

## Old Tool for New Times: The Discovery of an Ancient Holy Site in Contemporary India

Daniela Bevilacqua  
SOAS University of London

### ABSTRACT

This paper aims to show how different typologies of narration can be involved in the place-making process of a religious centre in India based on the claim of a yogi to have discovered in a jungle an ancient holy place, Garh Dhām, through his powers. As recorded by a devotee-run website, it was claimed to be the same place where King Surath met the sage Medha – as narrated in the *Devī Māhātmya*, a famous section of the *Markaṇḍeya Purāṇa* – and where the first ever Durgā Pūjā (worship) was ‘historically’ celebrated. The ‘discoverer’ is a yogi, Brahmānand Girī, who living in jungle was able to find hidden temples thanks to his austerity (*tapasyā*) and yogic powers (*siddhis*). The narration of his life story and of his powers recalls those appearing in Indian hagiographies and texts that describe *siddhis*. The discovery of a holy place by a yogi does not represent an isolated case since similar discoveries dot the history of Hindu religious orders. As in these latter cases, the place-making process of Garh Dhām aims to give authority and legitimacy to the foundation of a new religious centre and so to further spread the Durgā cult in the area and to attract pilgrims.

### KEYWORDS

Yogi, place-making, *Purāṇa*, hagiography, pilgrimage place, Durgā Pūjā.

## Introduction

I came across the story of Yogi Brahmānand Girī by chance: in January 2017, a friend suggested I visit a jungly place close to Shantiniketan (West Bengal), since the sādhu (holy man) living there was renowned to be a yogi.<sup>1</sup> Once there, not only did I find an incredible informant but also learn of his incredible story.

Yogi Brahmānand Girī claims that through the powers he developed meditating in a huge tamarind tree in the jungle, and remaining in the area for twenty years, he realised that he was doing his practices in the place where during Satya Yuga<sup>2</sup> the sage Medha had his āśram and where he suggested to King Surath to worship the goddess Durgā. Therefore, Yogi Brahmānand Girī realised that this was the place in which the first ever Durgā Navarātrī<sup>3</sup> was celebrated, as cited in the Devī Māhātmya contained in the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa.

The ascetic says to have 'brought back to life' small shrines and especially three main temples from Raja Surath's time, restoring the place as it was in the past. Yogi Baba – or Jogi Baba, as he is usually called – was able to rebuild such shrines thanks to the support of devotees who supported his discovery since 2000, when he became known to people other than Adivasis (tribals) who live in the neighbouring areas. Once the discovery spread, many pilgrims began to come, which further helped to develop the area.

The discovery of mythical places by ascetics due to their spiritual merits is nothing new in the history of Hindu religious orders. These discoveries in the past were often presented as miraculous events guided by the God or the Goddess connected with the story of the place and narrated to give authority and legitimacy to the foundation of new religious centres so as to attract pilgrims. Because of the presence of these historical discoveries, I thought it would have been extremely interesting to collect information about this contemporary discovery to analyse how such a claim is supported in the present day.

Therefore, I visited again Jogi Baba in February 2018. During this period, I followed him in his daily activities, collecting information about the place and

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<sup>1</sup> This paper results from the ethnographic fieldwork I am conducting in several areas of India as part of the ERC funded Hatha Yoga Project.

<sup>2</sup> *Satya yuga* is the first of the four ages (*yuga*) the world goes through. Each *yuga* is associated with a stage of perfection of the *dharma*, the universal law. *Satya yuga* is the 'Complete Age' or the 'Age of Truth', to which follows *Treta Yuga* the Age of the Roll of Three, *Dvapara Yuga* the Age of the Roll of Two, *Kali Yuga* the Age of Conflict, or the 'Worst Age'. The ages are not equal in length and represent the progressive triumph of discord over wisdom.

<sup>3</sup> Navarātrī is a nine-nights (and ten days) Hindu festival, celebrated in the bright half of the Hindu calendar month Ashvin, which falls in the months of September and October. The festival is in honor of the divine feminine Devī, Durgā, which is why it is also called Durgā Pūjā.

his life from him and from some of his followers. Another source of information was a website managed by one of his devotees that lives in Bangalore.<sup>4</sup>

This paper gives attention to this website because it refers to several traditional narrations: *Purāṇas*, hagiographies, narration of yogic powers, and narration of past discoveries. These traditional narrations are here analysed and presented as tools used in the place-making process of Garh Dhām, following the approach of K. Basso (1996). As Basso claims, “place-making consist in an adventitious fleshing out of historical material that culminates in a posited state of affairs, a particular universe of objects and events – in short, a place world – wherein portions of the past are brought into being” (1996, 5-6). It will be described how these narrations give authority to the discovery in order to support the “making” of Garh Dhām as a proper pilgrimage centre, whose future, nevertheless, will be questioned in the last section.

### **The history of the place according to the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa***

Following Jogi Baba’s statements, the website claims that the history of the place is narrated in the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*, one of the eighteen main *Purāṇas*.

The word *Purāṇa* literally means ‘old, ancient’, and it refers to a vast genre of Indian literature, with the oldest *Purāṇa* believed to date back from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> century and the most recent ones the 14<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. *Purāṇas* were the scriptures of the common people since, unlike the *Vedas* that were restricted to initiated men of the three higher classes, they were available to everybody, including women and members of the lowest order of society. They were the principal scriptures of theistic Hinduism and were to determine the majority of Hindu thought and practice up to the present day. Their content has been divided into five components: 1) primary creation or cosmogony; 2) secondary creation, destruction and renovation of worlds, with chronology included; 3) genealogy of gods and patriarchs, 4) reigns of the Manus; 5) ‘historical’ sections on the princes of the solar and lunar races and their descendants to modern times (Rocher, 1986, 26).<sup>5</sup>

Scholars have used *Purāṇas*, cautiously, to reconstruct Indian history being aware that “the Puranas are often surprisingly right in their statements; but not seldom they are equally mistaken” (by L.D. Barnett mentioned in Rocher, 1986, 20). Although as stressed by G. P. Singh (2004) they could be a precious source for the genealogies of kings, the use of *Purāṇas* for historical information has been rejected by scholars because of the presence of fables and fiction, and because each *Purāṇa* that has survived in numerous manuscripts are themselves inconsistent.

An opposite stand is taken by the Garh Dhām website, which claims that *Purāṇas* are the “most authentic texts which narrate the history of ancient India.” It further says that many places referred in there are existing today “in some form or the other,” and that geographical, cultural and historical findings

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.garhchandidham.pw/index.html> (Accessed March 2018)

<sup>5</sup> These are nevertheless not exhaustive since they do not consider the moral and religious instruction “which is inculcated in them, and to which all the legends that they contain are rendered subservient” (Kennedy, 1831, 153).

match with the written sources. An apologetic frame for the historicity of *Purāṇas* is also given:

This page is to break perhaps the biggest MYTH that anything and everything about ancient India are MYTHs. Notably, the historical events of the current cycle of Yuga(s) of Bharatvarswa is continuous and firmly sustainable ongoing cultural flow of mankind. According to Purana(s) Munis and Rishis (sages and hermits) there have been in the past, many cycles of Satya-> Treta-> Dapar-> Kali before the current cycle has begun.

The *Markaṇḍeya Purāṇa* consists of 137 *adhyayas* (chapters) and is considered one of the most important and probably one of the oldest works of the whole *Purāṇa* literature (Rocher, 1986, 192). Chapters from 81 to 93 contain the *Devī Māhātmya* in which the story of King Surath and the sage Medha is narrated.<sup>6</sup>

The importance of the *Devī Māhātmya*, also called *Caṇḍī Pāṭha*<sup>7</sup> or *Durgā Saptasatī*,<sup>8</sup> has been compared to that of the *Bhagavad Gītā* because it is the principal text for the worshippers of Durgā in Northern India (Rocher, 1986, 193). Its thirteen chapters deal with the victory of the goddess Durgā over demons and enemies, describing her various forms: the text includes hymns to incarnated forms of the Goddess, as well as unmanifested form of her. Among the incarnated forms, three found their place in Garh Dhām: Māhā Kālī, Māhā Lakṣmī and Māhā Sarasvatī.

The story of the *Māhātmya* begins with Maharaja Surath who, although dethroned and exiled, continues worrying about the welfare of his relatives and his kingdom and so does a rich businessman who has been driven out of his house by his family. These two characters met in a dense forest and, to find an explanation for their unexpected behaviours, turn to the sage Medha. Medha informs them that their attachment is the result of the cosmic power of goddess Māhāmaya, who is both responsible for the attachment to worldly things but is also capable of dispensing from them. To explain the nature of this goddess, Medha delivers the core section of the *Devī Māhātmya* (Rocher, 1986, 193). In the final chapter, as a result of Medha's instruction, king Surath and the businessman worship the Goddess and she grants each of them a boon (*idem*, 195).

The historicity of King Surath and the sage Medha is suggested by the website:

<sup>6</sup> While this *Purāṇa* is generally dated to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE, several other dates have been proposed for the *Māhātmya*. Since one of its stanzas appears on an inscription dated 608 CE, D. R. Bhandarkar claims that the *Devī Māhātmya* was popular as early as the 7<sup>th</sup> century (Bhandarkar 1914: 74). However, Pargiter, analysing the content of the various chapters, supposes that its earliest sections belong to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, while others to the 6<sup>th</sup> century, time in which it was probably added to the *Markaṇḍeya Purāṇa*, and then the text fully completed around the 9<sup>th</sup> century (1904, xiii-xx).

<sup>7</sup> Caṇḍī is the name by which the supreme Goddess is referred in the *Māhātmya*.

<sup>8</sup> It is so called as it contains 700 (*saptaśatī*) verses.

If the present cycle of Satya->Treta->Dapar->Kali is taken into consideration, the evolution of Chandi Puja on this earth can be easily traced and proved.

Given below is a list of the names of the rulers of India starting from Satya Yuga and the inception age of Saptasati Chandi is marked. [Age of Vasus starts] ----> Darbhya vasu ->Vasukra -> Vasurachi -> Vasuyava -> Vasushrata -> Vasuna -> Vasumana -> [End of Vasus rule] ->Rohidashwa -> Traibrishnu -> trayaru -> Puru -> Kestsya -> Chitra -> Benya -> Sagar -> Samanjya -> Angshuma -> Bhagirath -> Sohan -> Raja Surath -> [Performed Durga Navaratri at the instruction of Maharshi Medhas [...]]

The website also claims that the location of Medha's āśram is geographically localizable following the descriptions given in *Markaṇḍeya Purāṇa*. It claims: "Ancient India was called as JambuDwip (*sic*). As per Markandeya Purana Bharat was referred as Kurma (turtle) Pith also. The situation in Garhham with respect to the map of Bharat perfectly matches with the description of Markandeya (*sic*) Purana."

To visually support this claim, a map of India (Fig.1) has been painted and installed in Garh Dhām.



Fig. 1 Map of north India represented as a turtle. Photo Daniela Bevilacqua

However, in the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* we find the mention of Jambudwip in Chapters 53 and 54 as an island or a continent, since in this cosmogony the world is divided into seven concentric islands/continents separated by seven encircling oceans, each double the size of the preceding one. Jambudwip is then described from chapter 54 to 57 as being occupied by Agnidhra and his descendant Bharata, from whom derives India's traditional name Bharat. Then, in chapter 58, Bharat is represented as resting upon Viṣṇu in the form of a tortoise. The *Mārkaṇḍeya* names the various people as they were distributed over the tortoise's body (Pargiter, 1904, xxvi-xxvii). In 58.10 the *Purāṇa* lists the people which are situated in the mouth of this tortoise that, according to the website and its map, is the place where Surath's kingdom is located:

Brishadvaja, Anjana, Jambuakhya, Manabachala, Shupakarna, Byaghramukha, Kharmaka, Karbatashana, and likewise, Chandreswara, Khasha, Magadha, Giri, Mithila, Pundra, Badanadantura, Pragjyotisha with Lohita, Samudra, Purushadaka, Purnatkati, Bhadrageour, likewise Oh thou twice-born one, Udayagiri, Kashaya, Mekhala, Mushta, Tamralipta, Ekapadapa, Vardhamana, Koshala.

Pargiter tries to identify these people but “the grouping in this canto is far from perfect” (1904, 357). He supposes that Vardhamana is the modern Bardhwan (commonly Burdwan) in West Bengal, “comparatively an old town” (p. 358) therefore we could connect this people with West Bengal. However, in 81.3, which is part of the *Devī Māhātmya*, it is said that “times ago in the Svāroc'isha period, a king named Suratha, sprung of the race of C'aitra, reigned over the whole earth” (p. 466). Surath is said to be the eighth Manu, who will be called Savarni Manu. However, all this information does not create a substantial connection between king Surath and the West Bengal.

According to Pargiter, a very important element in the geography described in this *Purāṇa* is the river, which is not present in Garh Dhām. Considering the geographical references contained in the text, Pargiter locates the place of production of the *Markaṇḍeya Purāṇa* and the *Devī Māhātmya* in Western India, near the Narmada river: “in the hills (the Vindhya) on the north bank overlooking the river at Mandhāta we may place the alleged cave where the first part of the Purana professes that it was delivered” (Pargiter 1904, ix).

In any case, the *Māhātmya* does not claim that Raja Surath or Savarni Manu established their reign in the same place where Medha had his *āśram*, while this idea is supported today also asserting the presence of a past citadel.

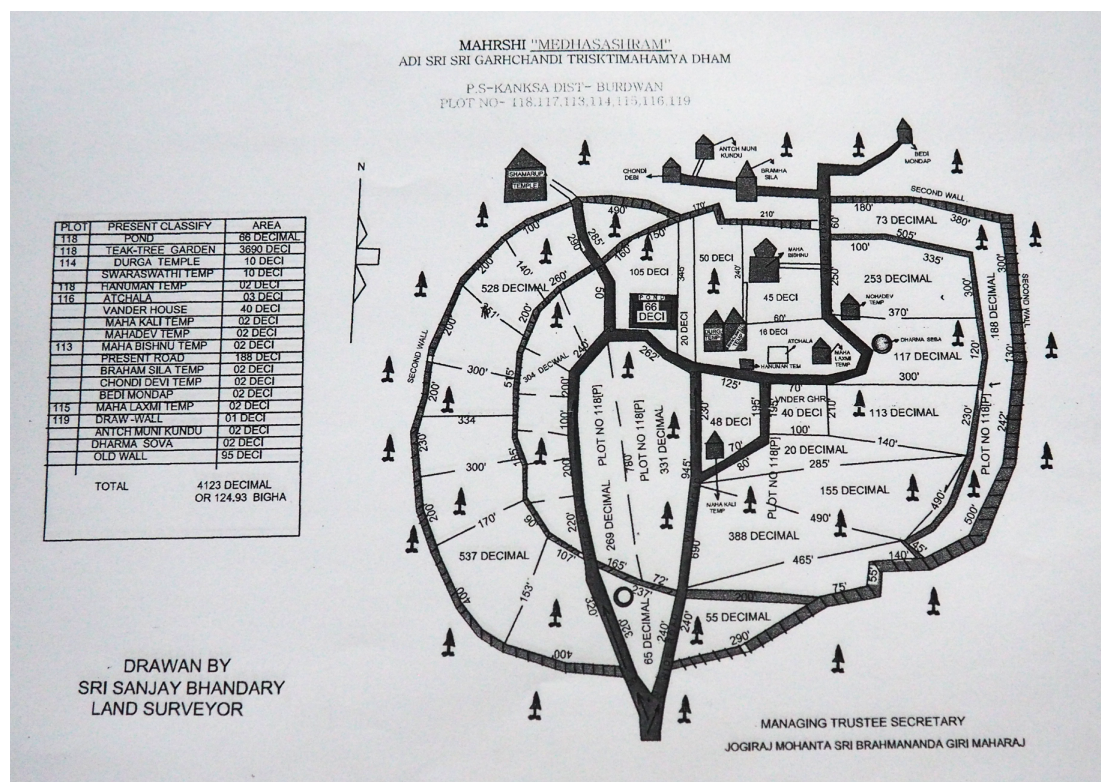


Fig. 2 Map of Garh Dham as reported in official documents. Photo Daniela Bevilacqua

In this map (Fig.2) the area of Garh Dhām is traced and its 'historicity' presented in the web site:

It is [...] a complete civilization surrounded by a boundary or a garh or mud fort. The most significant aspect of the place is that even today, it retains the same characteristics as has been delineated in Saptasati Chandi. One may arrive at the place after a journey of more than 5 km(s) through the forest. The inhabitants of the forest are some ancient tribes of Kola(s),<sup>9</sup> Bhil(s) and Santhals. A trip to the place would reveal that it is same as it was there during the period when the ashram of Medhamuni was located there. The place retains the serenity and is so peaceful that even ferocious animals have been found to behave with absolute calm and domesticity. The sacred seat of Medha Muni is still there under a sal tree. Anybody can understand that the sal tree is old, very very old with many roots. [...]

Inside Dharma Garh the tripartite temples of Devis MahaKali, MahaLaxmi and MahaSaraswati are situated. Interestingly, at first glance itself it can be realized that the Dharma Garh and everything inside it was well maintained till the very recent past but that too, no

<sup>9</sup> It is interesting to notice that according Pargiter, in the *Purāṇa*, Kolas means aboriginal races (1904: 466), and that among the Scheduled Tribes of West Bengal there is a group called Kora. Probably the website mentioned it as Kola to create a connection with the *Purāṇa*.

less than some thousands of years. With this, the historic truth of Saptasati Chandi is now established and open to you all.

In the *Māhātmya* nothing is written about the secret seat of the sage Medha, and the descriptions of the celebration of the Durgā Pūjā present substantial differences. In the website the sage Medha suggested:

...to both of them to perform Durga Puja Navaratri with the sacred mantras of Chandi and assured them that their agonies and sufferings would disappear. Being instructed by Mahamuni Medhas Raja Surath built the Murti of MAA DURGA and performed Navaratri for nine days with only fruits and leaves. And with that Vedic Durga Basanti Navratri started on the face of this earth.

Instead the *Māhātmya* says:

Having heard this his speech, King Suratha fell prostrate before the illustrious rishi [...] went forthwith to perform austerities; and the vaisya [...] took up his station on a sand-bank in a river; and the vaisya practised austerities, muttering the sublime hymn to the goddess. They both made an earthen image of the goddess on that sand-bank, and paid worship to it with flowers, incense, fire and libations of water. Abstaining from food, restricting their food, concentrating their minds on her, keeping their thoughts composed, they both offered the bali offering<sup>10</sup> also sprinkled with blood drawn from their own limbs. When they continued with subdued souls to propitiate her thus for three years (93.5-9).

It is clear that although considered a 'historical source', the *Purāṇa* and the *Māhātmya* have been reinterpreted and used accordingly. These reinterpretations have a huge importance in the making of the place, which, as Basso suggests, "is a way of constructing history itself, of inventing it, of fashioning novel versions of 'what happened here'" (1966: 6). This becomes clear when we consider that the contemporary celebration of Durgā Pūjā is performed without blood sacrifices, as instead it is suggested in the *Māhātmya* with the *bali* offering. This choice is consistent with the presence of the temples dedicated to Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī.

To note, although two-hundreds forms of Durgā are described in the *Māhātmya*, two forms have been installed in the *āśram*, Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī, which have actually a specific identity by themselves in the Hindu Pantheon and are popular and worshiped all over India. Durgā's terrifying form worshiped by Jogi Baba, Cāmuṇḍā, is not present in any shrine in Garh Dhām. Likely, a 'peaceful' cult directed to three of the main Goddesses of Hinduism seemed more suitable for the establishment of a pilgrimage centre able to attract all Hindus.

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<sup>10</sup> The *bali* offering is the sacrifice of animals in honour of the Goddess. The animals, commonly goats, are beheaded and their head offered to the deity.



## Hagiographies

“If place-making is a way of constructing the past, [...] it is also a way of constructing social traditions and, in the process, personal and social identities” (Basso, 1996: 7).

To give authority to the construction of Garh Dhām, the life story of Jogi Baba has to be properly narrated, containing those features that could consolidate his identity as guru and yogi. For this reason, it is narrated following the structure of an Indian hagiography.

The hagiographic tradition is still a living literary genre in India (Mallinson 2001: xi). This genre began to spread around the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when Nābhādās wrote his *Bhaktamāl*, a collection of the life of saints. The purpose of hagiographies was for the writer to illustrate exemplary lives, and for the devotee to get inspired by such lives (Snell, 1994, 4). From the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries onwards, various religious orders had started to write hagiographies of their founders.<sup>11</sup> These works give great importance to the founder’s life details, which are selected and modified so as to illuminate his character and the teachings he embodies. These hagiographies have often a mythological dimension in which the ‘saint’ is assimilated with God and has almost divine characteristic. As Pauwels stresses (2010, 66), “The legends told [...] evoke a strong feeling of déjà vu in anybody who is familiar with the life stories of other bhaktas or even saints from other religions. Legends about saints transmit ideological messages that are common for many hagiographers. They are part of a general discourse of bhakti.”

The majority of these stories follows a similar life pattern: a childhood characterized by signs of a precocious spiritual intuition; a life which does not follow normal social stages and is punctuated with incredible events until the protagonist undertakes travel. During this travel, further miraculous events happen and he finally accomplishes his mission: the formulation of a new religious teaching, or the foundation of a new religious order, or the foundation of new religious places. Therefore, hagiographies instruct on and edify the life of a saint to give authority to his teachings and by consequence to the religious group based on it.

Exemplary of this is the life of Śaṅkara, 8<sup>th</sup> century philosopher and one of the most famous religious order founders in India, as narrated in the *Śaṅkaradigvijaya* (produced around the 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries). I report here few passages to compare with passages from the website:

Without any instruction this boy was to master all the four Vedas with their auxiliary branches of learning, besides literature and the tough subjects of logic and sound reasoning [...] Very quickly he learnt the four Vedas and the six Sastras from the Guru, who was astounded by the prodigious intelligence and capacity of the small boy. His fellow students could not keep pace with him, and the Guru himself felt

<sup>11</sup> See Winand M. Callewaert, Rupert Snell (1994).

embarrassed by the demands on his limited capacity to teach. (Canto, 4, 1-20)

In every way the holy influence of Sankara is a blessing for mankind --it brings the fruit (If spiritual realisation close to them to pluck; it disperses the thick cloud of ignorance of devotees; it consumes all their sorrows: it shatters the embankments of their accumulated sins; it kidnaps their evil passions of arrogance, jealousy and the like; and it gives the fatal blow at the vulnerable spot in the body of man's threefold miseries. (Canto, 4, 40)

In the website we read:

The birth, life and work of JogiBaba is a treasury of knowledge and the unfolding of an important spiritual event which is an unexplainable mystery for majority of human beings.

Named Subhas at birth, he was brought up in a well to do family of Kalyanpur. At a very young age, his family members realized that Subhas had a strong spiritual inclination [...] At that time (his childhood), Subhas used to leave his house at midnight to be at the Durga temple located in front of his house. As such, all people soon realised that the infant Subhas was a devotee of Devi Durga. As time passed, he attained more and more spiritual maturity and gradually, the mystery of Durga Mata slowly began being revealed to him.

Soon he turned into a master of every aspect of Patañjali Yoga, being barely out of his teens. His childhood friends recall how he used to appear all of a sudden out in multiple occasions whenever there are discussions on him among friends. He could swim across the river Ganga during the height of the rainy season, when other people were afraid to even go near the water because of strong currents.

This narration is enriched by the oral transmission of Jogi Baba himself. He told me that he was a *sādhu* since he was in the womb of his mother because it was thanks to the grace of God Bolenath (a form of Shiva) that he was born. A detail not reported on the web-site is that he had to marry under the wish of his father and he had also a daughter, but he left his family when he was 23 years old to take *saṃnyāsī dīkṣā*, initiation as a renouncer. His wife later on took the path of renouncer as well, but she does not live with Jogi Baba and his daughter only rarely meets him.

The web site continues:

Subhas Baba left his parental house and attained complete sainthood to dedicate his life completely to the discovery of the truth within, and became Jogiraj Brahmananda Giri in the saint Atal Akhārā tradition. After a few years of his complete saintly life and rigorous tapasyā the truth unfolded to him and he realized that his supreme goal is to uncover the temples inside a deep forest in a certain part of the Earth. In no time, JogiBaba got some references and finally reached the

place. It was a period of silent spiritual revolution spanning over two decades inside the deep dense forest and a rare phenomenon in the history of the world. The mission was a mystery till he unfolded it by shedding light to the dark unconscious mind with the power of Yoga.

The practice of yoga bestowed Jogi Baba with those powers that allowed him to discover the place, but also gave him the authority to advance such a claim.

### The narration of yogic powers

“[...] places possess a marked capacity for triggering acts of self-reflection, inspiring thoughts about who one presently is, or memories of who one used to be, or musing on who one might become. [...] place-based thoughts about the self lead commonly of thoughts of other things –other places, other people, other times, whole networks of associations that ramify unaccountably within the expanding spheres of awareness that they themselves engender.”  
(Basso, 1996, 106)

It was when Jogi Baba found a huge tamarind tree in the jungle and decided to practice *tapasyā*<sup>12</sup> in its hollow that he could disclose his vision and, time after time, visualize the temples hidden in the soil. The place is considered a *tapobhūmi*, an area in which various *sādhus* accomplished themselves through *tapasyā*, therefore it is ‘normal’ that from practicing there several ‘superhuman’ skills have been developed by Jogi Baba and now have been told by people.

The Adivasis who live with him told me that he is able to find sources of water and that, no matter how many people will come to the *āśram*, he will feed all of them since he is able to make food appear. Further specific powers were narrated to me by some of his devotees. In February 2018, I met one of the first men that began to support Jogi Baba. He came to know him through a friend who told him an astonishing story. He was roaming in the jungle when suddenly he saw an individual who was walking on the leaves of trees. He followed the man and he found that he was living in the hollow of a tree. It was Jogi Baba who, at that time completely alone in the jungle, had to subjugate the wild animals that used to take shelter in the tree. After this extraordinary experience, this man with other people started visiting Jogi Baba, and brought him ‘back to society’. One was the devotee I met. He told me another fascinating story. Once he went with his family and Jogi Baba to visit a Durgā temple quite far away and, arriving late in the night, found the temple doors were closed. As they were quite upset, Jogi Baba told them to go back in the car and wait for him. They followed his advice and after a few minutes they heard the bells inside the temple play and, the devotee said, they saw a minimized Jogi Baba coming out from the lowest part of the temple door, assuming later on his normal size. Interesting, while the man was talking his wife tried to point out that they did not see him directly, however the man and also his daughters disagreed with her and stressed that they really saw him. The man was talking to me almost whispering because he did not want Jogi

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<sup>12</sup> The word *tapasyā* means austerity and refers to *tapas*, the mental-spiritual heat produced by means of austere religious practice.

Baba to scold him: Jogi Baba does not like people talking about his ‘powers’, since (as is often said) they are not important.

However, during our conversations, Jogi Baba *en passant* disclosed to me some of his other powers: he can see the future; he can see what a person he knows is doing even if far away from him; he knows who is coming to visit him and plus he can read the minds of people; that is why, according to him, many ‘dirty politicians’ are afraid to visit him.

The stories about these powers would be collected soon, another devotee told me. He was attracted to go to Jogi Baba by a dream. He did not know Jogi Baba at the time, but he appeared in his dream sitting in his tree. So, the man started looking for a *sādhu* who lived in a tree and by chance it happened that someone had heard the story of Jogi Baba. Hence after meeting him he became his devotee, and now he wants to collect the various stories about Jogi Baba and his powers to create a proper text.

The credibility of these accounts would rely on a well established oral and textual tradition according to which, from a sustained practice of yoga, a yogi develops a radical enhancement of the normal powers of perception, which enables the yogi to obtain supernatural powers, known as *siddhis* (lit. perfection, accomplishment, mastery). As stressed by Mallinson and Singleton (2017, 359), “The extraordinary capabilities of accomplished yogis are a widespread motif” in various “literary genres, including yogis’ own legends, narrative tales and travellers’ reports.”<sup>13</sup>

Here I consider some texts that describe and list various powers that yogis through their practices and thorough *tapasyā* can acquire to demonstrate that those attributed to Jogi Baba are well renown powers.

Different texts present different list of powers. A number of eight unspecified powers are mentioned as early as the *Mahābhārata* (between 400 BCE and 200 CE), and subsequently eight powers are described in *Pātañjalayogaśāstra* 10.4 (prior to 400 CE), becoming a widespread trope in yoga texts of all traditions (Mallinson, Singleton 2017).<sup>14</sup> To summarize, these eight powers are: *aṇimā*, reducing one’s body even to the size of an atom; *mahima*, expanding one’s body to an infinitely large size; *garima*, becoming infinitely heavy; *laghima*, becoming almost weightless; *prāpti*, ability to be anywhere at will; *prākāmya*, realizing whatever one desires; *iṣṭva*, supremacy over nature; *vaśtva*, control of natural forces; *kāma-avasayitva*, complete satisfaction.

From this list, several have been already attributed to Jogi Baba: *aṇimā* when he became very small, *laghima* when he walked on the leaves of trees; *prāpti*

<sup>13</sup> This is clear in White’s *Sinister Yogis* in which the author shows how the character of the yogi appears in plays, legend cycles and songs produced at the courts of Rajput and Nepali kings (2009, 14).

<sup>14</sup> For detailed examples of yogic texts dealing with yogic powers, see Mallinson and Singleton (2017, 359-394); for examples of yogic powers in various religious traditions in India see Jacobsen (2012).

as he used to appear suddenly in front of his friends; *iṣṭva* since he subjugated animals in the jungle.

The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* claims that there are eighteen supernatural powers. Here I report those described in verse 11.15.6:

Freedom from the [six] 'waves' [of existence, i.e. cold and heat and so forth] in this body, the powers of hearing and seeing things far away, of moving as fast as thought, of assuming whatever form one wants, of entering another's body, of dying at will, of witnessing the gods sporting together, of accomplishing whatever one wishes, [...] of knowing the past, the present and the future [...] of knowing the thoughts of others [...]

Freedom from cold and heat are attributed to Jogi Baba, since he lived naked in the jungle and he still sleeps in the open air, taking a bath with cold water. Furthermore, in our conversation 'dying at will' was mentioned by him while talking about *samādhi*: he said that he could enter in deep meditation and leave his body, if he so decided. The last powers listed in the *Purāṇa* have already been mentioned as possessed by Jogi Baba.

In the *Dattātreya yogaśāstra* (82) we find that the yogi gets the 'animal power' (*bhūcarasiddhi*), i.e. the power to overcome animals, which has been attributed to Jogi Baba especially when he had to 'conquer' the tamarind tree from a huge snake; and in the list of the *Vāyavīya saṃhitā* (which lists sixty-four powers) we find that the twelfth power is 'finding water', and the forty-fourth is 'seeing hidden objects' both attributed to Jogi Baba by Adivasis.

The power of transforming and producing food is well attested in several traditions. Among the powers described by Wiley in Jainism, there is in the fourth *khaṇḍa* of the *Ṣaṭkhaṇḍāgama*, *akṣīṇa* that is the power to make food and dwellings inexhaustible; and in the *Pravacanasāroddhāra*, *akṣīṇa-mahānasi* the power to feed hundreds of thousands from a small amount of food placed in the bowl (2012, 157, 165).

Even Jogi Baba's reticence to talk about his powers or to have people talking about them has its correspondence in both Yogic and Buddhist traditions. Texts refuse such powers as the goal of yoga, though they demonstrate that yoga practices have been perfected. Nonetheless, these powers have also another function. As Jacobsen claims, "Powers are understood by devotees to provide proof about divinity, asceticism, and knowledge. These powers were attained by many founding gurus of religious traditions, they are generally accepted as signs of divinity" (2012).

Therefore, although they should not be publicized, powers too have an important role in the construction of the spiritual and religious individuality of the yogi, and by consequence an important role in the place-making of Garh Dham.

## Examples of past discoveries and the establishment of Medha Muni Garh Dhām

Talking about the discovery of Garh Dhām, the web site claims:

The place of Saptasāstī was found by a saint sounds very attractive but in the land of Bharat, it is nothing new as it has happened multiple times and it is through Yogic Smṛiti that the ancient land of Bharat is known.

In effect, from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onward, various ascetics have claimed to have found sacred holy places through the powers resulting from their yoga practice, but especially by their devotion and by the grace of God. These discoveries were to become part of narrations aimed to glorify the saint and the place and can be recognized as other examples of successful place-making.

For example, the *Caitanya-caritāmṛtam* (by Srila Krishnadasa Kaviraja) describes the wanderings of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486–1533) through the different sacred forests of Vṛndāvan in a spiritual trance of divine love, constantly chanting the holy names of Krishna. Thanks to his divine spiritual power, he was able to locate the places connected to Krishna's play (*līlā*). After him, other saints in the 16<sup>th</sup> century also claimed to have rediscovered in their meditative wanderings countless lost sites associated with Krishna (Lutgendorf, 1991, 264).

The *Śrī Mithila Bilas* collects the oral tradition on the discovery of Janakpurdham by Sur Kishor Das (17<sup>th</sup> century) a Rāmānandī who lived in today Rajasthan. According to this work, Sur Kishor used to carry everywhere a statue of Sita, the wife of God Ram, but he was dissatisfied because he could not worship her directly in her birthplace, Janakpurdham. So, one day the statue itself suggested that he go and find her place in the land bounded by the Himalayas, the Ganges, the Kosi and the Gandaki. Sur Kishor began his journey, leaving the statue there. He stopped in the jungle of northern Mithila, to rest under a margosa tree. Then, the statue of Sita which he had left behind appeared and he understood that he had found the ancient site of Janakpurdham (Burghart, 1976, 139-140). The coming of other Rāmānandīs led to the discovery of other places connected to the story of Sītā, and Janakpurdham developed as a pilgrimage centre.

Sarbadhikary (2015, 43) shows that the discovery trope was used even in 1894 by Kedarnath Datta, a renowned Vaiṣṇava and leading intellectual of the Bengal Renaissance, who claimed to have had a "vision of Chaitanya's true birthplace, which had been submerged by flood-waters about a hundred years before that." According to him this place would be the town then called Meyapur (literally, 'land of Muslims'), which he renamed Mayapur, although there was already Navadvip identified as the birthplace of Chaitanya. According to Sarbadhikary, mythical recollections of past geographies, dreams and other divine revelations were used to support the discovering of what was called Gupta-Vrindavan and these stories were "written up in pamphlets about the temples' histories and sold in the temples, and narrated

by temple attendants with equal conviction, every time pilgrims raise questions about the birthplaces” (pp. 47-48). The today fame and prosperity of Mayapur demonstrates how this strategy was successful.

The rediscovery of Garh Dhām is passionately narrated in the website section on the life of Jogi Baba and recalls the aforementioned examples:

After a few years of his complete saintly life and rigorous tapashya the truth unfolded to him and he realized that his supreme goal is to uncover the temples inside a deep forest in a certain part of the Earth. In no time, JogiBaba got some references and finally reached the place. The place was then totally covered in dense forest. It was so dense that cowherds of that area did not allow their cows to enter into that area fearing their loss. Also, that there could be any structure in that area, was beyond the imagination of common men living in the surrounding areas. JogiBaba spent a long time there and time to time with the help of different people, gradually uncovered the entire place. He even spent more than two years inside the hollow of a taramind (*sic*) tree to help himself concentrate. It was a period of silent spiritual revolution spanning over 2 decades inside the deep dense forest and a rare phenomenon in the history of the world. An adivasi named Madan, who used to give milk regularly during that time, today recalls with utter surprise as to how this holy man with bare minimum belongings, survived so many years in the dense forest.

The story narrated by Jogi Baba is slightly different because he told me that while he was doing *tapasyā* in his *āśram* in Belapur (West Bengal), he heard the voice of the Goddess telling him to find a spot in the jungle and to do *tapasyā* there. So he walked for forty kilometres and stopped when he found a huge tamarind tree, deciding to make it his shelter for the next two years. The more his practice advanced the more his inner vision clarified so that he could realize that close to him there were old constructions completely wrapped in the jungle. Initially he worked alone, sometimes supported by local Adivasis, the first who came to know about him and his practices. Later on, also some Bengalis began to support him in the effective ‘making’ of the place.

### **The place-making of a pilgrimage centre**

Garh Dhām, also known as Māhā Ṛṣi Medha Āśram, was officially inaugurated in 2009, the 9<sup>th</sup> day of Navarātrī with the *Prāṇa Pratiṣṭhā* (consecration of the statue) of the Goddesses Māhā Kālī, Māhā Lakṣmī, and Māhā Sarasvatī. From the web site we read about the inauguration of this discovery:

With all glory the trio manifestations of Mahamaya Devi MahaKali, Devi MahaLaxmi and Devi MahaSaraswati were re-established in a full Vedic ceremony. [...] The event has great significance with respect to ancient Bharat. The day has become an eyewitness of repetition of the ancient history. Basanti Navratri was naturally chosen as the place itself is the land of inception of Durga Basanti Navratri. Extensive arrangements and state wide were advertisements were made.

Ceremonial inauguration was done by Guru Hari Giri Maharaj with off course JogiBaba, in the presence of saints, priests from different parts of the country amid Vedic chants. Eminent personalities like the then Hon'ble Fisheries Minister of West Bengal, Shri Kironmoy Nanda, top bureaucrat Dr Madhumita Mukherjee among others were present in the august gathering. Overall a large gathering consisting thousands of people were eyewitness to the rare event of re-installation of the Saptasati.

Media personalities were also seen covering the entire event. The re-installation of the Devi's made the place regain its lost glory after thousands of years. [...] A long period of dedicated devotion supported by people from all walks helped reach the goal and the supreme objective -- the re-establishment of the place with installation of trio Devi Idols and Vedic prana pratistha. The event marks the beginning of another movement for making the place well known to the world as one of the carriers of ancient legacy of Bharat, a living manifestation of Saptasati Chandi. The place has already become a spiritual hub and place of eternal peace. People from around the country throng the place to have a dharshan of the Ashram of Medhamuni of Satya Yuga.

Since its inauguration many improvements have been implemented in the *āśram*. In Fig. 3 we can see the temple of Sarasvatī, which Jogi Baba was said to have found entrapped by the roots of another ancient tree, now completely renovated. In front of this temple the *dhūnī* of Jogi Baba, the everlasting fire arranged by every *sādhu*, has been installed.



Fig. 3. Temple of Sarasvatī. Photo Daniela Bevilacqua



The area is dotted with several other shrines: in between the temple of Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī there is a Hanuman temple and, on the path that brings one toward the tamarind tree, a *liṅgam*<sup>15</sup> has been established which was found in the soil. Taking the path that leads into the jungle, one encounters another small shrine with slabs on the altar representing the image of snakes. Then the path divides left and right, both ending in small shrines in which candles and incense are lighted twice a day. According to Jogi Baba these are places connected to the story of sage Medha. For example, the shrine near a stone would sign the spot where Medha used to meditate. However, as we already said, no specific place is described in the *Māhātmya*.

Jogi Baba takes care of the place alone, with the assistance of few tribal people. The daily routine is quite busy with morning, half-day and evening *pūjās* that last in total a couple of hours since there are several temples to enact worship. Jogi Baba is busy the full day; he does all the physical works necessary to maintain the *āśram*. Sometimes he takes a break to make some *āsana*s (yoga posture) to stretch his body, or to smoke chillums with a crippled Adivasi man who helps him as much as he can. In the evening, he sits in *padmāsana*, takes his *mālā* (rosary) and meditates.

The presence of three temples dedicated to three of the main Goddesses of the Hindu Pantheon marks the place as a centre of attraction for people from the nearby areas. Since the jungle has been cleared from around the *āśram*, the place is also agreeable for pic-nicks and short walking.

There are different types of people visiting the place. There are the 'Sunday visitors' who come just to have a look: most of them do not know the story of the place and do not even take time to read the boards. They come, take photos and go, sometimes leaving their garbage as a sign of their presence. Jogi Baba does not support these visitors and he is often sulky with them, since, according to him, they are not really devotees to the Goddess. This kind of visitor appears from December till the beginning of March, while the weather is pleasant.

Among other visitors, there are also pious devotees to the Goddesses that do *pūjās* in their temples. Then, there are Jogi Baba's followers. From his words, it seems that they are quite a big number, spread throughout West Bengal and in different parts of India. When they come the main reason is to meet Jogi Baba and do *sevā* (service). Jogi Baba takes care of his devotees giving advice and blessings that, according to one of them, can change a life for ever, as it happened in his case. This is quite 'normal' for a guru, since the roles a guru can have in the life of a disciple or followers can go beyond mere religious or spiritual ones.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> A *liṅgam* is an abstract or aniconic representation of the Hindu deity Siva.

<sup>16</sup> A frequent role that a guru fulfils is that of parent, usually a father: "the guru creates a kind of spiritual family around himself, sometimes forming much stronger ties between the members than biological ones" (Broo, 2003, 264.). A guru may have the role of teacher, especially those who give initiation and have then the purpose of instructing the disciple, as well as the role of psychologist in some case. According to Sudhir Kakar the surrender shown to the guru is an expression of transference, a need to imagine the self

Among Jogi baba's followers there are several important people (musicians, lawyers, politicians), and business men. One of them goes every day twice a day to bring food to the Baba, cook for all the people that are present in the *āśram* – with the help of an Adivasi woman – and participating in the evening ceremony before going home.

As a pilgrimage centre, Garh Dhām becomes over populated twice a year: in occasion of Rām Navamī,<sup>17</sup> but especially during Durgā Pūjā, when the *Devī Māhātmya* is also recited. During these festivals, each of which lasts for nine days, temporary accommodations are built to host the thousands of people who come from the around areas and even from afar. Followers of Jogi Baba since the very beginning have told me that every year the participation at these events increases to such an extent that today small shops and places for eating are arranged and other *sādhus* come here to celebrate but also to astonish people with some of their yoga practices.

The making of the place has been, till now, successful, since not only devotees of Jogi Baba come, but also people attracted to the place in itself, and the vitality of these festivals demonstrates this. As explained by Basso:

It is at times such as these, when individuals step back from the flow of everyday experience and attend self-consciously to places -when, we may say, they pause to actively sense them- that their relationship to geographical space are most richly lived and surely felt. For it is on these occasions of focused thought and quickened emotion that places are encountered most directly, experienced most robustly, and ... most fully brought into being. (1996, 107)

### **On the future of the place**

From just a spot on the ground covered by jungle, where a *sādhu* and local people started clearing, today Garh Dhām is much more organized and several buildings have been built. Today Jogi Baba is, theoretically, not alone since there is a Trust helping him in managing the place, the Adi Sri Sri Garh Chandi Mahamaya Dham Trust. However, Jogi Baba says that still he has to fight to have his presence in the area acknowledged by local politicians. He is still fighting to have his discovery recognised by the authority although, as we have seen, when the place was officially inaugurated some important politicians were present. Therefore, the wish of Jogi Baba is that a Rāja, i.e. someone powerful and with money, will come to help him economically to properly develop the place in the full respect of nature. Among his further projects, there is the opening of a school for Adivasi children and the reconstruction of the wall of what he recognises as King Surath's Kila, the fort of King Surath. Likewise, he would like the forest inside the wall to be cleared

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in an external perfect figure, who is at the same time also a 'healer of emotional suffering and somatic manifestation' (1991, 45-54).

<sup>17</sup> Rām Navamī is a spring Hindu festival during which the birthday of god Rām is celebrated.

up, the road to reach the place to be properly built, and a small town to be developed so as to recreate the city that he says once was there.

If Jogi Baba finds the right supporters, he will probably be able to accomplish his mission. This demonstrates how the role of *sādhus* in contemporary times has expanded, and it is not rare that *sādhus* get involved in humanitarian efforts, setting up institutions like schools and hospitals. This has been defined by Copeman and Ikegame as guru “governmentality” (2012: 35). This term aptly describes the ability of gurus to exercise power through institutions focused on welfare activities that should actually be in the hands of government. As pointed out by Ikegame, when religious institutions become centres of locally focused welfare activities, the gurus who manage them represent a new form of leadership among local people (2012: 47). Already Jogi Baba has a leadership in the area, especially in the Adivasis’ villages around the temples and, thus, the place-making of Garh Dhām is quite successful in this regard.

However, what will be its future? Jogi Baba says that since this place is the result of his efforts, but mostly of the grace of the Goddess, She will sort out the situation. But he hopes that someone will follow after him and will accomplish his vision. It is question of time. Sometimes he complains, a bit resigned, that his role as ‘discovery man’ has not been recognised, but according to him this will probably happen once he is dead: somehow he will be part of the history of the place. Another concern is that he does not have ascetic disciples, nobody directly instructed by him and to whom he could leave the place once he dies.

As I have noted elsewhere (2018), places which are renowned and have established temples survive regardless of the religious order attached to them, which can change. Other places, though, rely heavily on the charisma or initiative of the *mahant* (abbot), and the support that lay people give to him.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, probably the sort of place Garh Dhām will be will depend on who succeeds Jogi Baba, since lay donors have till now been attracted to the place because of the spiritual skills of Jogi Baba, therefore his successor should live up to their expectations. Furthermore, it will depend on the sense of community which will be created. As Pauwels claims (2010, 53), religious community legitimises themselves “by affiliation with holy men and how they go about ‘imagining’ this affiliation in stories in praise of holy men.” If the story of Jogi Baba was properly told and around his figure a proper community formed and a new *mahant* to manage the place, then probably Garh Dhām will further develop considering the importance of the Devi and her celebration in West Bengal.

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<sup>18</sup> Similar considerations have been done by Pauwels who analyses the failure of the creation of a Vyāsa *sampradāya*. She says “Theoretically, chances for the formation of a Vyāsa *sampradāya* were as strong as those of the sects of Harivaṃśa and Haridās. [...] the lack of charisma of Vyāsa’ s son who inherited the custody of the image may have been a factor that prevented a Vyāsa-*sampradāya* to be established” (2010, 82).

## Conclusion

As we have seen, several narrations intermingle in the story of Garh Dhām. These narrations are useful in the place-making process of Garh Dhām, giving authority and right to the discovery, and to the life story of the yogi who found the place.

As it is written on the website:

...the life and work of JogiBaba is as precious and subject to research as the mission of Subhas's life is. Both belong to the same cycle and his whole life is influenced by this mission. The mission was a mystery till he unfolded it by shedding light to the dark unconscious mind with the power of Yoga. Many more documents are to be released soon, to make a deep and detailed insight into the life of JogiBaba.

People do not question the words of the Baba since for those going there, and for those living there, he is the guru, as Broo explains, that is "someone who has attained the mercy of God, and who can act as an intermediary between the disciple and God" (2003: 75). The fact that he is able to intercede in the path toward God is demonstrated by his special powers and, since people have a lot of stories to tell about the Baba, this would confirm, in their eyes, such powers. But, people can believe and recognize his powers since, as we have seen, there is a long tradition of narrations of yogic powers, miraculous lives and discoveries, that authorises his claim to have found such a historical place. The story narrated in the *Purāṇa* plays an important role in the place-making of the *āśram* since it is not considered as part of a myth, but of Indian history. This claim is supported also by professionals and educated people who, having met Jogi Baba, recognise his powers as Yogi and believe in the old, holy texts of Hinduism that he uses, without questioning them.

The spread of these narrations is a source of joy and attraction for devotees and lay people, whose number is increasing year after year, especially at the time of Durgā Pūjā. This demonstrates that through narrations stories and mythologies can be reintroduced and retold so that even an isolated spot can be made into a "place", and therefore get the authority and legitimacy necessary to attract pilgrims, becoming a religious centre, and giving new vitality to old beliefs.

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