

Walking for Maryam's grace:

Christian piety in the Pakistani Punjab

Paper presented at the 6th French Network for Asian Studies International Conference, held at Sciences Po, Paris (26-28/06/2017)

Abstract: Every year, thousands of Pakistanis walk over great distances to reach the village of Maryamabad and celebrate the nativity of the Virgin Mary. This paper offers an ethnographic account of the three-day walk from Lahore to Maryamabad, and the subsequent *mela* held around the shrine of Mary. Following a group of male Lahori youth, I document the growing popularity of this gruelling yet playful ritual established by Belgian Capuchins in the 1940s. Most pilgrims are working-class Punjabi Christians, descendants of untouchable castes converted to Christianity. But the language of ritual practice deployed in this setting is interchangeable with that of Muslim shrines, allowing for a wide participation of non-Christians. Often described as excessively Islamized, or as a superficial recasting of Hinduism, the performance of local Christian piety upsets the received nomenclature of Pakistan's religious communities as discrete entities. In particular, I show how the pilgrimage enables participants to display an assertive Christian identity, but in so doing compels them to contend with accusations of Hindu idolatry and with their status as vulnerable untouchables. While the nature of this ritual trivializes religious affiliation by accommodating non-Christian participation, it reinscribes local Christians' past Hindu identity within the world of caste.