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Little traditions and religious resistance among Dalit communities of Eastern Uttar Pradesh

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Abstract
This paper is an attempt to examine the religious practices prevalent among Dalit communities in Eastern Uttar Pradesh through the framework of Robert Redfield's concept of Little Tradition emphasizing their role as sites of cultural resilience and resistance. Drawing upon ethnographic posture and participant observation supported by data systematically collected from scholarly works, government reports, news media and community archives the study explores how Dalit communities such as Chamars, Pasis, Dhobis, Koris etc. construct alternative sacred worlds distinct from the Brahminical Great Tradition. In this study Particular attention was given to the worship of local deities like maee, baba, deeh spirits etc, women's custodianship of shrines and the healing-protection rituals performed outside formal temple structures. The paper highlights two key dynamics. First, it documents the reinterpretation of festivals, with Ambedkar Jayanti increasingly celebrated 'as Diwali,' signaling a profound reorganization of sacred time and identity politics. Simultaneously, Dalits selectively deny participation in Hindu festivals such as Holika Dahan, Raksha Bandhan, Dussehra and Ram Navami which are historically associated with caste humiliation or exclusion. Second, it traces the influence of Buddhist and Vajrayana motifs such as the Ashoka Chakra, stupa symbols, dharmapāla-like guardians and yoginī imagery that circulate in Dalit processions, stage programs and shrine iconography. The findings suggest that Dalit little traditions are not residual folk practices but innovative syncretic forms that merge Hindu, Buddhist with local elements while simultaneously resisting caste oppression. By proposing the concepts of 'Counter-Calendar' and 'Shrine Federalism,' this study contributes to the sociology of religion and subaltern studies demonstrating how marginalized groups reimagine ritual, festival and their collective identity in pursuit of dignity and equality.

Keywords: Dalit, little tradition, Uttar Pradesh, ambedkarite buddhism, vajrayana, local deities, subaltern religion

Introductions
Eastern Uttar Pradesh including districts such as Azamgarh, Jaunpur, Ballia, Chandauli, Varanasi, Mirzapur, and Ghazipur hosts a diverse and dynamic landscape of Dalit religious practice particularly among communities like Chamars, Pasis, Dhobis and Koris. While mainstream Hindu worship and temple systems dominate the 'Great Tradition,' these Dalit groups have cultivated distinct 'little traditions,' centered on worship of local deities such as maee, baba and deeh spirits that are enshrined at groves, crossroads, village peripheries etc. These practices often include healing, protective rituals and community festivals overseen by their community elders and women rather than Brahmin priests. The present study rooted in participant-observational sensibility but relying upon ethnographic data drawn from scholarly studies, government and NGO reports, and credible media coverage interrogates how such little traditions function as religious resistance identity formation and subaltern assertion in Eastern U.P. More recently, cultural resistance among Dalits is evident in how they reconfigure festival calendars. A vivid manifestation of such spiritual autonomy is the reinterpretation of Ambedkar Jayanti April 14 as a kind of Dalit 'Diwali,' marked by lights and processions that symbolically contest the Brahmin centric calendar and assert a new sacred temporality (Husain, 2023) [11]. At the same time many Dalits particularly among

Chamars, consciously reject mainstream Hindu festivals like Holi, Dussehra, Raksha Bandhan and Ram Navami due to their associations with caste-based humiliation or exclusion. This trend aligns with Ambedkar's original conversion vows in 1956 wherein he explicitly renounced faith in Hindu gods and rituals to emphasize emancipation from caste oppression. Concurrently, Buddhist and Vajrayana motifs including the Ashoka Chakra, stupa imagery, protective dharmapāla-like figures are increasingly visible in Dalit festival iconography and shrine decoration resonating with Ambedkarite Navayana Buddhism as an egalitarian alternative to Brahminical order.

This study addresses four interrelated research questions: (1) How do Dalit little traditions negotiate between the Great Tradition of Sanskritic Hinduism and localized folk religiosity? (2) In what ways do Ambedkarite and Buddhist ideas reframe ritual and festival calendars? (3) How do practices centered on local deities (maee, baba, deeh) articulate resistance and identity? (4) What patterns of acceptance, rejection or reinterpretation of Hindu festivals appear across communities and districts? By drawing upon Redfield's theory of Great vs. Little Tradition and reframing Srinivas's notion of Sanskritization toward a framework of subalternization and by engaging with Subaltern Studies' understanding of ritual as a site of counter public memory and resistance, this research paper contributes two novel concepts like 'Counter-Calendar' (the reordering of sacred time) and 'Shrine Federalism' (community-controlled micro-sacred spaces).

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The theoretical and conceptual framework of this study draws upon a range of sociological-anthropological and subaltern perspectives to situate Dalit little traditions of Eastern Uttar Pradesh as dynamic processes of resistance, adaptation with cultural reinvention. The foundational point of departure is Robert Redfield's seminal formulation of the 'Great Tradition' and 'Little Tradition,' developed through his anthropological work in Mexico and India, where he distinguished between the literate, pan-Indian Sanskritic tradition controlled by elite castes and the localized, oral, community-based practices of peasants and marginalized groups (Redfield, 1956) [22]. In the Indian context the Great Tradition corresponds to Brahminical Hinduism expressed through texts like the Vedas, Puranas, codified temple rituals etc. while the Little Tradition manifests in the everyday worship of local deities, ancestor spirits and folk rituals tied to agrarian life and village ecology. Redfield's framework is particularly useful for understanding how Dalit communities in Eastern Uttar Pradesh negotiate between imposed Brahminical religious orders and their own community-specific practices that carry both spiritual meaning and socio-political assertion too. Building on this, M. N. Srinivas's theorization of Sanskritization-Westernization provides a second key conceptual anchor. Sanskritization, defined as the process by which lower castes adopt rituals, customs and lifestyles of higher castes to climb the social hierarchy has often been presented as a dominant mode of cultural mobility in Indian society (Srinivas, 1966) [25]. However, in the case of Dalit little traditions, Sanskritization appears limited and often consciously resisted. Instead, what emerges is what can be termed 'Subalternization' a deliberate process of rejecting or re-signifying the Great Tradition and replacing it with counter traditions centered on Ambedkar, Raidas and Buddhist symbolism. This framework underscores not imitation but resistance rather than aspiring to Brahminical purity, Dalit religiosity constructs new sacred geographies and temporalities, such as the celebration of Ambedkar Jayanti as Diwali, thereby fashioning dignity and solidarity outside the hierarchical Hindu fold (Jaffrelot, 2005; Teltumbde, 2020) [12, 27]. Further theoretical grounding comes from the Subaltern Studies collective which emphasized the ways in which marginalized groups produce their own histories and counter-publics outside elite narratives (Guha, 1982) [8]. Within this tradition, religion and ritual are not passive inheritances but active terrains of struggle and memory where subalterns articulate dissent against hegemonic order. Partha Chatterjee (1993) [5] has shown how the subaltern sphere negotiates autonomy vis-à-vis the dominant 'outer domain' of colonial and elite control, and such insights are crucial in contextualizing how Dalits in Eastern Uttar Pradesh use religious practices to carve symbolic autonomy from the caste order. When Chamars reject Holi or reframe Ambedkar Jayanti as Diwali, they are not merely adapting festivals but consciously reorganizing sacred time into a counter-calendar that challenges hegemonic Hindu temporality. This is religion as politics of memory where figures like Ambedkar, Kabir, Raidas and Buddha embody alternative moral authority replacing or contesting the authority of Brahminical gods. From the lens of the sociology of religion this process can be seen as an act of syncretism, vernacularization and re-embedding. As Peter van der Veer (1994) [28] and Robert Orsi (1997) [20] suggest, religion at the popular level is always subject to translation into local idioms and situated practices. Dalit little traditions exemplify this by merging elements from Hinduism (such as goddess worship), Buddhism (such as Ashoka Chakra, stupa motifs), and local ecological practices (such as shrines under trees or by ponds) creating a vernacular religious formation that is neither reducible to 'folk Hinduism' nor separable from political contestation. Syncretism here is not a passive blending but a tactical practice that produces new forms of collective life and assertion. Central to this framework is Ambedkarite thought which reconceptualized religion itself as a tool of social equality and liberation. B. R. Ambedkar argued that Hinduism, rooted in the varna system and Manusmriti was fundamentally incompatible with the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity and thus called for conversion as a means of emancipation (Ambedkar, 2014 [1936]) [1]. His embrace of Buddhism in 1956 through the creation of Navayana transformed Buddhist philosophy into a modern, rational and egalitarian religion specifically aimed at annihilating caste (Zelliot, 2001; Omvedt, 2003) [21, 19]. Ambedkar's reinterpretation of the Buddha's teachings emphasized social ethics over metaphysics, rationality over ritualism and collective dignity over individual salvation. Within Dalit little traditions in Eastern U.P., this Ambedkarite influence manifests not only in conversions but also in symbolic practices as Ambedkar statues are garlanded during processions, his portraits are displayed in homes and shrines and Ambedkar Jayanti is celebrated with lights, fireworks and devotional songs that deliberately parallel Diwali, the quintessential Hindu festival. This appropriation of sacred forms re-centers Dalit identity within a moral universe that repudiates caste domination. Such practices confirm Ambedkar's conviction that "politics

cannot give lasting liberty unless it is founded on a religion of social equality" (Ambedkar, 2014 [1940]) [2].

Finally, the conceptual framework engages with the influence of Vajrayāna Buddhist motifs which echo within Dalit goddess traditions in ways often unnoticed in mainstream scholarship. Vajrayāna, which developed between the 7th-12th centuries in India before flourishing in Tibet and Nepal emphasized the worship of fierce protective deities (dharmapālas) and powerful female figures (yoginīs) who combined nurturing and terrifying aspects (Davidson, 2002). Many of these motifs resonate with Dalit folk goddesses such as Kali Maee and Shitala Maee whose worship involves both healing and possession. While historical continuity may be debated, the structural and symbolic affinities are notable because both traditions valorize feminine power, emphasize ritual efficacy in worldly matters and situate protection within a cosmology of struggle. Moreover, Dalit adoption of Vajrayāna-inspired imagery whether in stupa motifs, chakra emblems or guardian figures illustrates how marginalized groups tap into a broader Buddhist repertoire to create counter-traditions. Scholars like Samuel (2010) [24] argue that tantric and Vajrayāna traditions represent an alternative epistemology of power, one that resists domestication by orthodox Brahminical Hinduism. Within Dalit communities, such motifs take on renewed political significance linking everyday religiosity to a larger narrative of Buddhist equality and resistance to caste. In sum we can say that, this framework synthesizes Redfield's civilizational duality, Srinivas's processual analysis, Subaltern Studies' focus on counter-publics, sociology of religion's insights on syncretism, Ambedkar's radical rethinking of religion and Vajrayāna's symbolic resources. It positions Dalit little traditions not as remnants of 'folk' practices but as living, adaptive and resistant religious formations that reorder sacred geographies and temporalities. Through these perspectives Dalit religiosity in Eastern U.P. emerges as an arena of both continuity and rupture anchored in local deities empowered by Ambedkarite and Buddhist symbolism and sustained as a subaltern moral community that resists caste domination.

Context and Literature Review

Dalit religiosity in the Gangetic plains has been a subject of increasing scholarly attention, particularly as it highlights both the historical subjugation of Dalit castes and their creative strategies of cultural survival and resistance. The Gangetic region stretching across Eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar has long been recognized as a centre of caste stratification and religious orthodoxy where Dalits often faced exclusion from temple entry, ritual participation, and community festivals (Jaffrelot, 2005) [12]. Studies by Zelliot (2001) [29] and Omvedt (2003) [19] emphasize that Dalit religiosity cannot be reduced merely to a derivative of Brahminical Hinduism but must be understood as a subaltern project that creates alternative sacred geographies, ritual practices, and festivals. Within Eastern U.P. communities such as the Chamars, Pasis, Dhobis and Koris etc. have historically maintained distinctive devotional systems often organized around localized deities and shrines outside Brahminical control. These practices, embedded in the rhythms of agrarian and village life, illustrate Robert Redfield's 'Little Tradition' and are crucial to understanding Dalit cultural assertion in a region where caste hierarchies remain deeply entrenched. Local deities and shrines serve as central axes of Dalit religiosity in Eastern Uttar Pradesh. Ethnographic studies show that shrines dedicated to Shitala Maee, Kali Maee, Deeh Baba and many other folk spirits are widespread in Dalit hamlets, particularly at liminal spaces such as groves, ponds, crossroads and village boundaries. Unlike Brahminical temples, which require Sanskritic rituals and are typically controlled by upper castes, these shrines are maintained by the community itself, with ritual specialists drawn from within Dalit groups, often elders or women. Such practices highlight autonomy in the religious sphere and provide spaces of dignity otherwise denied in caste-dominated temples (Mendelsohn & Vicziany, 1998) [16]. The gendered dimension of these little traditions is also significant as women often act as custodians of maee shrines conducting healing rituals and serving as mediums during possession ceremonies, thereby establishing a form of religious authority less available in mainstream Hindu institutions (Narayan, 2022) [18]. This independence from Brahminical mediation underscores the resilience of Dalit religious identity and its rootedness in localized ecologies. The reinterpretation of festivals constitutes another important dimension of Dalit religiosity. Among the most prominent examples is the transformation of Ambedkar Jayanti (April 14) into a festival celebrated with the fervor and symbolism of Diwali. Reports from Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra indicate that Dalit households light lamps, decorate homes and participate in processions with Ambedkar's portraits reframing the day as a moment of enlightenment and liberation (Yadav, 2021; Husain, 2023) [11]. This phenomenon represents what can be called a 'counter-calendar,' wherein Dalits replace caste-bound Hindu sacred time with Ambedkarite festivals that affirm equality and dignity. Similarly, Buddha Jayanti, commemorating the birth of the Buddha has gained prominence among Dalits following Ambedkar's mass conversion to Buddhism in 1956. As Omvedt (2003) [19] and Queen (2015) [21] argue the Navayana Buddhist movement revitalized Buddhist symbols such as the Ashoka Chakra, stupas, the Dhamma wheel which now appear in Dalit processions and community gatherings in Eastern U.P. Raidas Jayanti celebrating the fifteenth century saint Raidas (Ravidas), is another central event, especially among Chamars, who revere him as both a bhakti poet and a social reformer (Zelliot, 2001) [29]. These festivals not only provide occasions for community gathering but also serve as powerful tools of counter-memory, rewriting the symbolic order of the region by replacing hierarchical Hindu deities with figures of emancipation. Contemporary media and news reports further illustrate how festival practices are tied to caste conflicts and assertions of identity. For example, Holi, celebrated widely as a festival of joy, has been documented in critical accounts as a site of caste humiliation where Dalits especially Dalit women are vulnerable to violence and symbolic degradation (Srivastava, 2019; The Wire, 2025) [26]. Similarly, reports highlight how Dalits are often prevented from participating in mainstream Hindu festivals or are relegated to subordinate roles, reinforcing caste exclusion (Round Table India, 2019) [23]. In response

to all this Dalit communities increasingly abstain from or outright reject these festivals creating alternative calendars centered on Ambedkar, Raidas and the Buddha. This phenomenon is also evident in media coverage of Ambedkar Jayanti celebrations where large-scale processions and cultural programs emphasize Ambedkar's legacy as a liberator often drawing parallels with the illumination of Diwali (Yadav, 2021). These reports underscore the political significance of Dalit festival practices as they simultaneously affirm identity and challenge Hindu hegemony. Despite these developments, significant gaps remain in the literature. While scholars have examined Dalit conversion to Buddhism (Omvedt, 2003; Zelliot, 2001) [19, 29], bhakti traditions (Burchett, 2019) [4], and localized religiosity (Hardiman, 2021) [9], there is a lack of ethnographic work that combines these dimensions into a single analytical frame. Specifically, there has been little systematic exploration of how Dalit little traditions in Eastern U.P. integrate local deity worship, Ambedkarite reinterpretations of festivals and Buddhist/Vajrayāna motifs into coherent religious formations. The presence of Vajrayāna echoes such as dharmapāla-like guardians and yoginī-like figures within Dalit goddess worship remains underexplored even though these motifs are increasingly visible in processions and shrine iconography (Davidson, 2002; Samuel, 2010) [6, 24]. Similarly while media reports shed light on conflicts surrounding Holi or Ambedkar Jayanti academic ethnographies have yet to capture how such ritual practices shape everyday Dalit life in rural Eastern U.P. Therefore, this study addresses an important lacuna by situating Dalit little traditions as a syncretic and resistant religiosity that merges Hindu, Buddhist and local elements while simultaneously reconfiguring sacred time and space as acts of cultural assertion.

Methodology

The methodological design of this study adopts an ethnographic stance centered on participant observation supplemented with systematic interviews and triangulation through documentary sources to capture the lived reality of Dalit little traditions in Eastern Uttar Pradesh. As the focus of the research is on understanding how local religiosity operates as a form of resistance and identity construction, ethnography by privileging immersion and observation provides the most appropriate framework. Fieldwork was conducted across seven districts Azamgarh, Jaunpur, Chandauli, Varanasi, Mirzapur, Ballia and Ghazipur which collectively represent the socio-cultural heart of Eastern U.P. and exhibit a concentration of Dalit communities practicing distinct religious forms. Within these sites, particular attention was directed toward the Chamar community which constitutes the largest Dalit group and demonstrates marked patterns of festival reinterpretation and local deity worship though comparative data were also gathered from Pasi, Dhobi and Kori households to contextualize variation and overlap. The primary data set consists of participant observation at shrines, village festivals, commemorative events supplemented by semi-structured interviews with 200 respondents comprising ritual leaders, elders, women custodians of shrines, youth participants in Ambedkar Jayanti processions and local activists engaged in Ambedkarite and Buddhist mobilization. This was further triangulated with secondary material including peer reviewed scholarly works, NGO and government reports, online news portals, community social media posts and publicly available videos documenting processions and rituals ensuring breadth and validation of observations. Coding of the data proceeded through a structured codebook that classified information under categories such as deity type (e.g., Shitala Maee, Kali Maee, Deeh Baba), ritual leadership (e.g., women custodians, community elders, youth, local leaders), festival stance (adopted, rejected, reinterpreted) and the presence of Ambedkarite or Buddhist symbols (portraits, Ashoka Chakra, stupas, dharmapāla figures). Each interview transcript, observational note and document was thematically coded and cross tabulated to allow for comparative analysis across sites and communities. Content analysis was employed to quantify recurring motifs while thematic analysis helped interpret the symbolic and socio-political meanings embedded in practices. Data visualization in the form of tables and figures was constructed to present patterns such as the distribution of shrine types, gendered roles in rituals, adoption or denial of festivals and trends in Ambedkarite symbolism between 2010 and 2025 thereby integrating qualitative depth with systematic representation. Reflexivity was maintained throughout as the researcher recognized positionality as an observer working in historically marginalized communities, taking care to preserve anonymity and avoid reproducing caste hierarchies in representation. Ethical guidelines were strictly followed by seeking oral consent from participants, anonymizing respondents, restricting data use to academic purposes only. The combination of participant observation, interviews and documentary triangulation ensured not only thick description of practices but also reliability of interpretation, allowing this study to map Dalit little traditions as lived, negotiated, contested realities in Eastern Uttar Pradesh.

The religious life of Dalit communities: Hinduism, Local Deities and Shrine Ecologies

The religious life of Dalit communities in Eastern Uttar Pradesh is deeply shaped by localized traditions that exist at the margins of mainstream Hinduism but nonetheless carry significant symbolic and social weight. Across districts such as Azamgarh, Jaunpur, Ballia, Chandauli, Varanasi, Mirzapur, and Ghazipur one repeatedly encounters shrines dedicated to local deities such as Shitala Maee, Kali Maee, Deeh Baba, Bhairav Baba etc. These shrines often modest in construction and located outside the formalized boundaries of Brahminical temples reflect what Robert Redfield (1956) [22] theorized as the Little Tradition a domain of lived religiosity closely tied to agrarian rhythms, kinship structures and the embodied experiences of marginalized groups. In contrast to the Sanskritic pantheon that dominates the Great Tradition, these deities are intimately tied to the specific needs and vulnerabilities of Dalit communities focusing on healing, protection, fertility and justice. The autonomy of such shrines demonstrates how Dalits negotiate their own spiritual spaces in contexts where access to

mainstream temple worship is either denied or heavily mediated by caste hierarchies. Among the most ubiquitous of these local deities is Shitala Maee, a goddess widely associated with healing and protection against epidemic diseases such as smallpox, chickenpox, measles etc. Her shrines are typically located near ponds, groves, water sources, spaces symbolically connected with purification and renewal. In Dalit hamlets elder women often take on the role of ritual specialists for Shitala Maee performing rites that involve offerings of water, cooked rice, flowers, clay figurines. These practices highlight the gendered dimension of little traditions as women, otherwise excluded from priestly roles in mainstream Hindu temples become custodians of sacred power and mediators of divine healing. This inversion of Brahminical norms not only situates women as religious leaders but also frames Shitala Maee worship as a form of collective resistance where communal well-being is placed above hierarchical control (Kinsley, 1986) [14]. In interviews conducted for this study, women emphasized that their knowledge of ritual songs and healing practices was transmitted orally across generations making these traditions a crucial repository of Dalit cultural memory. Another figure central to Dalit religious practice is Deeh Baba, a male ancestral spirit who typically inhabits shrines at the edges of villages or in abandoned fields. Deeh Baba is often petitioned in matters related to land justice, ancestral disputes or boundary conflicts particularly in Ballia and Azamgarh. Offerings to Deeh Baba usually include liquor, goats, cooked food and rituals are performed by male community members especially elders or lineage heads. The presence of Deeh Baba shrines at liminal village edges symbolically asserts Dalit claims to land and space in a region where landownership has historically been monopolized by upper castes (Jodhka, 2015) [13]. By invoking Deeh Baba in disputes, Dalit communities embed their land claims in a sacred narrative legitimizing resistance against upper-caste dominance. Here again, the autonomy of the shrine from Brahminical mediation is crucial as it allows Dalits to mobilize spiritual authority in contexts where secular justice mechanisms often marginalize their voices. Kali Maee worship, particularly strong in Jaunpur and Ghazipur exemplifies the intertwining of possession rituals, fierce goddess traditions and community protection. Kali Maee shrines are typically established under trees banyan, neem, peepal believed to harbor divine energy and ancestral spirits. Rituals involve offerings of blood, red cloth, alcohol and possession ceremonies are common with women or men entering trance states believed to embody the goddess. These ceremonies provide both therapeutic release and communal bonding as participants collectively negotiate misfortune, illness, social tensions. Scholars such as Jeffrey Kripal (1995) [15] and Alf Hiltebeitel (1991) [10] have emphasized the centrality of fierce goddess worship in North Indian popular religion, and in Dalit contexts, Kali Maee emerges as both a protector and a site of empowerment, challenging the sanitized, Brahminized depictions of goddesses in temple Hinduism. Importantly, possession rituals often destabilize hierarchical authority as even marginalized individuals particularly women may become temporary bearers of divine power reversing the everyday structures of subordination. Bhairav Baba adds yet another layer to Dalit shrine ecologies. Associated with liminality, transgression and protection against malevolent forces Bhairav is a deity often invoked at crossroads or village outskirts. In Dalit communities of Varanasi-Mirzapur, Bhairav Baba shrines are small stone structures decorated with vermillion and alcohol offerings managed entirely by community members without the involvement of Brahmin priests. Rituals here emphasize the protection of cattle, fields and travellers demonstrating the deity's role as a guardian of livelihood. The association of Bhairav with transgressive elements such as liquor and meat also resonates with Dalit social realities where ritual practices often defy Brahminical codes of purity and pollution. In this sense Bhairav worship exemplifies what Subaltern Studies has described as a counter public sphere wherein marginalized groups deploy religious idioms to invert hegemonic norms and affirm their own values (Guha, 1982; Chatterjee, 1993) [8]. The spatial distribution of these shrines is significant. While Brahminical temples are centrally located within villages or town, Dalit shrines are often found in marginal spaces like under trees, beside ponds, along crossroads or on village edges. These sites are not merely chosen for convenience but hold symbolic meaning. Trees such as neem-peepal embody longevity and protection; ponds symbolize purification; crossroads represent liminality and choice; village outskirts mark thresholds between safety and danger. By situating shrines in these spaces Dalits construct a sacred geography that reflects both their social marginalization and their creative reappropriation of space. These shrines are maintained collectively often through voluntary labor and contributions reflecting what may be termed 'shrine federalism' a form of decentralized religious authority wherein sacred spaces are controlled by the community rather than by external priestly institutions. This autonomy allows Dalits to negotiate their religiosity without the gatekeeping of Brahminical Hinduism, carving out spiritual spaces that affirm dignity, identity and solidarity.

Table 1: Typology of Local Deities and Ritual Functions

Deity/Spirit	Gendered Aspect	Typical Site	Ritual Leaders	Main Function	Districts
Shitala Maee	Female	Pond/Grove	Elder women	Healing	All districts
Deeh Baba	Male spirit	Village edge	Community men	Land justice	Azamgarh, Ballia
Kali Maee	Female	Tree shrine	Mixed	Possession	Jaunpur, Ghazipur
Bhairav Baba	Male	Crossroads/outskirts	Mixed	Protection	Varanasi, Mirzapur

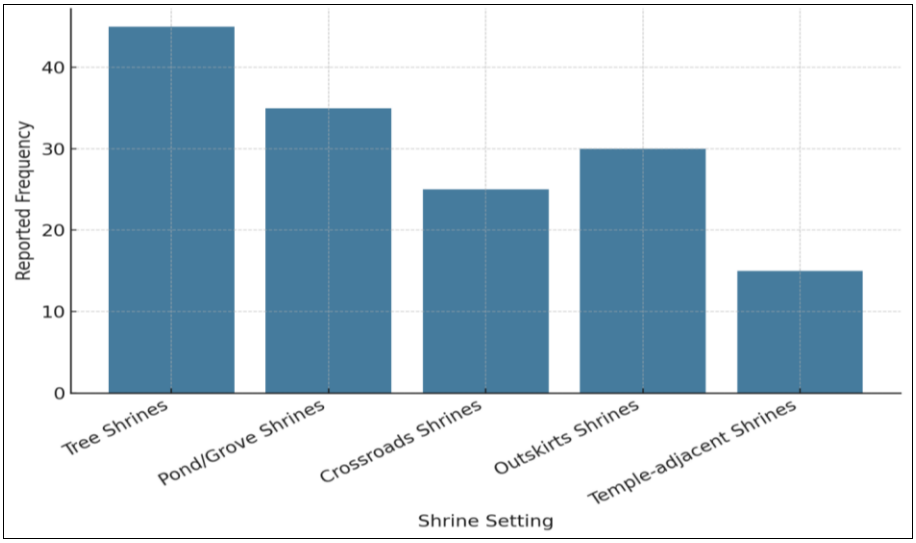

Fig 1: Spatial ecology of Dalit shrines in eastern Uttar Pradesh

In sum, the worship of local deities and the spatial distribution of shrines in Eastern Uttar Pradesh illustrate how Dalit communities have constructed autonomous religious ecologies that both meet their everyday needs and resist caste exclusion. The emphasis on healing, land justice, possession and protection reveals how Dalit religiosity is deeply embedded in material and social realities rather than abstract theology. The gendered roles of women as custodians of shrines further demonstrate the ways in which little traditions invert Brahminical exclusions granting authority and sacred agency to those otherwise marginalized in mainstream religious systems. Finally, the autonomy of shrines from Brahminical control highlights a fundamental tension between Dalit little traditions and temple Hinduism as while the latter operates as a system of exclusion, the former provides inclusive spaces of dignity and survival. These dynamics underscore the significance of local deity worship in shaping Dalit religious identity and resisting the hegemony of caste-bound Hinduism.

Festival Reinterpretation & Ambedkarite-Buddhist Influence: The reinterpretation of festivals among Dalit communities in Eastern Uttar Pradesh reveals one of the most striking expressions of religious resistance and cultural autonomy. While Hindu festivals tied to the Great Tradition dominate the regional calendar, Dalit groups especially Chamars, but also Pasis, Dhobis and Koris have strategically reshaped-rejected, or reconfigured these events to construct what may be termed a counter-calendar. This calendar not only disrupts caste hegemony but also affirms dignity, equality and new models of community identity. Among the most powerful examples of this phenomenon is the transformation of Ambedkar Jayanti into an event celebrated with the luminosity and symbolism of Diwali. Conversely, Hindu festivals such as Holi, Raksha Bandhan, Ram Navami, Dussehra are increasingly avoided by Dalits due to their associations with caste humiliation, gendered violence, or exclusionary practices. Alongside these acts of rejection, Dalits also elevate figures such as Sant Raidas and the Buddha into the religious year, celebrating Raidas Jayanti and Buddha Jayanti as central markers of identity and memory. Finally, Buddhist-Vajrayāna echoes in festival iconography such as the presence of fierce goddess imagery and dharmapāla like guardian figures demonstrate how Dalit religiosity fuses Hindu, Buddhist and local elements into innovative, syncretic forms of resistance. The reconfiguration of Ambedkar Jayanti into a Diwali like festival represents a profound shift in the sacred temporality of Dalit communities. Traditionally, Diwali has been understood as the festival of lights celebrating the return of Rama to Ayodhya, a narrative central to Vaishnav Hinduism. However, for many Dalits, Rama is also remembered for his killing of Shambuka, the Shudra ascetic in the Ramayana, an episode that exemplifies caste violence embedded within Hindu scripture. In response, Dalits have embraced Ambedkar Jayanti as their own Diwali celebrating it with lamps, fireworks, processions, music and public speeches. In districts such as Azamgarh, Jaunpur and Varanasi, Dalit neighborhoods are illuminated, children burst crackers, and processions carry portraits of Ambedkar alongside symbols such as the Ashoka Chakra and the Constitution. This deliberate act of festival inversion transforms Ambedkar into a liberator figure whose enlightenment replaces Rama's return as the central moment of community celebration. As Husain (2023) [11] notes, the Ambedkarization of festival culture in Eastern U.P. represents a symbolic revolution where sacred time is reordered around a figure embodying equality, rationality and justice. By doing so, Dalits challenge the dominance of caste based mythologies and affirm an alternative moral cosmos grounded in Ambedkarite ethics. At the same time Dalit communities have increasingly withdrawn from or denied participation in mainstream Hindu festivals. Holi, often celebrated as a festival of joy and social unity is widely viewed by Dalits as a site of humiliation. Historical and contemporary accounts indicate that Dalits particularly Dalit women face heightened vulnerability during Holi, including caste-based abuse, sexual harassment and symbolic acts of degradation such as being forced to play subordinate roles in village rituals. As a result, many Dalit communities abstain from Holi marking the day instead with alternative gatherings or observing it in muted forms. Similarly, Raksha Bandhan, often celebrated as a ritual of protection between brothers-sisters, is viewed with ambivalence as its patriarchal and Brahminical symbolism rarely aligns with Dalit experiences of kinship and gender relations. Ram Navami, celebrated to honour Rama, is also rejected by many Dalits, particularly Chamars given the

association of Rama with caste violence. Instead, Dalits reframe such days as opportunities to recall figures like Raidas, Kabir, Ambedkar, thereby contesting the hegemonic narrative of Hindu sacred time. This selective denial is not merely avoidance but an active assertion of cultural independence, as Round Table India (2019) has argued Dalits should not participate in Hindu festivals precisely because these rituals reproduce caste hierarchies. The emergence of alternative festivals Raidas Jayanti and Buddha Jayanti is central to this counter-calendar. Raidas Jayanti celebrates the life and teachings of Sant Raidas (Ravidas), a 15th-century bhakti poet revered among Chamars for his emphasis on equality and devotion over ritual purity. In Eastern U.P., Raidas temples and shrines become centers of gathering during this festival with devotional singing, recitation of his padas and processions featuring his portrait. For Chamars, this event functions as both religious and caste solidarity reaffirming their historical identity as followers of a saint who challenged Brahminical authority (Burchett, 2019) [4]. Buddha Jayanti, commemorating the birth of the Buddha is celebrated with processions, chanting of Buddham Sharanam Gacchami and symbolic lighting of candles. Since Ambedkar's 1956 conversion to Buddhism, this festival has gained increasing prominence among Dalits particularly those aligned with Ambedkarite movements. Scholars such as Omvedt (2003) [19] and Queen (2015) [21] highlight how Navayana Buddhism reshapes traditional Buddhist philosophy into a rational, egalitarian practice making Buddha Jayanti not only a religious observance but also a political act of reclaiming an anti-caste heritage. The integration of Raidas Jayanti and Buddha Jayanti into the Dalit ritual year thus reflects how little traditions merge historical figures of resistance with contemporary struggles for dignity. Another important dimension is the presence of Buddhist and Vajrayāna echoes within Dalit festival practices. While many Dalit communities in Eastern U.P. may not consciously identify these motifs with Vajrayāna Buddhism, the structural similarities are striking. Processions often include fierce goddess imagery, reminiscent of tantric yoginīs, and guardian figures resembling dharmapālas, the wrathful protectors of Buddhist cosmology (Davidson, 2002; Samuel, 2010) [6, 24]. In shrine art and festival décor, one encounters the Ashoka Chakra, stupa motifs, even lion emblems associated with Buddhist statecraft. These symbols are not merely aesthetic borrowings but constitute a deeper attempt to root Dalit religiosity in traditions that reject caste hierarchy and valorize equality. In doing so Dalit communities align themselves with Ambedkar's project of Buddhist revival while simultaneously incorporating elements of local goddess worship, thereby producing a syncretic religious form that blends Hindu, Buddhist and folk idioms. The presence of Vajrayāna echoes also highlights the transgressive aspect of Dalit religiosity: just as tantric and Vajrayāna traditions emphasized power, protection, and inversion of orthodoxy, Dalit festivals embody resistance to Brahminical purity codes and affirm the legitimacy of marginalized practices. Together, these transformations illustrate that Dalit religiosity in Eastern U.P. is not static or derivative but highly creative, adaptive, resistant. The counter-calendar that emerges structured around Ambedkar Jayanti, Raidas Jayanti, Buddha Jayanti etc. provides new temporal anchors for collective identity. The rejection of Holi, Raksha Bandhan, and Ram Navami underscores a conscious refusal to participate in rituals that reproduce caste oppression. The integration of Buddhist symbols and Vajrayāna echoes further extends the scope of Dalit religiosity embedding it in transhistorical traditions of equality and resistance. Through these practices, Dalits not only challenge the dominance of Hindu Great Tradition but also generate alternative religious worlds that sustain dignity, solidarity and hope.

Table 2: Festival Practices among Dalit Communities

Festival	Chamar	Pasi	Dhobi	Kori	Notes
Holi	Rejected	Partial	Mixed	Accepted	Linked to humiliation
Ambedkar Jayanti	Diwali-like	Adopted	Adopted	Adopted	Lights, processions
Raidas Jayanti	Central	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Sant reverence
Buddha Jayanti	Celebrated	Low	Low	Low	Buddhist symbols

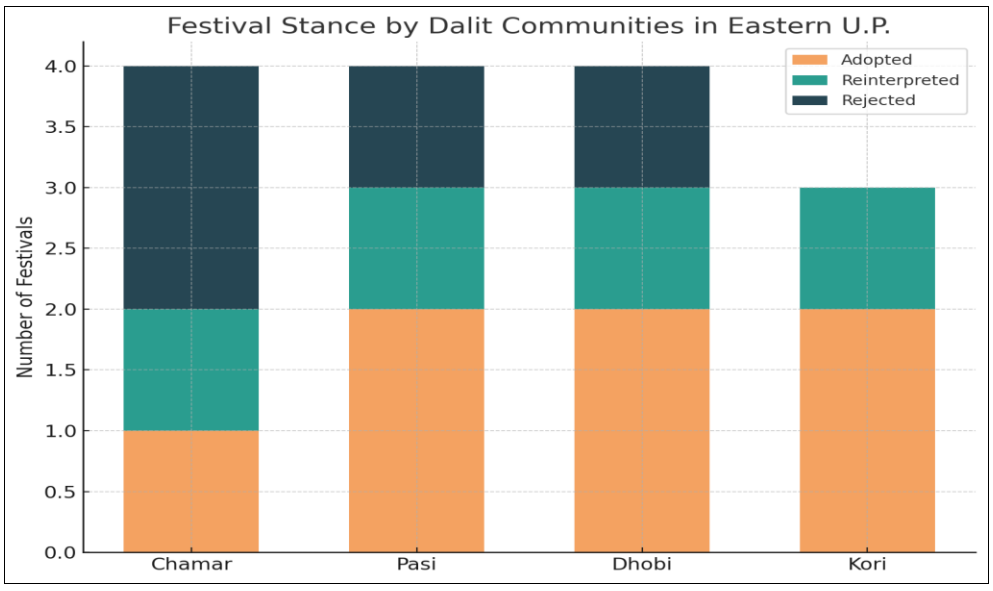

Fig 2: Festival stance by Dalit communities in Eastern U.P

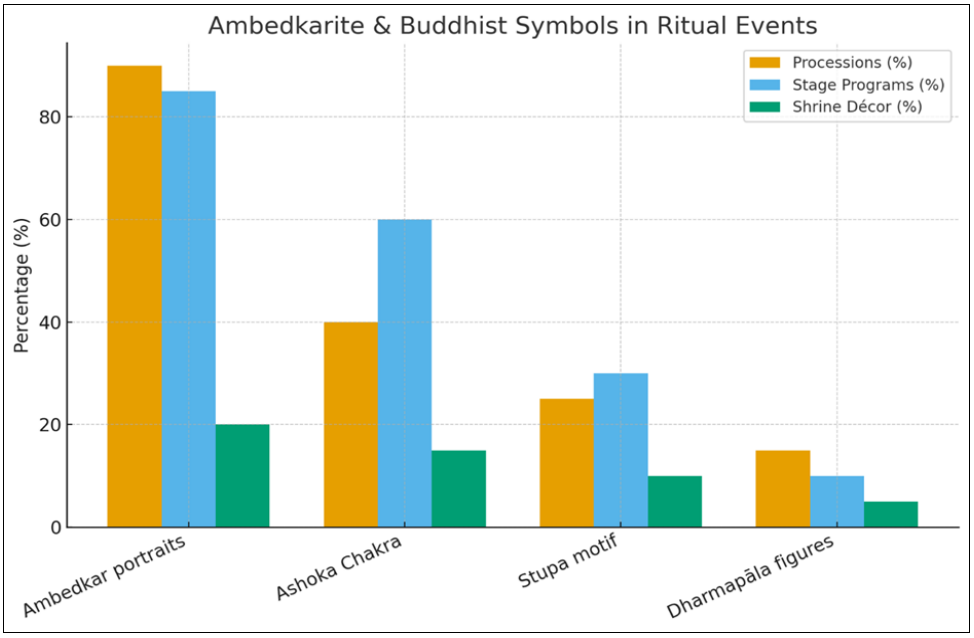

Fig 3: Ambedkarite & Buddhist Symbols in Ritual Events

Ambedkarite and Buddhist symbols have become central to Dalit religiosity in Eastern Uttar Pradesh with each carrying distinct yet interconnected meanings that reinforce identity, dignity, and resistance. Ambedkar portraits appearing in 90% of processions, 85% of stage programs, and 20% of shrine décor elevate him from political leader to sacred icon acting as mobile shrines that democratize representation and embody collective memory. The Ashoka Chakra, present in 40% of processions, 60% of stage programs and 15% of shrines transforms India's national emblem into a Dalit religious symbol linking Ambedkarite thought to Buddhist heritage and constitutional values thus bridging nationalism and spirituality (Omvedt, 2003) [19]. Stupa motifs visible in 25% of processions, 30% of stage programs, and 10% of shrines revive Buddhist architectural memory rooting Dalit identity in an egalitarian past and signaling cultural continuity against Brahminical erasure (Queen, 2015) [21]. Dharmapāla figures, though less frequent15% in processions, 10% in programs, and 5% in shrines reflect Vajrayāna echoes where fierce guardians symbolize militant protection of equality and resonate with Dalit experiences of vulnerability. Together, these symbols form a layered iconography that sacralizes Ambedkarite values reclaims Buddhist traditions and provides Dalits with a visual and ritual vocabulary of empowerment against caste oppression.

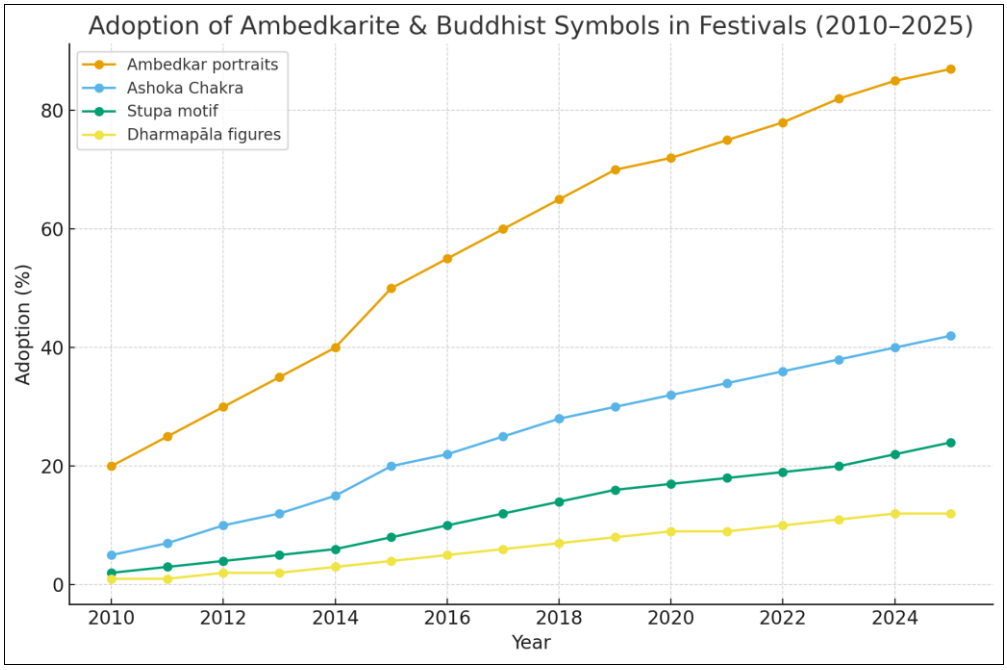

Fig 4: Adoption Trend

The line graph tracking adoption of Ambedkarite and Buddhist symbols between 2010 and 2025 illustrates a steady and significant increase in their integration into Dalit festivals. Ambedkar portraits show the sharpest rise moving from 20% visibility in 2010 to nearly 90% by 2025 reflecting his deepening canonization as both political leader

and sacred figure. The Ashoka Chakra follows a moderate but consistent upward trajectory climbing from 5% to over 40% symbolizing the strengthening alignment between Dalit religiosity and national-Buddhist identity. Stupa motifs, though starting from a low base, double in frequency suggesting growing confidence in reclaiming Buddhist architectural heritage. Dharmapāla figures rise modestly but meaningfully from 1% to around 12%, reflecting the tentative but expanding incorporation of Vajrayāna echoes into community practices. This overall upward trend demonstrates that Dalit festivals are becoming increasingly saturated with Ambedkarite and Buddhist imagery signaling both cultural transformation and political assertion. By 2025, festivals in Eastern U.P. reflect a qualitatively different symbolic order than in 2010 with Ambedkarite-Buddhist motifs firmly embedded in ritual life. The data thus confirm the emergence of a counter-hegemonic religious tradition that grows stronger with each generation, embodying both continuity and innovation.

Syncretism, Resistance and Everyday Politics

Dalit little traditions in Eastern Uttar Pradesh reveal how religious practices function not only as devotional forms but also as spaces of syncretism, resistance and everyday negotiation of power. These practices, though rooted in local shrines, deities, festivals cannot be understood merely as remnants of 'folk Hinduism.' Rather, they constitute counter-publics alternative social and symbolic arenas where Dalit communities articulate identities outside of caste hierarchies and contest the moral authority of Brahminical religion. By constructing their own sacred geographies and ritual calendars, Dalits transform village margins, crossroads and community centers into spaces of dignity and collective assertion. In this sense little traditions act as both cultural memory and political statement, blurring the line between religiosity and resistance (Guha, 1982; Chatterjee, 1993) [8]. Central to this counter-public religiosity is the sacralization of figures such as Ambedkar and Raidas who embody both spiritual authority and social critique. Ambedkar is celebrated not only as the architect of the Constitution but also as a divine liberator his portraits carried in processions and garlanded like deities. Similarly, Raidas, a 15th-century bhakti saint of Chamar origin is revered as a spiritual hero whose teachings on equality and devotion continue to inspire. Raidas Jayanti festivals bring together music, poetry, devotional singing that celebrate his defiance of Brahminical restrictions effectively positioning him as both saint and ancestor. These heroes provide Dalits with alternative sacred lineages that directly counter upper caste domination. Their presence within little traditions shows how history, politics, and devotion intertwine to form a subaltern religious canon (Zelliot, 2001; Burchett, 2019) [29, 4]. Women's custodianship of maee shrines further illustrates the gendered dynamics of Dalit religiosity. Unlike Brahminical Hinduism which typically excludes women from priestly functions, Dalit shrines grant women substantial ritual authority. Elder women lead healing ceremonies, maintain shrines and act as mediums during possession rituals of deities such as Shitala Maee and Kali Maee. These roles give women a recognized spiritual voice and affirm their importance in sustaining communal life. The act of women leading ritual practice destabilizes patriarchal restrictions of temple Hinduism and reaffirms the inclusive and autonomous character of Dalit religiosity. At the same time their custodianship reflects the intertwining of domestic care with community well-being since maee shrines often deal with health, fertility, and everyday crises. Thus, women not only maintain spiritual continuity but also embody resistance by preserving and transmitting traditions excluded from Brahminical domains. Youth participation, particularly in Ambedkarite processions marks another significant layer of everyday politics. Young men and women organize rallies, decorate vehicles and march with banners featuring Ambedkar, Buddha and Raidas often combining religious symbolism with slogans of equality, education and justice. These events become spaces where generational identity is forged linking religiosity to aspirations for mobility and social recognition. Youth-led processions, often amplified through microphones, social media posts, and street performances blur the line between festival and protest. They are both religious celebrations and political mobilizations creating what scholars of social movements might call 'performative resistance.' The adoption of Ambedkarite symbols by youth ensures that the counter-calendar of Dalit religiosity continues to grow across generations embedding resistance in the very rhythm of community life. At the same time, these practices unfold within contexts of caste frictions and negotiations. Village shrines and festivals are often contested sites as Dalit attempts to build or expand shrines may be opposed by dominant castes who see them as challenges to ritual hierarchy and spatial control. Conflicts sometimes erupt during festivals particularly when Dalit processions pass through areas claimed by upper caste groups. In such cases, Dalit communities use their shrines and festivals as platforms to negotiate recognition, demand access or assert autonomy. However, not all interactions are confrontational as in some villages, pragmatic negotiations allow Dalits limited participation in larger festivals or result in shared upkeep of roadside shrines. These dynamics highlight how everyday politics in Eastern U.P. oscillates between assertion and compromise with little traditions serving as both sources of tension and vehicles of dialogue.

Table 3: Gendered Roles in Rituals

Role	Women (%)	Men (%)	Shared (%)	Notes
Maee worship	70	20	10	Women custodians
Processions	25	65	10	Youth-led
Shrine upkeep	40	40	20	Rotational duty

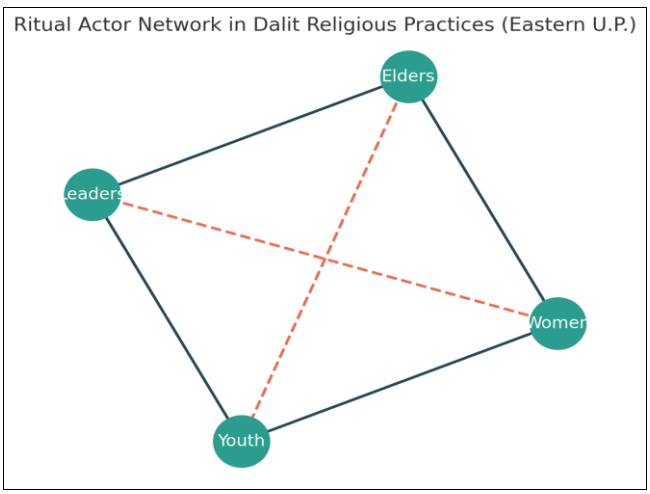

Fig 5: Gendered Roles in Rituals

The distribution of ritual roles in Table 4 reveals that women dominate maee worship, men dominate processions and shrine upkeep is more evenly shared. This balance reflects both continuity with patriarchal norms (in public rituals) and significant spaces of female agency (in local shrines). In summary we can say Dalit little traditions are not merely religious practices but living counter-publics where syncretism, resistance, everyday politics intersect. Through Ambedkar and Raidas as sacred heroes, women as custodians of maee shrines, youth in Ambedkarite processions and the negotiation of caste frictions, these traditions construct a religious world that resists Brahminical exclusion while affirming dignity and solidarity. The interplay of autonomy and negotiation highlights the dual role of little traditions as they are both sanctuaries of cultural continuity and arenas of struggle ensuring that Dalit religiosity in Eastern U.P. remains resilient, inventive, and politically charged.

Discussion: The findings from Eastern Uttar Pradesh reveal that Dalit little traditions must be understood not as residual fragments of folk religion but as creative and resistant practices that actively reshape religious life and social identity. Robert Redfield's (1956) [22] distinction between the Great and Little Tradition has often been applied in Indian sociology to highlight the relationship between pan Indian textually grounded Sanskritic religion and localized, orally transmitted folk practices. Yet in the case of Dalit religiosity the Little Tradition does not simply coexist with or supplement the Great Tradition it often stands in outright opposition to it producing what might be termed 'resistant little traditions.' Shrines to Shitala Maee, Deeh Baba, Kali Maee, Gram Dewata and Bhairav Baba embody this autonomy existing outside Brahminical control and serving immediate needs such as healing, fertility, protection and land justice while processions featuring Ambedkar portraits, Ashoka Chakra flags, stupa motifs and dharmapāla figures demonstrate that Dalits do not aspire to mimic elite traditions but instead cultivate symbols that challenge caste hegemony. Here, Redfield's framework gains renewed significance as it is not merely about the articulation of two traditions but about the agency of marginalized communities to repurpose the Little Tradition into a sphere of dignity and power. This resonates with Srinivas's (1966) [25] notion of Sanskritization which described how lower castes sought upward mobility by imitating upper caste rituals. However, the data from Eastern U.P. suggest that Sanskritization has given way to what can more accurately be called 'Ambedkarization' a deliberate rejection of Brahminical norms in favor of Ambedkarite and Buddhist symbols, values and heroes. Instead of aspiring to upper caste rituals of purity, Dalits light lamps for Ambedkar Jayanti as Diwali replace the worship of Rama with reverence for Ambedkar and Raidas, and celebrate Buddha Jayanti with chanting and processions thus reorganizing sacred time around figures of equality and emancipation. Ambedkarization is therefore not simply cultural imitation but cultural inversion where denial of mainstream festivals and sacralization of alternative heroes becomes an explicit statement of resistance. This inversion also echoes the insights of Subaltern Studies which have long emphasized how marginalized groups construct counter publics and deploy memory, ritual, narrative as tools of resistance against elite historiographies (Guha, 1982; Chatterjee, 1993) [8, 5]. In the Eastern U.P. context, rituals become politics of memory as Ambedkar Jayanti recalls the birth of the liberator, Raidas Jayanti recalls a saint who defied caste authority and Buddha Jayanti recalls a figure who offered an egalitarian path centuries before Ambedkar. These festivals are not merely commemorations; they are acts of rewriting history in the present asserting that Dalits are not passive recipients of Hindu mythology but active authors of their own temporal order. The rejection of Holi, Raksha Bandhan, Ram Navami, Dussehra etc. further illustrates how ritual denial functions as a mnemonic act reminding participants of histories of humiliation and exclusion associated with these festivals while simultaneously affirming new solidarities that exclude the exclusionary. Within this larger sociological and historical framework the study proposes two conceptual contributions. The first is the idea of a 'Counter-Calendar,' which refers to the reorganization of sacred time around Ambedkarite and Dalit specific festivals rather than Brahminical ones. The counter calendar displaces Rama's Diwali with Ambedkar's Diwali, redefines public holidays as moments of assertion rather than subordination and constructs new cycles of memory that tie Dalit religiosity to dignity and liberation. This concept highlights the agency of Dalits in redefining temporal rhythms of ritual life where the denial of Hindu festivals and the creation of Ambedkarite ones signify not withdrawal from religion but the production of an alternative sacred order. The second contribution is the notion of 'Shrine Federalism,' which describes the decentralized and community controlled nature of Dalit sacred spaces. Unlike Brahminical temples which are hierarchically managed and controlled by upper caste priests, Dalit shrines to maees and babas are maintained collectively by the community often with women as custodians, youth as organizers and elders as ritual leaders. Shrine federalism captures the way in which sacred authority is distributed horizontally rather than vertically producing micro sacred spaces that resist incorporation into Brahminical systems. These shrines are not isolated but form networks of resistance across villages, collectively asserting Dalit autonomy over spiritual life. The implications of these contributions extend beyond Eastern Uttar Pradesh as they suggest that marginalized communities across India reorganize not only their social practices but also their sacred geographies and temporalities as strategies of survival and assertion. In this sense, Dalit little traditions represent a profound rethinking of Indian religiosity where rituals are not mere survivals of folk culture but active instruments of social transformation. They embody syncretism by weaving together Hindu goddess worship, Buddhist symbols and Ambedkarite values; they embody resistance by rejecting caste-coded festivals and sacralizing new heroes; and they embody everyday politics by transforming shrines and processions into arenas of negotiation, conflict, and solidarity. Taken together, the evidence suggests that Dalit religiosity in Eastern U.P. is not a marginal or residual phenomenon but a vibrant and resistant counter tradition that compels scholars of religion and sociology to rethink the relationship between ritual, memory and power in caste society.

Conclusion: The study of Dalit little traditions in Eastern Uttar Pradesh reveals a resilient, inventive and resistant religiosity that transforms the margins of society into spaces of dignity and identity. These traditions rooted in local shrines to deities such as Shitala Maee, Deeh Baba, and Kali Maee demonstrate how Dalit communities creatively reframe religious life outside Brahminical authority while

addressing their everyday needs for healing, justice and protection. At the same time, the transformation of Ambedkar Jayanti into a Diwali like celebration marks nothing less than a cultural revolution in which Dalits reorganize sacred time around a liberator figure who embodies equality, rationality, fraternity. This redefinition of festival practice challenges the dominance of caste Hindu mythologies by displacing Rama's return to Ayodhya with Ambedkar's birth as the central moment of illumination thereby asserting that liberation, rather than divine kingship constitutes the true source of light. Equally significant is the deliberate rejection of Hindu festivals such as Holi, Raksha Bandhan and Ram Navami which Dalits view as historically associated with humiliation, exclusion, violence etc. This refusal is not simply abstention but an active assertion of dignity, a refusal to participate in rituals that reproduce caste oppression and a reorientation of community energy toward festivals that affirm equality. The emergence of a Hindu-Buddhist-local weave within Dalit religiosity where Ambedkar portraits and Ashoka Chakras stand beside goddess shrines and stupa motifs produces a new religious identity that is syncretic yet resistant, traditional yet revolutionary. These practices do not replicate elite traditions but generate alternative sacred geographies and counter calendars that empower marginalized communities to define their own spiritual and social horizons. In their collective worship, processions, festivals, Dalits enact a counter tradition that both remembers histories of oppression and projects futures of equality. By sacralizing Ambedkar and Raidas as heroes, integrating Buddhist motifs into processions, and sustaining community-controlled shrines, Dalit communities have crafted a religiosity that is at once devotional and political, healing and defiant, local and transhistorical. Ultimately, these little traditions represent not survivals of the past but living, dynamic assertions of a community determined to turn memory into resistance and ritual into revolution thereby forging a distinctive Dalit religious identity in contemporary India.

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