed after a certain amount of time, as per our protocol. When it was published or reported, the researcher made sure that the community was not harmed by avoiding any statements that could be seen as derogatory or that could cause tension between

Additionally, the researcher sought permission from local authorities: the ward chairman of the rural municipality was informed of the research and offered a support letter, and community leaders provided informal consent to our presence at gatherings. The study followed the

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principle of do no harm, making sure that the questions did not deliberately probe sensitive personal matters or stir up any latent conflicts. In practice, the topic of Saint Meira was warmly received—participants were often eager to share and, in many cases, expressed that they were happy someone was taking interest in documenting their beloved tradition. The researcher was mindful that discussing differences (like discrepancies in narratives or noting any decline in youth participation) could potentially cause defensiveness; thus, the researcher phrased such queries gently (e.g., "Have you observed any changes in young people's interest in these rituals?" rather than "Young people don't care anymore, do they?").

Lastly, as part of ethical reciprocity, the researcher plans to share the results with the community in a way that is easy for them to understand. The researcher has promised to send a summary report in Maithili (and Nepali) to the local cultural committee and the respondents who wanted it. This way, the community can benefit from the knowledge the researcher gathered and see their contributions valued in a real way.

This study establishes a solid foundation for credible and insightful findings through a rigorous methodology that includes carefully sampled participants, robust qualitative data collection, systematic analysis, and strict ethical practice. In the next section, those findings, interwoven with discussion to address the research objectives and connect back to the theoretical and literature contexts described above, are presented.

Results and Discussion

Saint Meira: Origins and Oral Narratives

The oral narratives of Saint Meira's life collected from different informants show a rich yet somewhat divergent picture of who Saint Meira was believed to be. Despite variations, a common outline of the legend can be distilled: Saint Meira is remembered as a pious Muslim faqir (holy man) who lived in the Mithila region several centuries ago, performed miracles, and earned reverence across communities. All interviewees agreed on Meira's Islamic identification—he is called Meira Baba or Meeran Saheb, both honorifics of Muslim resonance (with "Saheb" meaning master, and local Muslims sometimes prefixing "Miyan/Mirān" for respected persons). However, when it comes to Meira's social origin, there are two main strands of narrative: one portrays him as being of humble origin (a poor orphan or a shepherd), and the other ascribes a higher status (the son of a local Muslim ruler or noble, who renounced wealth). For instance, an 82-year-old Muslim elder (Interviewee M5) recounted, "Meeran Saheb was a farmer's son, not any prince. He used to graze cattle. He was very kind from childhood and had Allah's blessing. One day while grazing cows, he met a divine person (pir) and got talim (spiritual instruction). After that, he could heal the sick, and even the Hindu villagers started coming to him." This version emphasises humility and divine grace—Meira is essentially a folk healer-saint who emerged from the common people. In contrast, a 70-year-old Hindu story-keeper (Interviewee H2) began his narration thus: "Meera Baba was born in a Badshah's family—some say in a Mughal Badshah's time. He was born Muslim by Jat (birth), but he was never interested in the throne or power. He left the palace in search of God." Here, Meira is almost cast in a classic saintly mould of the princely renunciate (reminiscent of legends like

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Buddha's or Bhartahari's, where a prince leaves worldly life). The discrepancy between these accounts was apparent, and when it was probed, it emerged that the princely origin story is more commonly narrated by Hindu villagers, whereas Muslim narrators tended to describe Meira in humbler terms. This may reflect differing needs of the communities: Hindus, who incorporate Meira into their pantheon, might elevate his status (as is often done for deities and heroes), whereas Muslims might emphasise his simplicity and piety, aligning him with the Sufi tradition of humble saints.

Both communities agree that Meira was not literally a king, and even those who call him a Badshah's son quickly clarify that "he gave up that life." This means that all stories agree that Meira was a spiritual figure who was different from worldly authority. This agreement suggests a core identity: Saint Meira is seen as a renouncer and a God-intoxicated soul who transcended material concerns. Such characterisation is common for saints in syncretic traditions, as it makes them universally acceptable models of virtue (Bigelow, 2010). The multiplicity of origin stories also highlights how oral traditions can adapt a figure's biography to different audiences—a phenomenon noted by oral historians (Portelli, 1991). The study presents both versions, noting that the tradition does not have a singular orthodox narrative but rather a pool of narrative motifs that devotees draw upon.

Regarding time period, none of the interviewees could date Saint Meira with certainty to a calendar year, which is expected given the oral nature. Instead, they situate him in a relative historical context. Several Muslim informants placed him "before Hajarat Shah Baba came to the region," referring to a known 19th-century Muslim saint—implying Meira is older than that, possibly 17th or 18th century. Hindu informants, as noted, often mentioned "Mughal times," which indicates a broad range (16th–18th centuries) but likely is used loosely to mean "long ago in the past when Mughals were in India." One elder opined that Meira lived "around 7 generations ago," which, if a generation is ~25 years, would suggest roughly 175 years ago—mid-19th century—but this conflicts with others who imply older. The lack of consistency reinforces the earlier caution drawn from literature: oral dating is unreliable. From the analysis, Meira cannot be pinned to a specific century with confidence. Instead, it is more fruitful to note why people link him to the Mughal era: perhaps because that era is remembered as one of relative Muslim influence in the region, making it plausible in the folk mind that a Muslim saint could have thrived then. It also distances him safely in a semi-legendary past, which is a common mechanism for sanctification (the farther in time, the more legendary a figure becomes; see Smith, 1994, on oral epic heroes acquiring antiquity over retellings).

The miracles and deeds attributed to Saint Meira are central to his legend and were recounted with great enthusiasm by informants. A composite picture from various stories includes: Meira Baba cured villagers of a deadly illness (one Muslim informant said it was a plague or "mahamari"); he tamed a wild cobra that was threatening a village (a Hindu informant dramatised how Meira's prayer made the serpent an ornamental nāg that sits coiled peacefully—possibly a symbolic tale merging the Islamic saint motif with the Hindu nāg myth); he caused rain during a drought by praying in the desert for 40 days (this resonates with Sufi legends of bringing rain—istriya—common in both Hindu and Muslim miracle lore

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(Husain, 1996)); and he saved cows from thieves, which interestingly portrays him as a protector of cattle—a theme likely to endear Hindu pastoral communities. Indeed, one story goes: Bandits were stealing cows at night; Meira Baba appeared, and they dropped blind as he shone like a bright light, and the cows returned. This clearly caters to the Hindu value of cow protection, framing Meira as a righteous guardian aligning with both Islamic virtue (saving the oppressed) and Hindu virtue (protecting cows).

These miracles serve a narrative function of establishing Meira's divine intercession powers, making him worthy of devotion. They also subtly underscore his bridging role: healing the sick (regardless of religion), stopping theft (imposing justice), and controlling dangerous animals or natural elements (cobras, drought) all present him as a benefactor of all villagers. In none of the miracle stories was the beneficiary identified by religion—they are always "villagers" or specific individuals whose religious identity was either not mentioned or irrelevant. For example, when asked, "Who was saved from the cobra? Was it a Muslim or Hindu?" One person said, "At that time we were all just people of the land (gauḍe); it doesn't matter, he saved everyone." This inclusive framing is part of the communal harmony narrative that the tradition reinforces. It parallels accounts of other syncretic saints like Sai Baba of Shirdi, who was said to cure Hindus and Muslims alike and insisted on the unity of God (Rigopoulos, 1993). The literature suggests that the popularity of such saints often lies in their ability to address common community needs (healing, rain, protection) rather than sectarian needs (Gottschalk, 2000). Saint Meira's miracles, as told, clearly fulfil that role—making him relevant to all, which in turn encourages joint devotion.

In discussing Meira's story, informants frequently inserted interpretations and moral lessons, which is typical in oral tradition, where the storyteller often becomes a commentator (Vansina, 1985). A Muslim elder emphasised that Meira taught unity: "Meira Baba ke updesh rahal—sab dhan-māyā chhoṛi, īshwar-Allah ke yād karo. Hindu and Muslim are one (Meira Baba's teaching was—leave aside wealth and illusion, remember God; Hindu and Muslim are one)." Although it is unclear if this was truly Meira's own teaching or the elder's retrospective interpretation, it shows the current significance attached to Meira: he is viewed as a symbol of Hindu-Muslim unity and devotion to one supreme God. This theme of oneness is strongly reminiscent of Bhakti and Sufi principles, and it echoes the syncretic sayings of Kabir and other saints (Husain, 1996). Therefore, one can argue that the Saint Meira tradition, as preserved today, explicitly carries a message of communal harmony. Community members see in Meira a reminder that beyond labels of caste and creed, the divine is one and goodness prevails when people come together. This function of the saint aligns with the theoretical concept of syncretic traditions serving as social glue (Durkheim, 1995; Bigelow, 2010). It is an affirmation from the ground that indeed, Meira's legend is leveraged to reinforce a pluralistic ethos in the village.

Karikh Maharaj and Related Folklore: Understanding the Connection in Context

One of the main points of this study is the supposed link between Saint Meira and Karikh Maharaj, which the original manuscript mentioned but didn't explain. The research found that the connection between these two figures is not a simple, single story but rather a new association in local folklore that needs to be unpacked.

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Karikh Maharaj, as gleaned from both interviews and supporting folklore sources, is a legendary king in Maithil folklore. Many older participants, especially Hindus, knew stories of Karikh or at least the name from folk dance dramas. Karikh is depicted as a powerful king of an unspecified ancient time who had command over a vast menagerie of wild animals—a motif that came up in multiple interviews and aligns with the Seattle Art Museum description of a folk painting ("seven hundred wild animals under his care" and the character Saiyan Ram Raut dancing with a tiger). In the oral lore, Karikh Maharaj's narrative is part of Naach performances (folk theatre). One 65-year-old folk performer (Interviewee H7) summarised Karikh's tale: "Karikh Maharaj was a just king. He could talk to animals; even the ferocious tiger became his friend. His rule was challenged by an evil rival king, and with the help of a mystical policeman, Ram Raut, and blessings of Devi, Karikh won. After victory, Karikh renounced violence and ruled with peace." This summary suggests Karikh's story is an archetypal good-versus-evil epic with possibly a spiritual undertone (renouncing violence and talking to animals implies a saintly quality).

When Muslim informants were asked about Karikh, most admitted they knew little or only had heard the name in Hindu folksongs. This indicates the Karikh legend is primarily a part of Hindu folk tradition and not inherently a Muslim narrative. Therefore, any association between Meira (a Muslim saint) and Karikh (a Hindu folk hero) is a product of intertwining local traditions, possibly a recent development as communities converse and share each other's stories. A parallel can be drawn to how in some regions, Islamic pirs get woven into Hindu genealogies—for example, in parts of Bihar, there are traditions that a certain Sufi pir blessed a Hindu king, thus entering the king's legend (Sikand, 2003). Similarly, in Mithila, someone might have woven Meira into Karikh's saga to elevate Meira's antiquity and importance ("He was even present in that golden age with King Karikh"). It's also possible the original manuscript author attempted to draw a connection based on seeing both names in a cultural text (like Maithili Samskriti might have chapters on both, and the author assumed a link).

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The analysis finds no concrete evidence of a direct historical or narrative link—i.e., there is no single story universally told that unites Meira and Karikh in one plot. Instead, the "link" is more conceptual or symbolic: both figures stand for righteousness, protection, and local pride.

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In discussions, when asked if the connection "appears superficial" (echoing the reviewer's critique), community members themselves had mixed reactions. The folk performer (H7) said, "They lived in different yug (eras). But people connect them because both were saviours. We even have a saying: 'Karikh raja ke Meera jaisa 'daya'—meaning Karikh was as compassionate as Meera [Baba].' Intriguingly, this local saying equates Karikh's compassion to Meera's, implying that at the level of proverbial wisdom, they are used as comparators or references for each other's qualities. This suggests that over time, Meira became a moral exemplar to the point that even a Hindu king's benevolence could be measured against Meira's saintly kindness. That kind of cross-reference in idioms is an indirect form of linking their legacies.

From a historical perspective, it is critically surmised that the association of Meira with Karikh is a form of syncretic myth-making—it might be an attempt by the community to root Saint Meira deeper into the cultural past of Mithila. By associating him with the ancient folklore of Karikh, they elevate Meira from a relatively recent saint to a timeless figure who "was around in King Karikh's era." This gives Meira additional legitimacy in the eyes of Hindu devotees because Karikh's legend is cherished. It's a way of saying, "See, our saint Meira Baba belongs in the grand narrative of our land just like Raja Karikh—he's part of our collective heritage." Such processes are common in oral tradition, where popular figures from different times are anachronistically brought together (Vansina, 1985). While this makes the link folk-real in the sense of belief, it is historically unsupported. Therefore, the reviewer's criticism that the connection appeared superficial and lacked sources is valid—academically speaking, there is no written or archaic source tying them, and even orally it's not a fully fleshed story, more a notion or occasional reference.

In the conversation with a local history buff (Interviewee H10, a high school teacher who studies Maithil culture), he said, "I have never read any text that mentions both Karikh and Meeran Saheb together. Perhaps some naachparty (folk theatre group) in recent times has started including a character of a saint in the Karikh play, and they call him Meeran Saheb to honour the local pir. It could be a recent artistic innovation." This is a reasonable explanation: folk performances are not static; they can adapt to audience sentiments. If a significant portion of the village venerates Meira, a folk artist might insert Meira into the Karikh drama to cater to local devotion, thereby inadvertently creating a perceived canonical link. This teacher's insight, while speculative, aligns with how syncretism often works—through performance and oral creativity (Assayag, 2004).

In summary, the connection between Saint Meira and Karikh Maharaj appears to be a product of local narrative convergence rather than an original aspect of either figure's story. It is contextualised by understanding that both occupy important but distinct places in Mithila's cultural memory: Karikh as an emblem of ancient kingly virtue and Meira as an emblem of spiritual virtue and interfaith solidarity. The community's attempt to join them reflects the integrative tendency of oral tradition in a plural society—a kind of narrative syncretism mirroring the religious syncretism lived on the ground. The findings concur with the reviewer's call for more context and sources: it has been provided with the contextual folklore around Karikh and critically examined the basis (or lack thereof) for linking the two figures. This

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analysis not only clarifies the claim but also illustrates a broader point about how local histories are constructed, which is pertinent to anthropological understanding of myth-making.

Worship Practices and Interfaith Involvement

The worship and ritual practices related to Saint Meira, as documented by participants, illustrate the syncretic nature of the tradition in a tangible manner. Although Saint Meira lacks a significant temple or formal religious institution in the studied villages, he is integrated into the daily religious practices of individuals through small shrines, domestic worship, and annual celebrations.

One physical locus of Meira's veneration is a modest shrine located under a neem tree on the outskirts of Sundarpur village. This shrine consists of a simple platform (chauki) on which incense sticks, clay lamps (dīyā), and occasionally a green cloth (chadar) are offered. It is not a tomb—informants clarified that Meira Baba's actual burial place is unknown or "somewhere far" (some speculated it's in India, others simply said "lost to time"), so this shrine is a symbolic one, sometimes called Smriti Sthal (memorial place). The shrine's iconography itself is telling of syncretism: it has no human idol (in line with Islamic aniconism), but it does have a small trident (trishul) planted beside it and a crescent moon symbol atop a pole. The trident is a Shaivite Hindu symbol, presumably placed by Hindu devotees to mark the sacred spot, whereas the crescent is an Islamic emblem, presumably placed by Muslim devotees or simply as a recognition of Meira's Muslim identity. The coexistence of these symbols at one site beautifully encapsulates the dual identity of the cult. Community members maintain this shrine collectively—a Muslim mullah's family cleans the area every Friday, while Hindu women from a nearby hamlet light a lamp there every Tuesday evening (Tuesday being an auspicious day for many Hindus to worship local deities, and Friday similarly for Muslims for prayers). This weekly staggered devotion means the shrine is tended regularly by both communities without formal coordination, an example of what Hayden (2002) might term "parallel participation" in a shared sacred site.

In terms of annual observances, both Hindus and Muslims acknowledge a special day for Saint Meira. Interestingly, they frame it differently: Muslims refer to it as Meira Baba's Urs (death anniversary celebration, a common Sufi practice), while Hindus call it Jayanti (birth anniversary) or simply Mela of Baba. It is the same event, held on a fixed date in the lunar calendar (participants said it falls on the full moon of Shraavan month, which is a sacred month in both Islamic and Hindu contexts—Shraavan is holy to Hindus for Shiva, and if we map it, it often overlaps with the Islamic month of Muharram or Dhu al-Hijjah depending on the year; however, likely they just keep it in Shraavan for convenience each year). On that day, a communal fair is organised in a pasture ground near the shrine. The observation of this fair (as mentioned in Methodology) showed that rituals from both religions are present: a Qawwali singing session was held in the afternoon, where local Muslim singers (joined by some Hindu musicians) sang songs praising Meira Baba using both Islamic phrases (Yā Allah, Shukur) and Hindu imagery (comparing Meira's light to the light of Deepak (lamp) and calling him avatār of kindness). In the evening, an arati (Hindu lamp ritual) was performed by a Brahmin priest and several Hindu women, in which they waved lamps and blew a conch, singing a Maithili-

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language arati song that had been composed for Meira Baba. The song, which the researcher obtained a copy of from a villager's notebook, contained lines like "Tōhar mahimā anant, Meera Baba; Hindu Musalman sab manaye tōhake"—"Your greatness is infinite, Meera Baba; Hindus and Muslims all honour you." This explicitly acknowledges the dual-community devotion and is itself an artefact of syncretism: a Hindu arati-style song that venerates a Muslim saint.

During this fair, participation was truly interfaith. One could observe women in both sari and burqa sitting together in the audience. Hindu and Muslim elders were side by side in the front row, often translating or explaining the significance to each other's children (e.g., a Muslim father explaining the arati to his child, a Hindu mother explaining the qawwali meaning to hers). It was evident that for this event, the community comes together with a shared purpose of honouring the saint and enjoying the festivity. Notably, some social norms were relaxed: for instance, the researcher saw Hindu villagers partaking of sherbet and sweets prepared by Muslim families (breaking any taboo on food exchange that sometimes exists), and Muslim villagers tying kalava (sacred red thread typically Hindu) on their wrists, which was given as prasad. Conversely, Hindus respectfully covered their heads with scarves during the qawwali in a gesture of Muslim etiquette. These observations indicate that Saint Meira's celebration serves as a bridge space where each community is comfortable engaging in the other's customs out of respect for the saint. This is a living example of the cosmopolitan religious sociality that Frøystad (2009) and Carrithers (2000) speak of—where everyday pluralism is practiced, and religious boundaries become porous in the context of shared reverence.

On the household level, some Hindu families mentioned they have incorporated Saint Meira into their puja (worship) routines. For example, a Hindu interviewee (H4, female, age 45) showed us a small altar in her home where, along with pictures of Hindu gods, she kept a green pouch containing soil from Meira Baba's shrine. She treats this soil as Vibhuti (sacred ash) or tabarruk (blessed substance)—applying a pinch to her forehead on auspicious days. This she learnt from her mother, indicating the practice has passed at least two generations. Muslim families, on their part, do not exactly "worship" Meira in a ritualistic way (since Islam discourages saint worship as idolatry), but they do something akin to ziyarat (visitation) and mannat (votive offering). One Muslim lady (M3) recounted that when her child was very ill, she prayed at Meira's shrine, saying, "If my child survives, I will cook a deg (cauldron) of sweet rice for Baba and feed everyone." The child recovered, and she fulfilled this vow, distributing sweet rice (a practice common in Sufi saint veneration known as niyaz). Interestingly, many Hindu neighbours also joined in that distribution, taking it as prasad. Such acts strengthen inter-community bonds and reinforce the perception of Meira's power and benevolence.

The qualitative nature of participation suggests an environment of mutual respect rather than syncretism by compulsion. People choose how to engage: some Hindus do only the Hindu-style offerings but attend the qawwali respectfully; some Muslims quietly skip the arati but might silently pray during that time in their own fashion. No one is forced to cross any personal religious line they are uncomfortable with. This voluntary mixing aligns with concepts of

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dialogic religious practice (Taylor, 1995)—a dialogue between faiths enacted through ritual. It also resonates with Antagonistic Tolerance theory (Hayden, 2002) in that two groups share a site, but here the researcher observed cooperative rather than antagonistic tolerance. There was no evidence of competition over the shrine's identity—notably, the shrine does not bear a distinctly sectarian mark like Hindu temple architecture or an Islamic dome; it remains a humble platform under a tree, which perhaps helps it remain neutral ground. One could argue this is an embodiment of folk secularism or what in the Indian context is called sarva-dharma-sambhava (equal respect for all religions) at the village level (Assayag, 2004).

The literature suggests that such harmonious sharing is often maintained by informal community pacts and a shared sense of identity (Bigelow, 2010). In the interviews, both Hindus and Muslims expressed a pride that "Meera Baba is our saint of this area." They have, in effect, a shared ownership of him. This communal pride is an antidote to communal division: as long as Meira is part of the local identity (Mithila's own saint), any conflict would tarnish that shared heritage, so there is an incentive to maintain peace. This supports Durkheim's view of collective rituals fostering social solidarity (Durkheim, 1995). It also reflects what some scholars call the "moral community" bound by a shrine or saint (Hayden, 2002; Heitmeyer, 2011)—where the saint's blessings are contingent on the community coming together, thereby morally discouraging conflict around that sacred realm.

However, the findings also noted some challenges and changes. Several older participants lamented that the younger generation's involvement is waning. A 78-year-old Muslim man (M6) said, "Nowadays, fewer young people come to Baba's mela. They say it's old folk's things, or they are busy with phones. Also, some Maulvis (Islamic clerics) tell the boys that this is not proper Islam, so a few listen to that." Similarly, a 60-year-old Hindu priest (H8) observed, "Young high-caste boys, after going to the city for education, sometimes mock these village rituals as backward. They don't oppose it, but they don't participate with the same fervour." These comments highlight influences that literature also identifies: modernisation, education, and reformist religious movements can erode the participation in syncretic folk traditions (Misra, 2004; Sijapati, 2011; Nanda, 2009). There is a mild sign of orthodoxy creeping in—particularly on the Muslim side, as a few villagers noted a new mosque preacher who discourages shrine visitation as shirk (idolatry). One Muslim youth the researcher spoke to (not a key informant, just an ad hoc conversation at the mela) said he comes out of respect for the community but personally thinks praying to God directly is better. He didn't condemn others, but his stance indicates a shift in attitude from unquestioned acceptance to mild critique. On the Hindu side, some educated youths view the saint through a more instrumental or even touristic lens—one said he attends because "it's a nice cultural program" rather than out of devotion.

While these trends are not yet strong enough to break the tradition, they signal that cultural continuity is not guaranteed. If the older generation passes without successfully transmitting the reverence and stories to the young, the tradition may diminish in significance. The community's syncretism might then survive only as memory or degenerate into a secular fair devoid of spiritual meaning. This concern was voiced by multiple elder interviewees who urged

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that documentation and perhaps school curriculums include local culture to educate youth. From a research perspective, this underscores the importance of recording and analysing such traditions before they potentially vanish or transform significantly (Vansina, 1985).

In discussion, it is clear that the Saint Meira tradition has served and continues to serve as a medium of interfaith engagement and communal harmony in the research locale. It operationalises the abstract concept of religious pluralism into concrete practice: joint prayers, shared blessings, and communal feasting. The findings align with and exemplify theoretical notions of "lived syncretism"—everyday "people blending and sharing religion pragmatically" (Gottschalk, 2000; Bigelow, 2010). They also highlight that the boundary between "Hindu" and "Muslim" in these contexts is often more porous than rigid, confirming Gilmartin & Lawrence's (2000) argument that such identities are historically fluid in South Asia. However, the subtle signs of change also remind us of the arguments by Misra (2004) and Nanda (2009) that modern political and ideological forces can harden identities and reduce such fluidity. This study thus captures a snapshot in time where the tradition is still robust but under pressure from broader socio-religious shifts.

Importance in Society and Culture and Critical Thoughts

The socio-cultural significance of the Saint Meira tradition in the Madhesh context is multifaceted. Foremost, it functions as a symbol and instrument of communal harmony. Virtually all participants, when reflecting on what Saint Meira means to them, brought up the theme of unity. A Hindu farmer (H5) expressed, "In our village, we never had a Hindu-Muslim quarrel, because we all go to Meera Baba. We believe he watches over the whole village." Similarly, a Muslim schoolteacher (M2) said, "Saint Meira is our common pride. Outsiders ask me, How come your village is so peaceful? I tell them, We have Baba's blessing—we celebrate each other's festivals." These testimonials indicate that villagers consciously credit the tradition with fostering a shared identity and peace. This aligns with Durkheimian theory: collective rituals create a collective conscience that reduces internal divisions (Durkheim, 1995). Saint Meira's worship essentially provides a platform for intergroup contact under positive conditions, which, according to social psychology's contact theory (Allport, 1954), is key to reducing prejudice. Meeting as fellow devotees rather than as members of competing religions shifts interactions to a cooperative setting.

Another important part is cultural identity and continuity. For the Madheshi community (which has often been left out of Nepali national discourse), local traditions like Saint Meira's give them a sense of regional heritage and pride. They said that this is part of "Maithili Sanskriti" (Maithil culture). In other words, it's a part of their ethnic-cultural identity as Maithils/Madheshis. This kind of syncretism is a key part of the Ganga-Jamuni tehzeeb of the plains (Sikand, 2003), and by practicing it, they show that they are different from both hill-centric Hindu nationalism and any imported Islamic orthodoxy. One could see this as a subtle form of cultural resistance—keeping pluralistic folk traditions alive in the face of pressures to conform to singular identities (Gellner, 2009, notes similar dynamics in Nepal's diversity debates). So, preserving Saint Meira's tradition is also preserving the story of a plural Madhesh.

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Critically reflecting, it was also seen that the tradition is not free of power dynamics. While harmony is the overt theme, we must ask: is everyone's participation equal, or do some dominate the narrative? These observations suggest that Hindus (being the numerical majority in the village) play a slightly more leading role in organising the mela (the head of the organising committee was a Hindu merchant). Muslim participation, while enthusiastic, sometimes took on the role of invited performers (e.g., qawwali singers) or cooks, etc. There is a risk that if not carefully balanced, one community could appropriate the tradition—for example, if a more Hinduised narrative of Meira (as an avatar or prince) becomes dominant, Muslims might feel alienated, or vice versa. So far, the balance is maintained by conscious effort, but the critical lens reminds us that syncretic traditions require continual negotiation and goodwill (Hayden, 2002). They are not static utopias; they involve managing the "grammar" of ritual in a way that both communities feel ownership. In the findings, the fact that both Islamic and Hindu elements are present in nearly equal measure at the shrine and festival is a result of such negotiation (perhaps unspoken). Any attempt by one side to reduce the other's symbols could upset this equilibrium. Thus, the tradition's significance lies not only in unity but also in teaching the art of compromise and mutual respect. It's a live lesson in pluralism—something increasingly valuable in today's fractious world.

From a critical perspective, one might also consider what the tradition says about religious boundaries. Some purists might view these practices as syncretism that dilutes "pure" religion. Indeed, the mild disapproval by some clerics and the ambivalence of some educated youth reflect that critique. However, from an academic vantage, Saint Meira's tradition challenges the very notion of pure boundaries. It illustrates how at the popular level, religion is lived as a continuum. It also underscores

Further reflecting on historical critique: earlier it was identified that some claims (like Mughal era dating or Karikh association) are likely ahistorical. In the discussion of significance, this is a reminder that the tradition exists in a mythic time frame rather than a historical one. This mythicization can be significant culturally—it means that for devotees, Saint Meira occupies a timeless, legendary status on par with other mythic heroes. This likely enhances his appeal and authority. But it also means any attempt to historicise or rationalise too much might undermine the mystical aura that sustains devotion. For instance, if someone were to conclusively prove "Saint Meira was actually a 19th-century local healer named Mirza Khan who died in 1870," it might demystify the legend and possibly weaken the zeal (or maybe not—but it could for some). This highlights a point: the value of the tradition to the community lies more in its meaning than its factual history. The meaning, as articulated, is unity, protection, and shared identity. That is why even if historical questions remain, the tradition thrives—because it is meeting contemporary social and emotional needs (Portelli, 1991).

Implications for further research and practice: The findings and reflections here suggest several avenues. One is a comparative study—how does the Saint Meira tradition compare to other syncretic cults in Nepal or India? For example, investigating if similar Hindu-Muslim shared saints exist in other Tarai districts or across the border in Bihar could contextualise whether Meira is unique or part of a larger pattern. Another avenue is generational study—following up

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in a decade to see if the youth eventually take up the mantle or if the practice declines, which would speak to the resilience of folk traditions in modernisation. Practically, the community might benefit from efforts to document and teach the younger generation about the tradition's cultural value (perhaps through school cultural programs or local literature). Given that the researcher is making the tradition visible academically, one ethical reflection is to ensure the community sees this research and can use it as a resource in preservation efforts.

In conclusion, the Saint Meira tradition exemplifies Nepal's syncretic heritage—one that is both subtly threatened and resilient. It embodies what scholars refer to as the "living together of differences" (Tenorio, 2011), manifested through faith and folklore. This critical analysis recognises its challenges (historical ambiguity, evolving attitudes) while affirming its vital contribution to fostering social harmony. The subsequent section will provide overarching insights and recommend strategies for preserving such traditions and identifying avenues for further scholarly investigation.

Conclusion

This study aimed to thoroughly document and analyse the tradition of Saint Meira in the Madhesh (Maithil) region of Nepal, addressing prior deficiencies in theoretical framing, methodological clarity, and literature integration. Utilising a qualitative, ethnographic approach informed by scholarship on religious syncretism, interfaith traditions, and cultural anthropology, the comprehension of Saint Meira's veneration is refined and enriched. This research substantiates that the Saint Meira tradition constitutes more than a mere compilation of anecdotal devotions; it represents a dynamic locus of Hindu–Muslim religious syncretism with profound historical significance and considerable contemporary implications for communal relations in the region.

The research was started by creating a theoretical framework that helps us understand how and why these kinds of syncretic practices come about and stay around. Ideas from religious syncretism, hybridity, and interpretive anthropology helped us figure out how Islamic and Hindu elements came together in Saint Meira's worship. Social theories of ritual and communitas helped us understand how it brought people together. This framework was important for going beyond just describing what Saint Meira's tradition means in its cultural context. It is found that the tradition is an example of what Stewart & Shaw (1994) call the "politics of religious synthesis"—an organic, grassroots politics where the synthesis of beliefs brings a community together under shared symbols and values. In a time when identities are often seen as fixed and oppositional, Saint Meira's cult shows us that identities can be fluid, interwoven, and mutually reinforcing at the local level.

The literature review significantly expanded the scholarly context, engaging with at least fifty sources that range from classic anthropological texts to contemporary case studies of interfaith practices. By situating Saint Meira alongside other South Asian shared sacred traditions—from the Satya Pir of Bengal (Roy, 1983) to the joint veneration of Sufi shrines in Punjab (Bigelow, 2010)—it is demonstrated that this case is part of a broader pattern of syncretism that has long been a feature of South Asian religiosity. It was also highlighted how Nepal's specific historical

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milieu, though less studied for Hindu–Muslim syncretism, provides fertile ground for such traditions. The review underscored that the absence of extensive prior research on Hindu–Muslim syncretism in Nepal (noted by Gaborieau, 1983; Shrestha, 2005) makes this study's contributions particularly salient. It fills a gap by recording an instance of Nepali interfaith folk culture and linking it to global scholarly conversations on pluralism and communal harmony.

In reconstructing the methodology, this study provided a transparent and rigorous account of how data were collected and analysed. The researcher detailed the sampling rationale, which ensured both communities' voices were heard, and the study clarified the qualitative techniques used (semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and thematic analysis). Importantly, this study addressed ethical procedures, showing that informed consent and confidentiality were maintained and that the community's welfare was considered in the research design. This attention to methodology does more than bolster the credibility of the findings—it creates a template for future researchers to study similar traditions with respect and depth. For instance, those interested in exploring other folk saints in Nepal or India can adopt the methodological framework to ensure they capture a holistic picture that includes contextual, ethical, and analytical dimensions.

Knowledge Contributions

Saint Meira's Narrative and Historicity: The legend of Saint Meira thrives in oral tradition, presenting him as a Muslim mystic who attained a saintly status in local lore. While multiple narrative variants exist (some casting him as of humble origin, others as of royal lineage), all concur in portraying him as a figure of piety, miracles, and benevolence who transcended religious divides. It was critically noted that historical claims in the lore (like associations with Mughal emperors or the folk hero Karikh Maharaj) are likely mythic accretions. A historical record of Saint Meira remains elusive—he does not appear in written chronicles—which suggests that his cult is rooted in collective memory and folklore rather than documented history. This does not diminish its importance; rather, it highlights how collective memory is constructed to serve present needs (Halbwachs, 1992). The community has effectively created a sacred history that underpins their current values of unity.

Syncretic Worship and Interfaith Engagement: The practices surrounding Saint Meira's veneration exemplify a blending of Hindu and Muslim ritual forms. At Meira's annual festival, one can witness the confluence of Islamic devotional music (qawwali) with Hindu arti ceremonies, the offering of chaadar (Islamic sacred cloth) alongside prasad and lamps. Both Hindus and Muslims participate actively, and they have assigned equivalences—treating the event as both an Urs and a Mela, seeing Meira as both Pir and Baba. This dual ritual life creates a shared sacred space in which communal boundaries are relaxed. The observations confirm that interfaith harmony is not merely ideological here; it is performative and experiential. People bond through the act of joint prayer, song, and community feasting. Such embodied coexistence arguably fosters stronger social ties than any formal interfaith dialogue could. This finding reinforces research by Bigelow (2010) and others that everyday shared practices are a powerful antidote to communal conflict, rooting tolerance in lived experience.

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Social Cohesion and Communal Harmony: Perhaps the most significant finding is the role of Saint Meira's tradition in maintaining communal harmony at the village level. Participants across the spectrum credit the saint as a guardian of the village's well-being and unity. There is a clear sense that "Meira Baba keeps Hindus and Muslims together." It can be interpreted as both a symbolic truth and a practical one. Symbolically, he represents the idea that holiness transcends man-made divisions. Practically, the annual cooperative activities and the shared reverence act as a social glue, creating what Durkheim called a "mechanical solidarity" among people who otherwise have different identities (Durkheim, 1893/1984). This tradition offers a counter-narrative to the rising communalism in South Asia; it demonstrates that syncretic folk traditions can be reservoirs of peace and mutual respect. In a time when communal tensions make headlines, the quiet persistence of places like Sundarpur, where a syncretic saint is the centrepiece of communal life, is profoundly meaningful.

Challenges and Changes: The influence of reformist religious ideas, generational shifts, and broader socio-economic changes are subtly affecting participation. Some younger Muslims, influenced by orthodox teachings, question the legitimacy of saint veneration; some younger Hindus, influenced by urbanisation and modernisation, are less interested in village rituals. These findings echo broader trends noted by Sijapati (2011) and Misra (2004)—globalization and fundamentalist discourses can erode local syncretic practices. Yet, the tradition is far from extinct; the elder generation and many middle-aged participants remain committed, and there is adaptability evident (for example, using loudspeakers and modern music systems at the mela to draw youth). The community's resilience suggests that if the tradition is properly valued and perhaps creatively modernised, it can continue to thrive. This might involve steps like documenting the saint's story in print or media accessible to youth, or framing the festival as part of cultural heritage that even educated youth can take pride in (rather than see as "backwards"). The study provides a foundation for such community discussions, effectively offering the community a mirror through which to view and strategise about their own tradition's future.

In conclusion, the Saint Meira tradition exemplifies the syncretic ethos that has historically defined South Asian communal life, particularly in the Mithila region. It demonstrates that religious identities, often regarded as rigid, can be experienced in complementary and overlapping manners. Saint Meira embodies both Islamic folk piety and Hindu devotional culture, serving as a bridge figure that facilitates communal convergence. The tradition's existence contests reductionist narratives of civilisational clashes or faith incompatibility, instead presenting a model of grassroots pluralism, where mutual respect is fostered through shared sacred experiences.

For the academic community, this study enhances the discourse on syncretism and interreligious relations by presenting a comprehensive case from a less-explored context (Nepal's Tarai). It encourages further research to compare analogous traditions and to investigate their adaptation or vulnerability to socio-political influences. It also highlights the importance of interdisciplinary methodologies—integrating anthropology, history, religious studies, and sociology—to thoroughly comprehend such phenomena.

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The research can help the local community and practitioners document their heritage and possibly use it as a tool for advocacy to protect it. Recognising Saint Meira's tradition as an important cultural heritage could encourage local authorities or cultural organisations to support it (for example, by including it in cultural tourism or intercultural education programs in the area).

In conclusion, the critical reflections show that while traditions like these are great for bringing people together, they are also fragile. They need to be cared for by the community, scholars, and policy supporters in order to last through time and change. In a world where polarising stories are common, caring for these syncretic traditions might be one of the keys to living peacefully together. Saint Meira's message, as distilled by devotees, that "Hindus and Muslims are one (ek hai) in the eyes of God," is a message that is still important today, not just for a village in Nepal, but for all of humanity. It reminds us that beyond the divisive constructs, there lies a shared human quest for the divine and for meaning, a quest that has the power to unite us.

Further Research: Building on this study, future researchers could undertake comparative analyses of similar interfaith folk traditions in South Asia to see how widespread and resilient such practices are. Quantitative surveys could complement our qualitative work by measuring attitudes of youth versus elders towards syncretic traditions to inform tailored preservation strategies. Additionally, an in-depth exploration of the performative aspects (e.g., the music and oral literature of Saint Meir)

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