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Dalit Catholic Home Shrines in a North Indian Village

Mathew Schmalz

College of the Holy Cross, mschmalz@holycross.edu

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MATHEW N. SCHMALZ

Dalit Catholic Home Shrines in a North Indian Village

Thank you for your presentation, Professor. But are these your meanings, or theirs?¹

Introduction

It was a fair question and one I had trouble answering to the satisfaction of many members of the audience. I was at Dharmaram Vidhya Kshetram, the chief seminary of the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate in Bangalore, and I had just finished presenting on Dalit Catholic home shrines in a North Indian village. The question was not intended to put me “on the spot” in some sort of confrontational way, but it did generate discussion: on what basis was I arguing for my particular approach to the material? What have we really learned about Dalit Catholic home shrines and why is it important?

Of course, home shrines are quite common in India. Muslim homes have special spaces set aside for images that focalize or direct worship: Ka’ba, the great mosque in Mecca, or sometimes Burāq or the Dome of the Rock. Most Hindu homes have a room for household deities, and even those dwellings that do not have space for an entire room will have an alcove for an image or statue. In South Asian studies, textbooks on lived Hinduism identify the domestic shrine as a particularly important locus of religious expression. For example, Nancy Auer Faulk argues that Hindu home shrines, and the practices associated with them, reveal “two premises of popular Hindu thought:” the human and divine worlds are separated by only a “very thin veil” but certain forces can prevent their beneficial interpenetration.² Moving away from the Indian sub-continent, but focusing still on Hindus of South Asian descent, Shampa and Sanjoy Mazumdar

¹ Audience member responding to Mathew N. Schmalz, “Dalit Catholic Home Shrines in a North Indian Village,” (paper presented for Indian Cultures, Catholic Cultures: A Workshop on Rites, Religiosity, and Cultural Diversity in Indian Catholicism, Dharmaram Vidhya Kshetram, Bangalore, January 13, 2015).

² Nancy Auer Falk, *Living Hinduisms: An Explorers Guide* (New York: Thompson Wadsworth, 2006), 119.

consider household practices connected with domestic shrines as forms of socialization for Hindu Americans. In addition to arguing for the functional significance of home shrines, Mazumdar and Mazumdar maintain that taking domestic religion seriously offers an important counter-point to Eurocentric paradigms that privilege public, congregational, religious expression.³

Scholarship on material religion has also taken greater notice of home shrines, or domestic religious art and visuals, by speculating on how such expressions might be theorized. In her study of women's home altars, Kay Turner speaks of how the "art and meaning of women's altars" provides access to the hopes, dreams, and imaginings of the women who construct them.⁴ Colleen McDanell also addresses home altars and domestic images in her influential discussion of material Christianity, orienting her analysis around the relationship between image and affect to argue that material religion mediates modes of sensory experience.⁵ David Morgan observes that religious visual culture "embodies" belief and directs special attention to how images are used.⁶ Post-modern scholarship on materiality has also played with the notion of what could be called "the thingness of things" and takes pleasure in deconstructing the distinction between subject and object.⁷

All these approaches problematize the apparent simplicity of the question of where we locate meaning when we observe an object or a constellation of objects. But the question about whose meaning is being privileged, in this case my own or those of the Dalit Catholics, is still important because it opens up consideration of the boundary between observer and observed, not to mention the broader question of what significance—if any—academic interpretations can reasonably claim.

Before we engage the thoughtful question posed by my interlocutor, we will figuratively travel to the village of Jasdeopur, in the Muhammadabad District of Eastern Uttar Pradesh. There we will investigate three Catholic home shrines of the Dalit community. I will present, or re-present, these home shrines through a narrative that emphasizes my varied interactions with those who constructed the shrines and invited me into their homes. In the conclusion of this article, I will return to the question recorded above and suggest that such inquiries—though clearly well intentioned—can mislead us to thinking that home shrines and other collections of material objects are somehow static conveyors of meaning.

³ Shampa Mazumdar and Sanjoy Mazumdar, "Creating the Sacred: Altars in the Hindu American Home," in *Revealing the Sacred in Asian and Pacific America*, ed. Jane Naomi Iwamura and Paul Spickard (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 143-157.

⁴ Kay Turner, *Beautiful Necessity: The Art and Meaning of Women's Altars* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1999).

⁵ Colleen McDanell, *Material Christianity* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1995).

⁶ David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 21.

⁷ For a helpful overview of this scholarly tendency, see Daniel Miller, "Materiality: An Introduction," in *Materiality*, ed. Daniel Miller (London and Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 1-50.

“Meaning” can mean many things or nothing at all, depending upon the terms we are using and the scholarly methods we deploy. The crucial aspect of Dalit Catholic home shrines is that they are literally open to interpretation and reinterpretation, to touching and being touched. Their significance—their meaning—depends not on decoding their structure or symbolic logic, but interacting with them as part of a larger network of human and material connections and interpenetrations.

Jasdeopur

The village of Jasdeopur lies about half a kilometer back from the main road that leads from Varanasi—some 120 kilometers to the south—to Ballia and up to the city of Gorakhpur. From the main road, fields of wheat and lentils are visible and a dirt road to Jasdeopur branches off to parallel the fields and cuts past a soccer pitch before space opens up to reveal closely packed homes that are typical of the layout of most villages in this agricultural region that borders the Ganges river.

Figure 1. The Fields of Jasdeopur (photograph by author, 2014).

In a colony separate from the main village, lives the Dalit community and Catholic families primarily belonging to the Chamar caste, a community long associated with tanning and considered “untouchable.”⁸ While Dalits in Jasdeopur do possess deeds and titles for the plots on which their homes are built, they have no land of their own for cultivation and therefore work the crops for the dominant Bhumihār caste. Jasdeopur’s Dalit community has resisted this subordinate status,

⁸ For an overview of the Chamar caste, its traditions and folklore, see George Briggs, *The Chamars* (New Delhi: D. K. Publishers, 1995); most recently, it has been argued—quite persuasively—that the association between Chamars and tanning was a product of British colonial policy, see Ramnarayan S. Rawat, *Reconsidering Untouchability: Chamars and Dalit History in North India* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2011).

and one time came together to renounce the caste-based obligation to remove dead cattle. But the landowners countered by taking away rights or easements for crossing over their land and thus prevented Dalits from using the fields for their latrine and for scavenging to collect dung or firewood. The landowners eventually prevailed and the Dalits were forced to go back to their traditional caste-based work.⁹ Sixteen years ago, several years after the failed protest, the colony looked like this:

Figure 2. Dalit Colony, Jasdeopur, 2000 (photograph by author).

Since that time, however, conditions have improved in rapid and unexpected ways. Although caste-based discrimination and segregation still exist, most Dalit families have a *pakkā ghar*, built of brick and concrete. Also, latrines have been constructed so that women no longer have to go to the fields to relieve themselves. The “Accredited Social Health Activist” Program (ASHA) has directly impacted health care delivery by placing a trained female health care advocate in the village.¹⁰ Dalits are also given financial incentives to go to the doctor or local hospital when the need arises. The local Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA), Afsal Ansārī, and his Qaumī Ektā Dal (National

⁹ I discuss this resistance more fully in Mathew N. Schmalz, “Christianity: Culture, Identity, and Agency,” in *A Companion to the Anthropology of India*, ed. Elizabeth Clark-Deces (London: Wiley Blackwell, 2011), 277-294; see also, Mathew N. Schmalz, “Dalit Catholic Tactics of Marginality at a North Indian Mission,” *History of Religions* 44: 3(2005): 216-251.

¹⁰ The “Accredited Social Health Activist” Program is known by the acronym “ASHA,” which means “hope” in Hindi and is also common female name: on ASHA, see “About ASHA,” <http://nrhm.gov.in/communitisation/asha/about-asha.html> (accessed Sept. 12, 2016).

Unity Party) are known for their strong advocacy of the district's Dalit and Muslim communities and this political protection and influence have provided periodic respites from the anti-caste violence that has historically plagued the area.¹¹ The most obvious sign of progress is the appearance of many of the homes: they are larger and give greater opportunities for creative self-expression by the Dalit families who live in them.

Figure 3. Sign Informing Jasdeopur's Residents about the ASHA Program (photograph by author, 2014).

¹¹ It is important to also mention that the Qaumī Ektā Dal is itself quite controversial, given its association with Afsal Ansārī's brother Mukhtār, see "BJP Denounces SP, QED Alliance, Says Merger Will Worsen Law and Order in UP," *DNA India* (August 30, 2016) available: <http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-bjp-denounces-sp-qed-alliance-says-merger-will-worsen-law-and-order-in-up-2250233>; for a narrative of a period of violence in the area associated with the Naxalite movement in the 1960s, see Mathew N. Schmalz, "The Death of Comrade Moti: Practicing Catholic Untouchable Rage in a North Indian Village," in *Practicing Catholic: Body, Performance and Contestation in Catholic Faith*, eds. Bruce Morrill, Jody Ziegler, and Susan Rodgers (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 139-155.

Figure 4: Jasdeopur's Dalit Colony in 2014 (photograph by author).

The Dalit Catholic community grew and developed from the 1940s onwards as the result of initial missionary work by Canadian Capuchins and later by the Indian Missionary Society, an indigenous Indian religious order that came to the area in the 1960s. At first, relations between the Catholic converts and the larger Dalit community were tense and antagonistic: individual Dalit Catholic converts were often expelled from the Chamar caste of their birth.¹² Beginning in the 1970s such social sanctions relaxed. Still, up until quite recently, the preferred term of self-identification among Catholics was *Īsāī*, which simply means “Christian.” However, with the recent electoral successes of the Bahujan Samāj Pārtī and former Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Māyāwatī Prabhu Dās, Catholics have embraced the term allied with “Bahujan:” “Dalit,” meaning “oppressed” or “crushed.”¹³

Catholic Home Shrines

The Bishop of The Varanasi diocese, who has jurisdiction over Jasdeopur and surrounding villages, encouraged the construction of home altars as part of the “new evangelization” inaugurated by St. John Paul II. The bishop evidently understood home shrines or altars as facilitating the process of catechesis and socialization into Catholic piety: catechists would be encouraged to visit homes

¹² For a discussion of the outcastings and the marginal status of early Dalit Catholic converts, see Mathew N. Schmalz, “Images of the Body in the Life and Death of a North Indian Catholic Catechist,” *History of Religions* 39 (November 1999): 177-201, available: http://crossworks.holycross.edu/rel_faculty_pub/1/

¹³ “Bahujan” literally means “majority.” Dalit Studies is an important, emerging, field. For an overview of current scholarship and scholarly trajectories associated with Dalit communities, see Ramnarayan S. Rawat & K. Satyanarayana eds., *Dalit Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

and say the rosary with the family assembled against the backdrop of the home shrine. Beyond providing an opportunity for doctrinal instruction, it seems clear that home shrines were also intended as a continuing part of the inculturation movement that seeks to “Indianize” Catholicism. The fact that a shrine of some sort is a consistent feature of Hindu homes offered a cultural practice that Catholics could replicate while still emphasizing their own distinct identity.¹⁴

I must admit that while I was in Jasdeopur, I never saw a catechist “on his rounds” from the local mission. But in walking through the narrow pathways of the Dalit colony, I was invited into a number of Catholic homes so that I could see altars and shrines. In one home, a multi-room dwelling made of brick and distinguished by a bright green wash or glaze, lived a newly converted family that I had not known during my extended period of research in the area in the mid-1990s. The head of the household, wearing a white dhoti and blue button down shirt, motioned for me to enter and in the sitting room was a shrine taking up one full shelf, inset into the wall.

The centerpiece of the shrine was a picture that alternated between the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary. A paper copy of the New Testament in Hindi was to the side of the picture, and the display was filled out with various travel or pilgrimage artifacts: a replica of the Taj Mahal; boxes of flowers; plastic pears in a vase. At first glance, the display might seem to have a rather haphazard or cluttered quality. But as far as the “clutter” is concerned, the presentation perhaps reveals not a lack of space but a surplus that can be filled with material objects—appropriate for one of the larger homes in a colony that only a decade ago was dominated by one or two room mud huts with roofs of thatch. And the clutter gives momentum to the motion suggested not only by the shifting images of Jesus and Mary but by objects like pears—which are not grown in the area—and the Taj Mahal replica, which evoke distant geographic locales. There is also a small heart-pillow in a box that mirrors the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary; the words “love life” are embroidered on it and intensify the association with difference and distinctiveness by pointing beyond the Hindi and Bhojpuri speaking confines of the area.

¹⁴ The inculturation movement began in earnest in the 1960s and remains controversial—especially in the view of many Dalits—because it assumes a close connection between “Indian” and Braminical Hindu identity. On this theme and for a further discussion of the impact of inculturation in this part of North India, see Mathew N. Schmalz, “*Ad Experimentum*: Theology, Anthropology and the Paradoxes of Indian Catholic Inculturation,” in *Theology and the Social Sciences*, ed. Michael Barnes (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 161-180 and Mathew N. Schmalz, “The Indian Church: Catholicism and Indian Nationhood,” in eds. Paul Christopher Manuel, Lawrence C. Reardon, and Clyde Wilcox *The Catholic Church and the Nation State: Comparative Perspectives* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2006), 209-225.

Figure 5. Home shrine with Sacred/Immaculate Heart (photograph by author 2014).

Surveying the images and objects on the shelf, I asked my host, “Do you pray here every night?”

“Yes. We light incense, say the rosary. Sometimes our neighbors come.”

“And the catechist—does he come?” I was trying to get some hard ethnographic data about how the home shrine was used.

“Not really.”

“There’s a lot stuff on the shelf,” I remarked.

“Yes. A lot—some of it was brought by relatives, friends.”

“Then there’s Bābā Sāheb.” I said, motioning to the calendar facing the shrine.

“Yes!” My host’s face brightened. “Do you know about Bābā Sāheb?”

Figure 6. Dr. Bhīmrāv Ambedkar
“Bābā Sāheb”
(photograph by author, 2014).

I nodded my head side to side, indicating that I did know something about “Bābā Sāheb,” Dr. Bhīmrao Ambedkar, Columbia University graduate, architect of India’s Constitution, convert from Hinduism to Buddhism, and founder of the Dalit movement. I was offered a chair, and a glass of water followed by puffed rice (*muramure*), which was generously set before me on a stainless steel plate.

“You know, Bābā Sāheb, was India’s most educated man,” my host said.

I nodded again and observed, “When I came here in the 1990s, no one called themselves Dalits.”

“We’ve learned—we’ve progressed. You’ve seen how much things have changed—where we’ve come since then.”¹⁵

“I certainly have,” I said as I sipped water and shifted the puffed rice from one hand to another. It seemed to me the collection of images and artifacts on the shelf was best understood not as a backdrop for catechesis or Catholic piety. Instead, it was a kind of aspirational travelogue but no less a shrine: it sacralized more expansive notions of space and identity in charting out a journey from Untouchable to Catholic, then to Dalit and beyond.

After bidding farewell to my gracious host, I went a little further into the colony to where Gyān Prākāś lives. I had known him since my initial research in the area some twenty years earlier. While socio-economic progress in Jasdeopur

Figure 7. Gyān Prākāś
(photograph by author, 2014).

¹⁵ For a discussion of the term “Dalit” and how it has been used in the area among Catholics, see Mathew N. Schmalz, “The Broken Mirror: John Masih’s Journey from Isai to Dalit,” in *On the Margins of Faith: Dalit and Tribal Christianity in India*, eds. Rowena Robinson and Joseph Marianus Kujur (Delhi: Sage Publications, 2010), 185-210.

cannot be denied, and certainly counters the caricature of Indian village life as hermetically sealed and unchanging, it is not as though all homes have been upgraded with new walls, roofs, and fresh coatings of paint or white wash.¹⁶ For those whose homes are one room mud huts or small dwellings of cracking bricks, sleeping, entertaining, and other family activities happen in a close space. With such limitations, it is often difficult to find a place for a formal shrine—one might very well have pictures, but they also have to be carefully placed.

Gyān Prākāś' home had changed little in its external construction over the past two decades. When I visited Jasdeopur in the spring of 2013, I learned that his mother had recently passed away. He lives in the same home in which he was born. Over the threshold of his home, there is a cross. Even before conversion to Catholicism, the cross had always had a special significance for the area's Dalits as a brand burned onto the abdomen to protect from the evil eye. The cross bifurcates the Hindi phrase, "Íśwar Ko Dhanyawād" or "Thanks be to God:" a blessing and protective utterance that guards anyone who makes the transition from outside to inside.¹⁷

Figure 8: "Thanks be to God" (photograph by the author, 2014).

¹⁶ For an extensive discussion and critique of the trope of rural India as unchanging, see Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 131-161.

¹⁷ Images or statues of Lord Gaṇeśa, the god of good fortune and remover of obstacles, also serve a similar function when placed over doors or thresholds in Hindu homes.

Moving across the threshold of Gyān Prākāś' home, one is immediately confronted by an old water tank. And on it is a picture of Jesus's sacred heart with the words in Hindi: "What could be lacking where God is? There's boundless joy established here that will endure—thanks be to Lord Jesus."

Figure 9: Water Tank Inscription
(photograph by author, 2014).

What is most interesting is a longer piece of text in Hindi that is situated below a picture of the crucified Jesus. The Hindi reads:

Everyday I surrender before God Jesus and everyday I say the rosary before Mother Mary. From 7:30 to 8:30, at my door on Thursday, I know that you speak the truth and you are not distracted, and do not show off and give lessons about the path of God.¹⁸

¹⁸ A previous version of this article mistranslated “dandvat” (surrender) as “dhanyawād” (thanks).

Figure 10. Hindi text, Gyān Prākāś' home
(photograph by author, 2014).

Admittedly, the text is and was rather cryptic for me—especially the last part. In this area of North India, the verbs agreeing with masculine pronouns “I,” “you,” and “they” have the same ending in colloquial speech, and Gyān Prākāś has only included a limited number of personal pronouns in the text. So, I asked him about it.

“I wrote it myself,” he said. “I give lessons here every week.”

Gyān Prākāś has embraced charismatic Catholicism—a form of religiosity that emphasizes “Pentecostal” or “charismatic” gifts such as prophecy, healing, and speaking in tongues.¹⁹ And so, while he was never able to take advantage of government schemes to renovate his home and he still works as a manual laborer,

¹⁹ For more on the Catholic charismatic movement and its influence in the area, especially among Dalits, see Mathew N. Schmalz, “Boundaries and Appropriations in North Indian Charismatic Catholicism,” *Engaging South Asian Religions: Boundaries, Appropriations and Resistances*, eds. Mathew N. Schmalz and Peter Gottschalk (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), 85-112; see also Mathew N. Schmalz, “Dalit Christian Pentecostalism in a North Indian Village,” *Dalit International Newsletter* 7 (October 2001): 7-9.

he nonetheless claims an inspired identity as an interpreter of scripture. The texts in his home are reminders to be grateful and also a gentle admonition to others to look beyond appearances to see God's peace and love in his home. Materiality is displaced by text—by words—that convey a deeper, hidden reality other than the immediate material reality of a humble home. The use of Hindi, along with English, gives a sense of authority—after all, Gyān Prākāś was the first person in his family to learn how to read and write. And it was in the charismatic movement that Gyān Prākāś gained status as a healer and so he gives lessons, every Thursday.

After saying goodbye to Gyān Prākāś, I walked over to Peter's home since he had invited me for lunch. Peter is the night watchman at the local mission. That day, he was in the process renovating his home, which already was quite substantial with an inner courtyard, water buffaloes, and an enclosed latrine. I remembered that some twenty years ago, Peter and his wife, along with their young son, lived on the same plot of land in a two room home that had a hand pump outside, but no water buffaloes or latrine. Now a multi-room dwelling, Peter and his wife have space for a formal sitting room, in addition to a kitchen and two bedrooms.

Figure 11. Peter's Home (photograph by author, 2014).

Figure 12: Peter's Home, Buffaloes (photograph by author 2014).

The home shrine was in the sitting room. At the top of the shrine is a picture of Jesus as guru. On the second level, St. Alphonsa—the first Indian saint to be canonized—and Mother Mary, flank a picture of Jesus with his Sacred Heart exposed.²⁰ Immediately next to Jesus is Mother Mary again—first a statue of her revealing her Immaculate Heart and then a bottle of water from Velankanni, an important shrine to the Blessed Mother in Chennai.²¹ Behind the Velankanni water is a depiction of the Nativity and, on the opposite side, a smaller statue of Mary, which is made of plastic and glows in the dark. On the third level, there is another shifting picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary and then a smaller, more static, representation of Jesus and Mary side by side. It is on this level where the incense is burned and where the Bible and prayer manuals are kept in a relatively neat pile, with the New Testament on top.

²⁰ For an outstanding discussion of St. Alphonsa and her significance, see Corinne G. Dempsey, *Kerala Christian Sainthood: Collisions of Culture and Worldview in South India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

²¹ On Velankanni see “Velankanni Church,” available at <http://www.velankannichurch.in/>; see also Thomas Landy, “Our Lady of Velankanni,” available: <https://www.catholicsandcultures.org/india/shrines-pilgrimage/our-lady-velankanni>.

Figure 13. Levels of Peter's Home Shrine (photographs by author, 2014).

Figure 14. Peter's Home Shrine, full (photograph by author, 2014).

Stepping back and looking at the layout of Peter's home shrine, I could see a number of ways to interpret the arrangement. The most obvious aspect of the composition is that it is cruciform. This cruciform structure can be broken down or read in a number of ways. First, it is hierarchical. It is interesting that Jesus as a guru, as a renunciant, is at the apex of the composition. Interestingly he is above a clock—symbolizing perhaps being outside of time. Christ as guru is not paired with Mother Mary or another saint, while on the second and third levels he is. But if you read the composition from bottom to top, you have textuality with the Bible and other texts, then purification, represented by the Velankanni water, and finally transcendence. When the incense is burned, it goes upward—like prayers to heaven or like the word that connects us to God. Also, each level has a different degree of weight. The bottom level is the weightiest, with both pictures and text. The second level is somewhat lighter since there are no texts, only water and images. And of course, the image of Jesus as guru is the least weighed down—it's also the least tactile of anything in the display.²²

Alternatively, you could read the cross as more of a metaphor for embodiment with the heart at the center, and Jesus as guru as the head—the texts on the third level then provide the foundation: the feet to stand on, as it were. There is also an implicit hierarchy of temperature, the hot incense, the cooling water above it juxtaposed to Jesus's flaming heart, and, above it all, Jesus the guru against an entirely white background. The display, however, is positioned only so that people who enter the inside of the house can see it. In fact, my reflections on the presentation of the home shrine developed as I was waiting for Peter to finish cooking a special dish of pork, fried in mustard oil with garlic and cilantro. He and I had been friends for many years, and so he left me, unattended, in the sitting room after saying, "My house is yours." I was privileged and my "reading" of the shrine was shaped by feeling that I had a special position as a particularly important guest.

Conclusion

Did the foregoing discussion reflect my interpretations, or those of the Dalit Catholics who welcomed me into their homes? Both and neither. Images, whether figurative or material, do not provide "messages" or seamless interpretations, like words in a language or cyphers in code. Like metaphors or symbols, as the philosopher Donald Davidson or the anthropologist Dan Sperber would perhaps remind us, the images and material artifacts displayed in Dalit Catholic homes cannot be paraphrased.²³ Instead of static meanings, the Dalit

²² For a contrasting discussion of Jesus as guru as a distant figure not given reverence, see Mathew N. Schmalz, "Materialities of Jesus in North India," in *Material Religion in South Asia*, eds. Tracy Pinchman and Corinne G. Dempsey (Albany: SUNY Press, 2015), 67-88.

²³ See Donald Davidson, "What Metaphors Mean," *Critical Inquiry* 5: 1 (Autumn, 1978): 31-47; also see Dan Sperber, *Rethinking Symbolism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974).

Catholic home shrines invite interpretation: interpretations that are the collective, albeit uneven, product of visual cues, positioning, talk between hosts and visitors, and how all of that plays against the background of memory--in this case, a memory that includes a certain kind of experience in North India and academic training. And so, in a certain sense, the “meanings” attributed to these home shrines are “mine” if meaning is understood as significance, rather than as a philosophical assertion appropriate to semantics or signal theory. What academics do, to use Richard Rorty’s words, is “recontextualize” data or “objects” that are “always already contextualized.”²⁴ In this case, I have represented the “data” of a select group of Dalit Catholic home shrines in a way that highlights specific structural and aesthetic components as they relate to expressions of identity, which are Catholic and Dalit in varying ways.

“Recontextualizing” might seem to be an overwrought way to describe something that is in fact quite simple—and not within exclusive expertise or purview of scholars, however they may be trained. But hopefully, the meanings I have attached to these Dalit Catholic home shrines are not exclusively my own. Instead, they issue from interactions within certain cultural or societal parameters and expectations. While home shrines are used for worship and for catechesis, that obviously does not exhaust their significance or function. Indeed, what is most important about Dalit Catholic home shrines is precisely that they are open: they are not secreted away in a part of the home accessible to only family members. Even Peter’s home shrine, which was reserved for guests who had to be invited in, was still not protected from contact with “polluting” outsiders as a traditional high caste home shrine might often be. Dalit Catholic home shrines are interactive: they may be gazed upon, touched, and inquired about. These dynamics warrant fuller study that would trace the responses evoked and how those responses, and the Dalit Catholic home shrines themselves, are positioned within larger networks of human and material relations as well as conceptual categories. Such a study would also provide greater insight into the various audiences assumed when Dalit Catholics create a home shrine: although their homes may be open, it is not as though everyone from the surrounding community would be inclined to cross a threshold to connect with an otherwise “untouchable” family. For a community that has suffered exclusion and ostracism like the Dalit Catholics of Jasdeopur, the improvisational play of image and artifact in a home shrine allows multiple and non-exclusive interpretations that have the salutary function of welcoming back those who wish to learn more.

COLLEGE OF THE HOLY CROSS
MSCHMALZ@HOLYCROSS.EDU

²⁴ Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers Volume 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 97.

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