

# URBAN HERITAGE IN DIVIDED CITIES

Contested Pasts

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First published 2020

ISBN: 9781138624863 (hbk)

ISBN: 9781138624870 (pbk)

ISBN: 9780429460388 (ebk)

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in Amritsar, India

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DOI 10.4324/9780429460388-10

The funder for this chapter is Helena Cermeño Mediavilla

 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

# 8

## HERITAGE OF INCLUSION OR EXCLUSION?

### Contested claims and access to housing in Amritsar, India<sup>1</sup>

*Helena Cermeño*

#### Introduction

When the British annexed the province of Punjab in 1849, Muslims represented the majority of the population of the city of Amritsar. According to the Census Report of 1881 (Government of Punjab 2000 [1883–1884]), two-fifths of the whole population of Amritsar were Muslims, while Hindus and Sikhs represented 34 and 20 per cent respectively. Nearly 100 years later, and shortly before the 1947 independence from British rule, the Muslim community had increased to almost half of the population of the city (Talbot 2006, 2007; Talbot and Singh 2009). In 1947, as the British rule ended in South Asia, the Radcliffe Line<sup>2</sup> set a new border between what emerged as the new nation states of India and Pakistan. It cut across Punjab province, dividing it between the two countries. Amritsar, once at the heart of the province, became all of the sudden a border city in India.<sup>3</sup> The consequent mass migrations depleted Amritsar of its Muslim community, which dropped from 49 to 0.52 per cent between 1949 and 1951 (Talbot 2007), so much so, that still today the Muslim population of Amritsar represents less than 1 per cent (Government of India 2011). The abandonment of properties, as a consequence of large-scale migrations, made debates over housing and heritage a major concern on both sides of the border. Despite rioting and violence during Partition, not all Muslim heritage in Amritsar underwent destruction. Much of it was appropriated, preserved and infused with new meanings and purposes by the incoming Sikh and Hindu communities.

In this chapter I focus on the locality of Takia Fateh Shah Bukhari in the city of Amritsar and the historic Gobindgarh Military Fort that stands next to it, to explore an ongoing process of contestation over urban land between a powerful state institution (i.e. the Indian Army) and a marginalised community of Balmikis (a Hindu Scheduled Caste). Until Partition, and before it became home to the

Balmiki community, Takia Fateh Shah had been the site of a Muslim graveyard and of seven Sufi *takias*. Also often named as *dargah*, the term *takia* refers to the built shrine or grave of a *pir*, a Muslim Sufi saint. These *takias*, which constitute a remnant of the (officially undesignated) religious Muslim heritage, have been preserved and maintained over the years by the new residents of Takia Fateh Shah. The result is a residential locality populated by a Hindu Balmiki community that incorporates and appropriates – territorially and spiritually – the Muslim heritage. During the years following Independence, and around the same time that low-caste immigrants sought refuge in Takia Fateh Shah, the Indian army progressively expanded its landholdings beyond its original encampment centred on a military enclave that included the Gobindgarh Fort and its surroundings. The fort, standing around 300 meters away from the *takias*, is historically significant for the Sikh community and recently has been designated as part of the national heritage and undergone refurbishment to become a tourist attraction. The Indian army, having handed over the fort to the City of Amritsar ten years earlier, still keeps their garrison in the areas around the fort and claims the Takia Fateh Shah neighbourhood as they seek to extend their garrison. Balmikis, having stayed in the locality since Partition, are unwilling to give up their claim, which is based not on property rights (which they don't have) but on their presence in, and sustained access to, the land over the decades.

Against this backdrop, in this chapter I explore how the two heritage sites – the *takias* and the fort with its adjacent areas – play a role in the demarcation of urban territories between two groups of differentiated caste and social status: the Balmiki community and the Indian army. I investigate how the contest over these two sites contributes in shaping the divergent claims over land by the Balmikis and the army. By unpacking the socio-spatial politics around these contested heritage sites, I show how people, communities and institutions make claims to certain places and spaces that are understood or designated as heritage. I also explore who assigns such designations and on what basis, and ultimately who stands to gain or lose as a consequence of such definitional politics. For that purpose, I draw on extensive fieldwork and empirical data collected in 2014–15 in the locality of Takia Fateh Shah. Secondary data included documents and reports from the different actors involved, as well as online and newspaper clips on the conflict. The empirical material included structured and in-depth interviews with residents of Takia Fateh Shah and local political representatives as well as ethnographic field notes.<sup>4</sup> In the analysis of the case study it will become clear that urban heritage plays a significant role in mediating between the contesting parties, but also, paradoxically, in producing sociopolitical conflict and socio-spatial divisions.

### **Conceptual premises: From critical heritage studies to access theory**

Understanding the economic, political and social relations that weave in, and through, and constitute heritage is crucial to thinking about how we analyse

it: as lived experience, as political relations, as an expression of modernity or as a cultural economy.

– Tim Winter (2013: 541)

In line with Winter (2013) and Smith (2004; 2006), the concept of urban heritage in this chapter is considered through the perspective of critical heritage studies wherein heritage is thought about as going beyond the scientific materialism of heritage conservation practice and beyond the limits of the built architectural site. I am not concerned with the details of the material conservation processes, neither of the Gobindgarh Fort nor the *takias* in the Takia Fateh Shah settlement but with the sociopolitical complexities entangled within and around them. Because critical thinking in urban and heritage studies has a clear moral and ideological grounding, adopting a critical perspective to the study of heritage entails politicising the debate on what constitutes heritage and asking who ultimately benefits from designating something as such. For this, I call for a broader understanding of heritage beyond the managerial perspective of heritage categorisation and conservation. Such a focus entails unveiling heritage sites as sites of conflict and contestation subject to unequal power relations and enables explorations of heritage sites as artefacts that are instrumental in mediating conflict and socio-spatial exclusions.

Besides being a contested land between the Balmiki community and the army, Takia Fateh Shah is both a residential area for the Balmikis and a(n) (undesigned) Muslim heritage site. This brings both heritage and the question of housing to the forefront in this case study. How people access housing is often framed and studied from the perspective of property rights. But this ‘rights approach’ often fails to provide a comprehensive view of how in contexts in which people lack property rights, access to urban resources (i.e. housing and services) is still negotiated and ultimately how everyday urbanism is (re)produced, lived and contested. While acquiring rights to resources assumes having certain claims recognised by a formal institutional framework through some kind of agreement connecting property and (legal) authority, other forms of access and claim-making are not legitimised the same way (Sikor and Lund 2009). There are grey zones, such as in Takia Fateh Shah, in which individuals and institutions, in the absence of property rights have the ability to access resources and make claims over the land.

My theoretical premises are therefore based on the concept of ‘access’, defined by Ribot and Peluso (2003: 153; italics in original) as ‘the *ability* to derive benefits from things, broadening from property’s classical definition as the *right* to benefit from things’. Drawing on this formulation, I refer to ‘access’ to housing as the ability of residents of Takia Fateh Shah to benefit from housing: their ability to acquire land, purchase or construct a house in Takia Fateh Shah and maintain and improve it over the years. At the same time ‘access to land’, I argue, is directly intertwined in this case study with ‘access to heritage’. The ability of individuals (i.e. residents) or institutions (i.e. the army) to make and sustain their claims over the land of Takia Fateh Shah is influenced by the material and immaterial benefits they derive from the Muslim heritage site and the Gobindgarh Fort respectively. In line with

Ribot and Peluso, I argue that these abilities are influenced by the power relations between the different actors, the Balmiki community and the army, and that these relational powers are shaped by (power) resources, that is, assets or mechanisms such as authority, legitimacy and social status.

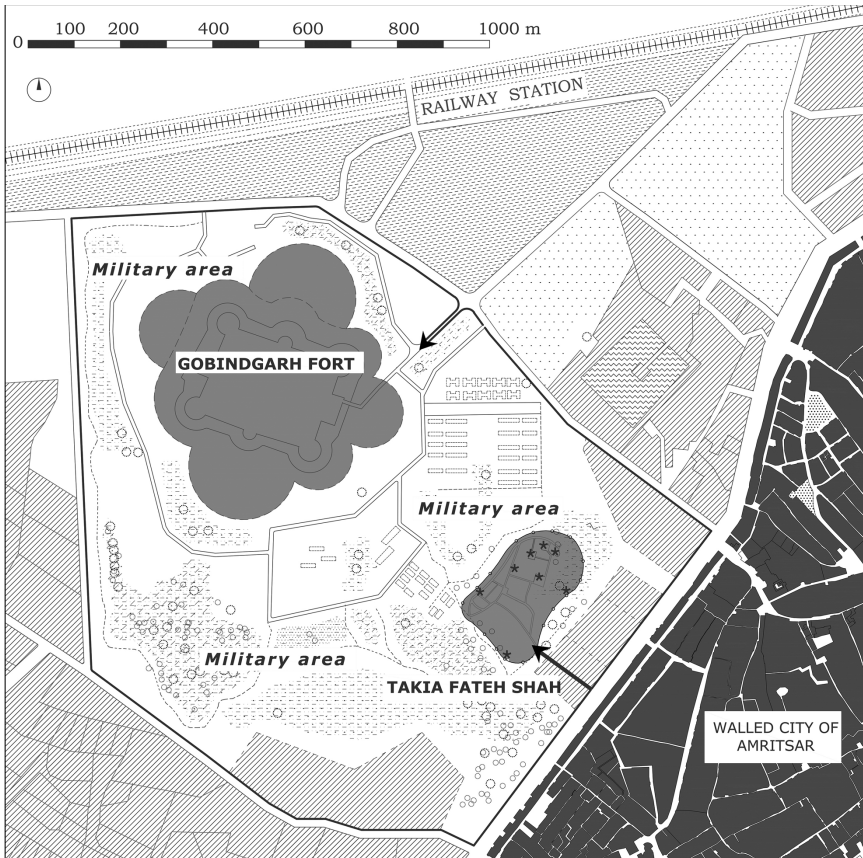
From a critical heritage studies perspective, the underlying assumption here is that access to both heritage sites, the Sufi *takias* on the one hand and the Gobindgarh Fort on the other, is based on unequal power relations and therefore contributes differently to facilitate or constrain residents' ability to make claims over the land and access a living space in Takia Fateh Shah. The residential locality, entangled with the two heritage sites, is seen as a site of conflict and contestation where a bundle of powers (resources) of both contesting parties manifest in the everyday practices as the two make claims on the same land. Hence the focus of exploration here is on the material and discursive practices of the residents of Takia Fateh Shah and the army respectively and the power relations underlying these practices.

### Access to housing and (un)designated heritage sites

Takia Fateh Shah Bukhari is situated in the vicinity of the Gobindgarh Fort heritage site, outside (what was once) the western wall of the fortification of the old city of Amritsar, and between the remnants of Lohrgarh and Beri Gates (Figure 8.1).

Officially, Takia Fateh Shah Bukhari has been called Rajiv Nagar for over three decades, but residents and neighbours still refer to the locality by its old name.<sup>5</sup> The locality nowadays is home to a community comprising different Scheduled Castes, the majority of whom are Balmikis, a low-caste Hindu community. A plaque made of concrete stands at the entrance to the locality, informing about the location of the Balmiki political representatives in the area, and also revealing the social fabric of the settlement to any potential visitor. Despite the de jure abolition of the caste system, social marginalisation of lower castes remains evident, for instance when visitors (i.e. high-caste Hindus) refuse to enter a locality.<sup>6</sup> Further telling is the text inscribed on another plaque: 'This land is property of Govt. of India (Ministry of Defence). Any act of encroachment/trespassing will draw legal action'. The unwelcoming message is reinforced by barbed wire laid down by the army, which fences off the Takia Fateh Shah except for a single entrance alley to the locality. When entering the paved lane of the seemingly unruffled settlement, one leaves behind the high density and hustle and bustle of the neighbouring colonies and the Walled City of Amritsar.<sup>7</sup> Takia Fateh Shah's environs appear comparatively greener and quaint. Here about 150 houses encompass the residential area of the Hindu residents: One- and two-storey brick houses have appeared here over the past decades and filled the spaces along and between the Muslim shrines.

Interviews with local representatives and residents of Takia Fateh Shah shed light on the origin of the hybridisation between the houses and the *takias*. Despite the progressive construction of Hindu houses in the locality since 1947, and the virtual absence of a Muslim community in the Takia Fateh Shah and the neighbouring areas, in the 1971 Collector's Registration Records presented by the interviewees



**FIGURE 8.1** A particular urban setting: Houses and takias intertwined  
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from the locality, the area was still designated as *Eidgah*. The term is used in South Asian Islamic culture for the open-air enclosures usually outside the city (or at the outskirts) reserved for Islamic prayer offered in the morning of Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha celebrations.<sup>8</sup> These records register as well the existence of the seven Sufi *takias* (i.e. shrines and tombs of Sufi saints – dargahs) and a masjid (mosque); among them are *Takia Fateh Shah Bukhari*<sup>9</sup> (which gives the name to the whole settlement), *Takia Karamdin*, *Takia Noorshah*, *Takia Sheikh Sahib*, *Takia Chanan Shah* and *Takia Umaridin*. These records show that despite hosting a large number of houses already in 1971, the locality was officially still considered a ‘Muslim property’.

In 1947, over the course of only a few months, the mayhem of the Partition and destructive rioting damaged nearly 10,000 dwellings all over the city (Talbot 2006). The Muslim properties that were not destroyed and were left vacant were allotted to, or were encroached on by, incoming Hindu and Sikh migrants from Pakistan. By the end of 1947, the first incoming refugees<sup>10</sup> in the Takia Fateh Shah

locality sought refuge in the mosque and the few houses surrounding the graveyard. Older residents of the Balmiki community who were interviewed, recalled not having dared to occupy vacant houses in better-off neighbourhoods, fearing to be evicted.<sup>11</sup> Hence they moved first to Takia Fateh Shah's graveyard, a perceived marginal location in the city, but eventually, safer due to the fuzziness around the notions of property rights this place could afford them. Like other Muslim religious properties such as masjids (mosques), *kabristans* (graveyards) and dargahs, the graveyard of Takia Fateh Shah and its *takias* were then – and still remain – under the administration of a statutory body, the Punjab Wakf Board. The term *wakf* – *awkf* or *awqaf* in the plural – refers to a customary institution that is found in countries of Muslim tradition. Throughout history, *awqaf* have emerged as a philanthropic mechanism for the Muslim community and have been an instrument of public and social policy. *Awqaf* have traditionally not only administered religious heritage such as the *takias* in Takia Fateh Shah, but they also aimed originally at providing land or housing to needy Muslims (Ottimofiore 2012; Sait and Lim 2006).<sup>12</sup>

Over the first years after Partition, the number of migrants in Takia Fateh Shah increased and progressively the construction of *kucca* houses (made of unstable materials – often mud constructions) developed in the graveyard, in and around the *takias*. The *takias* (i.e. shrines and graves) were preserved, and the Muslim heritage in Takia Fateh Shah was in this way incorporated into the homes, public spaces and everyday life of the new Hindu residents of the area. Although it might seem counterintuitive that Muslim heritage in Takia Fateh Shah was not destroyed at the time of Partition, one of the reasons for its preservation lies within the spiritual and religious syncretism that characterises popular life in Punjab. Traditionally this manifested in syncretic practices at Sufi shrines and in participation in intercommunal processions and festivals (Talbot 2006). As Bigelow puts it: 'In the two generations since 1947 in many places in [today's Indian] Punjab the long heritage of Muslim culture is only perceptible in the form of converted buildings and in the ongoing traditions of the dargahs' (Bigelow 2004: 323). Takia Fateh Shah is one example where these syncretic religious practices at Muslim Sufi shrines remain in practice among Sikhs and Hindus alike (Figure 8.2). Although this is not so uncommon in Punjab today, what makes Takia Fateh Shah such a unique case is the entanglements of houses and public spaces with the existing shrines and the use of heritage to support residents' claims over the land and access to housing.

The practices through which residents in Takia Fateh Shah have ensured access to housing and attempted to improve living space in the locality have shifted over the years. After the first migrants settled here and the subsequent construction of houses, there were a (few) reported lease agreements with the Punjab Wakf Board.<sup>13</sup> The provision of public services (i.e. water supply and improvement of sewage and drainage) by the government, which was initiated as part of a slum improvement programme, encouraged a second wave of incomers in the 1990s – most of them from the congested neighbourhoods within the walled city and from other Balmiki communities. Many informally purchased land or houses from earlier residents when they moved to Takia Fateh Shah, without necessarily informing the Punjab Wakf Board.





FIGURE 8.2 Shrine of Takia Fateh Shah Bukhari

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Over the years, the practices of Takia Fateh Shah's residents pertaining to the maintenance and control of living spaces have become strongly entwined with the preservation and appropriation of the *takias*. The development and improvement of the houses from *kucca* to *pucca* (stable, made of bricks and concrete) constructions has gone hand in hand with the conservation and material maintenance of the *takias* (i.e. shrines and graves) and the revival of the symbols surrounding the Sufi saints. Stirred by a spiritual motivation, but also as a way of legitimising their possession of land and houses in Takia Fateh Shah, some residents have become self-proclaimed caretakers of the different shrines. They often receive regular contributions and donations from other residents of the settlement and neighbouring areas for the maintenance of the *takias* and for the organisation of *melas*<sup>14</sup> (annual festivals) and *urs* celebrations marking the saint's death anniversary.

The fact that houses and Muslim heritage have become entangled constructions, sometimes within the same building or narrow streets, makes it difficult to discern one construction from the other. One example is that of the mosque. An interviewee explained how he acquired the mosque on lease from the Punjab Wakf Board and bought (without registration) the land surrounding the area from the previous occupant. He then constructed a house on that land and turned the mosque's praying area into one of the rooms in his home (Figure 8.3). For this purpose, he started paying a symbolic rent of 2,000 Rps<sup>15</sup> per year to the Wakf Board. The house was extended several times – through negotiations with the Board and the army, until it gained its current size (one-storey household, about 80m<sup>2</sup> and four rooms). In this specific case the resident claims having entered an informal agreement with the Wakf Board, in which the administrative body allows the use of the mosque as an embedded space in the house, in exchange for its maintenance.





**FIGURE 8.3** Mosque transformed into a room of a private house

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Although his statement is difficult to prove, the narrative allows the interviewee to legitimise the incorporation of the mosque as an extension of his home.

The extensions and improvement of the already existing houses have not taken place without conflict and negotiations with the army officers. The conflict has, on and off, since the first residents settled in Takia Fateh Shah until today, put at stake the right of residents to live in the locality. However, many respondents noted that since 2004 the conflict with the army had escalated and refurbishments had come to a halt. The situation became violent when residents had a direct encounter with army officers who had entered the locality to demolish houses and evict residents. Clashes that followed left a number of residents and four soldiers injured. In order to avoid further confrontations, an agreement was reached between residents and the army: No soldier would enter the area – except when and if actions were required to stop further construction by the residents of the locality – but at the same time the settlement would have to be secluded spatially by a fence that surrounds Takia Fateh Shah, which left only one entrance to the locality from the main circular road. The barbed wire fencing and Indian army authority go hand in hand. The fencing encircling Takia Fateh Shah is an expression of the physical and spatial segregation of the Balmiki community as much as it marks its social and psychological confinement. But its existence does not mean that the line has been accepted as the final statement on the conflict by the either of the two parties involved. It is enforced by one party against the other. It curtails the community's social space, fences them off and hence contributes further to their caste-based marginalisation through isolation and exclusion (Figure 8.4).

Local newspaper clips (2004; 2014) report how army officers, settled in and around the Gobindgarh Fort, prevent residents through violence and intimidation



**FIGURE 8.4** Wire fencing separating the army-controlled land from Takia Fateh Sha residential area

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from constructing more houses or improving and enlarging the already existing ones. Residents reported too having received written notices from the army notifying them against further construction works.<sup>16</sup> Demolition of new homes or house extensions by the army remains common. Bribery and night-time construction, to avoid attention from the army, are seen as the only options for residents to possibly improve their living conditions. In 2014, residents from the *takias* started seeking new avenues to voice their growing frustration. In October 2014, they brought the issue to the National Commission for Scheduled Castes' meeting organised in Chandigarh (the capital of Punjab state) to address problems faced by members of the Scheduled Castes in Punjab. Lamenting the control of the army over their everyday activities and the ever-looming fear of violence, they voiced their plight as follows:

[T]he army men take the rounds in every street, every morning and evening. They stop the residents from getting their houses repaired. If there is a maintenance work going on in any of the houses, they barge in without seeking any permission and start demolishing and destroying things. The residents are very scared of the army because of these reasons. If the residents try to stop the army men, then they are abused and warned of dire consequences. All of us residents living in these areas, belong to scheduled castes and live with our families in these [20, 30 or 40 sq. meters] houses. All of us do hard work to

make our ends meet. Some drive *autorikshaw*, some are janitors, while some work as maids in other households. We can hardly make our ends meet and on top of this, we are living in broken houses. The situation is such that we cannot even repair our houses, the doors and ceilings and have to live in these broken ones. We have to live like this despite the fact that we ‘own’ these houses since past 70–80 years.

(Letter from residents of the area Takia Fateh Shah and neighboring colonies, to the National Commission for Scheduled Castes: ‘Regarding the harassment of residents in the Takia Fateh Shah and vicinities by the army’)

Such expressions of hopelessness provide insight into how residents view the limited possibilities of improving and extending their homes due to the conflict.<sup>17</sup> But the letter itself reveals as well how caste-based identity is used here as a source of collective agency and ‘resisting power’.

### **Conflict and discordance at the crossroads of two heritage sites**

Despite severe restrictions and the difficulties in improving their dwellings, the connection between houses and shrines has played in favour of residents against the army’s claims over the land. The geographical location of the *takias* mapped in the old land revenue department documents serve as documented evidence of the territorial limits of the Takia Fateh Shah locality which residents use to undermine the claims over the land made by the army. In the first legal battle over land rights in 1972–6<sup>18</sup>, the Amritsar civil court recognised that the Wakf Board had held the property rights of Takia Fateh Shah’s locality since at least 1947.<sup>19</sup> The court decision, as we previously saw, did not stop the army from continuing to claim the land despite its lack of recognised legal rights to it. This indicates clearly that a (property) ‘rights’ approach cannot sufficiently explain the (in)ability of concerned actors to gain, control, maintain or improve their homes in the locality. Unequal power relations between residents of Takia Fateh Shah and the Indian army become apparent when looking at the practices undertaken by the residents to control and improve their homes on an everyday basis. On the one hand the Hindu Balmiki community instrumentalises Muslim heritage to legitimate their access to housing in Takia Fateh Shah. The ownership of the religious site falls on a third party, the Punjab Wakf Board, which hasn’t shown any interest in getting it vacated, opening up a grey zone in which residents – who do not have tenable property rights – manage to create a niche of relative security against the army’s expansive designs. On the other hand, however, the army’s power resources are formed by its capacity for violence and intimidation and its ability to mobilise the perceived legitimacy of security concerns (based on the fact that Amritsar is a border city and decades of tension with Pakistan place it uniquely in the army’s security calculus). It remains to be explored how the symbolic value of Gobindgarh Fort for the army and the latest designation of the fort, as a heritage attraction by the Tourism Promotion Board, play a role in influencing the ability of residents to ‘access’ and remain in control of their living situation in Takia Fateh Shah. It remains as well to be explored how the



**FIGURE 8.5** Gobindgarh Fort in 2017

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symbolic and spiritual dimension of the Takia Fateh Shah locality contributes to improving residents' situation. The following sections address these points.

### ***Gobindgarh Fort: tangible heritage, tourist attraction or tool for boundary making?***

Gobindgarh Fort was recently reopened to the public (Parshad 2014; Times of India 2016) and is expected to become a new hub of tourism in Amritsar (Figure 8.5). The details of the restoration and conservation process of the Gobindgarh Fort go beyond the scope of this chapter, since it mainly investigates the role of the fort as a heritage site in the process of claim-making by the army over the land against the residents of Takia Fateh Shah. However, while exploring how the fort is used for claim-making and the demarcating of urban territories of inclusion and exclusion, the recent development of the fort as a tourist attraction also shows a larger assemblage of actors and interests involved in heritage preservation in Amritsar. It also demonstrates the kind of urban imaginary through which the city administration and the Punjab Heritage and Tourism Promotion Board (PHTPB) currently envisage heritage as tourist attraction.

The military, strategic and symbolic importance of the history of Gobindgarh Fort is described in different accounts from Sikh and British rule alike.<sup>20</sup> The fortification was constructed in Amritsar in 1805–9 by Maharaja Ranjit Singh after demolishing the eighteenth-century Kila Gujjar Singh Bhanghi fortress situated on the road connecting the cities of Amritsar and Lahore. The fortification was

renamed after the tenth Sikh guru, Guru Gobind Singh. It aimed to protect the city of Amritsar on the western side from potential invaders using the Grand Trunk road<sup>21</sup> and safeguard the wealth and treasures such as the Koh-i-noor diamond. After the fall of the Sikh rule in 1849, the fort came under British control for nearly 100 years. The fort has thus been a symbol of power in Amritsar and Punjab:

The city which gives its name to Amritsar district is the principal mart [i.e. a trade center or market] in the Punjab. It is commanded by the celebrated fortress of Gobindgarh. It is to the Sikh what the Isle of Mona was to the Briton of Julius Caesar's day; what Mecca is to the Muhammadan and Benares to the Hindu.

(Government of Punjab 2000 [1883–1884]: 11)

Its strategic value remained during the post-Partition period. After 1947 and India's independence, the fort went under the control of the Indian army. Its importance as a border city and continued tensions between Pakistan and India have led to a large concentration of army troops in the city. Army personnel are hosted in cantonments, or military-controlled zones such as the Gobindgarh Fort and its surrounding land. Although the building had been declared a historical monument by the Government of Punjab under The Punjab Ancient and Historical Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act in 1964, a garrison of the Indian army had occupied it since Partition (as well as the surrounding premises). Only in 2006 did the Government of India (and the Ministry of Defence for that matter) hand over the possession of the fort for 'protection and conservation' to the Government of Punjab, to be accomplished as a public-private partnership venture in collaboration with the Asian Development Bank (Bagga 2011; Government of Punjab 2007). It was opened to the public in early 2017. The move towards recognising the importance of the fort as built heritage did not mitigate the power and interest of the army in making its claims and threatening the inhabitants of the Takia Fateh Shah. The army lost control over the fort land, but its symbolic power remains, and so remain the army's presence and ambitions regarding the areas surrounding the fort.

The recent (re)labelling by the authorities of Gobindgarh Fort as a 'Heritage Attraction', including the planned construction of a 'Heritage Hotel' (IDCL 2015) and different recreational attractions such as horse riding and restaurants, has nurtured a sense of tenure insecurity among neighbouring residents of Takia Fateh Shah. In the same way that previously the army kept on expanding its presence and stronghold beyond and around the Gobindgarh Fort, residents of Takia Fateh Shah fear that the official designation of heritage might also eventually expand to include the *takias*, leading to their displacement from the area:

[T]he government wants to declare this location as well part of the heritage site; if so we will be affected because they will also [like the army] try to grab or mark the houses and takias under the heritage site and then we will have

to vacate the houses as they are without registries [not everyone has even the lease contract with the *Wakf* Board]. The Deputy Chief Minister wants to do it, because for heritage sites, the central government gives more grants [...] so for the greed of money this area might be declared a heritage site.

(Interview with resident of Takia Fateh Shah, 15 June 2015)

The excerpt brings to light another interesting issue: the competition for grants between Indian cities. The current conservation project of the fort area follows the rationale of public–private partnership<sup>22</sup> that plans the construction of several ‘commercial facilities’ and exclusive infrastructures such as the aforementioned ‘Heritage Hotel’ and the elite ‘Club House’<sup>23</sup> in the fort. For Bauman (2005) and Ballard (2012), beautification programmes and the supposedly aesthetic value they bring to a place trump the ethical and legal concerns, that is, who should or shouldn’t have the ‘right’ to a space. The progressive transformation of the Gobindgarh Fort – and potentially its surroundings – into what seems aimed at becoming an exclusive ‘theme’ park is a good illustration of this. Behind the underlying theme of ‘Heritage’, fictionalised representations of important figures and events of the history of Punjab considered historically significant for the local (Sikh) Punjabi communities: For example, the Sher-e-Punjab (Lion-of-Punjab)<sup>24</sup> are being screened for visitors along with different kermis activities. This ‘Heritage Attraction’ and its underlying exclusive and aesthetic logic strongly contrast with the social realities of Takia Fateh Shah and neighbouring colonies. The actual unequal production of such spaces is disguised by the spectacle of ‘laser shows’ (IDCL 2015: 51) and lights that filter out unwanted facets of local surroundings, engaging in fantasies and desires that feed into new forms and experiences of cultural consumption. The contrast, or as Ashworth et al. (2007) put it, the ‘dissonance’ between these two heritage sites refers to the discordance between the sociopolitical complexities in which they are entangled. While the designation as heritage (and ‘heritage attraction’) and the commodification of Gobindgarh Fort and potentially of the surrounding areas aims at reinvigorating the symbolic value of the Sikh heritage and selling an image of exclusivity, leisure and consumption, it contrasts with the neighbouring undesignated Muslim heritage, it excludes already marginalised communities and puts into peril their access to a living space in Takia Fateh Shah.

### ***Takia Fateh Shah: (In)tangible heritage, syncretic practices and sense of belonging***

The prolonged conflict with the army and the recent designation of the Gobindgarh Fort as a heritage attraction and its subsequent commodification contribute to exacerbating social divisions and the exclusion of the communities in Takia Fateh Shah and neighbouring localities. Against this backdrop, I explore here to what extent the intangible spiritual dimension of the Muslim heritage helps the Balmiki community overcome such exclusions and caste-based marginalisation.

Although colonial British rule viewed Indian society as differentiated groups based on caste and religious identities, and the 1881 census contributed to shaping



the stereotype of rigid religiously defined communities, this categorisation largely disregarded popular beliefs which transgressed the boundaries of prescribed religions, such as the influence of Sufis' and saints' traditions in Punjab's everyday practices (Ballard 1999; Talbot 2006; Talbot and Singh 2009). Takia Fateh Shah is an example of the appropriation of religious elements from different traditions (e.g. Hindu, Sikh, Muslim Sufism) mixed together to construct a syncretic spirituality. The shrines – as well as the interior of the houses – display all different symbols from all faiths in ways that challenge clear-cut religious categories. Pictures collected in Takia Fateh Shah show that different religious symbols are commonly displayed and (re)interpreted by the residents.

To understand the sort of syncretism that manifests in Takia Fateh Shah and how it might help protect the community from ongoing exclusion (caste, army conflict etc.), I suggest to refer to Juergensmeyer's (1982) conceptual distinction of two dimensions:<sup>25</sup> *panthic* and *qaum*, and Ballard's contribution to it with a third dimension: *kismet*. On the one hand, *panth* (in Punjabi) refers to any spiritual teacher whether master, guru, saint, yogi, *mahant*, *sheikh*, *pir* or *baba*. The *panthic* dimension moves individuals to, as Ballard puts it: '[get] together by their commitment to the teachings of a specific spiritual master, be he living or (more usually) dead' (1999: 8). This is very much present in Takia Fateh Shah, where despite belonging to a Balmiki community (scheduled caste and part of Hindu religion according to orthodox categorisations), its community members venerate the different Sufi – Muslim – saints buried in the *takias*, and in particular Sufi Fateh Shah Bukhari, by attending events and celebrations in the different shrines and by displaying their images at home. *Kismet* (loosely translated as 'fate') refers to 'those ideas, practices and behavioural strategies which are used to explain the otherwise inexplicable and having done so to turn adversity in its tracks' (Ballard 1999: 8). The caretakers of Sufi Fateh Shah Bukhari *takia* and other residents in the locality explained that the practices of conservation of the dargahs and the fact of living in the vicinity of the shrines contributes to securing the support and assistance of saints in any potentially adverse situation. It here does not matter if that adverse situation is caused by spiritual entities (infringed by a bad spirit such as *bhuts*, *jinns*, *dhags* and *churails*) or physical ones, such as the systematic hardships and exclusions suffered by the Balmiki and other 'untouchable' communities, or whether it is fueled by the violence exercised by the army. The last dimension, the *qaum*, refers to 'the set of ideas and activities by means of which a body of people set about closing ranks as a community, and use their enhanced sense of mutual solidarity to advance their collective interests' (Ballard 1999: 15). This concept can refer to religious groups, and the division and polarisation between them, but it also, which is often the case in Punjab, refers to social groups, linked by kinship (*biraderi*), or social status like 'untouchability' (close to the idea of caste or tribes) that cross-cut the categories of religion.<sup>26</sup>

The three dimensions, *panth*, *kismet* and *qaum*, contribute to understanding the functioning of the sociopolitical entanglement of the residents at Takia Fateh Shah and the Sufi saints' locality. It can be understood as a mixing table where the *panthic* (coming together by following common spiritual master/s), *kismet* (practices and behavioural strategies) and *qaumic* (groups) proportions have been attuned to the



particular socio-spatial context. These three dimensions can explain the increased group cohesion around a Sufi spiritual master, and common practices and behaviours of the community to improve their situation through the intermediation of the saints and dargahs. The result of this confluence of the Balmiki community in this particular Muslim heritage site is a new syncretic collective identity resilient to ongoing caste-based marginalisation.

To sum up the preceding discussion in this section, one could say that the case study of Takia Fateh Shah shows that residents use the different *takias* as a way of demarcating their own urban territory, physically (against the claims of the army) and also spiritually (against the rigid Hindu caste-based marginalisation). In this way the hybrid composite of houses and *takias* manifests a use of heritage that expresses the creation and management of a new collective identity and a sense of belonging to the place.

## Conclusion

Amritsar, and in particular the locality of Takia Fateh Shah, presents a remarkable case for the study of divided heritage and contestations and claims made around it, for it is a site constituted by a unique cross-religious entanglement between a residential area (of a marginalised Hindu community of Balmikis) and two heritage sites (a Sikh historic fort and seven Muslim Sufi *takias*). Although socio-spatial marginalisation, in South Asian cities as elsewhere, is becoming prevalent, the case study of Takia Fateh Shah shows that some of the socio-spatial divisions that Amritsar presents today are still largely rooted in the history of Partition. They are linked to the caste and social status of the residents and play out in their ongoing conflict with a powerful state institution. In this context I showed how heritage sites (on the one hand, the Sufi *takias*, and on the other, the Gobindgarh Fort) mediate in the conflict and contribute differently to facilitate or constrain residents' access to a living space in Takia Fateh Shah, producing further social and spatial divisions.

The appropriation of (and caring for) the Muslim heritage by the residents of Takia Fateh Shah helps residents maintain their homes and urban quarter as they mobilise material and immaterial (power) resources that help them shape a mitigated resistance against their ongoing socio-spatial exclusion and threats from powerful state institutions (on the one hand the army, on the other Tourism Promotion Board for the latest heritage designation of the fort). In this their claims are legitimised by their representation in official documents and maps, and the fact that the Wakf Board doesn't express any objection to the land being used by the Balmiki community and recognised by the authority of a court. Among the immaterial resources unveiled in this case study, the most important ones refer to the spiritual dimensions related to the syncretic practices of residents in and around the Sufi *takias*. As Mitchell puts it, power can be conceived as a twofold phenomenon, with both a physical and a mental mode of operation (1990: 545). These two modes in Takia Fateh Shah empower the community by shaping a collective identity and sense of belonging to the place that unites residents and protects them from the

ongoing marginalisation and potential threats. In this case, a Muslim heritage site helps in mediating urban socio-spatial divisions and caste-based marginalisation.

On the other hand, first, the Gobindgarh Fort was used by the army for decades for claim-making and to pressurise the residents of Takia Fateh Shah. In the conflict between the army and residents over the land of Takia Fateh Shah, the army has tried to legitimise its claims on the basis of the historic, military, strategic and symbolic value of the fort (and by extension, its surroundings). Because the army lacks the legitimacy of a court, it has grounded its 'practices of domination' (versus the 'practices of resistance' of residents) (Paddison et al. 2002) in specific (in)material power resources such as physical force and coercion, authority and social status. This has contributed to increased isolation of the Takia Fateh Shah with respect to other neighbourhoods and has constrained the ability of residents to improve their living conditions. Second, the new designation of the fort as a heritage attraction, its commodification and its ongoing transformation as a theme park can be seen as the further deepening of urban divisions and exclusions. The 'dissonance' between the two heritages here, the fort as a designated heritage site and the *takias* as an undesignated one, is mirrored by the discordance between the different sociopolitical complexities, aesthetics and realities in which they are entangled. Underscoring a key insight from critical heritage studies, this contraposition manifests the divide between who does or doesn't have the power to define what constitutes heritage and therefore can be designated as such, and what kind of cultural, historical and political claims can or can't be recognised on those grounds. It manifests too, a divide between those who gain and those who lose as a consequence of such definitional contestations.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Carsten Keller, Fran Meissner, Ali Mohsin and the editors of this volume for their support. All of them contributed immensely to improve this chapter through their generous feedback. In Amritsar, I am thankful to the Guru Nanak Dev University (GNDU) and those residents in Takia Fateh Shah who welcomed my presence and took time to share with me their valuable insights. The research was made possible by a doctoral grant funded by La Caixa Foundation in collaboration with the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD).

## Notes

- 1 This chapter is framed under a larger research study that investigates the potential of 'access theory' (Ribot and Peluso 2003) as a conceptual and analytical lens to look at the processes of – and conflicts over – access to housing and related services on both sides of the India-Pakistan border (i.e. in the cities of Amritsar and Lahore respectively).
- 2 The Radcliffe Line was the boundary demarcation line between India and Pakistan published on August 17, 1947, upon the Partition of India. It was named after its architect, Sir Cyril Radcliffe, chairman of the Border Commission.
- 3 Despite the large Muslim population in Amritsar at the time of Partition, the existence of the Golden Temple (also known as the Sri Harmandir Sahib or Darbar Sahib,

- a gurdwara considered to be the holiest site in Sikhism) was the determining factor behind the decision for Amritsar to remain on the Indian side of the newly demarcated Indo-Pakistan border.
- 4 Structured and in-depth interviews were conducted between July 2014 and June 2015 in Amritsar.
  - 5 This, perhaps unconscious, resistance to adopting the new nomenclature might be a way of insisting upon the old identity of the place (*takias*) since it gives valence to the claims of the Balmiki community.
  - 6 That was all the more evident when at the time of conducting fieldwork, one of my (high-caste Hindu) research assistants refused to enter the site at first, advising me to remain out of the 'dirty' neighbourhood and far from its 'dirty' residents (field notes, 9 July 2014). This negative perception of the Balmiki community responds to the caste system and its traditional link with professions. Balmiki residents such as other *dalits* (low caste) pursued traditionally considered 'dirty' occupations such as scavenging, the removal of night soil and cow dung and other menial jobs. Despite abolition of the caste system in India, the social marginalisation of lower castes remains deeply rooted in Indian society.
  - 7 The term 'Walled City' refers to the old inner city of Amritsar, once surrounded by a fortified wall – of which only a few gates still stand.
  - 8 The two Eids mark religious Muslim holidays. The celebrations start with the morning congregations of the faithful in the mosque or *Eidgah* (literally, place for the Eid prayers). Since there is a very small Muslim population left in Amritsar since 1947, Takia Fateh Shah is no longer used as *Eidgah*.
  - 9 *Takia Fateh Shah Bukhari* is the most important shrine in the settlement and hence the one which gives its name to it. The shrine, also referred to as Hazrat Baba Syed Fateh Ali Shah Bukhari is named after the Sufi Faqir Fater Shah Bukhari. A popular story tells that the Sufi saint in search of milk for his disciples/devotees approached Baba Bhai Shaloji. Bhai Shaloji presented Sufi Faqir Fateor with a goat, wishing that it might fulfil the need. The goat (*bakri*) provided milk in abundance – unlimited – quenching the thirst of all devotees.
  - 10 In the literature pertaining to Partition, the terms 'migrants' and 'refugees' are often used interchangeably. It is understood that within the framework of violence in which the Partition of the subcontinent took place, it is difficult to distinguish voluntary migrants from forced migration/refugees. Therefore, both terms are used here –and elsewhere– interchangeably.
  - 11 According to official accounts, soon after the massive migrations of 1947, vacant (private) Muslim properties in Amritsar and elsewhere in India, were declared initially as 'evacuee properties' and were allotted to incoming refugees according to the property they could prove having left behind (in Pakistan) (Zamindar 2007). However, popular narratives often disagreed with this official version (Talbot 2011). Some accounts stated that when it was not possible to prove ownership of property, social networks and good offices became quite instrumental. This way, property allotment regimes did not benefit all refugees in the same way. Those who were not able to prove previous ownership of property (or who had not left behind any substantial property) or with little social capital to support their claims had to search for alternative locations to settle in. This applies to the first families that settled in Takia Fateh Shah.
  - 12 Originally a *wakf* referred to an optional and voluntary donation, often in the form of land or real estate, made by a person to a trust of the same name, the 'Wakf (Board)', a Muslim social institution. The donation is made for perpetuity, aiming to serve a social purpose. The usufruct or the income generated by the donated good – or *wakf* – is the property of the beneficiaries designated by the *wakif* (donor), who remains the owner of

- the ‘immobilised property’. Beneficiaries do not enjoy an absolute right over the property, but have *usus* (i.e. the right to use) and *fructus* rights (i.e. the right to derive profit from it), both necessary and sufficient to improve their living situation (Ottimofiore 2012: 246; Sait and Lim 2006)
- 13 The Punjab Wakf Board is formed of Muslim stakeholders, represented by a chairman, nine board members and officers of different levels. The Board administers new and old land and real estate properties donated to the trust. Financial donations are used for welfare programmes and the development of social infrastructures targeting Muslim communities (e.g. Hzt. Halima Hospital and the Islamia Girls College, both in Malerkotla, close to the Punjabi city of Ludhiana). Hence the Wakf Board does not particularly target other religious communities, though it often tolerates encroachments and eventually makes lease arrangements with the residents of other religious communities (e.g. Hindu and Sikhs residents), such as in Takia Fateh Shah. Worth mentioning is that, among the 34,237 properties currently owned by the Wakf Board in Punjab, nearly half of them are registered as being illegally occupied by different individuals and particularly government institutions (i.e. Municipality, Education Department, Police etc.). Only about 18 per cent of the total number of properties is listed as being leased out (Documents collected in Wakf Board office on 10 October 2014, and online Wakf Board website: <http://www.pbwakf.org/>; accessed 15 August 2017).
  - 14 During the *mela* that I attended in 2015, devotees from neighbouring localities came in large numbers to Takia Fateh Shah. The whole neighbourhood, but particularly the streets around the *dargah* of Sufi Faqir Fateor Shah Bukhari whose celebration was taking place, were decorated. The celebrations were accompanied with *qawwali* music (Islamic devotional musical style), despite the fact that there are no Muslims communities in the vicinity.
  - 15 At the time when research was carried out, 2,000 rupees equaled around 35 euros.
  - 16 See: Officer of the Indian Army (2004): Written notice to a resident of Takia Fateh Shah: ‘Notice against illegal encroachment on Defence land’, 28 July.
  - 17 The output of such a notice remains unknown, for field research was completed in July 2015, and up to that date, no response had been sent to the Balmiki Community from the National Commission for Scheduled Caste.
  - 18 Court case documents: Civil appeal No.260 of 1972: ‘On the dispute over land in Takia Fateh Shah Bukhari’. In the court case the five individuals named as ‘defendants’ constitute the party on the side of the army against one of the residents of Takia Fateh Shah Bukhari. They advocate the eviction and dispossession of the resident from his land, which they alleged is owned by the Government of India (i.e. in this case the Ministry of Defence) and not by the resident or the Wakf Board. No conclusive proof that the Government of India (or Ministry of Defence) owned that land was provided to the court. The resident of Takia Fateh Shah on the other hand could prove he had leased the land from the Punjab Wakf Board at least since since 1965 (Amritsar District Court, Decision N.1413 of 1976).
  - 19 The Gazette notification no. 19, survey (1) 15173, dated 9 January 1971, was also presented before the court. Here, it was mentioned that in the urban revenue records of Amritsar (*jamabandi*) Khasra No. 544, which is known as Takia Fateh Shah Bukhari, is a property of the Punjab Wakf Board.
  - 20 See for instance: Government of Punjab (2000 [1883–1884]: 78) and Singh (2008: 46, 47, 50, 90, 102, 110).
  - 21 The Grand Trunk (GT) Road is one of Asia’s oldest and longest major roads. For more than 2,000 years, the GT road has linked the Indian subcontinent with Central Asia.

- From Bangladesh it goes across Northern India through Delhi and Amritsar. From there, the road continues towards Lahore and Peshawar in Pakistan until it reaches Kabul, Afghanistan.
- 22 This PPP venture has a first total estimated cost of 5,089.35 Lakhs, about seven million euros (IDCL 2015: 65)
  - 23 Exclusive Club to be restricted to 15 new members per year (IDCL 2015: 51)
  - 24 Sher-e-Punjab (Lion-of-Punjab) refers to the Sikh ruler and founder of the Sikh dynasty that ruled over united Punjab between 1799 and 1849, before Punjab was absorbed by the expanding British Empire. The advertisement of the activities offered by the 'Heritage Attraction' is presented online as follows: 'A 7D show on Maharaja Ranjit Singh in a never before seen format in Punjab – which will transport you to the 19th century in an immersive way. The show will leave you enchanted. A preview will introduce you to the ages just before the Maharaja forged the powerful empire of Punjab'. Available online: <http://fortgobindgarh.com/sher-e-punjab-maharaja-ranjit-singh/>; accessed 25 March 2018.
  - 25 Juergensmeyer suggests a third dimension that I have not presented here, for it does not contribute to understanding the case of Takiya Fateh Shah. The *dharmic* dimension is less mystical than the other two. It refers to morality and can fall into a particular system of moral rules or values developed within each of the religious groups found in the Punjab: the Muslim sharia, the Hindu *Dharmashastra* or the Sikh *Rahit*, for instance. When comparing these norm systems in the everyday life practices of Punjabis, dissimilarities appear to diminish acutely. In the presented case, the *dharmic* dimension (a differentiated values system) is negligible.
  - 26 Ballard (1999) makes the point that the Ad Dharm movement in Punjab in the 1920s that joined together 'untouchables' (*dalits*, scheduled castes) from all faiths against the more and more polarised *qaums* (communities, groups) of Hindus Muslims and Sikhs, shows that the discrete religious categories failed to acknowledge the sociopolitical complexities of the Punjab.

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