

DEFENDING SUFISM, DEFINING ISLAM: ASSERTING ISLAMIC IDENTITY IN  
INDIA

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## ABSTRACT

RACHANA RAO UMASHANKAR: *Defending Sufism, Defining Islam: Asserting Islamic identity in India*  
(Under the direction of Dr. James L. Peacock and Dr. Lauren G. Leve)

Based on thirteen months of intensive fieldwork at two primary sites in India, this dissertation describes how adherents of shrine-based Sufism assert their identity as Indian Muslims in the contexts of public debates over religion and belonging in India, and of reformist critiques of their Islamic beliefs and practices. Faced with opposition to their mode of Islam from reformist Muslim groups, and the challenges to their sense of national identity as members of a religious minority in India, I argue that adherents of shrine-based Sufism claim the sacred space of the Sufi shrine as a venue where both the core values of Islam and of India are given form and reproduced. For these adherents, contemporary shrine-based Sufism is a dynamic and creative force that manifests essential aspects of Islam that are also fundamental Indian values, and which are critical to the health of the nation today. The dissertation reveals that contested identities and internal religious debates can only be understood and interpreted within the broader framework of national and global debates over Islam and over the place of Islam in the Indian polity that shape them.

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## NOTE ON PSEUDONYMS AND ORTHOGRAPHY

I have used pseudonyms throughout this dissertation for all my interlocutors, with only a few exceptions. Some interlocutors are easily identifiable because of the positions they occupy within the Sufi community: as authors, leaders, and scholars. These interlocutors participated in my research knowing this, and in many cases wanting to be identified as representatives of their larger community. In order to honor their position within the community, and not to obscure their contribution, I have retained their real names.

This dissertation includes terms and quotes in many different languages: Hindi-Urdu, Kannada, Persian, and Arabic. I have used a system of orthography that reflects the pronunciation of my interlocutors, rather than on standard, formal pronunciation. This bias is especially obvious for Islamic terms that have their roots in Arabic. I have chosen to err on the side of spoken, colloquial usage of these terms. My interlocutors were for the most part native speakers of Hindi-Urdu, and the transliteration I employ reflects their native accents, and not formal Arabic (*fusha*) pronunciation. The exception to this is when I discuss specifically theological debates in chapter 2, and when I quote from the quran in chapter 4. Here, I use transliteration that is standard in the academic study of Islam in the United States.



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## INTRODUCTION

Nooruddin Nizami Sahab was one of my main interlocutors at the shrine of the Sufi saint Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia in Delhi. He was a hereditary custodian at the Sufi shrine and one of the first people I met there during my exploratory visit in the summer of 2006. During this initial visit, I met with him for a few hours one evening and had a long conversation about the saint and his shrine. We sat in one of the smaller courtyards of the shrine-complex, a little away from the hubbub that is characteristic of most evenings at this shrine. He spoke about the charisma of the saint, his continued influence over the people of India despite the passage of the centuries, and of the importance of the sacred-space of the Sufi shrine. Nooruddin Sahab was animated throughout the conversation, and seemed deeply affected by the saint and the shrine.

At this early stage of my research, the Sufi response to reformist Muslim critique of shrine-based Sufism was of primary interest to me; and so I asked him about the oppositional stance of the Tablighi Jama'at, a reformist Muslim organization that opposed many of the practices and beliefs of shrine-based Sufism. This is what he said:

Fundamentalism is what has marred the name of Islam in the world... (But) the Tablighi Jama'at preaches this orthodoxy, this fundamentalism... they get Saudi aid, you know. The Quran commands us to be merciful towards people of all faiths. And this ideal is found in the shrines of Sufi saints here. You won't find this kind of respect in Saudi Arabia, which is the center of Islam. But in India, the value of every human being is recognized.

Nooruddin Nizami's complex narrative brought up many questions: Why did he equate reformist Islam with Islamic fundamentalism? What informs his reaction to these forms

of Islam? Why does he align shrine-based Sufism with the Indian nation? Why does he speak of Saudi Arabia negatively, while also calling it “the center of Islam”? Where does he place India in the historical narrative of Islam? And conversely, where does he place Islam in the history of India? And what links all these elements (differing modes of Islamic practice, the geographic valencing of the Muslim world, the Indian nation and Islam) in his response? My conversation with Nooruddin Nizami and others during that first trip led me to ask how the social, religious, and political milieu of India influenced assertions and contestations of religious identity.

This dissertation describes how adherents of shrine-based Sufism assert their identity as Muslims in the face of reformist claims that their beliefs and practices are un-Islamic, and in the context of public debates over religion and belonging in India. I also show that the positive narratives associated with shrine-based Sufism in the religio-political rhetoric of the Indian nation-state form points of tension that undermine adherents’ assertion of a Muslim identity. In what is a double-bind for adherents, their assertion of a Muslim identity in turn threatens to undermine their claim to Indianness. Viewed in this context, the responses of adherents of shrine-based Sufism to reformist critique form a complex narrative that asserts claims to both religious authenticity and national belonging.

The responses of adherents of shrine-based Sufism, however, cannot be understood merely as strategic narratives deployed in order to negotiate a precarious socio-religious position (though the expediency of such a strategic deployment is evident in light of the politics of religion in the Subcontinent). Through intensive and prolonged association with my interlocutors I found that adherents of shrine-based Sufism strongly

believed in their claim to these religious and national identities, and in fact expressed a view that shrine-based Sufism was essential to the existence and sustenance of both Islam and India. Scholarly and reformist understandings of Sufism have predominantly defined contemporary shrine-based practice and beliefs as the product of a long-standing religious and cultural decline from a “Golden Age” of Sufism, which was characterized by great intellectual and doctrinal creativity. I argue that for contemporary adherents of shrine-based Sufism the sacred space of the Sufi shrine is where the core values of both Islam and the Indian nation are given form and reproduced in the world today. For these adherents, contemporary shrine-based Sufism is a dynamic and creative force that manifests essential aspects of Islam that are also core Indian values, and which are critical to the health of the nation today.

Thus, at a more macro level, this dissertation reveals that contested identities and internal debates can only be understood, and must be interpreted, within the broader framework of the national and global debates over Islam, and the place of Islam in the Indian polity that shapes them and influences the forms they take. I base these conclusions on a year of intensive fieldwork carried out primarily at two major Sufi shrines in India.

In the following pages that serve as an introduction to this dissertation I will elaborate on this discussion and engage broadly with the major scholarship that has informed my thinking on the Indian nation, on Sufi Islam, and on reformist Islam. I will also give an account of my methods and field-sites.

## CONSTRUCTING A MUSLIM IDENTITY IN INDIA

At a very basic level, I am interested in how adherents of shrine-based Sufism construct their identity as Muslim subjects and as Indian citizens. This identity-construction occurs in a social circle and a political context where adherents of shrine-based Sufism receive very different messages about what each of these two categories are, and how to be both. How do they manage these messages, and how do they position themselves given the pressures that come with them?

Adherents of shrine-based Sufism face intense criticism of and opposition to their practices and beliefs from reformist Muslim quarters, and in turn respond to these oppositional stances; we are looking at a tug-of-war between members of two disparate Muslim groups. However, these larger questions are relevant because the internal struggles among Muslim groups are deeply informed by the prevailing socio-political narratives and shifting trends at a national and global level. The stances of adherents of shrine-based Sufism vis-à-vis reformist Muslim groups have to be viewed and understood as complex responses to 1) the need to assert their identity as Muslims in the face of reformist opposition, and 2) what such an assertion of Islamic identity means to their position as Indian citizens.

In order to understand the ways in which adherents of shrine-based Sufism construct their identity as Muslims and as Indians, and position themselves within this larger context, it is essential that we first unpack the main categories that constitute their socio-religious and political milieu: 1) Sufism and the core beliefs and practices of adherents of shrine-based Sufism; 2) reformist Islam and the broad debates and trends



that have shaped its current forms; and 3) the Indian nation state, and the social, religious and political narratives that dominate it.

## SUFISM

Very broadly speaking, Sufism is a mode of Islamic practice and belief centered on the core desire of the human being to become one with God. It is often translated as Islamic mysticism, but its beliefs and practices are quite wide-reaching and encompass discussions that are as much of this world as of the other. Sufi debates among Muslim philosophers over the centuries have included various speculations and assertions on the nature of God and the universe, and the means through which people can hope to achieve unity with God. However contested these issues may be among Sufis, the goal of attaining unity with God remains a central goal of Sufism. Sufi Muslims also acknowledge the difficulty of achieving this goal and traveling the path that leads to this ideal state, and very few are believed to have accomplished this journey. These select few are known as Sufi saints<sup>1</sup> (*vali*; pl. *aulia*). The Sufi saints continue to be revered centuries after they have passed on, and the tombs in which they are enshrined form the loci of lay practice among millions of Muslims all over the world.

Sufi practice among specialists is transmitted through Sufi orders, where the teachings of Sufism are passed on from master (*pir*) to disciple (*murid*). A Sufi order (*silsila*) is essentially a chain of master-disciple relationships (*pir-muridi*) that traces its

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<sup>1</sup>The word 'saint' is often used in the context of Sufism, but the notion of sainthood in Islam is not the same as that in Christianity. Sufi masters are often considered to be saints during their lifetimes, and the honor comes from consensus among peers, disciples and adherents, rather than granted through an institutionalized system. The consensus forms around the acknowledgement of a Sufi master's divinely granted powers, and personal charisma. Hagiographies of Sufi saints are replete with accounts of miracles: instances when saints display raw power by making walls walk and taming wild beasts, or narratives in which they possess uncanny powers of perception and foreknowledge.

point of origin to the Prophet Muhammad who is considered the first master; or even to Adam, the primordial master. When an adherent wishes to begin the journey on the Sufi path he (or she)<sup>2</sup> must be accepted as a disciple by a Sufi master. If proven worthy, the disciple may in turn be granted the right to take on his own disciples, thus forming a link in the chain that is his Sufi order. The word that I translate here as ‘Sufi order’, is *silsila*, which literally means ‘chain’ in Arabic. There are many Sufi orders the world over with particular orders dominant in certain regions of the world. The two shrines where I carried out the bulk of my research were the shrines of the saints Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia (in New Delhi) and Khaja Bandanawaz Gesudaraz (in Gulbarga, a city in peninsular India), both of whom belonged to the Chishti order of Sufis (*chishtiyya*).

Chishti Sufism is eponymous with the Sufi saint Shaikh Moinuddin Chishti, the founder of this order in India. In their seminal work on this order of Sufism, *Sufi Martyrs of Love* (2002), Carl Ernst and Bruce Lawrence answer the question, “What is Chishti Sufism?” thus:

It is both an experience and a memory. It is the experience of remembering God so intensely that the Soul is destroyed and resurrected. It is also the memory of those who remembered God, those who were devoted to discipline and prayer, but above all, to remembrance, whether they recited the divine name (*zikr*) or evoked his presence through song (*sama*’). [p. 2]

Ernst and Lawrence have rightly identified the ritual remembrance of God (*zikr*) and ritual audition (*sama*’) as two very important aspects of Sufi practice.

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<sup>2</sup>Sufi orders have historically been male institutions. However, there are a few recorded instances of women being granted discipleship, but very few of women becoming Sufi masters in turn. One of the most well-known female saints was Rabia al-Basri (717-801 CE), who continues to be revered all over the world as a blessed, charismatic and powerful figure in Sufi Islam.

In order to distinguish the intense spiritual and meditative practices of specialists who actively strive to achieve oneness with God from that of lay Muslims who believe in the power and the piety of the saints, I identify the former as Sufism and the latter as shrine-based Sufism. As the term suggests, shrine-based Sufism constitutes beliefs and practices that are centered on Sufi shrines as the seat of these saints. It rests primarily on belief in the intercessory powers of Sufi saints, in the blessed nature of the sacred space of Sufi shrines, and in holding Sufi saints as an ideal of Islamic comportment and ethics.

In India, Sufi saints and their shrines are an important part of the religious lives of both Muslims and non-Muslims. How these saints and their sacred spaces fit into the larger ritual and belief patterns of religious life between Muslims and non-Muslims differ. Among Muslims, practices and beliefs associated with Sufi saints and their shrines form a subset of Islam and are integral to their understanding of the nature of God, the world, and their place in it as Muslims. (For non-Muslims, Sufi saints are charismatic spiritual figures who are supernaturally blessed with powers to heal and grant boons.) To differentiate between Muslim practitioners and non-Muslim devotees, I characterize the former as adherents of shrine-based Sufism; and it is these adherents amongst whom I carried out my field-research in India. The term used by adherents of shrine-based Sufism for themselves is *ahl-e sunnat wa al jama'at*, which is a Persio-Arabic phrase meaning, “people of the Islamic way of life and community”, or *ahl-e sunnat* for short. They are sometimes often referred to as *barelvi*, which is a term eponymous with the 19<sup>th</sup> century scholar and pro-shrine reformist Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi.

I present a detailed account of Chishti Sufi shrines, and the practices and beliefs of adherents of shrine-based Sufism in chapter 1. However, it is important to note at this juncture the deep connection of Chishti Sufism with the Subcontinent. Adherents identify Chishti Sufism as one of the oldest orders of Sufi Islam in India (if not the first). The connection to India is also reflected in the practices at Chishti Sufi shrines, which take on a markedly Subcontinental flavor. Be it the accoutrements of ritual offerings to the saint or the mode of music through which God is remembered at shrines, there is an unmistakably Indian character to Islamic practice at these sacred spaces. While adherents of shrine-based Sufism take ownership of the Indian character of their Islamic practice, this, as well as some other core beliefs and practices of shrine-based Sufism, have become the target of reformist critique. I present the points of reformist opposition and their encounter with adherents of shrine-based Sufism in chapter 2.

Till fairly recently, the scholarship on Sufism was dominated by analyses of texts, especially from the “Golden Age” of Sufism (13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries). This is in spite of the fact that we see more prolific production of texts by Sufis of a later era, resulting in what Carl Ernst and Bruce Lawrence (2002) have called a “historiographical disconnect” (p. 1). Scholarship over the past two decades has attempted to make-up for this bias in the study of Sufism. There has been a concerted effort to shift the focus of scholarship to late-medieval and contemporary Sufism.

Carl Ernst’s seminal work *Eternal Garden* (2004) was a major step in this direction. In this work Ernst focuses on texts and sites that are off the beaten path, analyzing Persian texts that elaborate the teachings of a lesser-known 14<sup>th</sup> century saint, Burhan al-Din Gharib, at his shrine in a small Deccan town of Khuldabad. In *Eternal*

*Garden*, Ernst opens up texts for analysis from an era that has been neglected for long by scholars of Islam. In addition, this work has especially informed my own research in that Ernst analyzes these texts not in isolation or only in relation to major Sufi treatises and Islamic doctrine, but within the larger context of Indian historiography, oral and written traditions of Chishti Sufism in South Asia, and the political and religious backdrop against which these texts were written.

Part of this trend in scholarship, and another work that has informed this dissertation, is Ernst and Lawrence's *Sufi Martyrs of Love* (2002), a major work in the study of Sufism in South Asia. Here, the authors trace the history and contemporary practices of Chishti Sufism without recourse to the now-clichéd rhetoric of Sufism's decline in the late-medieval era. In fact, this book is a complex presentation and analysis of the continued impact and dynamism of South Asia's most prominent Sufi order. In the words of Ernst and Lawrence,

Our thesis is that a Sufi order such as the Chishtiyya is more than a parasitical legitimation of power or a nostalgic reverence for bygone saints; it is instead a complex of spiritual practice, historical memory, and ethical models, which continues to evolve from its medieval Islamic origins in response to the political, ideological, and technological transformations of the contemporary world. [p. 1]

The presentation of contemporary Sufism as a dynamic institution with active agents is a fairly new phenomenon. The legacy of Orientalist scholarship, dominant ideologies from reformist quarters oppositional to shrine-based Sufism, and later narratives of liberal democracy and modernity purged of spiritual and religious “baggage” have dominated the study of Sufism for decades. Part of the reaction to this legacy has been Katherine Pratt Ewing's work *Arguing Sainthood* (1997). In this work, she argues against an understanding of Sufism as entirely subject to hegemonic forces of

“Western epistemologies...and modes of domination” (pp. 3-4). While I engage with this work later in this dissertation, I would like to note here that Ewing’s understanding of Sufis as dynamic agents who negotiate between various modes of religious and political subjecthood has been an important contribution to the study of Sufism in South Asia, where for long Sufism has primarily been studied via texts and not through ethnographic engagement with its adherents.

More recently, Pnina Werbner (2003) and Anna Bigelow (2010) have added further to the growing body of anthropological and ethnographic approaches to Sufism. Anna Bigelow’s work, *Sharing the Sacred*, focuses on narratives of pluralism that have emerged out of the shrine of Shaykh Sadruddin Sadri Jahan in Maler Kotla (in Indian Punjab), and complements my own line of enquiry. Where I look at what identity narratives of Muslims who adhere to shrine-based Sufism tell us about what it means to be Muslim and Indian today, Bigelow’s work looks at how these narratives serve to mediate relationships between Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims in a part of India that has been susceptible to inter-religious violence. As with my own research, Bigelow approaches these narratives of pluralism as mirrors to larger questions of religious identity and national belonging.

In contrast to both my research and Bigelow’s recent work, Werbner’s book, *Pilgrims of Love*, is a close-up look at a Sufi cult that is secretive and insular in many ways, but one with a transnational following. I have found Werbner’s thoughts on the complexities of doing ethnographic work in the anthropology of religion to be insightful, and I engage with these briefly in the methods section of this dissertation.

In this dissertation I examine the identity-narratives of contemporary adherents of shrine-based Sufism in the context of social and religio-political forces that have impacted the story of Islam in India. My research adds to this movement towards presenting contemporary shrine-based Sufism as a dynamic mode of Islamic practice that must be understood within the larger social and political milieu that have informed its forms and character.

#### REFORMIST ISLAM AND REFORMIST SUFISM

Reformist Islam in reality refers to not one but a number of movements that emerged all over South Asia, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East and North Africa starting around the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, and having continued impact the world over through extant groups and organizations. In many cases these reformist movements arose from the decay and destruction of Islamicate political entities (kingdoms and princely states in Asia and North Africa, and the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East and Eurasia), and from the dissonance and rupture caused by contact with colonial powers and colonial modes of knowledge. Aspects of these early reformist movements germane to this discussion are the shifting locus of the center of the “Muslim World” to the Arabian Peninsula, and a focus on “purifying” Islamic practice among lay Muslims. As the term reformist suggests, these movements were armed with a sense of urgency in remedying what was seen by many elites as the degraded and weakened state of Muslims and Islamicate culture.

I have mentioned above that the “purification” of lay Muslim practice and belief was a primary goal of these reformist movements, and this remains true in the contemporary world. Muslim practice focused on Sufi shrines and the cults of Sufi saints

is chief among the targets of reformist Islam, as many reformist groups consider these forms of practice to have deviated from the tenets central to Islam: monotheism (*tawhid*) and opposition to idol worship.

Among the various reformist movements that continue to have an impact on the contemporary world, the Tablighi Jama'at is now one of the most extensive. Begun in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in North India by Muhammad Ilyas, this organization has grown over the past century into one of the most influential reformist movements in the world today, with a huge following in South Asia and beyond. The growth and impact of this movement can be credited to two distinct aspects of this organization: 1) its focus on changing lay Muslim practice and belief, especially among the rural and urban poor; and 2) the use of lay Muslims as missionaries to carry out the reformist message of the Tablighi Jama'at. These dual tactics have resulted in many millions of Muslims in India being drawn away from shrine-based Sufism, thus making this organization a cause for great anxiety and anger among adherents of shrine-based Sufism in South Asia. For this reason, my dissertation focuses primarily on the Tablighi Jama'at as one of the main antagonists to which adherents of shrine-based Sufism respond.

In chapter 2, I discuss these points of opposition in detail. I also delineate the sources of religious authority claimed by reformist Muslims in leveling these charges against shrine-based Sufism. Adherents of shrine-based Sufism self-identify as Muslims, and needless to say take these accusations of being un-Islamic very seriously. The complex response that adherents give to reformist critique is presented in chapter 4.



As with the dearth of scholarship on modern and contemporary Sufism, scholarship on reformist groups also suffers from a lacuna in the study of the late-medieval and the modern era. Scholarship on the Tablighi Jama'at and similar Sufi reformist groups is especially lacking. Barbara Metcalf (2006) has noted that this lacuna extends to reformist institutions, and their functioning, organizational set-up, and influence outside of a 21<sup>st</sup> century political lens (p. 29). Her work on Sufi reformist institutions such as Deoband and the Tablighi Jama'at (1982; 2006), and her special focus on Islamic education (2006; 2007) have gone a long way in filling this lacuna. Especially relevant to this dissertation is Metcalf's examination of the bureaucratization and privatization of religion in South Asia starting in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (2006: 30, 280). This trend within Muslim reformist groups has pitted them directly against shrine-based Sufism, where religion, ritual and sacred power are experienced and performed in the very public space of the Sufi shrine.

A very important work that came out this past decade is an edited volume titled, *Travellers in Faith* (2000), which features exclusively essays on the growth and development of the Tablighi Jama'at as a transnational movement. Especially informative for me is the essay by Muhammad Khalid Masud (who is also the editor of this volume), *Ideology and Legitimacy*. Considering the general dearth of scholarship on the Tablighi Jama'at, this essay provides much-needed context and critical analysis of the Tablighi Jama'at's history, methods, and ideology. His problematization of the concepts of "revivalism" and "fundamentalism" as used by reformist groups is pertinent to this dissertation. To use his own words:

Uses of the terms “revivalism” or “fundamentalism” lead one to believe that what is being revived are well-defined ideologies, principles, fundamentals or doctrines. But in fact the ideologies presented by the revivalist or fundamentalist movements are new constructions, and that is why their legitimacy is contested like any other ideologies. [p. 79]

Considering that reformist groups often levy the accusation that the beliefs and practices of shrine-based Sufism are heretical innovations (*bid'at*), it is important to note that these reformist groups are themselves very new entrants to the field and have also negotiated challenging ideological and theological terrain vis-à-vis oppositional co-religionists.

This past decade has also seen scholarship on reformist and piety movements outside of the South Asian context. Hirschkind's *The Ethical Soundscape* (2006) and Mahmood's *Politics of Piety* (2005) both stand out as works that present these movements as complex ones, with which adherents engage through layered motivations. I have found Hirschkind's work especially useful in its presentation of lay engagement with Muslim reformist media as a form of aspirational religious practice. Listening (both active and passive, in private and in public, in groups and alone) is a powerful form of engagement. The aural environment of India, as with Egypt in the case of Hirschkind's work, is awash with sacred voices and sounds that defy the characterization of the public square as a necessarily secular space, but that also do not preclude the diversity of religious voices in it.

Over the past decade, and importantly, in a post-9/11 world, these scholars have done a great deal to humanize reformists, and to bring coherent discussions of their ideologies and goals to the fore. However, much of the scholarship has focused on the workings of these organizations vis-à-vis secular political structures and against the backdrop of non-religious discourses in the public arena. The interaction between

reformist groups and their non-reformist co-religionists has been largely ignored. Where the oppositional stances of reformist groups are brought up, the discussion is presented largely in terms of the ideological stances of these groups and not as a point of tension, negotiation and conflict *between* various groups.

Earlier ethnographic works have touched upon identity politics and identity formation within sects and groups vis-à-vis co-religionists who stand outside such bounded religious groups. The Hindu, Muslim and animist traditions of South East Asia have drawn anthropological interest for decades, and the question of how to parse these traditions have especially intrigued ethnographers in this region. Geertz, in his book, *The Religion of Java* (1960), structurally divided Javanese society into three groups: *santri* (Orthodox Muslims), *priyayi* (Hindu-influenced nobility), *abangan* (animists in rural areas), and concluded that most Javanese were Muslim only by name due to a variety of Javanese traditions and religious practices that Geertz identified as not being Muslim at all. In this, Geertz echoed the contentions of the Muslim orthodoxy that “syncretic” Javanese traditions were antithetical to Islam.

In his book *Islam in Java* (1989), Mark Woodward reiterates the criticism that Hodgson (1974) leveled at Geertz in that the latter tended to use the yardstick of the orthodoxy to measure the authenticity of Muslim belief and practice of the Javanese. Reflecting on his own initial attempts to “trace the ‘Hindu’ elements of the ideologies and ritual modalities” of Javanese Muslim practice, Woodward concludes that any resemblance that there are between the two are “trivial” and do not bear out on closer examination (pp. 2-3). Woodward addresses an important issue: that of a truly anthropological approach to religion and religious practice; an approach to Muslim

practice, in which we examine the self-identification of groups, and use that as our starting point, rather than attempting to place these groups on a scale of authenticity from “syncretic” to “orthodox”. As Woodward succinctly puts it, “religious discord is based not on the differential acceptance of Islam by Javanese of various social positions, but on the age-old Islamic question of how to balance the legalistic and mystical dimensions of the tradition” (p. 3). Through this dissertation, I have attempted to add depth to this conversation by presenting points of Muslim reformist critique not merely as static positions on Islamic doctrine and practice, but as dynamic sites of contestation and identity-formation.

#### NARRATIVES OF INDIAN MULTICULTURALIST SECULARISM

Germane to understanding the dynamic responses of adherents of shrine-based Sufism are the narratives on religion and secularism that are such a marked aspect of the Indian nation-state. The responses of adherents of shrine-based Sufism to reformist critique are not produced in a vacuum; they function within the socio-political milieu of the Indian nation-state, and all the accompanying implications for Muslims as a minority population in a part of the world where religion and politics have often been antagonistic, if not strange, bedfellows.

The preamble to the Indian constitution defines India as a “sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic republic.” I identify the kind of secularism that has developed in India since its independence as *multiculturalist secularism*, as it is quite different from the Western European or American models. It is marked by the sharing of the public sphere by various religions as opposed to the exclusion of religion from the public sphere. It is a form of secularism that acknowledges India’s religious and cultural

diversity and includes expressions of this diversity in its public manifestations. Marked by phrases such as “Unity in Diversity” and an emphasis on “National Integration”, Indian multiculturalist secularism results in a favoring of religious identities that are fluid and have fuzzy edges, so to speak<sup>3</sup>. While the term ‘syncretism’ has been much-maligned in Euro-American scholarship, the narratives of the Indian nation-state present it as a positive attribute. The corollary to this is that religious identities that are rigid and bounded are characterized as antithetical to the Indian ideal and threatening to the integrity of the nation.

These conceptions of what is and what is not ideal religious subjecthood in India are spread through state-generated media such as public service messaging on TV and billboards, and in school texts; non-state media such as TV programming, commercial cinema, music and popular literature for children and adults. In these media, many historical Muslim figures are presented as conforming to this standard of “syncretic” religious belief, and thus as an ideal of Indianness. Shrine-based Sufism, with its cross-religious following and its embrace of regional customs, is also upheld as the posterchild of Indian multiculturalist secularism. In chapter 3, I discuss how the Indian national project, including the project of multiculturalist secularism, has resulted in the

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<sup>3</sup>The case of Indonesia and its experiments with secularism provides interesting parallels to and diversions from the Indian example. Robert Hefner, in *Civil Islam: Muslims and democratization in Indonesia* (2000), provides a detailed examination of the past and continuing efforts to create ideals of religious and secular engagement in Indonesia’s public discourses and arenas. Lorraine Aragon, in *Fields of the Lord* (2000), discusses changing interpretations of Suharto’s *pancasila* philosophy in defining the role of religion in government, and conversely, the role of government in the regulation of religious behavior (p.310-319). In an earlier essay, *The Creativity of Tradition in Indonesian Religion* (1986), Jaes Peacock provides us with an insight into the forms of social change produced by “syncretic mystical” praxis and “purist” praxis (p. 349). As he writes, “Indonesian polity has always been grounded in this syncretic mystical cosmology” (p. 347). Within the context of Hefner’s work detailing how a Muslim civil language is being crafted in contemporary Indonesia, and Aragon’s insights into how initial secular tenets have translated into state-use of churches, Peacock’s analysis of *abangan* or “syncretic mystical” praxis in shaping post-colonial Indonesia is useful in completing the picture.

construction of this ideal of religious subjecthood, and how certain Muslim figures and Sufism are co-opted into this project.

Important figures whose ideas on secularism and the Indian nation have framed and informed this dissertation are Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey. Chatterjee has identified what he has called a “contradiction of secularism in India” (2007) in an essay of that name, and in another essay titled *Secularism and Toleration* (1997). He argues that while there seems to be will among political leaders to separate religion from the workings of the state, the functioning of the state has not quite met this desire. The Indian state continues to have its many arms elbow-deep in religious issues (Chatterjee 2007: 143).

What Chatterjee describes as a “contradiction”, however, I think of as a defining characteristic of Indian secularism. He, however, is not satisfied with the notion that secularism takes on a different meaning in India than in Euro-America. To him, the dilemmas that arise because of the way in which the purportedly secular Indian state engages with religious communities necessitate the conclusion that “Indian secularism” is not a concept that is stable and internally-reconciled enough to be regarded as a fully-formed political entity in its own right (Chatterjee 1997: 241-248). While I acknowledge that Chatterjee raises a pertinent point, I have not engaged with this particular quandary in this dissertation, as I believe that it has the danger of getting us caught up in the nuances of nomenclature and definitions. For the purposes of this dissertation, I have discussed the nature of what I call India’s multiculturalist secularism. This is not to say that I take a celebratory or absolutist view of secularism in India. However, I do take the ways in which secularism functions in India as a given, and then proceed to engage with

the problematic national and religious subjecthoods that arise from India's brand of secularism.

One of the Chatterjee essays I have referenced above can be found in an important volume published under the title, *The Crisis of Secularism in India* (2007). In this same volume can be found an essay by Gyanendra Pandey titled, *The Secular State and the Limits of Dialogue* (157-176). Here, Pandey starts by lucidly defining the peculiarity of Indian multiculturalist secularism:

The concept of secularism has in our time been somewhat detached from its filiation with the process of secularization and the expansion of the secular (as opposed to "sacred") dimension of public life. It has come instead to be linked more and more to the idea of the recognition and acceptance of difference. The question of secularism has been posed as a question of pluralism, or of tolerance between diverse religious and cultural communities. [p. 156]

In this sense secularism is conceived as an act of "parleying" (p. 156). Pandey goes on to say, however, that in practice, this notion of secularism allows for toleration but not easy communication, as it is seldom clear who is to converse with whom in the resolution of religious issues.

This notion of an unclear mode of, and arena for, dialogue has framed my understanding of the identity-narratives of adherents of shrine-based Sufism. The desired Muslim subjecthood projected by the Indian nation state and by secularists and spiritualists within it necessitates a response from adherents. But where is this response to be made? To whom, and how? There is no direct line of communication, and so we must glean the stance of adherents vis-à-vis multiculturalist secular appropriations of their mode of religious practice by looking at their responses to Muslim reformist

critique. These are the complex scripts and dramatic asides that are a result of the “limits of dialogue” that Pandey writes of.

## FIELD SITES

I carried out my field-research for this project from February 2009 to March 2010. The two primary sites of research were the shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia in Delhi, and that of Khaja Bandanawaz Gesudaraz in Gulbarga. I began research at the latter site, living in Gulbarga from February 2009 to May 2009, and returning for an extended stay during the death anniversary celebrations of Saint Khaja Bandanawaz in November. I spent the rest of my research time in Delhi at the shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia. I give a brief overview of these two sites in the section below, while presenting a more detailed account in chapter 1.

It is important to note at the outset that while I spent much of my time in the field at these two Sufi shrines, this dissertation is not an ethnography of the shrines per se, where the main purpose is a detailed description of a shrine and its activities (though I do give the reader an account of these). In this dissertation I treat these shrines and the communities surrounding them as microcosms that reflect broader socio-religious and political trends (at a national and a global level). My conversations with interlocutors and my observations at these field-sites give insights into the larger question of how the socio-cultural and political milieux of a nation-state affect intra-religious disputes. Having said that, my methods would certainly be considered ethnographic, and my experiences conducting research are also fairly typical of an anthropologist in the field. I detail these methods in the section that follows.



My first site of research was the shrine of Khaja Bandanawaz Gesudaraz. This site is the major Chishti Sufi shrine of southern India, and draws visitors from all over Southern India and beyond. This saint and his shrine dominate the city of Gulbarga; streets, stores and organizations are named for him, and the shrine itself funds an educational trust that runs many institutions throughout the city.

I chose this shrine as a site of research because of its regional significance and local influence. What kind of an impact (social and religious) did the shrine have on the lives of Muslims in Gulbarga? Did the dominant presence of the shrine, through its secular educational institutions, influence the religious outlook of Gulbarga's Muslims? Did it, for instance, make them less inclined to heed Sufi reformist critique of shrine practice? Did the social contributions of the shrine to the city and particularly to its poorer Muslims have a favorable impact on how they viewed shrine-based Sufism? These were some of the questions I hoped would be answered through research here.

The next major field-site was the shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia, which is the most important Sufi shrine in terms of popularity and historical significance in the city of Delhi. It draws millions of visitors annually from all over the Subcontinent and central Asia. The shrine is certainly an integral part of the spiritual and religious lives of many denizens of Delhi, and is often a part of people's daily or weekly routines. The complex mix of people who are drawn to this shrine and its continued significance in such a massive city were the main aspects of the shrine that drew me to it as a site for research.

But aside from the importance that the shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya holds for adherents of shrine-based Sufism in Delhi and beyond, the neighborhood of

Nizamuddin was of particular interest to me for another reason: at the head of the alleyway that leads to the shrine sits the headquarters of the Tablighi Jama'at, a reformist organization whose teachings often challenge the legitimacy of shrine-based Sufism as a form of Islamic practice. The headquarters consist of a dormitory for men where reformist missionaries and young initiates stay, and a large mosque which draws many from the community for the five ritual prayers (*namaz*) each day.

Young men join the Tablighi Jama'at<sup>4</sup>, which has now become a global movement and participate in missionary activities, preaching a way of life that they believe is rooted in Islam and that is guided by the life of the Prophet Muhammad. The Jama'at claim over knowledge of Islamic practice and identity, of what it means to be Muslim, brings it in direct conflict with adherents of shrine-based Sufism who also make claims to religious legitimacy. There occurs in that alleyway between the Tablighi Jama'at headquarters and the shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya, contestations over sacred space, following, and religious knowledge that have a direct impact on those who adhere to shrine-based Sufism, on their religious self-definition, and their assertions of religious authenticity.

## METHODS

Ethnographic fieldwork was my primary research method. I spent approximately one year in India carrying out research for this project. As I have detailed above, I

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<sup>4</sup>The Tablighi Jama'at is open to women as well. However, their role and level of involvement is considerably different. Unlike male initiates, women do not engage in door-to-door missionary work, nor do they travel further afield to set up religious schools or Tablighi Jama'at centers. Women initiates focus instead on proselytizing to female members of their family and immediate community. They set up groups that meet in their homes for the purpose of prayer, reading of the Quran, and discussion of the prophetic sayings.

divided my time between the Khaja Bandanawaz shrine in Gulbarga, and the Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya shrine in New Delhi. But as with most attempts at ethnographic research, it became practically impossible to restrict myself exclusively to my chosen research sites. During my time in India, I found that connections and conversations often led me to places I had not initially intended to go. I found that keeping my eyes and ears open regardless of where I was made me aware of the broader ramifications of the questions I was asking. I found answers in places I did not expect to find them, and I found that my questions gained more complexity and nuance from these unexpected encounters.

Aside from the many months I spent at the Khaja Banganawaz shrine and the Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya shrine, I also had the opportunity to visit a few smaller shrines and other sites related to Sufism. Early during my fieldwork, I travelled to the small shrine of Baba Budhan in the highlands of the southern state of Karnataka with Dr. Anna Bigelow of North Carolina State University. I travelled with her as a translator of Kannada, the language predominantly spoken in this region. Over the past decade, the shrine has become a fraught location; its sacred space being contested by Sufi Muslims and by right-wing Hindu groups. The trip was eye-opening in many ways, and I was able to meet members of the shrine community, secular advocates and activists, and right-wing Hindu organizers who were all embroiled in protracted proceedings over shrine ownership. I also visited the shrine of Bu Ali Shah Qalandar in Panipat (a town a few hours west of Delhi) with my Fulbright-Hays advisor Dr. Azizuddin Husain. The visit to this shrine brought home to me the complicated politics of shrine-patronage when sacred space is shared among various religious communities.

A very interesting and productive detour for me was the southern Indian city of Bangalore, where I was able to engage with the International Sufi Centre and its founder, Dr. Peeran. I attended the Centre's monthly seminar, participated in group discussions that included members of the Centre and others who were interested in Sufism, and had many illuminating conversations about Sufism with Dr. Peeran.

Most of my time, however, was spent at the two main sites of my research. Before I left for the field, I had presumed that my primary methods of data-collection would be extended interviews with individuals whom I had identified as valuable resources. However, on arriving in Gulbarga in early 2009, I discovered that my recorder, my schedule of questions, and the consent forms with which I was armed would all be of little use to me during my stay. The very act of signing a consent form, for instance, made my interlocutors quite suspicious, or at least wary, of my motives. Was I working for the government (of the US, or of India)? Was I a journalist in search of a sensational exposé? Why did they have to sign something? The written consent forms were official and bureaucratic in essence, and I had not anticipated the depth of suspicion that my interlocutors felt for all things bureaucratic.

I also soon realized that my recorder made my interlocutors self-conscious and quite uncomfortable. They identified the recorder and the formal interview as something reserved for "experts" and elites (intellectual, economic, social). My interlocutors were quite ready to talk to me about Sufism, but when I would ask permission to tape our conversations, they would often demur. "Oh, why are you recording this? I don't know enough about Sufism. I am just a believer, just an ordinary Muslim," or some variation

on that theme was usually the response to my request to record. These interlocutors would then defer to some higher authority with whom they thought I should talk instead.

After my attempts at formal and informal recorded interviews were thwarted repeatedly, I decided that unrecorded informal conversations, and informal oral disclosure and consent would work much better. The disadvantage of interviews and conversations with no audio record is the lack of complete oral narratives regarding the topic at hand. The option to go back and listen to these, to be able to listen for tone of voice, for nuanced utterances etc. is of course invaluable. However, even though I was not able to obtain audio recordings of my conversations with my interlocutors, I compensated for this by jotting notes throughout these, and then following up with detailed explications of these short notes. After the first few weeks at the two shrines, most whom I regularly encountered there (shrine caretakers, librarians, preachers, teachers, students and adherents) recognized me as the student from the American university who was doing research on Sufism. I no longer had to introduce myself and explain my presence in their midst, and I received fewer curious glances as I furiously jotted my notes.

As an Indian fluent in Hindi, Urdu, and Kannada (of which I am a native speaker), I was able to interact with my interlocutors with relative linguistic ease. I did not need an interpreter, and as a woman of South Asian origin, I did not become the focus of attention at any research site (which, many of my non-South Asian colleagues have told me, poses quite an impediment during fieldwork). However, I did find that looking and talking like my interlocutors also had its disadvantages. Many ethnographers have relayed how they often get “adopted” in the field by their interlocutors. They are taken in by a family,

shown the ropes and eased into the routines of daily life. To some extent, this has to do with the prestige that, in many communities, accrues from having a foreigner in-residence. Also, since the ethnographer is so obviously an outsider, it is presumed that he/she is in need of guidance and support. I too was an outsider at my field-sites; both Gulbarga and Delhi were new to me, and the ritual and social life of shrine-communities was not one I had much familiarity with outside of the context of research. However, I was often not perceived as a lost foreigner by my interlocutors. They never presumed that I did not know my way around, that I needed introductions to and instructions on various aspects of living in their world. And yet, I was a Hindu doing research among Muslims, and the difference in religion was obvious to my interlocutors (my name is a recognizably Hindu one). There certainly must have been things (conversations, events, knowledge) that were off-limits to me, or at least not readily proffered. Being both an outsider and an insider, in a sense, meant that I often had to map out intricate routes and networks of interaction. I had to find ways to get invited to events, to be at the right place at the right time.

Contributing to this initial angst was my expectation that I would have something perceivably productive or structured to do every day in the field. Arriving at my field-sites, I soon realized that my days stretched out interminably before me, and I had to often content myself with just *being* somewhere, rather than *doing* something. That my physical presence somewhere with my radar on so to speak, was essentially productive, was a lesson hard-learned.

To allow for productive conversations, to get to know the people of the shrine, and to learn what they were learning, one of the first things I did was to enroll in the

religious school (*madrassa*) run by the Khaja Bandanawaz shrine in Gulbarga. The religious school was a large hall located right next to the main tomb of the shrine. It was primarily a boys' school, where young boys received training in the memorization of the Quran (*hifz*) Quranic recitation (*qir'a*), and Quranic exegesis (*tafsir*) for more advanced students. Annexed to this larger hall was a small room that served as the girls' school, where girls and young women from the local community gathered everyday to memorize the Quran. The school had two main male religious scholars (*maulvi*) and a few other male and female teachers who assisted them in their tasks. The school followed a syllabus for Islamic education set by the Jami'a Nizamia, a prominent religious seminary located in the southern city of Hyderabad.

Needless to say, I attended school with the female students in the annex. As mentioned above, the school only offered memorization lessons to the female students. However, on my request, the chief custodian of the shrine was gracious enough to ask one of the school's religious scholars (whom I will refer to henceforth as Maulvi Sahab) to give daily lectures on Quranic exegesis to me and other female students in attendance. This turned out to be a bonanza of data for me. For one, it was very insightful to learn the ways in which adherents of shrine-based Sufism parse Quranic verses and prophetic sayings (*hadis*). Much of the literature on exegesis I had read thus far had come from decidedly reformist quarters, and I was deeply interested to know what "the other side" had to say. But more importantly, I found that the tangential narratives of Maulvi Sahab, the exchanges between the students and the teachers, and their collective and individual engagement with the texts and their faith, gave me a glimpse into a world to which I would have otherwise had little or no access.

On further reflection, I found that I valued greatly the interactions I had with the students and the teachers at the school; in some ways more than some of my individual and private conversations with interlocutors. I am not implying that the fact that this was a religious school, and that one of my primary interlocutors here was a religious scholar lent authenticity to what was said there. What I mean is that when I heard narratives in such group settings, where most who were listening were lay adherents of shrine-based Sufism, and I was the only outsider, I felt reassured that what I heard was not being said solely for my benefit. A concern that plagues many ethnographers is the question, “How do I know that they are not merely telling me what they think I want to hear?” While at the school, Maulvi Sahab would deliver his lectures to all the female students present there; he would pause for their questions, ask them questions, make eye-contact with them and engage with them thoroughly. Although these lectures were occurring solely due to my requesting them, he never addressed them primarily to me; I was just one among the other students (and I daresay, one who did not know half as much as the others did on the topic at hand). Sitting among the other students in the little school-room each day also allowed me to build a rapport with these young women and with Maulvi Sahab quite quickly. Some of the female students at the school later confided to me that when they heard that a researcher from America was going to be joining them, they had expected someone quite glamorous and unapproachable! But my daily presence at the school allowed for my relationship with them and the teacher to develop into one of friendship and mutual respect.

A regular haunt during my months in Gulbarga was the Khaja Bandanawaz shrine’s library. This tiny room in the back courtyard of the shrine complex is a veritable



treasure-trove; its collection includes rare copies of the Quran and important manuscripts of hagiographies, philosophical and theological commentary, and exegesis. Keeping a close eye on this treasure was Altaf Sahab, a retired civil servant who now served as the shrine's librarian. I spent many hours in this little room with Altaf Sahab for company, reading the day's newspapers and talking about our day. My conversations with him, and a few others who stopped by the library, were often insightful. Altaf Sahab's kindly nature and amiability almost instantly put me at ease, and I felt very comfortable talking to him about nearly whatever was on my mind. In those first lonely months in Gulbarga, Altaf Sahab's welcoming smile and frank conversation became a source of both comfort and insight for me.

Another welcoming presence at the Khajabandanawaz shrine was the shrine's secretary, Ziauddin Sahab. An efficient and kind man, it was his job to make sure that the shrine and all its services ran smoothly. He was a very busy man on most days, but he would always invite me into his office and offer me a cup of tea if he saw me lingering outside. These little visits to his office were eye-opening. The intricacies of the shrine's operations played out in front of me as I sat in a quiet corner of his office or at his table with my cup of tea. During moments of respite between the various tasks that demanded his attention, Ziauddin Sahab would talk to me about the shrine, about the Saint and about Sufi Islam. Like Altaf Sahab, Ziauddin Sahab was a lay adherent of shrine-based Sufism who nonetheless had an insider's view of the shrine and shrine-based Sufism. They often offered to me glimpses of this unique vantage point, which helped in many ways to clarify some questions, and to raise others.

At the shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya in New Delhi, my days were far less structured than in Gulbarga. The shrine here does not have a religious school open to girls, and so that was not an option for me. However, during an initial exploratory visit to this shrine a few years ago, I had made a few important contacts among the shrine's hereditary caretakers. These contacts proved invaluable to me as I began my research at this shrine. One of my primary interlocutors at this shrine was Nooruddin Nizami Sahab, with whom I spent many evenings seated at the foot of the tomb of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya (and whom I quoted at the start of this introduction). Another very important interlocutor was Amjad Nizami Sahab, an aged Sufi scholar and caretaker of the shrine of his father, a Sufi master in his own right. Though I was not able to spend a lot of time with Amjad Nizami Sahab, the three long visits I had with him were very insightful, and gave me a fresh perspective on many of my research questions.

In addition to these primary interlocutors, the lay visitors to these Sufi shrines proved to be invaluable resources. Most of the lay visitors I encountered came from very poor rural or lower-income urban communities. This was especially true of the shrine of Khaja Bandanawaz. Both shrines, however, drew people from a wide demographic range, and interacting with these lay visitors allowed me to gain an insight into what the shrine meant to those not closely associated with its management or its heritage.

When I first began fieldwork, it was with the intention of doing ethnography among both adherents of shrine-based Sufism as well as with Sufi reformists. However, in the first few weeks in the field, it became apparent to me that this would be hard to achieve. I began my fieldwork in Gulbarga, at the shrine of Khaja Bandanawaz Gesudaraz. I had initially hoped to be introduced to, or to find contacts among Tablighi

Jama'at initiates in Gulbarga. As a woman working in a largely sex-segregated environment, I knew that groups of male initiates and the Jama'at schools for boys would be off-limits to me. However, the Tablighi Jama'at did have groups of female initiates who hosted small group sessions in their homes. I hoped to eventually have some access to these.

As I have discussed above, Gulbarga is a relatively small city, and the shrine-community is a very densely populated neighborhood around the Sufi shrine. I soon found that my comings and goings were clearly noted and commented on by everyone from the shrine's secretary to the rickshaw drivers waiting outside the shrine's walls. I also realized that there was quite a bit of animosity and suspicion regarding the Tablighi Jama'at among adherents of shrine-based Sufism. While my being a Hindu woman doing research on Sufi Islam was more a matter of positive curiosity among the people I initially encountered at the shrine, my association with an American institution did disconcert some people. I was asked often enough if I had anything to do with the government of the United States, and why some institution in America would be interested in their Sufi shrine. I tried my best to explain to them the nature of my research and its goals, and the nature of academic research in the United States.

Even though I looked and spoke like my interlocutors did (dressing as they did, using the same language (Urdu) as them, and being an Indian myself) I was still an outsider. And as an outsider who was attempting to build rapport and trust with members of the shrine community, it seemed to me that any association I developed with the Tablighi Jama'at would be noticed and would impede my progress. For this reason, while in Gulbarga, I did not attempt to make any formal connections with members of the

Tablighi Jama'at. When my research moved to Delhi, a decidedly larger environ than Gulbarga, I hoped there to make some connections with reformist groups. But here, I found it very difficult to find introductions to Jama'at initiates or higher ups. My attempts at trying to speak to officials at the Tablighi Jama'at headquarters were rebuffed; I was told that women were not allowed into any part of the building and I never made it past the threshold.

While I was thus not able to carry out fieldwork for an extended period of time within the organization of the Tablighi Jama'at, I had no dearth of interlocutors whose ideologies were decidedly reformist in character, and who had been influenced by Jama'at missionizing. The reach and the popularity of this and other reformist groups in India is quite extensive, and I was able to meet and engage with Muslims with reformist leanings and beliefs often enough. It is a common experience for ethnographers that some of the most interesting “ethnographic moments” occur with chance encounters.

I found that those who were not adherents of shrine-based Sufism generally did not belong to, or were not active members of, any one Muslim reformist group. Most of the time, it was more that their beliefs and practices had been shaped by the reformist teachings of a number of groups and individuals. I did find that with my younger male interlocutors, especially those of a lower economic class, the Tablighi Jama'at played more of a direct impact on their religiosity.

Another important source of information regarding reformist ideology was various audio-visual and text media. Reformist pamphlets, books, cassette and CD

sermons, TV shows and newspaper articles were all very useful in gaining an insight into reformist critique of shrine-based Sufi practice and belief.

#### LANGUAGES, TEXTS, AND NARRATIVES

Early in my graduate work at the UNC, I decided that my research as an ethnographer would be enhanced by a greater knowledge of Islamic (and especially Sufi) texts, religious and political history, and theology. To this end, I undertook the study of Arabic and Persian. I familiarized myself with the Quran in its original Arabic, with Persian Sufi poetry by Sufi masters such as Rumi, Hafez, and Sa'adi, and with the various hagiographies of South Asian saints.

So when I set out to carry out ethnographic fieldwork in India, I felt well-equipped with basic knowledge of the Quran, and of Sufi hagiographies and poetry. Not only did knowledge of these texts and traditions prove to be invaluable to me, but the very fact of my knowing textual Persian and Arabic opened doors to me that I had not anticipated. As a female Hindu student from the United States, I was a rank outsider to the world of Sufism. I soon found that my linguistic skills and my familiarity with various sacred and theological texts lent me a measure of credibility as a scholar. My interlocutors, many of whom were initially guarded in their responses, opened up to me once they realized that I was far from ignorant of Islamic and Sufi textual traditions.

During my initial visits to Delhi a few years before I started my fieldwork, I found that ignorance of Islamic texts on my part was a serious impediment to being able to communicate with many people regarding Sufism and Islam. I would introduce myself as someone doing research on Sufism, and this was often met with questions regarding religious texts. My lack of knowledge of hagiographies, or Quranic verses seemed to put

people off, and they seemed dubious of my credibility as a scholar of anything pertaining to Islam.

This was a problem I did not face during fieldwork, and I was quite surprised at how much of a difference my background research had made. Not only were my interlocutors more open to talking to me about Sufism in particular and Islam in general, but my knowledge of these texts and these languages allowed me to catch references that my interlocutors made that I otherwise would have missed. References to Quranic or Sufi verses, and to narratives from hagiographies would have been lost to me had I not delved into these texts prior to the commencement of my research. There were many instances when my interlocutors would begin to narrate an incident from the life of a saint: a narrative that I was familiar with. My facial expression and body language bespoke this familiarity, or I would participate in the narration of the tale. This familiarity on my part was met with pleasure and approval on the part of my interlocutors (whether they were scholars, ritual experts, shrine custodians or lay adherents), and allowed me to develop a rapport, and in some instances a relationship of affection and respect, with these members of the community.

One particular relationship that stands out from all my field encounters was that which I was able to develop with the teacher, Maulvi Sahab, at the Khaja Bandanawaz shrine's religious school. As I have mentioned above, I sat with the female students daily in the little room annexed to the main religious school for boys, and Maulvi Sahab would join us to lecture on Quranic exegesis and commentary. On the first day of my attendance, Maulvi Sahab began his lecture by pointedly saying that the Quran was a pure and sacred text and could not even be touched by a non-Muslim and without the

performance of ablutions. Needless to say, I did not touch any of the Qurans in the room. As the days progressed, and Maulvi Sahab began to realize that I was no stranger to knowledge of Islam, I could see that his demeanor towards me warmed considerably. He began to interact with me less as an ignorant, lay outsider and more as someone who, like him, was a scholar, a teacher, and a student.

When I visited the shrine for the final time before returning to the United States, the Maulvi Sahab asked that I meet him in the boys' school, a male bastion for certain. I sat by him on the cool floor of the school room. He beckoned to some of the older students in attendance and introduced me as "Rachana" (emphasizing my Hindu name), who had come from America to study Sufism. He then handed me a beautiful leather-bound Quran, which he said included the best Urdu translation of the text he knew of. I opened it to the first book of the Quran, and as I read the text, a question about differences in how a particular word is pronounced and consequently translated occurred to me. He answered my question, and then pausing, he said that this copy of the Quran was for me to keep. I found his gesture deeply touching, and recognized it as an acknowledgement that our relationship had grown to one of warmth and mutual respect. In this and other ways, my familiarity with Islamic texts and Sufi narrative traditions broke down many of the barriers that my gender, my religion, and my institutional affiliation initially posed.

My knowledge of Islamic texts, though, did pose a very interesting and unexpected dilemma for me. On several occasions, my lay interlocutors approached me for advice and guidance on theological issues. I was entirely unprepared for this response, and I honestly felt quite uncomfortable being put in a position to pass judgment

on Islamic practice and belief. On these occasions, my interlocutors asked me if certain aspects of Sufi practice were un-Islamic, if Islamic reformist groups or adherents of shrine-based Sufism had the right end of the argument. Firstly, in no way was my knowledge of Islamic theology and Sufi texts deep enough to be able to make such a call! And secondly, as an anthropologist, I did not feel like I was in an ethical position to comment in favor of one side or the other. After all, I was in the field in order to learn about Islam and about Sufi practice and belief from my interlocutors: an anthropological approach to the study of religion. To then be asked by these same interlocutors what was Islamic and what was un-Islamic left me feeling dissonant to say the least. My usual response to such queries was to present to my questioners the complexities of the debate at hand. This did not always satisfy them, but I did feel like I left them with more information to make their own judgments than they had come with. But these encounters brought home to me how important textuality and language were to the construction of religious identity. So much so, that lay Muslims felt the need to approach a non-Muslim with some textual knowledge of Islam to resolve a religious question.

Thus far I have addressed how my knowledge of Islamic texts affected my engagement with interlocutors in the field. Islamic texts and narratives have also informed this dissertation at another level. Throughout this dissertation I have engaged not only with my dialogues with interlocutors, but also the narratives that saturate one's experience in the field. In a sense, I have approached a wide variety of media (school text books, advertising, state-produced propaganda, popular movies, sacred poetry and secular songs, miracle stories and fiery sermons) as texts and as audio-visual narratives.



I have also approached these narratives as “primary texts”, so to speak, and through secondary retellings. For instance, I have not only looked at hagiographic narratives as they are published and broadcast, but also as they are recounted, and the settings and formats in which these recollections are conveyed. Here, I would like to acknowledge Margaret Wiener’s work, *Visible and Invisible Realms* (1995), in which she engages not only with archival narratives of Bali’s colonial “encounter”, but importantly, with other retellings of this moment: visual, textual, and performative. She challenges the dominant narratives of this encounter, which are almost always from either a colonial perspective, or an ethnocentric Euro-American one, by examining counter narratives and Balinese retellings of the advent of colonialism in Bali. This dissertation is an attempt to present a similar countervailing perspective. First, by closely examining narratives from reformist quarters and from secularist media in India I have attempted to unpack the biases inherent to these narratives; Second, I examine narratives deployed by adherents of shrine-based Sufism in a variety of forms to present the same moments of “encounter” from the counter-hegemonic perspective.

#### POSITIONING MYSELF IN THE FIELD

The idea of a “native anthropologist”, of course has been problematized. Kirin Narayan (1993) is especially astute in observing:

the loci along which we are aligned with or set apart from those whom we study are multiple and in flux. Factors such as education, gender, sexual orientation, class, race, or sheer duration of contacts may at different times outweigh the cultural identity we associate with insider or outsider status” [pp. 671-672].

There is of course the fact that anthropologists returning to their home countries, cultures or communities for research are removed from their interlocutors by virtue of class, their

status as scholars, and also just the voyeuristic position of observers and researchers. It is also true that anthropologists increasingly work in urban areas with members of social movements or religious organizations, where the sheer size of the field, the massive numbers of people who populate it, and the diverse membership of groups make it quite impossible for the ethnographer to identify as a native in a meaningful sense.

I have mentioned above that I was both an outsider and insider while in the field. I am an Indian citizen with immediate family in India, but who grew up in the Middle East as an NRI, a Non-Resident Indian. The transient nature of immigrant lives in the Middle East leads to India occupying the position of “home” for many like me who grew up in wholly South Asian communities in the oil-rich but labor-deficient countries of the Arabian Gulf. But NRIs are not as easily embraced as insiders by those who live in India. So there is certainly some amount of dissonance between my self-identity as an Indian and my labeling as an NRI. However, my native fluency in various registers of a number of Indian languages has meant that most Indians cannot tell that I have spent most of my life outside India.

My complex positioning as a Hindu of Indian origin who has come to India from the United States to do research among Muslims was one that was also the cause of some confusion among my interlocutors. They did not know how to make sense of me, so to speak. Why was I doing research in India if I was a student in the United States? Why had I gone to study in the United States if only to return to India for research? What interest did I, as a Hindu, have in doing research at the Sufi shrine, especially given that my research did not focus on the commonalities between Hinduism and Sufi Islam? How was a South Indian Hindu fluent in Urdu? Why did I know so much about Islam? These

were all questions that I encountered while in the field. Lay adherents whom I encountered at the shrines were often startled when I introduced myself, as my name is recognizably Hindu.

I did not encounter any real pressure to convert to Islam during field work; but there was certainly unfamiliarity on the part of many interlocutors with the notion of a secular, academic study of religion, as opposed to one spurred on by a spiritual quest. As one of my major interlocutors, Maulvi Abdul Rasheed Sahab, once told me, “Don’t *research* God—*search* for Him!” I heard on more than one occasion the sentiment that I ought to convert to Islam since I already knew and understood it to such a great degree. It left me feeling awkward; I found it hard to explain that my interest was an academic one, without feeling like a voyeur. On a few occasions, my interlocutors asked if I was by any chance a Brahmin. When I said that my mother’s side of the family was, this seemed to satisfy my questioners. They reasoned that it was in the nature of Brahmins to seek knowledge, and after all, in the old days, it was the Brahmins at the courts of kings and sultans who had knowledge of Sanskrit as well as Persian and Arabic.

Saying that my interest in the topic of my research is a purely academic enterprise is perhaps disingenuous. I come from a family of freedom fighters and revolutionaries who had risen up against the British. Many of these family members had been Hindu nationalists in their anti-colonial stance, while my grandfather had been a Gandhian during the movement for independence. Also, the demolition of the Babari Mosque in Ayodhya in 1992 at the hands of right-wing Hindu nationalists, and the devastating religious violence that followed, had created a strong impression on my mind as a 10-year old becoming aware of the world around her. All of these factors have resulted in a

very strong identification on my part as an Indian, and a deep investment in conversations regarding Indian citizenship and the politics of religious identity in India.

Pnina Werbner (2003), in her work, *Pilgrims of Love*, ruminates on the problems that anthropologists and their interlocutors encounter at points of tension. Many of the issues I have raised above (being in many ways both an insider and an outsider, being academically and not spiritually interested in Sufism, not always knowing how to negotiate power and powerlessness while in the field) are all issues that Werbner raises as causing these points of tension during the ethnographic process, which in our imagining of it is an empathetic enterprise. One other point that she brings up is one that I have yet to discuss: how to negotiate and communicate conflict within the communities that we anthropologists engage with. She writes,

In a postcolonial world, [an anthropologist's] multiple identities are never ignored by her hosts, just as she cannot ignore or gloss over the internal politics and conflicts within the group she studies. It is the *social anthropological* analysis of local and transnational politics, rather than simply the *cultural* analysis of the plurality of cultural voices, that reveals the hidden, often painful truths of a social group. [pp. 301-302]

Here, I have to admit that there are such conflicts and tensions that are part of many shrine-communities that I have not engaged with fully in this dissertation. The custodianship of Sufi shrines can be fraught affairs that remain unresolved for generations; Sufi shrines can become sites of corruption and exploitation where the faith of adherents is milked for financial gain; the commercialization of Sufi sacred music can result in the questioning of the spiritual intent of ritual musicians; and contestations over the gendered spaces within shrine-complexes occur regularly. All of these issues result in a great deal of disharmony within shrines communities.

I have not engaged with these points of tension for two reasons: First, I did not feel that these were immediately pertinent to the larger questions I pose in this dissertation. Regardless of dissent and conflict within these shrine-communities, I found that in the face of reformist critique and the forces of Indian multiculturalist secularism, adherents of shrine-based Sufism deployed similar identity-narratives across the board. And second, having been a guest within these communities whose members gave generously of their time and insight, I found that I was uncomfortable with the idea of then detailing the tensions within these often-small networks of people, especially since that was not the premise of my research to begin with. I cannot say that I am entirely comfortable with having “gloss(ed) over the internal politics and conflicts within the group”, to use Werbner’s words. Looking ahead, I hope that I will be able to come to some resolution on this front; finding that balance between the empathetic ethnographer and the neutral, distant scholar.

#### BROADENING THE FIELD-SITE

In addition to traditional ethnographic methods, which involved formal and informal interactions with lay and specialist interlocutors, I also delved into audio-visual and textual data available to me while in the field. English-language and Urdu-language newspapers are an excellent source of data regarding religio-political issues currently being debated in India. English-language newspapers and magazines often feature op-ed pieces about Hindu-nationalism, Islamic fundamentalism, the nature of Indian secularism and religious politics. State and non-state produced public-service messaging and advertising are equally important sources of such information. They serve as reflections of the prevailing zeitgeist, especially among India’s youth.

The language-politics of India and Pakistan in the wake of the Subcontinent's partition led to the construction of Hindi and Urdu as two separate languages<sup>5</sup>. Within India, Hindi (though the national language) is primarily considered a "Hindu language", with Urdu then being constructed as a "Muslim language". The results of pre-independence and Partition-politics, these constructions have now been largely internalized by the respective language media and by their audience and readership<sup>6</sup>. Thus, Urdu language newspapers are primarily geared towards a Muslim readership. And although Urdu language TV channels can be understood by those who consider themselves Hindi-speakers, their programming also caters primarily to a Muslim audience.

Urdu language newspapers, such as Inqelab and Roznama Rashtriya Sahara, carry extensive reporting on issues considered of interest to India's Muslims and Islam-focused columns and supplements on Friday (a day sacred to Muslims). Similarly, Urdu-language channels such as DD-Urdu (a state-run TV channel) and ETV-Urdu feature talk shows on religious topics, and have special programming during the month of Ramadan

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<sup>5</sup>Spoken, colloquial Hindi and Urdu are practically identical both in terms of grammar and vocabulary. It is only when one gets to the higher registers of formal and literary Hindi and Urdu that the former becomes more Sanskritized and the latter more Persianized and Arabized. The scripts of the two are mutually unintelligible (Hindi using the Devnagari script, which is derived from Sanskrit; and Urdu using the Nastaliq script, derived from Arabic). However, since the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, the division between Hindi and Urdu has intensified and the two nation-states have made an intense and concerted effort to develop these as two separate languages. Urdu is now the national language of Pakistan, and Hindi the national language of India. Interestingly, Bollywood cinema continues to resist the division of the two and continues to use the colloquial amalgam, which was often called 'Hindustani' in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (a term less-commonly used now).

<sup>6</sup>The content of Urdu language media includes a lot of articles and programming that is specifically religious in content. Other non-religious items feature elements that are widely regarded as conforming to a Muslim aesthetic, such as the formal recitation of Urdu poetry.

and during Eid. In addition to these generally secular media<sup>7</sup>, there are also two major channels, QTV and Peace TV, that are fashioned as Islamic channels. These text and audio-visual media of course gave me a glimpse of what was of interest to a Muslim readership and audience, but it also provided me an insight into various sides of the debates over correct Islamic practice and belief, and the constructions of national and religious identity among Indian Muslims.

Finally, I also relied on contemporary religious tracts and literature for information on the kinds of material used for missionary work and for spreading information about Sufi Islam. The Khaja Bandanawaz shrine's religious school produced a journal in Urdu that carried essays of religious scholars on topics pertaining to Islam in general and Sufi Islam in particular. Similarly, the International Sufi Centre based in Bangalore also produced a journal in both English and in Urdu that also contained essays, treatises, poems and personal testimonials. Reformist groups also produce a vast array of religious material in various languages. Some of these are manuals for missionary groups, and others are religious tracts about issues such as personal conduct, ritual activity, marriage, food, and charity etc., geared towards lay Muslims. In addition to these analog texts, both shrine-based Sufi groups and Islamic reformist groups have websites that are geared towards a more international audience. Religious reformist groups especially produce audio sermons available on cassette and CD. I sometimes got the opportunity to listen to the sermons that an auto-rickshaw driver or a shopkeeper was

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<sup>7</sup>I consider these secular media because the goal of these channels is primarily entertainment. Though they may feature shows with religious themes, most of the programming consists of soap operas, the screening of movies, broadcast of concerts and poetry recitals, and talk shows.

listening to. These encounters gave me the opportunity to not only access the content of these sermons, but also observe the responses of lay listeners.

All of these audio, visual and textual materials gave depth and context to the conversations that I was having with my interlocutors. They allowed me to see larger patterns in the micro-level conversations that I had on a daily basis. Through these materials, I was able to situate what my interlocutors were telling me within larger debates that were occurring nationally, internationally, and in various parts of the country.

## DISCUSSIONS OF ISLAM AND SUFISM IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE

Since the events of September 11, 2001 the question of how Muslims are to be represented has been raised both in the popular media and in academic circles. Though the characterization of certain Muslims as good and others as bad in popular and academic media has persisted for at least a century now, the starkness of these representations has become quite evident over the past decade. The stakes of constructing such representations have also been raised, as has the impetus to scrutinize them. What has been especially interesting this decade, are the overlaid representations of Muslims in the popular media, in the analyses of public-policy think-tanks and state-intelligence networks, and in discussions of these in academic scholarship.

When it comes to directing American foreign and domestic policy, public-policy think-tanks and media pundits have for a while now identified “moderate” and “liberal” Muslims as a demographic worthy of attention. The contention is that in the now seemingly interminable “War on Terror”, strengthening this segment of the Muslim



population will help curb the growth of “radical Islam”. The key argument often made in these circles in support of this contention is that “moderate and liberal Muslims” are more in tune with the values of democracy and secularism; when living in democratic states, these “moderate” and “liberal” Muslims are more inclined to engage with the discourses of the public sphere and participate in democratic, civic institutions. The converse of this, of course, is that Muslims who are not deemed “moderate” and “liberal” by these think-tanks and pundits do not similarly participate in and engage with the various instruments of democracy and secularism.

Of particular interest to me is that public-policy institutions, as well as the popular media, have identified Sufi Muslims as worthy of support for some of the same reasons mentioned above. They also often place reformist Muslim groups (Salafi and Wahhabi reformists in particular) as being averse to democratic institutions of state and civic society, and thus not likely to be looked on favorably. This valencing can be seen not only in media generated within the United States, but also in India.

This, of course is a rather simplistic assessment. In this section, I take a two-pronged approach to parsing this problem. First, I ask if such a dichotomy is valid. That is, is the presumption that Sufis are necessarily (as a category) compatible with “Western” democratic values while others are not, a tenable position? Second, when it is suggested that adherents of Sufi Islam are “natural allies of the West” (Rand Corporation 2006:73), I ask what the implications of such a statement are for these adherents themselves.

## HOW IS A 'SUFİ' DEFINED IN THE PUBLIC DISCOURSE?

Before diving in, however I would like to pose the question, "Who is a Sufi?" What do the popular media and policy pundits mean when they speak of Sufis? When speaking of political allies with compatible values, is 'Sufi' a meaningful category?

The category of 'Sufi' is certainly quite broad. It includes hereditary custodians of Sufi shrines who are charged with the upkeep and maintenance of the shrine complex and the generation of revenue; and then we have the millions of lay Muslims for whom the Sufi saints and their tombs constitute an important locus of daily Islamic practice and belief. Aside from these folk, there are religious scholars who explore the intellectual and spiritual questions raised by various schools of Sufi philosophy, or parse questions of legality and legitimacy of various religious and secular practices. There are ritual specialists who are committed to the higher spiritual practices and goals of Sufi life; these specialists and scholars may or may not hold Sufi shrines as an important part of their belief and practice. And then, significantly, we have a substantial number of reformists who self-identity as Sufi, but consider the shrine space and much of shrine practice to be a deviation from their conception of correct Islamic practice. Within the South Asian context, adherents of the Deoband seminary and the Tablighi Jama'at are examples of this latter group. In addition to these various groups, there also exists considerable regional variation in practice and belief among Sufis who hail from South Asia, South East Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia, and Europe and America.

As we can see, there is quite an array of people who fit under this very broad umbrella term 'Sufi'. So when an influential Rand Corporation report claims that Sufis are "natural allies of the West" (2006:73), who are they talking about? When William

Dalrymple (journalist, historian and self-professed Indophile) writes in a Time Asia article that Sufism is “The Real Islam” (2004:2), to what is he referring?<sup>8</sup>

In his Time Asia article, titled *The Real Islam* (2004), Dalrymple begins by recounting his encounter with a Tablighi Jama’at missionary who denounces Sufism as magic (*jadu*). He then speaks of a family he met at the shrine of Moinuddin Chishti in Ajmer whose son had miraculously been healed by the grace (*barkat*) of the saint where modern medicine had failed. He then goes on to describe Sufism in some fashion:

From the very beginning of Sufism, music, dance, poetry and meditation have been seen as crucial spiritual strides on the path of love, an invaluable aid toward attaining unity with God—true paradise. Music, in particular, enables devotees to focus their whole being on the divine so intensely that the soul is both destroyed and resurrected. At Sufi shrines, devotees are lifted by the music into a state of spiritual ecstasy. Yet these heterodox methods of worship have divided Sufis from many of their Muslim brethren. [p. 3]

This kind of a description, with its emphasis on Sufi music, dance (if it can be called that) and poetry is fairly representative of reportage in the popular media. The description of Sufis is a little more nuanced in the Rand Corporation report mentioned above. This is not surprising considering that the Rand Corporation is a public-policy think-tank, and its reports are not necessarily geared for lay consumption. This is what the report, titled, *Building Moderate Muslim Networks*, has to say about Sufis:

(Sufis) are often, but not always, conservative Muslims who uphold beliefs and traditions passed down through the centuries – 1,400 years of Islamic traditions and spirituality that are inimical to fundamentalist ideology... These traditions incorporate the veneration of saints (and the offering of prayers at the tombs) and other practices that are anathema to the Wahhabis. They interpret the Islamic scriptures on the basis of the teachings of the schools of jurisprudence (*mazhab*) that were established in the early centuries of Islam; they do not engage in

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<sup>8</sup>I have examined these two sources here primarily because they have received wide publicity and reportage. But reporting in the popular media that adheres to the same template as these two sources is abundant.

unmediated interpretation of the Quran and the *hadis* (the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad), as Salafists and modernists do. Many traditionalists incorporate elements of Sufism – the tradition of Islamic mysticism that stresses emotive and personal experiences of the divine – into their practice of Islam. [73]

As can be seen from these excerpts, the term ‘Sufi’ is being used not in the broadest sense of the term. What is being connoted, is Sufi practice and belief that is centered on the Sufi shrine. This is clear from the fact that Dalrymple, and others who write in this genre, focus their attentions on Sufi music and other forms of ritual remembrance (*zikar*), which are activities that are usually, but not always, performed in the sacred space in or around Sufi shrines. The emphasis on a saint’s charisma and miracle stories associated with him also point to shrine-based Sufism. With the Rand corporation report, the reference is obvious, as it speaks directly of the veneration of saints and their tombs.

The consensus in these media is that adherents of shrine-based Sufism have values in common with denizens of Western democracies and their governments; values such as the support of human rights, participatory government, religious pluralism, etc. It is also agreed that their socio-political stances and their supposed heterodoxy position them as allies to Western governments. To put it bluntly, the message conveyed in these media is that from the perspective of the West, adherents of shrine-based Sufism are the “good Muslims”; the corollary to this being that “orthodox” Muslim groups are not.

#### PROBLEMATIZING THE GOOD (SUFİ) MUSLIM

What often comes up in media representations of adherents of shrine-based Sufism is their commitment to pluralism. The sacred space of the shrine, which has cross-religious appeal in many parts of the world, and the incorporation of regional

customs in shrine practice are aspects of shrine-based Sufism that are often brought up to support this claim. It is also true that this claim to pluralism is not wholly an outside imposition. I found that my interlocutors (ritual specialists, scholars and hereditary custodians of Sufi shrines, as well as lay adherents) often point to the shared sacred space of the shrine as reflecting a message of pluralism that they considered inherent to Islam. They also spoke of the Sufi shrine and Sufi beliefs as fulfilling the need for commonality in an increasingly fraught religious environment.

Given that this rhetoric of pluralism can be heard at Sufi shrines from adherents of shrine-based Sufism, I pose this question: does the idea of pluralism denote the same things to these different groups of people? When adherents of shrine-based Sufism in India use such narratives of pluralism, are their motivations and their understandings indeed the same as say, an inter-faith center in San Francisco? I say no. The term ‘pluralism’ is often used by those who advocate for Sufis as “good Muslims” in the same vein as it is used to describe a wide range of Euro-American cultural institutions; but the use of the term often glosses over cosmologies, socio-political circumstances and histories that differ vastly among these groups.

For instance, talk of pluralism at Sufi shrines is usually focused on shared sacred space among devotees of various faith-systems. This cross-religious appeal of Sufi shrines and Sufi saints is a well-worn trope of most reporting on Sufism. What gets left out of such discussions of pluralism at Sufi shrines are prickly issues such as the inaccessibility of many sacred spaces in a shrine to women, or the inequitable distribution of power and knowledge between lay adherents (who are for the most part poor and uneducated) and shrine custodians. Throughout my fieldwork, my interlocutors narrated

to me innumerable miracle stories and tales of the saints' charisma. Many of these narratives were stories of skeptical non-Muslims embracing Islam after an encounter with a Sufi saint; or of non-Muslim ascetics (*jogis*) being defeated by the superior miracle-working powers of Sufi saints. Where do such tales of religious conversion and competition fit into over-arching themes of pluralism? I am not insisting here that the ways in which adherents of shrine-based Sufism engage with pluralism are disingenuous because they do not abide by Euro-American notions of plurality. What I am arguing is that issues of gender, class, and religious disparity are real issues that emerge from the socio-economic context in which a Sufi shrine and the people associated with it exist. But such context is entirely missing in most non-academic discussions of Sufism.

In the popular media (not only in Euro-America, but in many other parts of the world), shrine-based Sufism has become a poster-child of pluralism. To advocates who report on shrine-based Sufism (as outsiders, and not as practitioners), this mode of Islamic practice seems to fill political and social lacunae. This process of lionization may come from an honest desire to present Islam in a positive light in a media environment that is otherwise quite hostile to it. It may come from a desire to find commonality at a time when Muslims have been Othered in many parts of the world. But such attempts, as well-intentioned as they may be, reduce complex cosmologies and worldviews to palatable warm fuzziness.

For instance, the role that love plays in Sufi philosophy often draws much lay interest. Most reportage on shrine-based Sufism in the popular media talks about how love is the emotion that forms the core of Sufi practice and belief. This makes for great copy, of course, and translations of Sufi devotional poetry sell millions packaged as

verses on secular, romantic love. But the Sufi notion love of the divine is not necessarily the same as love between human beings. And indeed, this notion of love for the divine in Sufism is largely not a mellow, fraternal love. It is *ishq*, or passionate love; it is an excessive love, a love that is all-consuming in its intensity, a love that is violent even, requiring the annihilation of the self into the being of another. This is love at a cosmological scale. But that is not the impression one is left with on reading most reporting on Sufism<sup>9</sup>. Another issue that is often simplified or overlooked entirely is the tension that exists in the literature between the idea of a Sufi as a public figure and a private ascetic, or the differences in opinion that exists among various orders of Sufism over acceptable shrine practice.

In addition to these over-simplifications of complex cosmological and socio-religious concepts, there is also the issue of understanding the responses of adherents within the context of social dynamics and political legacies. For instance, one of my interlocutors told me that a major significance of the Sufi shrine is that it provides a platform for inter-religious encounters through the joint expression of faith. In the popular media, such statements are often reported only as a championing of pluralism. But it is important to plumb the sources of such statements. What is the social, political and historical context for such a statement? To what is it a response? With whom is the speaker in dialogue? Without such contextualizing questions, we are left with what appear to be mere rhetorical flourishes.

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<sup>9</sup>Sufi saints and poets have spoken of love and compassion for fellow human beings as essential. But this concept is not the same as the notion of ecstatic or passionate love (*ishq*) which is core to Sufi philosophy and ascetic practice.

Anna Bigelow (2010), in her recent book, *Sharing the Sacred*, provides such contextualization. She examines these narratives of pluralism deployed by devotees of the saint Shaykh Sadruddin Sadri Jahan in Maler Kotla, a town in Indian Punjab. Bigelow concludes that these narratives bind together a religiously diverse community in a part of the Subcontinent that has been witness to horrific inter-religious violence during the Partition. In the face of the very real threat of inter-religious violence in present-day Malerkotla, these narratives set in motion what Bigelow characterizes as the “institutionalized peace system” in the community (237).

Anna Bigelow’s work provides us with one example of the complex place of these narratives in the contemporary lives of a religiously plural community in India. The rhetoric of pluralism deployed by adherents of shrine-based Sufism is the legacy of innumerable historical contingencies and lived realities: the construction and deconstruction of South Asian religion during the colonial era, the Partition of India and the creation of Pakistan, the post-Partition relationship between the two countries, minority-politics and Hindu nationalism in India, the growth of Arab-centric Islamic reformist movements, the cross-religious appeal of Sufi shrines, the events of September 11, 2001 and the ensuing “War on Terror”, attacks on Indian soil at the hands of Islamic militants, the kind of religious subjectivity favored in India, and the growing clout and proximity of anti-shrine Muslim groups.

This list, while lengthy, is by no means exhaustive. It is within this variegated landscape that we begin to see complex claims to authenticity and belonging embedded within these declarative statements about pluralism and shared sacred space. This dissertation draws out some of these interwoven effects and processes.



## MUSLIM ENGAGEMENT IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE

Another associated claim that we often find in reportage on shrine-based Sufism is that this group of Muslims, along with liberal, moderate and secularist Muslims, are much more likely to be engaged in public discourses within democratic and secular nation states than more “orthodox” or “fundamentalist” Muslims. Public-policy pundits and non-expert voices in the popular media often point to the rhetoric of pluralism and shared sacred space as exemplifying values compatible with democracy. There is also a very strong notion in popular media sources that more puritanical modes of Islam, if I may use the term, are essentially anti-modern.

Such characterizations begin to unravel when one looks closely at the activities and statements of many of these “orthodox” and “fundamentalist” Muslim groups. For instance, examining the rambling addresses and presentations of the exceedingly popular Indian speaker, Zakhir Naik is revealing. Closely associated with the Wahhabi group, the Jama’at-e Islami, Naik’s addresses are peppered with scientific and rationalist arguments for Islam’s superiority; arguments that I learnt, through subsequent encounters with members, were quite characteristic of Jama’at-e Islami rhetoric.

In terms of engagement with discourses of democracy in the public arena, I can recall quite a few instances during my fieldwork when I encountered a strong showing in such discourse from presumed “orthodox” groups. For instance, representatives from the Jama’at-e Islami participated in a three-day long forum discussion on the topic “What it Means to be a Muslim in India Today” held in New Delhi in 2009. And in a dramatic series of events, the Jama’at-e Ulema’-e Hind (the governing body of religious scholars from throughout India that would be considered “orthodox” in their very conservative

stance on social and religious issues) was petitioned with the question of whether India was *dar ul-harb*. This body of traditional Muslim scholars released a *fatwa* that India was not *dar ul-harb*, but *dar ul-aman*<sup>10</sup>. And the reasoning that the Jama'at-e Ulema'-e Hind gave for this was that India is a secular democracy, and all Muslims in India have an equal right to vote and participate in government.

The point I am making here with the examples I have recounted above is that engagement in the public discourse of democracy, religious diversity, secularism and modernity is a phenomenon we see across the board<sup>11</sup>. And so, to say that adherents of shrine-based Sufism have a particular proclivity for such engagement is misguided.

Furthermore, and I would like to emphasize this point, even when we are speaking of the engagement of adherents of shrine-based Sufism in the public sphere, the richness of this engagement would be lost if it were reduced to an un-contextualized expression of pluralism. It is a lack of context that has led many to jump to the conclusion that shrine-based Sufism is of considerable value to the policy goals of the United States, or is the embodiment of some desired mode of Islam, a cure-all for violent Islamism. Such conclusions and presumptions considerably diminish the complexities of

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<sup>10</sup>*dar ul-harb* (realm of war) is a term in Islamic jurisprudence used to describe lands not under Islamic rule. The term most often regarded as its antithesis is *dar ul-islam* (realm of Islam) (Algar, Hamid. 1993. Encyclopaedia Iranica. *Dar al-Harb*). The term *dar ul-aman* is less-commonly known. It is used to describe lands not under Islamic rule, but where Muslims are free to practice their religion (personal correspondence with Dr. Mona Hassan, Department of Religion, Duke University). In a *fatwa* given in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Shah Abdul Aziz, India was declared *dar ul-harb*. This claim was made in response to the question of whether Muslims living in British-ruled India were under obligation to follow prohibitions against usury in Islamic law. The contemporary petition for a *fatwa* on the issue of India's status was made by the Vishva Hindu Parishad, a Hindu Nationalist organization. This petition can be understood best in the context of religious minority-politics and Hindu nationalism in India.

<sup>11</sup>For an excellent analysis of Muslim engagement in the public sphere in Indonesia, the largest Muslim country in the world, see Hefner, Robert W (2000) *Civil Islam: Muslims and democratization in Indonesia*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

expression and experience of these adherents. To reduce intertwined historical legacies and contemporary realities with deep and broad ramifications to such glib phrases as “natural allies”, or “the real Islam” is not only misguided, but is an act of great disservice to complex agents with nuanced motivations and desires.

It is clear from the above discussion that through this dissertation I am in dialogue with both those in academia who have engaged with Sufism and those speaking from the platform of popular media. I am especially keen to engage with this latter demographic. I mentioned previously that my own background has made me personally vested in issues of citizenship and religious subjecthood in India. In this light, I hope through my research to contribute to this very public conversation that continues to unfold in India today, the pivotal issues of which are of relevance to a much broader global conversation.

In the chapters ahead I will address the specific argument that I presented at the outset: that intra-religious conflict and the responses to it must be understood not only within the context of specific doctrinal and belief-based issues, but also the broader social, religious and political backdrop against which they play out. In chapter 1 I give an overview of Sufi shrines, the practices and beliefs associated with these shrines, and aspects of shrine-based Sufism that draw a large following in South Asia. In chapter 2, I present the encounter between Sufi reformists and adherents of shrine-based Sufism, and the pressures faced by the latter group to conform to a mode of Islamic practice very different from what they hold to be true. In chapter 3, I examine how the construction of religious subjecthood in India contributes another dimension to the pressures faced by adherents of shrine-based Sufism in being Muslim, as well as to their identity as Indian citizens. In chapter 4, I examine how these competing pressures to their religious

subjecthood inform the narratives deployed by adherents of shrine-based Sufism vis-à-vis reformist critique.

## I. SHRINE-BASED SUFISM AND THE SACRED SPACE OF THE SUFI SHRINE

In the introduction, I presented a very broad definition of Sufism as a form of Islamic practice and belief that focuses on attaining oneness with God. In this chapter, I will detail shrine-based Sufism as a lived practice by describing the physical space of Sufi shrines, and the various members of typical shrine communities. This chapter also includes a description of my two major field-sites: the shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia in New Delhi, and the shrine of Khaja Bandanawaz in Gulbarga. By placing the beliefs and practices of adherents of shrine-based Sufism within their socio-cultural milieu, this chapter highlights the importance of the sacred spaces of Sufi shrines to adherents, and the place that these shrines and their associated practices and beliefs have in the daily lives of Muslims in India.

### THE SUFI SHRINE

#### THE SHRINE COMPLEX AND SURROUNDING LOCALES

At a very broad level, the Sufi shrine is the mausoleum of a Sufi saint. In addition to the tomb of the saint, a Sufi shrine may contain the tombs of his close relatives (such as his wife, children, and other descendents), and his prominent disciples. Sufi shrines vary considerably in size and patronage. Many villages across the subcontinent have tiny shrines. A small shrine would be just the tomb of a locally known Sufi figure, housed in a rudimentary brick and mortar structure. Such small shrines dot the Indian landscape,

and are patronized by the residents of the villages surrounding the shrine and any passing travelers. Indian cities and towns are home to several hundreds of shrines, some barely known outside the neighborhood they inhabit, and others with regional, national and international patronage.

The shrine-complexes of larger Sufi shrines have a religious school (*madrassa*) (that is often no more than a school-room), a mosque, adjoining facilities for the performance of ritual ablutions, and some kind of office or clerical space from where the hereditary custodians of the shrine manage the premises. Some of the most prominent shrines in the Subcontinent (such as the shrines of Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia in Delhi, of Khaja Moinuddin Chishti in Ajmer and of Khaja Bandanawaz in Gulbarga) also have some kind of a library or archive with manuscripts and early prints of the Quran, exegetical writings, hagiographies and other documents such as deeds, titles, and proclamations of regional nobility.

Visitors to Sufi shrines not only consider these sites sacred and spiritual spaces, but also spaces of healing and mediation. And so a shrine complex will also house spaces other than the tomb of the Sufi saint that are important to shrine visitors. Old wells or water-tanks, the tombs of specific relatives and disciples of the saint are examples of such sites. Reputations and legends grow around the Sufi shrines, and specific spaces within the shrine become known for particular kinds of healing and mediation<sup>12</sup>. Thus, it may be that visitors believe that drinking the water of the shrine's old well will heal their ailments, or that the space around the tomb of the saint or the saint's disciple will exorcize malevolent spirits.

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<sup>12</sup>Pfleiderer (1981) provides us with a fascinating look at the healing of mental illnesses at the Mir Datar shrine in *Mira Datar Dargah: The Psychiatry of a Muslim Shrine*.

The shrine of Khaja Bandanawaz in Gulbarga, for instance, housed the tomb of his great nephew. This nephew and the space surrounding his tomb had a reputation for exorcism and the easing of psychological trauma. Evenings at this tomb were intense affairs that took me aback the first time I witnessed it. Women from the city of Gulbarga, and even from surrounding villages, would come (or be brought) to this tomb for the treatment of some trauma. Often wearing black robes and veils, they would wail, scream and cry out, pleading to be healed and saved. They would often fling aside their veils, tear at their hair, and roll and spasm on the warm flagstone courtyard around the tomb. After the “episode” passed they would rise, gather their scattered veils and scarves, tidy themselves, say a prayer and leave. Others believed that fastening a lock to the gateway and fence surrounding this tomb would seal the loose lips of gossiping relatives, or seal the malevolence of ill-intentioned relatives; needless to say, the fence and gate were adorned with thousands of tiny locks. Another belief was that if one left water on the nephew’s tomb and then drank it, this blessed water would heal ailments. This belief resulted in the rather strange scene of a tomb covered in water-filled Coke and Mountain Dew bottles.

There is also a strong belief among lay Muslims in the subcontinent that certain verses of the Quran, and certain combinations of numbers, hold special powers of protection and healing. The hereditary custodians at Sufi shrines dispense lockets (*taviz*) to visitors for a small fee. These lockets often contain small pieces of paper with these Quranic verses and number-combinations, and are worn around the neck or arm of the person needing healing and protection. The reputation of some Sufi saints and the lockets dispensed at their shrines is quite great, and very often non-Muslims will also

seek out Sufi shrines and purchase such amulets to guard against nightmares, the evil eye, infertility etc.

Markets and neighborhoods often encompass Sufi shrines. These are densely packed communities that have grown around the shrine complex. These neighborhoods are predominantly lower-middle class/lower-income Muslim enclaves. The markets often cater to the needs of shrine visitors. Many stalls closer to the shrine complex sell ritual offerings to the saint. The most common ritual offerings in India are small balls of sugar mixed in with rose and marigold petals, and sheets of cloth (varying in detail and cost) with gold-colored trimmings that are laid over the saint's tomb. Also very common in these stalls are short strings dyed with turmeric and vermillion that shrine visitors tie to the lattices at Sufi shrines as a mark of their appeal to the intercession of the saint. Other offerings include incense sticks and coconuts at shrines in peninsular India. Some shrine markets will carry shrine-specific offerings such as the locks I have mentioned above at the shrine of Khaja Bandanawaz.

These markets also sell scriptural material. Copies of the Quran are sold in a variety of sizes and formats, but also very common are slim booklets with specific books (*surah*) of the Quran, such as the opening book (*fatihah*) and the book *Yasin*, that adherents read at the shrine. Hagiographies of major Sufis saints are also sold at these markets; they may be new editions of old Persian texts or translations of these and recent retellings in Urdu. In addition to these texts specifically pertaining to Islamic and Sufi Muslim doctrine and scripture, booklets on appropriate Muslim conduct and comportment are also available at these markets, such as books on appropriate clothing and food, conduct behooving married couples and unmarried men and women, or books



on the ideal conduct of the pious and devoted. Non textual media are also sold at these shops. They often include audio sermons in cassette, CD and DVD formats, formal recitations of the Quran by ritual reciters (*qari*) or gifted children, recordings of Qawwali (the form of ritual song offered at Sufi shrines to honor God, Muhammad, his family, and the saints) by famous performers, and other songs of piety and devotion recorded by less well-known Indian performers. In addition to these shrine-specific ritual paraphernalia, shrine markets also carry items of general interest such as prayer rugs and prayer beads, skull-caps and veils, scented oils, and food.

#### THE SACRED SPACE OF THE SUFI SHRINE, AND ITS VISITORS

As mentioned above, at the heart of the shrine complex is the tomb of the Sufi saint. The tomb itself is a raised stone structure, sarcophagus-like in appearance, carved with Quranic verses and Islamicate artistic motifs. This tomb is often covered with offerings to the saint such as flower petals and decorative sheets that visitors have brought in. Surrounding the tomb is a larger (usually domed) mausoleum that can be very ornately decorated. These outer structures very rarely date to the time of the saint's death, and more-commonly are built by royal or noble patrons or by members of the shrine-community at a later time. As I have stated, shrine complexes are also home to tombs of minor Sufi figures and may or may not have elaborate mausoleums built over them. The tomb of the saint and the auxiliary tombs form the core of the sacred space of the shrine. The open courtyards within the shrine complex provide space for the large numbers of people who gather at these locations to pay their respects to the saint, to seek intercession, to pray, to heal and to be in the charismatic presence of the saint. Visiting a Sufi saint at his mausoleum (whether as a once in a lifetime event, or on a daily basis) is

important to Muslims throughout India; this act of visitation is known as *ziyarat*. For these adherents of shrine-based Sufism, visiting a local Sufi shrine may be a frequent occurrence, while many may hope to one day visit the most renowned Sufi shrines on the Subcontinent.

It is important to note one major belief of shrine-based Sufism that places the Sufi shrine as a locus of religious fervor and spiritual longing among adherents. A major concept in shrine-based Sufism is that of the ultimate destruction of the self in the presence God (*fana*). The passing of a Sufi saint is not considered to be death (either of the body or the soul). The saint, having attained union with God, is restored to life, and lives on in his grave. It is a strongly held belief among adherents of shrine-based Sufism that the saint is present at his shrine; he is a living master (*zinda pir*), and he is perceptive of, and receptive to those who come to the shrine seeking spiritual or worldly relief. The Sufi shrine is thus not merely a mausoleum of a Sufi saint; the saint continues to preside within the sanctum of the shrine, and the shrine is in a sense a living embodiment of the saint. It is no wonder then, that Sufi shrines in South Asia are given the honorific of *sharif*, literally ‘noble’. And so, the shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia is often referred to as “the noble shrine” (*dargah sharif*). Sometimes, the entire city in which a very prominent shrine is located is granted the honorific of *sharif*, and is used as a metonymical reference to the shrine; thus, the shrine of Khaja Bandanawaz Gesudaraz in Gulbarga is often spoken of simply as *gulbarga sharif*.

#### DAILY VISITORS TO THE SHRINE

For shrines in the cities and towns of India, daily visitors number in the many hundreds and even thousands. These visitors are representative of a broad swath of

Indian society, comprising of rich and poor, men and women, young and old, educated and uneducated, and Muslim and non-Muslim. These visitors may be Muslim adherents of shrine-based Sufism who stop by the shrine regularly before or after work, or visit weekly to pay their respects to the saint. Many visitors to the shrine are there for a specific reason: seeking a remedy for infertility, seeking healing from mental trauma, or protection from harm; and of these, non-Muslims may often equal (if not outnumber) Muslims at Sufi shrines. Visitors who come for such remedial purposes will circumambulate the mausoleum of the saint, they will appeal to the saint for intercession and tie a colored string to the mausoleum structure to mark this appeal, and/or will purchase lockets for healing and protection; they may also make an offering of flowers, incense, sweets and/or a decorated sheet to the saint. Beyond this, practice varies between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Non-Muslims often perform rituals at the shrine which they are familiar with, and which they would perform at their own house of worship. For instance, Hindus may offer a prayer directly to the saint with their hands folded and their eyes closed; they may, in addition, prostrate themselves before the saint or touch their hands to the ground before the tomb and then touch their forehead. At shrines in Deccan India, I have seen Hindu visitors break coconuts at the foot of the tomb and offer the broken halves to the saint (this being a practice common at temples in this part of the Subcontinent).

Muslims (whom I refer to as adherents of shrine-based Sufism) typically do not offer prayer directly to the saint. They may bow before the tomb as a mark of reverence, and prayer may be recited *for* the Saint, in his honor, rather than *to* him. Generally, Muslims direct many of the same kind of ritual acts toward the saint in his tomb as they

would a deceased person in a cemetery: praying for the soul of the deceased and reciting the opening book of the Quran (*fatiha*) at the grave. However, due to his exalted status and belief in his living presence at the shrine, adherents accord him special reverence and make intercessory requests of him as well.

Most Sufi shrines (that are not merely a small structure built over a saint's tomb) also house a mosque. These mosques are generally for male adherents only, though some may have a smaller annexed room for women. Male adherents often stop by the shrine mosque for one or more of their daily prayers (*namaz*), and the gathering for the noon prayers (*zohar*) on Fridays is the largest in the week.

As mentioned, visitors (Muslim and non-Muslim) often come to the shrine to seek healing and to alleviate personal hardships. If it is believed that the saint has interceded on their behalf, visitors will often continue to visit the shrine at a regular frequency (annually, weekly or even daily) to remember and acknowledge the saint for this miracle (*karishma/karamat*).

#### VISITATION TO MARK EVENTS

Adherents of shrine-based Sufism also look to the Sufi shrine during major Muslim festivals such as Eid-al Fitr, the ritual end to the holy month of Ramadan; and Eid al-adha, the ritual end to the month of annual pilgrimage to Mecca (*haj*); and important ritual periods such as the holy month of Ramadan, and the month of mourning (*muharram*) that marks the martyrdom of Muhammad's grandchildren, Hassan and Hussain.

Many shrines distribute food among shrine visitors, especially the poor, during these occasions. For instance, during the entire month of Ramadan, the shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia would fill to bursting point with adherents wanting to break the day's fast in the auspicious presence of the saint. In anticipation of the crowds, the shrine's courtyard would be covered with plastic sheets for food to be served on. Men would perform their ritual ablutions (*vuzu*) at the shrine's facilities and begin to assemble within the shrine's mosque and then spill out onto the courtyard, and would perform the evening prayer (*maghrib*) that marks the official end to the day's fasting. After the prayer, food (in the form of rice, meat, fruit or lentils) would be distributed to all present at the shrine.

#### VISITATION DURING THE SAINT'S DEATH ANNIVERSARY

Pilgrims also travel to Sufi shrines for the death anniversary of the Sufi saint (*urs*), one of the most important events in a shrine's ritual calendar. I will discuss the significance of saints' death anniversaries in Sufi belief in greater detail later in this chapter. In this section, I will discuss how these death anniversaries are generally marked at Sufi shrines in India. For shrines of regional or national repute, the death anniversary of the saint is not only a significant event in ritual terms, but is also logistically the biggest event marked at the shrine. This event is marked for anywhere from a couple of days to a whole week, depending on the shrine. The number of people who perform pilgrimage to Sufi shrines for the occasion of the death anniversary of prominent saints is staggering, ranging from thousands at locally important shrines to millions at nationally renowned shrines.

Since the death anniversary of a Sufi saint marks his union with God, this event is not marked with mourning. There are of course, many rituals that are somber and

reverential in nature (such as the ritual cleaning and adorning of the saints tomb with flowers and sandalwood paste), many of the activities performed at these death anniversaries celebrate the saint's life, his spiritual achievements, and his continued power and charisma. The multitudes of Muslims who gather at a saint's shrine for his death anniversary use this opportunity to pay their respects to and be in the presence of an exalted and blessed Muslim figure. Many come to request the saint's aid or to thank him for a successful act of intercession; others feel blessed and energized in the mere presence of the hundreds (and perhaps millions) of other pilgrims as they join in the celebration of the saint.

Troupes of performers who specialize in the form of Sufi songs (*qawwali*) sung in remembrance of God, Muhammad and his family, and Sufi saints visit shrines during the death anniversaries of that particular saint. Thus, while most Sufi shrines may have a Qawwali performance for the saint once a week or once a month, visitors to the shrine can witness these acts of lyrical offering nearly throughout the day during the period of the death anniversary.

Many religious scholars and prominent preachers are invited to the shrine by its custodians to participate in the death anniversary rituals. These guests usually contribute to the event by delivering sermons in a typically fiery style. These sermons are usually delivered at the shrine's mosque or an adjoining hall, and the few hundred who can fit in these structures attend. However, many shrines broadcast these sermons to the masses in attendance through an array of speakers set up throughout the shrine complex.

These death anniversaries of prominent Sufi saints in India (such as Khaja Moinuddin Chishti or Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia) are of importance in non-religious terms as well. To be seen at these Sufi shrines during this event is often expected of local politicians and bureaucrats. Political figures often make an appearance at Sufi shrines and very publically make an offering to the Sufi saint.

The mood of celebration during the death anniversary is echoed outside the shrine complex as well. The neighborhoods and markets surrounding Sufi shrines take on a fair-like atmosphere. Lights are festooned everywhere, stalls and carts selling all manner of ritual and non-ritual goods spring up, and Sufi music blares from shops selling cassettes and CDs.

Aside from these additional ritual and non-ritual occurrences, general shrine activities continue (such as the five daily prayers, the ritual opening and closing of the sanctum etc.), except that the number of those who participate increases by many fold. When I attended the death anniversary of Khaja Bandanawaz at his shrine in Gulbarga, the noon prayer on Friday was attended by so many men that the crowd flowed out of the shrine's large inner and outer courtyards and into the streets of the neighborhood and market for several yards.

#### THE PEOPLE OF THE SUFI SHRINE

In the previous section I have given an account of the visitors to Sufi shrines and the various occasions that would bring them there. In this section I will give an overview of those who are, in a sense, permanent fixtures at Sufi shrines.

## HEREDITARY CUSTODIANS

At the heart of the day to day functioning of Sufi shrines are the shrine's custodians. At locally and nationally prominent shrines, these custodians claim descent from the saint. They may be direct descendents or may trace their ancestry to a sibling of the saint. The custodianship of the shrine is passed on from generation to generation, through a line of descent directly from the saint. However, as is the case of the hereditary custodians at the shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia (who was celibate), descent may be traced to a close relative of the saint if the saint did not have any offspring. The chief hereditary custodian of a Sufi shrine is called the *sajjada nashin* or the *gaddi nashin*. After centuries of this institution, the transfer of custodianship from generation to generation is not always smooth, and the position of chief custodian may be contested among several male descendents of the saint. Whoever the current chief custodian may be, however, many members of his immediate and extended family may also be present at the shrine nearly every day. These people are known as *khadim*, which literally means 'servant' as they serve the saint and the institution of the shrine. This is a position of esteem, however, and I refer to these members of the shrine community as 'hereditary custodians'.

It is customary for offerings to the saint to be made via these hereditary custodians. Shrine visitors hand their offerings to a hereditary custodian, who will then place the offering on the saint's tomb. It is also these hereditary custodians who dispense amulets, lockets and other objects considered to have healing powers (such as flowers or sandalwood that have been laid on the tomb) to visitors seeking such intervention. At many Sufi shrines, hereditary custodians also manage the income and expenditures of the



shrines. These hereditary custodians also have other duties such as officiating rituals during important shrine events such as the death anniversary of the saint or the breaking of the fast during Ramadan, or the recitation of prayers that mark the daily opening and closing of the Sufi shrine.

#### RELIGIOUS SPECIALISTS

As mentioned above, most Sufi shrines of a reasonable size have mosques annexed to them. A shrine mosque may have its own resident preacher. Shrine mosques will often run a religious school staffed by one or more teachers and scholars depending on the numbers attending. These mosques may also have an expert on Islamic jurisprudence (*mufti*) on hand (or the mosque's preacher may serve this function), who addresses questions that adherents may have regarding proper and improper conduct and practice by dispensing religious rulings (*fatawa*).

At larger and well-run shrines (as with the shrine of Khaja Bandanawaz), the shrine's religious school may be affiliated to a larger seminary, and follow a syllabus set by this larger seminary. Male students attending such a religious school would be able to pursue further education at seminaries and train to be preachers and religious scholars.

#### RITUAL SUFI MUSICIANS

Larger Sufi shrines with a substantial following will have resident ritual musicians. An important part of Sufi practice is the act of ritual audition (*sama*), in which adherents listen to poetry or chanting in order to attain a meditative and ecstatic state. What is listened to and the nature of the audition varies all over the world. One of the hallmarks of South Asian Sufi shrine practice is the form of Sufi ritual music known

as Qawwali. A performer of Qawwali is known as a *qawwal*. Typically, Qawwali is performed by a group of ritual musicians consisting of one or two lead singers, several accompanying singers, a musician who plays the harmonium, and another who plays a percussive instrument (usually a *tabla* or a *dhol*). These ritual musicians perform the poetry of Sufi poets such as Amir Khusro and Bulle Shah that combines verses in Hindavi, Persian, Arabic, and sometimes Punjabi and Sindhi. Custom varies with each shrine. At some shrines like Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia, the Qawwals perform each evening; at many other shrines, the ritual performance is restricted to Thursday evenings.

These musicians often come from families of musicians dedicated to the singing of Sufi ritual music, and often Qawwali groups include many members of the same family. Not all Sufi shrines have resident ritual musicians. Smaller shrines rely on travelling Qawwali troupes who visit to mark special ritual events at the shrine<sup>13</sup>.

#### SHRINE FUNCTIONARIES AND CARETAKERS

So far I have listed members of the shrine community who are in some way connected to the ritual life and religious services of the shrine. In addition to these, a Sufi shrine also often employs (formally or informally) a number of people who aid in the day to day running of the shrine. Formal employees of larger shrines (who are hired for a monthly wage) may include a secretary or treasurer, or even a librarian for a shrine's collection of books and manuscripts. Regionally prominent shrines sometimes also employ security guards who will stand by the entrance of the shrine or patrol the

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<sup>13</sup>Regula Qureshi is an important source for anyone interested in a musicological approach to the study of Qawwali. Her essay, *His Master's Voice? Exploring Qawwali and 'Gramophone Culture' in South Asia* (1999) is especially interesting to me for its analysis of Qawwali as a genre in flux between the sacred and the profane.

premises; their presence, I have found, is often nominal and it is rare to see them exerting their authority on the shrine's visitors.

Sufi shrines will also have informal employees. These are people who are not necessarily hired formally as staff at Sufi shrines, but make their living by providing services at the shrine and to shrine visitors. The sweepers who see to the cleaning of the premises, the men who fan visitors in the courtyards during the hot summer months, and the men and women who keep an eye on visitors' shoes at the threshold of the shrine are examples of such informal employees at Sufi shrines. In addition to members of the shrine community whom I have listed above, there are of course the storekeepers in the markets that surround the shrine. There are also the large number of beggars and religious mendicants who are inevitably found at and around religious spaces in India.

#### A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A SUFI SHRINE

I have discussed previously in this chapter the various occasions that are important to the ritual calendar of Sufi shrines. To recap, these are the death anniversary of the saint (*urs*), the month of Ramadan, Eid al-Fitr (which marks the end of Ramadan), the month of Muharram (when Muslims mourn the deaths of Muhammad's grandsons), Prophet Muhammad's birthday (*eid milad unnabi*), and Eid al-Adha (which marks the end of Hajj, the month for pilgrimage to Mecca). In this section I will give an account of daily life at Sufi shrines.

As mentioned above, most shrine complexes have mosques on, or annexed to the premises. A typical day at a Sufi shrine begins with the dawn prayers (*fajr*). It is also around this time that caretakers sweep and wash out the courtyard of the shrine in

preparation for visitations to the shrine. The ritual opening of the shrine is performed by the hereditary custodians of the shrine (usually led by the chief custodian). This ritual opening takes the form of a prayer in praise of God and Muhammad, which marks the waking of the saint in his tomb. As the prayer is recited, custodians deck the tomb of the saint with a decorated sheet, and make the first offerings of flowers, sugar balls and incense at the tomb.

Visitors begin to trickle into the shrine very early in the day. Many of these early visitors are often folks who visit daily and stop by the shrine on their way to work. At Sufi shrines in India's towns and cities, a steady stream of visitors come in throughout the day. There are spikes during the times of prayer (*namaz*) during the day: noon, afternoon, sunset, and at nightfall. During the very hot summer days in North and Deccan India, most visitors choose to visit after sundown when the stone courtyards of the shrines have cooled somewhat.

Visitors to the shrine may stop at the stores outside the shrine to buy an offering of rose-petals and sugar-balls, or even a decorated sheet for infrequent visitors. But making these offerings is not a prerequisite to visiting the saint, and many do come empty-handed. Visitors then leave their shoes at the gateways or sidewalls of the shrine in the safe-keeping of the minder of shoes. They then enter the shrine complex barefoot. The tomb of the saint is the first stop for these visitors, where they make their offerings, requests and prayers. Most visitors (both adherents of shrine-based Sufism as well as non-Muslims and casual visitors) will not leave immediately after paying their respects. Most will sit awhile in the stone courtyards and pray and meditate in murmurs or in silence. Adherents of shrine-based Sufism, especially female adherents, sit outside the

inner sanctum of the tomb<sup>14</sup> and read certain books of the Quran while facing in the direction of the tomb. Visitors are also found paying their respects at other tombs throughout the shrine complex and making their offerings there.

Thursday evenings are ritually important at Sufi shrines as sundown on Thursdays marks the beginning of Friday (*jumma*), the holy day of the week, and many more adherents of shrine-based Sufism will visit their local Sufi shrine then. At larger Sufi shrines with resident ritual musicians, Thursday evening is also when the ritual musicians offer their songs to the saint. Sufi ritual music in the form of Qawwali is very popular in South Asia, and visitors flock to Sufi shrines to participate in this uniquely South Asian form of ritual audition. Very prominent shrines, such as the shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia, which draws many hundreds of visitors everyday, feature the ritual offering of music every evening. The ritual musicians set up at sundown after the evening prayers. As their songs are an offering to the saint who is considered their primary audience, they sit on the courtyard facing the tomb. Shrine visitors sit around these ritual musicians, but never with their backs to the tomb as this is considered a sign of disrespect.

At larger shrines where visitors number in the thousands, the crowd is usually managed by shrine custodians or by a member of the musicians' troupe who will ask visitors to hurry with their offerings or to move along in their circumambulation of the tomb, will reseat members of the audience, make room for more visitors, or chide visitors seated with their backs to the tomb.

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<sup>14</sup>Women are often not allowed inside the inner sanctum of the tomb. This is not a hard and fast rule, however, and women are allowed in at some Sufi shrines.

Depending on the crowds on any given evening, ritual musicians may sing till the prayers at around nightfall (*isha*). In general, even on days when there is no offering of Qawwali, the number of visitors begins to dwindle by this last prayer of the day. After these prayers have been offered, shrine custodians will begin the end-of-day rituals that mark the ritual closing of the shrine. This is usually a mirror image of the opening rituals in the morning: custodians recite a prayer, request the blessings of the saint, clear the tomb of the day's offerings, and close the door to the tomb.

## CONTEMPORARY SHRINE PRACTICE IN INDIA

Sufi shrines in South Asia are loci of religious and spiritual activity at a massive scale. As mentioned above, prominent Sufi shrines draw steady streams of adherents on a daily basis, and attract pilgrims in the hundreds of thousands during certain annual events such as the death anniversary rituals of the saint (*urs*). Pilgrimage to Sufi shrines (*ziyarat*) is an important and at times essential part of the ritual calendars of adherents throughout South Asia.

## SHRINE VISITATION

Ritual visitation to a Sufi shrine is known as *ziyarat*. The reasons why Muslim adherents pay their respects to saints at their shrines vary, and are often a combination of various points of belief and circumstances. As mentioned above, there is a strong belief among adherents that Sufi saints are alive in their shrines. Visiting a Sufi shrine is thus not merely a visit to a memorial, but an act of bringing oneself into the living presence of the saint. Certain attributes of the saint in his elevated position also play into the draw of the shrine. Many of my interlocutors told me that Sufi saints were blessed from birth and

that the grace of God (*barkat*) continues to shower upon them. Visiting the saint at his shrine then brings one into close proximity to such an individual, and thus, by association, also to that divine grace.

Many adherents also believe in the intercessory powers of the saint. The word that is by convention translated as ‘saint’ is *vali*. *vali* literally means ‘friend’; a saint is one who is a friend of God (*vali allah*). In this position, it is believed that saints have God’s ear, so to speak, and thus have the ability to put in a good word (*sifarish karna*) or intercede (*shafa’at karna*) on behalf of supplicants. Thus, adherents of shrine-based Sufism will often visit shrines when they wish to seek deliverance from specific personal problems such as marital disputes, the inability to have children etc. When visiting shrines for the resolution of problems, it is quite common for adherents to pledge to perform some deed (*mannat manana*) in return for his intercession. I encountered many adherents at Sufi shrines who had been blessed with a child they believed to be the direct result of a saint’s intercession, and thus paid their respects to the saint at least once every year; sometimes traveling great distances to do so. Such visitations then often become part of a family’s ritual tradition.

I have mentioned previously how the life and deeds of Sufi saints are often recounted by adherents. The charisma and the miracles of the saint aside, the piety and devotion of Sufi saints is also a point of great admiration among adherents of shrine-based Sufism. Thus, it is not just the power to perform miracles, but also the power of a saint’s intense piety that draws people to his shrine. Many of my interlocutors spoke of how they hoped that through their proximity to such a pious individual, some of that piety would rub off on them as well.

Local Sufi shrines are very much a part of the daily lives of the community or the neighborhood that grows around it. The mosques that are part of a shrine complex serve as an important site for prayer (*namaz*) by Muslim men<sup>15</sup>; Sufi shrines may offer religious education for a neighborhood's boys and girls through a shrine-run religious school; the shrine may offer a moment of respite in the otherwise hectic schedules of adherents, especially in urban areas; and the power of the saint may provide an opportunity for the resolution of personal problems. Though the reasons for shrine visitations are various and varied, the presence of the saint at the shrine remains the core of belief and practice for adherents.

#### THE PLACE OF SHRINE-BASED SUFISM IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

The majority of Muslims in India adhere to shrine-based Sufism. The sheer numbers of Muslims who visit Sufi shrines across India on a daily basis would attest to this estimation. In general, for the vast majority of Muslims in India, unless they have been drawn by anti-shrine reformist groups, shrine-visitation forms an integral part of their religious and ritual lives as a matter of course. The reason this is true can be best understood if we look to the history of Islam and Sufi-Islam in South Asia.

There is not a lot of literature on the sociological context in which Islam spread throughout South Asia (Eaton 1996: 113-134). It is my estimation, however, that “shrine-based Sufism” as an epistemological category has become necessary only fairly recently. The questioning of Sufi practice and belief as legitimately Islamic is certainly not a new phenomenon. The persecution and subsequent execution of the Sufi figure Mansur al-Hallaj in the 10<sup>th</sup> century for his utterance, “I am the Truth!” (*ana al'haqq*) is

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<sup>15</sup>For the most part, Muslim women pray at home.



renowned among Muslims in South and Central Asia. And as Ernst (2004) has pointed out, “some of the earliest prose treatises concerning Sufism were apologetic works designed to show that Sufism was not in conflict with the Islamic religious sciences, but complemented and perfected them” (p. 8). However, it is after anti-shrine Sufi reformist groups (many of whom also claim a Sufi identity) emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century that we find an anti-shrine position spreading among lay-folk. Discussions about the appropriateness or inappropriateness of practice centered on Sufi shrines had for long been restricted to religious scholars and political elites. It is fairly recently that these conversations have begun to permeate among lay Muslims.

Whatever the historical evidence for the ways in which Islam permeated throughout the region, there was one narrative that I heard most often among adherents of shrine-based Sufism and among Sufi reformists. Most of my interlocutors strongly felt that Islam owed its presence in South Asia to the Sufi orders that brought the Islamic faith to the Subcontinent’s masses. According to this narrative, while much of South Asia was ruled by a Muslim elite for centuries, these elites were concerned more with matters of politics than with faith; nor were the lives and goals of the political elite pious. I was often told by various interlocutors that the message of Islam was brought to the people of the Subcontinent by Sufi masters. Often cited as fundamental to the spread of Islam were the pious lives that Sufi masters led, their obvious charisma and power, the succor and aid offered by their hospices to all regardless of religion, their ability to communicate Islamic values and beliefs through poetry and music, the incorporation of local language, iconography, and custom in shrine-practice, and the imperative for Sufi disciples to take their message to even the most remote reaches of the region.

Academics have challenged the notion that Sufi hospices and shrines in South Asia were sites of active conversion to Islam (Ernst 1997: 138-139; Eaton 1996: 72-73). However, it is my experience that Sufism's role in bringing Islam to South Asia is definitely a matter of pride for my interlocutors. I would like to call to attention two points that would provide some context for my interlocutors' narratives. First, it is important to note that the predominant narrative of Islam's introduction in India is one marked with violence. Popular narratives in India often point to conversion "at the end of a sword"; images of rape, pillage and forced conversion meted out by "Muslim invaders" permeate literature, cinema and oral histories. As Ernst (2004) has noted,

there are many conflicting modern views on the nature of the entrance of Islam in India, but most of these views derive from much later political preoccupations, such as Mughal imperialism, British colonialism, Indian or Pakistani nationalism, and other ideological concerns foreign to the medieval period. [p. 3]

The responsibility for the dominant narrative of Islam's violent spread in the frontiers of India rests with Orientalist scholarship, as well as with Muslim hagiographers who sought to embellish the role of Sufis as destroyers of temples and as those "who had made a decisive break between (a) Hindu past and (a) Muslim future", what Eaton (1996) calls "hagiographical reconstruction" (72-73). These narratives have been passed down into popular understandings of early Islam in India, where the predominant narrative is one of Muslim violence and aggression. In view of these obviously negative and damaging narratives, it is no wonder that my interlocutors stressed the role of Sufism in the *nonviolent* spread of Islam in India.

Second, I feel that a distinction certainly needs to be made between conversion as a formal mechanism for the change in professed religion, and conversion as a process of

embodying a different mode of practice and belief. When my interlocutors spoke of the role of Sufism in the spread of Islam in South Asia, the word they most commonly used to speak of this process can be translated as ‘to make one’s own’ (*apnana*). Their narratives were replete with images of non-Muslims adopting Islam or of them “accepting” (*manana*) the truth of the oneness of God. This is a considerably different sentiment, and a different lens through which to view the profession of faith. These narratives give to those who became Muslims a measure of agency that the predominant conversion-narratives have thus far denied them.

#### THE CROSS-RELIGIOUS APPEAL OF SUFI SHRINES

The tradition of shrine-visitation is not restricted to Muslims in India; a significant number of Hindus and Sikhs in India too consider Sufi shrines an important aspect of their belief and ritual worship. This cross-religious appeal of Sufi shrines is quite evident daily at any major Sufi shrine in India. One of my interlocutors at the shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia, a hereditary custodian of the shrine, once estimated that on any given day at a popular shrine such as this, nearly 50% of the folks at the shrine might be Hindu. Maulvi Sahab, a teacher at the religious school at the shrine of Khaja Bandanawaz, said during a lecture to the school’s female students that at some of the smaller rural Sufi shrines more Hindus than Muslims attend the death-anniversary rituals of the Sufi saints (he was lamenting the encroachment of anti-shrine reformist ideology among Indian Muslims). The significance of non-Muslim patronage to Sufi shrines across India speaks to a great extent to the importance of Sufi saints to the religious landscape of India in general, where spiritual and religious leaders are very important to the practice and beliefs of Indians, regardless of their proclaimed religious identities.

However, as is clear from the context of Maulvi Sahab's lecture above, a significant aspect of the demographic constitution of shrine patronage is the slowly diminishing numbers of Muslim adherents: folk who have been drawn away from shrine practice and belief by anti-shrine reformist ideology. During my interactions with adherents of shrine-based Sufism, I found that in general, my interlocutors did not begrudge the devotion non-Muslims felt towards Sufi saints. On the contrary, to them this cross-religious appeal of Sufi shrines was emblematic of the immanent charisma and power of the living saint (*zinda pir*) at the shrine. There have been instances where shrines have been transformed entirely due to an overwhelming presence of Hindu devotees compared to Muslim adherents, or by Hindu nationalist groups who have claimed ownership of shrines as being "originally" Hindu. But I found that my interlocutors' responses to such cases were quite nuanced; there was an acknowledgement of the danger posed by so much attention from a non-Muslim presence at Sufi shrines, but this was largely in relation to the activities of Hindu nationalist groups and not to devoted non-Muslim pilgrims. My interlocutors often identified a drop in the numbers of adherents of shrine-based Sufism among Muslims due to reformist activity as the main threat to the integrity of Sufi shrines in India. I will discuss this in greater detail in the next chapter.

A poignant reminder of this complex relationship between Sufi shrines and their religiously varied patronage came with a visit to the shrine of Bu Ali Shah Qalandar in the town of Panipat, a few hours outside Delhi. I visited this shrine with my Fulbright-Hays advisor, Dr. Husain, a historian with the Jamia Millia Islamia who was carrying out research on the shrines of Panipat. Though Bu Ali Shah Qalandar was a Sufi saint of the

13<sup>th</sup> century, most of this shrine was built in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries by Mughal patrons. The shrine was clearly in need of repair. Some renovation work was being carried out, but it was obviously shoddy, and the new unskilled work of the masons stood out in stark contrast to the refined craftsmanship of the medieval artisanst. The lane that led up to the shrine too left much to be desired, with unpaved and rutted streets and pigs wallowing in the open sewers.

As we approached the shrine, Dr. Husain mentioned that the native Muslims of Panipat had been forcibly evacuated to Pakistan during the time of India's partition to make room for the influx of Sikhs and Hindus from across the border. The hereditary custodians of the shrine too no longer lived in Panipat, and the shrine was maintained and run by a member of the Waqf Board<sup>16</sup>. This Waqf Board representative was away on pilgrimage to Mecca when we visited the shrine, and we sat in a small room annexed to the tomb with one of his subordinates. As we sat in the dim room sipping the obligatory cup of sweet tea, Dr. Husain asked the attendant if any native Muslims of Panipat still lived in the city. No, was the response. Most of the Muslims in the city were from neighboring cities and states, and so was he. All the Muslims who now lived in Panipat were abjectly poor, the attendant told us, and the shrine was able to carry on only thanks to the non-Muslims who patronized it. "It is because of them [non-Muslims] that the shrine has survived," he said; "they come with so much faith and give so much", he

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<sup>16</sup>In India, communal Muslim property (such as tombs, grave yards, and certain historic monuments and lands) meant for public use is managed by an institution known as the Waqf Board. There is a Sunni Waqf Board and a Shia Waqf Board. This is a government-appointed panel of Muslims. Generally, Sufi shrines have remained outside the purview of the Waqf Board, being run and maintained by hereditary custodians who claim descent from the particular Sufi saint in question. Many historical monuments (such as the Taj Mahal), fall outside the jurisdiction of the Waqf Board, and are instead managed by the Archaeological Survey of India. These exceptions to the Waqf Board's purview remain points of contention, and occasionally come up for legal review.

added. I asked if most of the Muslims in Panipat paid their respects at the shrine. To this, the attendant smiled wryly and said that the Muslims of Panipat were of two kinds: “Some come with faith, and say a prayer to God before the tomb. Sure, we have some of them. But then, there are others who say all sorts of things!” He reiterated that it was the Hindus of Panipat who kept the shrine going, and added, “The Muslims here just raise issues.”

## THE TWO FIELD-SITES

In this section, I will introduce my field-sites, my primary interlocutors there, and my experiences with them.

### GULBARGA AND THE KHAJA BANDANAWAZ SHRINE

I started my fieldwork at the shrine of Khaja Bandanawaz Gesudaraz in Gulbarga. For most of the year Gulbarga is a hot, dry and dusty city of nearly half a million people that sits at the heart of the Deccan Plateau in peninsular India. Historically, Gulbarga was established as the capital of the nascent Bahmani kingdom in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, when a rebellious governor of a Deccan province wrested control from the Delhi Sultanate. The Bahmani sultanate was one of the first Islamicate kingdoms in peninsular or Deccan India, and Gulbarga to this day bears the legacy of this Islamicate past: the older parts of the city are strewn with crumbling tombs and edifices from the medieval Islamicate era, and though the city retains a Hindu majority, it has a significantly large Muslim minority. Gulbarga is religiously segregated in the same way that most Indian cities and towns are, with various Muslim and Hindu enclaves scattered throughout the city. However, the people of Gulbarga are quick to point out that in spite of the large numbers that both

religions boast, the city has never witnessed devastating Hindu-Muslim violence like some other religiously diverse cities in India have.

The 14<sup>th</sup> century shrine of Khaja Bandanawaz Gesudaraz is another reminder of Gulbarga's Islamic legacy. Partly built in the 15<sup>th</sup> century during the lifetime of the saint, the shrine complex is grand in scale and boasts large domed tombs, tall archways and open courtyards. Like the typical Sufi shrines that I have described in the previous sections, this complex too houses not only the tomb of the saint, but also tombs of his relatives and descendants, a mosque, a religious school (*madrassa*), and auxiliary buildings that often serve administrative purposes. This shrine complex is exceptional in that it is also home to a library with an impressive collection of manuscripts and books.

Just beyond the arched entrance to the shrine lies a market that, like markets that service shrines all over India, sells books of prayers in Urdu and Arabic; copies of the Quran bound in various styles; hagiographies of prominent Sufi saints and other important Islamic figures; CDs and cassettes of Quranic recitations, sermons, and sacred Sufi music; as well as sweets, perfumes and prayer rugs. The small stalls that line the bazaar also carry various ritual items commonly offered in reverence to the saint by visitors to the shrine.

On any given day visitors from the city brave the heat to pay their respects to the saint and to pray at the shrine's mosque. On Fridays it is nearly impossible to find a way into the shrine past the flanks of hundreds of men (perhaps even a thousand) who come to the shrine complex for the all-important noon prayer; their overflowing numbers spill out well past the gates of the shrine and up to the main market street.

The city of Gulbarga is also home to a large temple-complex that is dedicated to the 18<sup>th</sup> century Hindu saint, Sri Sharanabasaweshwara. These two institutions, the Sri Sharanabasaweshwara temple and shrine of Khaja Bandanawaz, dominate the religious and secular lives of Gulbarga's people. Walking through any part of Gulbarga, one is struck by the regularity with which stores, schools, and various for-profit and non-profit institutions are named after either saint. The shrine of Khaja Bandanawaz itself has a subsidiary educational trust, which runs institutions ranging from primary schools for abjectly poor children, to medical and engineering colleges which draws students from all over India. This sense of the inescapable presence of Khaja Bandanawaz in Gulbarga was one of the main reasons that I chose this shrine as a site for my research.

In addition to these considerations, the religious importance of the Khaja Bandanawaz shrine in peninsular India was also a factor in my choosing it as a site for research. Throughout the year, pilgrims come to the shrine from Gulbarga district and also from further afield: mostly from the countryside or from other South Indian cities. The true scope of the saint's popularity and the religious importance of this shrine can be appreciated at the time of the death-anniversary rituals of the saint (*urs*), when hundreds of thousands of pilgrims gather at this shrine from all over India. A measure of how many pilgrims come to the shrine for the saint's death anniversary is the fact that the Indian Railways offers a special express from the large Deccan city of Hyderabad (another major Muslim center in India) to Gulbarga especially for this event.

Aside from these pilgrims who journey from all over India during the time of the death anniversary, daily visitors include Muslim adherents and Hindus from Gulbarga and the surrounding rural areas.



## THE SHRINE OF HAZRAT NIZAMDDUIN AULIA IN NEW DELHI

The shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia in New Delhi is located at the heart of a bustling neighborhood of narrow alleyways, and closely-packed residential structures and store-fronts that also bears the name of the saint. The shrine of Khaja Bandanawaz is breathtaking in its size and vastness; the shrine complex of Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia, though much smaller, is notable for its striking black and white inlaid stone courtyard, the beautiful cusped onion dome of the saint's tomb, and its fine laced marble lattices. Though Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia was a saint of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the main structures in this shrine complex, including his tomb, were constructed much later in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by the shrine's Mughal patrons.

The shrine complex is accessible through a tiny archway, leading up to which is a mad tangle of tiny store-fronts that sell all the accoutrements of shrine-visitation found at typical shrine markets described above. Also found here are bronze hookahs and lamps; wall-hangings of Quarnic verses in calligraphy; and calendar art featuring various Sufi shrines, Mecca, Medina and portraits of Sufi saints. The archway itself is flanked by a non-functional metal-detector: an artifact, if you will, that got put in as a security measure after the shrine of Khaja Moinuddin Chishti (another major Sufi shrine in India) was bombed a few years ago.

The city of Delhi, now India's capital, has served as the capital of various preceding empires and as the hub of art, literature and trade in North India. It is now a city of nearly 14 million, drawing hundreds of thousands of immigrants annually from all over India. Delhi is home to at least three Sufi shrines of regional importance and hundreds of much smaller ones. Chief among these Sufi shrines is the shrine of Hazrat

Nizamuddin Aulia, which is regarded by most adherents as one of the two most important shrines in the Subcontinent (the other being the shrine of Khaja Moinuddin Chishti in Ajmer). Two neighborhoods (the one that surrounds the shrine, and the much more affluent area of Nizamuddin East) are named after the saint, as is the nearby railway terminus. Politicians often visit the shrine during the time of elections, movie stars frequent it to aid their career, and even foreign dignitaries come in to pay their respects. It is no surprise that one of the first excursions by the then newly-appointed US ambassador to India was to this shrine. The inclusion of the shrine in the Lonely Planet guide to India as a must-see place in New Delhi has meant that it is now not uncommon to see backpackers and frazzled tourists from around the world at the shrine at any time of the day.

These occasional visitors aside, most of the visitors one sees at the shrine on any day, and at any time of day, are local folk from all over Delhi and a sizeable number of pilgrims from all over the Subcontinent. The fame of the shrine and stories of the saint's power have drawn these pilgrims to the shrine for the past several hundred years. These days a major attraction of the shrine, to both the pilgrim and the casual visitor, is the offering of sacred songs (*qawwali*) made at the shrine by professional singers (*qawwal*). As mentioned in the previous section, at the shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia (like many popular Sufi shrines) these musical offerings are made every evening. As I visited this shrine nearly every evening during my fieldwork, I soon began to recognize familiar faces among these listeners: folk I would see at the shrine several times a week, paying their respects to the saint and sitting a while to listen to often-heard songs of his praise.

The shrine is certainly an integral part of the spiritual and religious lives of many residents of Delhi, and is often a part of people's daily or weekly routines. The complex mix of people who are drawn to the shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia, and its continued significance in such a massive city, were the main aspects of the shrine that drew me to it as a site for research.

#### THE TWO SAINTS AND THE CHISHTI SUFI ORDER

Sufi shrines are only ever as important as the saints whom they enshrine. Sufi saints often live storied lives, and their legacies persist as lived realities centuries after the contemporary political formations around them decay and disappear. Delving into the biographies of the two saints, Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia and Khaja Bandanawaz, would help us in some measure understand the significance of their shrines, and of shrine-based Sufism, to the religious and cultural lives of Indian Muslims.

Born to a noble family from Bada'un, the young Hazrat Nizamuddin lived first in Lahore, and then was sent to Delhi for his formal education. He then traveled to Ajodhan (modern-day Pakpattan in Pakistan) to seek discipleship under the Sufi master, Shaikh Farid al-Din Ganj-e Shakkar, which he received. Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia returned to Delhi to establish his own Sufi hospice, and on his death was buried close to it. Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia is considered by most adherents of shrine-based Sufism to be among the most important Sufi saints of South Asia. Thus, his shrine in New Delhi draws millions of pilgrims every year. Many South Asian adherents, Muslims and non-Muslims, often undertake religious tours, stopping at various shrines all over India. The shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia is a major stop in this religious circuit both during the

time of the saint's death anniversary (the most important ritual event in any shrine's calendar), and during the rest of the year.

Khaja Bandanawaz Gesudaraz was born and raised primarily in Delhi. It was in Delhi that he became the disciple of the Chishti saint, Nasir al-Din Chiragh Dehli. On his master's death, he took on the stewardship of the Sufi hospice. He remained in Delhi for forty-four years, and decided to move to Deccan India only at the age of 80. Eventually, Khaja Bandanawaz set up a hospice in Gulbarga on the invitation of the Sultan there. It was in Gulbarga that the saint passed away, and where he lies buried. Khaja Bandanawaz is less well-known than Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia is all over the Subcontinent, however his shrine is very significant in peninsular India. It is one of the largest and perhaps the most popular Sufi shrines in Deccan India. As mentioned above, pilgrims to his shrine gather in great numbers from all over India, particularly from the South, during his death anniversary. A steady stream of visitors can be seen at the shrine during the rest of the year.

Both Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia and Khaja Bandanawaz belong to the Chishti order of Sufis. Many Sufi orders can be found in South Asia, such as the Naqshbandiyya order, the Qadiri order, and the Suhrawardiya order, but the Chishti order of Sufism is the most prominent in the region, boasting the most adherents, and the most popular shrines and forms of Sufi practice. In the previous section describing typical Sufi shrines and the practices seen there, I mentioned the importance of the offering of ritual song and music, especially in the form of Qawwali. While many other Sufi orders practice the ritual remembrance of God (*zikar*), the incorporation of ritual audition (*sama*) in the form of sacred music into the performance of this ritual remembrance is a distinct characteristic

of Chishti Sufi practice (Ernst and Lawrence 2002: 4). This order gets its name from Khaja Moinuddin Chishti, one of the preeminent Sufi saints of South Asia, who is also credited with bringing Sufi Islam to the Indian Subcontinent. He, in turn, gets his name from the town of Chisht in Afghanistan from where he came. Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia is twice removed in spiritual descent from Khaja Moinuddin Chishti, and Khaja Bandanawaz is once removed in spiritual descent from Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia. Below is a chart showing the line of spiritual descent of the first six masters of the Chishti Sufi order (Figure 1.1). The chart traces the lineage through the most prominent line, and displays the site of their shrines. As mentioned in the introduction, this spiritual lineage, as with other Sufi orders, is traced back to Muhammad. Also below is a map of South Asia displaying the sites of these Sufi masters' shrines (Figure 1.2).



Figure 1.1.



Figure 1.2.

As with other Sufi saints, adherents of shrine-based Sufism narrate many accounts of the power and charisma of these two prominent Sufi figures. I heard narratives detailing how these saints restored blindness, healed other ailments, were able to glean the good or evil intent of those in their presence, and had visions of Muhammad and revelations about the nature of God and the universe<sup>17</sup>.

Aside from these miracle stories, which focus on the divine sources of a saint's power and position, hagiographies and popular narratives often also draw attention to the political and social powers wielded by these saints. I was often told stories of Sufi saints

<sup>17</sup>A rich and detailed translation of the hagiographic narratives and utterances (*mal'uzat*) of the Naqshbandi order is provided by Simon Digby (2001) in *Sufis and Soldiers in Awrangzeb's Deccan*. This text is replete with fascinating tales of the power, piety and charisma of the Deccan saint Baba Palangposh.

confronting the might of empires, and prevailing. These are not narratives where secular political institutions compete with clerical or institutionalized religious structures for authority and power. They are often narratives of kings and sultans feeling utterly threatened by Sufi saints who do not need their patronage, or who pay no heed to them. These narratives also reflect what Ernst and Lawrence (2002) identify as a marked aspect of Chishti Sufism: the conceptualization of political power as corruptive and the need to avoid its symbols and manifestations (p. 4).

Two stories about Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia stand out among the many such narratives that I heard at Sufi shrines. The one is quite famous and often repeated. The tale is told that the then sultan of Delhi, Ghiyasuddin Tughlaq, felt slighted by Hazrat Nizamuddin's insubordination. The sultan was away on a military expedition at the time and resolved to deal with the defiant Sufi on his return to Delhi. On hearing of this threat, Hazrat Nizamuddin said, "Delhi is yet far away!" (*hanoz dehli dur ast*).<sup>18</sup> His words proved prescient, as sultan Ghiyasuddin Tughlaq never made it to Delhi, dying en route. So famous is this tale, that Hazrat Nizamuddin's words (uttered in Persian) are still used by speakers of Hindi-Urdu when speaking of eventualities.

Another intriguing tale narrates Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia's resistance to Sultan Alla'uddin Khilji's overtures. Impressed by Hazrat Nizamuddin, the sultan had sent a missive to the saint saying that he would visit him at his hospice. Hazrat Nizamuddin wrote back to the sultan that visiting him was not necessary, and that he was occupied in prayer and meditation. In spite of this clear message, the sultan insisted on an audience with the saint. To this, Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia very bluntly responded: "The home of

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<sup>18</sup> هنوز دهلی دور است

this weak one has two doors, and if the emperor enters through one door, I will leave through the other.” I had read of this incident in the compilation of hagiographies, *akhbar al-akhyar* (Dihlavi 2004) before I began fieldwork, and then heard it several times from adherents in the field.

The social importance of the Sufi saint and his hospice (*khanqah*) are given considerable attention in the hagiographies and oral narratives that I encountered. While I was at the shrine of Khaja Bandanawaz Gesudaraz the chief religious teacher at the shrine’s religious school spoke to me extensively about Sufism, the saint and the shrine. Addressing me and a room-full of young female students at the shrine’s religious school for girls, he told us about how Khaja Bandanawaz had enjoined his followers to be like the tree that stood at the heart of his hospice’s courtyard: withstanding the intense heat, but providing shade for so many. “Be like the tree!” he said to us, and gestured at the very tree that still stood in the blazing hot courtyard outside.

The hospices of Sufi saints acted as loci of both social and spiritual activity during their lifetimes. They functioned as caravanserais for weary travelers, provided care for the sick, fed the hungry, and dispensed religious education and spiritual knowledge to those who sought it. These hospices would have drawn considerable numbers of people: lay folk in need of its services, as well as disciples of the saint. The hospices of eminent Sufi masters would thus have been far from secluded sanctuaries for those with other-worldly persuasions, and yet were home to spiritual masters who strove for ultimate union with God.



A hagiography of Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia, in *akhbar al-akhyar* (Dihlavi 2004) provides an intriguing presentation of this tension between the other-worldly goals of a Sufi's life, and the worldly responsibilities that accompanied his social position. The author of this hagiography tells us that once Hazrat Nizamuddin had gained renown as a Sufi master of the highest order, his hospice began to attract quite a few visitors. The saint felt that these daily interactions with lay-folk and hospice-related activities distracted him and detracted from his larger spiritual goals. One day he thought to himself that he would leave the hustle-bustle of hospice life and retire to the forest, to a secluded life of meditation and austerity. This, he reasoned, would enable him to focus all his energies on the contemplation of God. The very day that the thought occurred to him, Hazrat Nizamuddin encountered a handsome youth emerging from the mosque at the time of the afternoon prayer. The saint knew immediately that this was no ordinary youth; that this was a vision of the Prophet Muhammad. Hazrat Nizamuddin invited the youth to his home and offered him a meal, which the youth refused to eat. Eventually, the youth said to the Sufi that he was aware of the latter's resolve to leave his hospice. But, he said, to leave behind the people and the responsibilities of the hospice and to meditate on God in seclusion was easy enough. To be fully immersed in the contemplation of God *in spite* of the crowds and the worldly responsibilities of a Sufi master was the true test of devotion. And so Hazrat Nizamuddin continued to live at the hospice, and as the hagiographical narratives tell us, it is at his hospice that he left this world and entered into union with God (*fana*). Throughout my fieldwork I was told such stories about Sufi saints by lay adherents of shrine-based Sufism, and by specialists.

These narratives were also recounted with great gusto at various ritual and celebratory events, where they received a massive audience.

While these hagiographical narratives are focused on the lives of Sufi saints and their work through their hospices, the tension between the goals of this world and that continue to persist with regard to Sufi shrines in contemporary India, centuries after the time of these saints. It is this straddling of two worlds (this and the other) that often places Sufi shrines in contemporary South Asia in a maelstrom of debate, contestation and opposition. Contemporary Sufi shrines do provide social services to the general public to a greater or lesser extent; the education trust run by the custodians of the Khaja Bandanawaz shrine is an example of a more successful attempt at continuing this tradition of the Sufi hospice. But at a minimum, most well-established Sufi shrines provide food at no charge to the poor who gather there. As with most religiously important sites, there do exist institutions around many Sufi shrines that seek to commercially exploit the faith of visiting lay adherents. In short, Sufi shrines in contemporary India are complex social sites, and are loci of spiritual fulfillment, religious devotion, commercial opportunism, education and employment for thousands of lay and specialist adherents. And the oppositional responses to Sufi shrines are equally varied. The other-worldly aspects of Sufi practice and belief draws the ire of many reformist groups who claim that it shifts focus away from a Muslim's social and institutional responsibilities; other reformists find the a-spiritual and a-religious concerns of Sufi shrines and their custodians to be exceedingly problematic. I will discuss these specific points of contention in greater detail in chapter 2. I have discussed above various aspects

of a Sufi saint's life that make his hospice (during his lifetime) and his shrine (after his death) so vital to the religious lives of millions of Muslims across South Asia.

## II. ALLEYWAY ENCOUNTERS: SUFI REFORMISM AND THE CRITIQUE OF SHRINE PRACTICE

In this chapter, I give a detailed account of the reformist ideologies that stand in opposition to the beliefs and practices of shrine-based Sufism. I focus especially on the Tablighi Jama'at, a Muslim reformist group that poses the biggest and most imminent threat to shrine-based Sufism in India. I present the origins of this organization, and the ideological lineages and proselytizing practices that give it such purchase in spreading reformist Muslim views among lay adherents of shrine-based Sufism in India today. I also present the specific points of tension between reformist ideology and shrine-based Sufism, and the encounter between members and lay adherents of these two groups.

### THE TABLIGHI JAMA'AT AND SUFI REFORMISM

The Tablighi Jama'at is primarily an apolitical missionary movement that began in South Asia, and that has now transformed into a global phenomenon. It was founded in 1927 in Mewat (south Delhi) by Muhammad Ilyas, who is variously characterized in the literature as a scholar of Islam (Haq 1972) or a Sufi scholar (Ahmad 1995: 165). Ilyas received a religious education at the Dar al'Ulum Deoband (often contracted to Deoband), one of India's foremost Islamic seminaries<sup>19</sup>, and later "lived in seclusion at the Sufi sanctuary of Nizamuddin at (Delhi)" (Gaborieau 2000: 38). This combination of

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<sup>19</sup>The Dar ul'Ulum Deoband is a seminary with reformist strictures that are by and large oppositional to the lay practices and beliefs of shrine-based Sufism. The other leading seminary in India is the Jamia Nizamia in Hyderabad, which generally tends to stand for the practices and beliefs of shrine-based Sufism. These are generalizations, however. As religious seminaries with many prominent scholars, opinions within these institutions differ on a number of theological points.

a textual and doctrinal education at Deoband and a period of spiritual and mystical learning at the shrine of Nizamuddin Auliya is significant, and had a great impact on the missionary goals of the Tablighi Jama'at and its interactions with the shrine-community.

#### THE LINEAGES OF MUSLIM REFORMISM IN SOUTH ASIA

Forming the backdrop to Ilyas' education was the growing polarization of the Hindu and Muslim communities in the Subcontinent, and the burgeoning movement for independence from British rule. The 1920s saw the birth of the Shuddhi Movement by the Arya Samaj, a major Hindu reformist organization of the time. The goal of this movement was to (re)convert Muslims to Hinduism (a practice that, till the inception of this movement, was largely unknown in the Subcontinent). The prime target of these (re)conversions were people who self-identified as Muslim, but who continued to practice Indic and Hindu rituals and life-ways (Haq: 31; Ahmad: 165).

Muhammad Ilyas established the Tablighi Jama'at in response to the spread of the Shuddhi movement. Through his nascent organization, Ilyas hoped to bring these “borderline’ Muslims” (Ahmad: 165) firmly and clearly into the fold of Islam by the removal of assimilative practices and the promotion of “true Islam” (Haq: 5). Ilyas soon realized that the setting up of religious schools towards this end was having little impact. He thus founded the Tablighi Jama'at as a cadre of dedicated Muslim youths who were willing to contribute their time and energy towards preaching “true Islam” to the Muslim masses (Ahmad: 166; Metcalf 2006: 272).

At this point it becomes important to define the term *tabligh* and its changing context in the Subcontinent. The term, Arabic in origin, translates to “to call” or “to

communicate” and is closely related to the term *da'wa* or “invitation”. For the purpose of clarity, I use the term “invitational proselytizing” for *tabligh*. The primary understanding of the term had for long been to equate it not with any process of *active* conversion. The role of the proselytizer, as implied by the literal meaning of the term, was to merely communicate the message of Islam; whereas the onus of conversion to Islam fell on the individual who was bring “called” or “invited” (Masud 1995: 162). Furthermore, the act of invitational proselytizing was largely the domain of only those who had a command over the Arabic language, had knowledge of Islamic texts and Islamic jurisprudence, and who were trained specifically for the performance of such “calling” or “inviting”.

This broad, less-aggressive understanding of the term *tabligh* has undergone a marked change in reformist Islamic circles. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Subcontinent saw the growth of missionary Christian activity, which was seen as a threat and as an encroachment by both Hindu and Muslim communities in the region. Against this setting, the 19<sup>th</sup> century Muslim intellectual, Mansurpuri defined *tabligh* as a message being sent from one “nation” to another (Masud 1995: 162), thus emphasizing the political as well as the religious differences between communities that were exclusive enough in character and practice to be termed as separate nations. This definition also then incorporates the same sense of goal-oriented proselytizing as Christian missionary work. Barabara Metcalf (2006) has likened the organizational style of the Tablighi Jama'at to that of Alcoholics Anonymous where “the heart of Tablighi Jama't strategy was the belief that the best way t learn is to teach and encourage others” (p. 272).

In the context of the Indian Subcontinent, these “nations” would signify either the growing European (Christian) presence there, or the existing Hindu population. This is

an intriguing prospect, as for centuries, Christians (and Jews) within the Islamicate Empire were considered to be “people of the book” (*ahl al-kitab*), and a part of the same religious lineage as Islam; while in India, Hindus had also begun to be granted a similar (if not the same) acknowledged status. Mansurpuri’s characterization of *tabligh* as a message transmitted across nations as applied within the Subcontinent marks a change in the intended recipient of such invitational proselytizing. Mansurpuri also proclaimed that the act of proselytizing was the duty of all Muslims, and not necessarily of religious scholars (p. 162). This too, marks a shift in the understanding of *tabligh*. Mansurpuri’s assertion allowed for invitational proselytizing to be practiced by lay Muslims, and in turn allowed the act to be aimed at a large section of the population who were previously unreachable through proselytizing carried out by religious scholars.

There was a further transformation of this term with the birth of the Tablighi Jama’at in the 1920s<sup>20</sup>. Ilyas’ stated aim in establishing the Jama’at was to prevent Muslims in the subcontinent from being converted to Hinduism by the Arya Samaj. He redirected the focus of invitational proselytizing from non-Muslims to Muslims. That is, invitational proselytizing was now directed inward; missionaries would preach the Jama’at conception of correct Islamic practice and belief to fellow Muslims, and would seek to transform their own lives in congruence with these. For Ilyas, invitational proselytizing was no longer an attempt to reveal the word of God to non-Muslims, but to reiterate Islamic law, practice and belief (but specifically, the Jama’at interpretation of these) to Muslims. As mentioned above, the focus of this newly defined *tabligh* was

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<sup>20</sup>The name, Tablighi Jama’at, translates to “Organization for Invitational Proselytizing”.

“borderline Muslims”. Also included in his vision of reform were Sufi shrines, to whose many assimilative practices he was opposed (Ahmad: 168).

In tracing the history of the movement as accepted by the Tablighi Jama’at, the communal tensions of the 1920s are not the sole point of origin for their reformist goals vis-à-vis shrine-based Sufism. The Tablighi Jama’at traces this reformist strain (as with many Islamic reformist movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries) back to the millenarian movement of Ahmad Sirhindi and his Naqshbandi<sup>21</sup> Sufi connections. Also in this lineage are the reformist successors of the 18<sup>th</sup> century thinker and scholar Shah Waliullah, as well as the more recent political revivalism led by Sayyed Ahmad Shahid Barelwi in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Masud: 164; Haq: 10-16).

The opposition to assimilative practices in South Asian Islam has a long history, one that is emphasized by reformist groups such as the Tablighi Jama’at. These groups often identify Ahmad Sirhindi as taking one of the first concrete steps to counteract assimilative trends, which he considered deviant and innovate. The Chishtiyya, the first order of Sufis to be established in the Subcontinent had, by the time of the Mughal emperor Akbar (1542-1605 CE), already incorporated many Indic traditions and motifs into shrine practice. Akbar is noted for the founding of an esoteric religious movement, which he called *din-e ilahi*. In response to Akbar’s religious experiments, Sirhindi is characterized in reformist narratives as broadly rejecting assimilative Chishtiyya practices as well. Here, the relationship between the Chishti order of Sufism and Akbar is emphasized, as is the loss of favor in the Mughal court for the Naqshbandi order, which Sirhindi embraced. In these reformist narratives, Sirhindi’s attack on Akbar’s religious

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<sup>21</sup>The Naqshbandiyya is a Sufi order with its origins in Central Asia. It is one of the many predominant Sufi orders extant in India today.



experiments is also seen as addressing the growing influence of the Chishti order, and his disapproval of what he considered their “un-Islamic” practices. In such a characterization of Sirhindi’s critique, the Naqshbandi order is presented as emphasizing a strict adherence to Islamic law (*shari’a*), and to silent performance of the ritual remembrance of God (*zikr-e khafi*). Reformist narratives position these stances as creating a rift between the two orders – Naqshbandi and Chishti – in the Subcontinent (Haq: 10-15).

Reformist historical narratives also present Sirhindi’s apparent division of the Islamic philosophical concepts of *wahdat al-wajud* and *wahdat al-shuhud* as two diametrically opposed ideas as a significant one. Sirhindi’s critique of the former is seen as an attack against the Chishti order<sup>22</sup>. In this historical narrative, the latter school of thought – *wahdat al-shuhud* – is presented as one espoused by Sirhindi and his ilk. These narratives also present it as being more in line with the Islamic precept of strict monotheism (Haq: 10-16).

This marked opposition between the Naqshbandi order and the Chishti order is contested in the scholarship. Damrel (2000) has shown that opposition to the vocal, ritual remembrance of God, and to ritual audition (*sama’*) were not stances common to all those who followed the Naqshbandi order (p. 188-189). Moreover, Damrel also suggests that Sirhindi’s hard-line attitudes against non-Muslims were more likely influenced by similarly inclined Chishtis (such as Shaikh Gangohi), rather than by his own Naqshbandi Sufi master or his Naqshbandi contemporaries (p. 187). Scholars have also suggested

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<sup>22</sup>The school of philosophy known as *wahdat al-wajud* was formulated and expounded by the 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century Sufi philosopher Ibn ‘Arabi. In South Asia, this school of thought is commonly associated with the Chishti order. Many religious scholars of the time saw *wahdat al-wajud* to be uncomfortably close to notions of pantheism, and thus questioned its validity within the fold of Islam.

that Sirhindi's understanding of the two philosophical concepts of *wahdat-al wujud* and *wahdat al-shuhud* was far more nuanced than is reflected in much of the historiography (Friedmann 1971: 60; Damrel: 190), and these two schools of thought are by no means wholly accepted or rejected by any given Sufi order. There is in fact evidence of debate within the Chishti order regarding the validity of these schools of thought (Hussaini 1982).

I have discussed these narratives on theology and philosophy here because reformist narratives use these to bring into question the validity of Chishti Sufi practice and belief. Such narratives result in a very problematic dichotomy with Naqshbandi/reformist Muslims, and adherence to Islamic law and ritual on one side, and Chishti Sufism, the iconoclastic religious innovations of Akbar and non-compliance with Islamic law and belief on the other. Though the field is quite messy with differences of opinion across members of different orders and groups in the later medieval period in India, reformist narratives paint these divisions as being stark.

The second thread of the Tablighi Jama'at's doctrinal ancestry leads to the 18<sup>th</sup> century thinker, Shah Waliullah, and importantly, to his reformist heirs. As I mentioned above, reformist narratives present the activities of religious experimenters like Akbar and reactionaries such as Sirhindi as having deepened the rift between Chishti Sufis and the scholars of Islamic law and jurisprudence, and thus ossifying notions of a separation of Chishti Sufis from Islamic practice and belief. Shah Waliullah attempted to minimize this divide by emphasizing the interpretive quality of the Quran and the prophetic sayings (*ijtihad*) (Haq: 36). He also felt that it was not some general notion of civilizational decline that had led to a feeling malaise among Muslims in his time, but instead that the

closing of the door to an interpretive approach to religious texts was to blame. However, his approach was taken only so far by his intellectual successors. To them, the flexibility allowed for by this approach was only permissible to the degree approved of by traditional religious scholars of the time. This was the stance taken by Shah Waliullah's son, Shah Abdul Aziz Barelwi, a scholar of prophetic sayings (*hadis*), and his successor in turn, Sayyed Ahmad Shahid Barelwi.

In comparison to his successors, Shah Waliullah's position on the practices and beliefs of shrine-based Sufism can be considered quite moderate (Baljon 1989), and contemporary reformist positions are more in line with the theological and ritual stances of Shah Waliullah's successors than with those of Shah Waliullah himself. However, this disjuncture between the position held by Shah Waliullah and his successors does not prevent the Tablighi Jama'at, along with many other reformist groups, from claiming Shah Waliullah as a source of their criticism of shrine-based Sufism. The stature of Shah Waliullah as an Islamic scholar and thinker lends credence to those who claim to be part of his intellectual and theological lineage.

Looking more closely at this lineage, it is perhaps more the mark of the later thinker and Muslim leader, Sayyed Ahmad Barelwi, which can be seen on the Tablighi Jama'at and on other 20<sup>th</sup> century reformist movements. Sayyad Ahmad Barelwi's views did certainly bear the imprint of Shah Waliullah and his son Abdul Aziz. Firstly, Shah Waliullah's emphasis on the interpretive approach to Islamic texts (*ijtihad*) drove in the message that the individual, lay Muslim's efforts are key to the revival, reform and rejuvenation of Islam; secondly, Abdul Aziz Barelwi's emphasis on the prophetic sayings (*hadis*) and on core daily ritual practices (such as prayer, clothing etc.) is echoed in the

conception of “correct” Muslim practice and belief among contemporary reformist movements.

The religio-political climate of 18<sup>th</sup> century India also affected the approach of Sayyed Ahmad Barelwi. In reaction to the professional methods used by Christian missionaries, he began to employ such strategies as missionary tours of South Asia, pamphleteering, and the establishment of journals aimed at religious reform. In addition to this, in the Northwestern regions of British India his reformist movement transformed into an anti-British and anti-Sikh religio-political struggle (Ahmad: 165). These developments of the reformist movement under Sayyed Ahmad Barelwi were unique in that 1) for perhaps the first time, he defined Muslims in the Subcontinent as a politically and socially distinct group, and 2) he was able to employ the media-technologies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century for the purposes of religious and political proselytizing. The direct influence of these significant aspects of Sayyed Ahmad’s movement can be seen on the Tablighi Jama’at and on other reformist groups. Though the Tablighi Jama’at, the Dar ul-‘Ulum Deoband, and nearly all other Muslim reformist institutions in India today are staunchly a-political, they proselytize to Muslims with the goal of awakening their consciousness as a distinct group, and use modern media to do so.

The legacy of these 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century reformist thinkers and leaders among contemporary reformist groups in India is evident in one other significant way: the sense of urgency to take the message of Islam first and foremost to Muslims themselves, while relegating proselytizing among non-Muslims to the back-burner. It is this reflective, grass-roots based, Islam-centric reformist ideology that clearly defines the doctrinal

ancestry and the ideological lineage of the Tablighi Jama'at and other reformist groups in India today.

#### THE GOAL OF SUFI REFORMISM

Before I delve into the objectives of the Tablighi Jama'at, I would like to clarify my use of the terms “Sufi reformism” or “Sufi reformist”. In this dissertation, I have used these terms to connote Muslim reformist movements that have been oppositional to shrine-based Sufism and that have sought to reform Sufism while simultaneously claiming a Sufi identity. However, it is very important to note that religious scholars, the clergy, and ritual specialists who are adherents of shrine-based Sufism (that is, who self-identify as the *ahl-e sunnat wa al jamat*), in many respects, consider themselves to be reformists as well. Here, I echo Usha Sanyal's (2005) words:

While critics might argue that the Ahl-e Sunnat were too accommodating of local practice, too local, and too parochial to be considered “reformist” – unlike the Deobandis or the Ahl-e Hadith or the Nadwa, for example – I would argue that the Ahl-e Sunnat movement was reformist in the self-consciousness of its practice, and in its insistence on following the sunna of the Prophet al all times. In paying attention to every detail of their comportment on a daily basis, members of the Ahl-e Sunnat were no different from followers of rival movements at the time. What set them apart from the other movements was their interpretation of what, in practice, was entailed by following the Prophet's example. [pp. 128-129]

Muhammad Ilyas' educational and religious background also illuminates the nature of the movement that he so successfully initiated. Ilyas received his religious education from the Deoband school and from Abdul Aziz Bareilwi. After completing his education, Ilyas spent a few years in meditative seclusion at the shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya in New Delhi. This perhaps embodies the most fascinating aspect of the genesis of the Tablighi Jama'at. Like most religious thinkers of his time and before, Ilyas was a Sufi initiate and was willing to explore the various arenas of thought and

philosophy offered by various Sufi orders. In Muhammad Ilyas we find the coming together of Sufi spirituality, the spirit of Islamic reformation, and an apolitical stance.

It is in the claim to this ancestry, with such figures as Shah Waliullah and his reformist successors, and Muhammad Ilyas, that the Tablighi Jama'at places its religious authority; authority it then uses to levy aggressive critique on shrine-based Sufism today. It is also what makes the Tablighi Jama'at unique as a reformist organization. Most other Islamic reformist organizations that level attacks against shrine-based Sufism, such as the Jama'at-e Islami or the Ahl-e Hadis, do so while simultaneously distancing themselves from Sufism in most of its forms. While these reformists may have had early Sufi affiliations, their organizations not only deride shrine-based Sufism and its lay practices and beliefs, but also deny any legitimacy to Sufism in general. It is in this context that the Tablighi Jama'at stands out. The Tablighi Jama'at's criticism of shrine-based Sufism comes from a doctrinal and spiritual base *within* the Sufi fold.

Masud (2000) has pointed out that the political stance of the Tablighi Jama'at is more complex than is made out to be in much of the literature, and that its ideological lineages are more tenuous as well. He points out that the Tablighi Jama'at's initial non-sectarian position largely failed because many of its early patrons being were a part of the Dar ul-'Ulum Deoband, and Hanafi movements such as the Nadwatul 'Ulama (p. 95). He also writes that the Jama'at's self-identification as apolitical "should not be taken to mean that the Jama'at has no political vision" (p. 97). He elaborates: "In a very broad sense, the Tablighi Jama'at's work is, in fact, political. Making Muslims conscious of their separate identity and aware of their social obligations from a religious perspective" (what he terms as "*Umma* consciousness") "ultimately serves a political purpose" (p. 99).

The Tablighi Jama'at is able to claim authority and legitimacy for its rhetoric against Sufi shrines at several levels. First, is the fact that Muhammad Ilyas as well as other influential figures for the movement, such as Shah Waliullah and Ahmad Sirhindi and the Deoband school, were greatly influenced by Sufi thought and philosophy. Sirhindi's strong ties with the Naqshbandi order, Shah Waliullah's deep knowledge of Sufism, and Ilyas' days spent in seclusion at the shrine of Nizamuddin Auliya all allow the Tablighi Jama'at to claim authority over knowledge of what it means to be Sufi. These factors give its critique of shrine-based Sufism immense leverage among lay Muslims, especially of the educated classes.

Secondly, the Tablighi Jama'at's doctrinal emphasis on the prophetic sayings (*hadis*) gives them further weight among lay Muslims in their anti-shrine rhetoric. The Tablighi Jama'at distributes some literature on the teachings of the Deoband seminary and is considered to have grown under the larger umbrella of the Deoband movement (Metcalf 2006: 266). The majority of the Tablighi Jama'at's proselytizing script consists of anecdotes and morality tales, which have little or no direct sources in the Quran or the in the prophetic sayings (Gaborieau: 38), but are presented as being drawn from the life and example of Muhammad<sup>23</sup>. However, their association with the Deoband seminary is quite strong, and their rhetorical claim over knowledge of the prophetic sayings (through the personages of Muhammad Zakariya and Abdul Aziz Barelwi) allows them to define and preach Islamic practice to lay Muslims, especially among the unlettered classes for

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<sup>23</sup>Muhammad Khalid Masud (2000) provides a thorough outline of the canon of Tablighi Jama'at literature and their early reception (p. 80-85).

whom oral narratives have immense purchase<sup>24</sup>. With this claim to religious authority backing them, Tablighi Jama'at missionaries place the practices and beliefs of shrine-based Sufism outside the realm of "true" Islam, as defined by them.

Thirdly, the Tablighi Jama'at defines the *reform* of Sufism to be one of its goals. Unlike many reformist groups, especially those with Wahhabi and Salafi roots, who wish to obliterate most forms of Sufism and Sufi practice, the denial and rejection of Sufism is not the stated aim of Tablighi Jama'at missionaries. The goal of them is to revive "true" Islamic spirituality inherent to Sufism, which they believe has long disappeared in the popular practice of Sufism. Needless to say, this "true" and "correct" mode of Islamic belief and practice is based on their reformist interpretations of Islamic doctrine.

Both the Tablighi Jama'at's focus on prophetic sayings as the key to Islamic comportment and their self-identification as Sufis is a legacy of their roots in the Deobandi school of thought. As Metcalf (2006) notes, both are important aspects of the Deobandi curriculum and the beliefs of their most prominent scholars and teachers (p. 269). However, "the place of Sufism [for Tablighis] was more complex. Although what were seen as deviant customs around holy men were discouraged, Sufism in no sense disappeared. Indeed, among Tablighis, the holiness associated with the Sufi *pir* was in many ways defused into the charismatic body of the jama'at so that the missionary group itself became a channel for divine intervention" (p. 274).

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<sup>24</sup>This aspect of Tablighi Jama'at teaching has been strongly informed by the Deoband approach to religious education. As Metcalf (2006) has noted, the Deoband school from the start has laid more emphasis on Prophetic sayings (*hadis*), daily rituals and personal comportment (p. 266). In addition, Deoband "de-emphasized the so-called rational sciences, logic and philosophy" (p. 36).



Adherents of shrine-based Sufism do counter the outright denial of Sufism's legitimacy by other reformist groups. Ritual experts do this by staking a superior claim to doctrinal and theological knowledge, while lay practitioners look to the authority, wisdom and charisma of Sufi saints. The Tablighi Jama'at's insistence on the *reformation* of shrine-based Sufism as insiders is often harder to counter, however. Their Sufi reformist goal, coupled with the claimed authority over knowledge of Sufism, the Quran and the prophetic sayings, makes it a movement that is a constant and unbending adversary to adherents of shrine-based Sufism today.

#### THE TABLIGHI JAMA'AT'S REACH AND GROWTH

The Tablighi Jama'at is a movement that has grown immeasurably in following since its inception in the 1920s. As it grew from its small-town origins in Mewat, the Jama'at set up its headquarters in the Nizamuddin neighborhood in New Delhi, the place where its founder had undergone spiritual seclusion in his formative years. Other important centers have now emerged in Tungi in Bangladesh, and in Raiwind in Pakistan. In addition, there are now many centers outside the Subcontinent. A reflection of the Jama'at following is the fact that the annual Tablighi Jama'at gathering at Raiwind is now estimated to be the second largest religious gathering of Muslims, second only to the Hajj (Ahmad: 165; Metcalf: 671). Significantly, Sufi shrines such as the shrine of Nizamuddin Auliya and the shrine of Khaja Moinuddin Chishti in Ajmer draw a comparable number of visitors during their death anniversary events (*urs*).

The global reach of the Tablighi Jama'at movement was made clear to me during my many visits to the shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya. As I have previously described, I had to pass by the Tablighi Jama'at mosque and headquarters on my way to

this Sufi shrine. The alleys around the mosque and the headquarters are full of sundry stores and restaurants that cater primarily to a clientele of Tablighi Jama'at initiates. On any given day, I saw initiates here from all over India, and also from South East Asia and from the Middle East. Signboards for these stalls and shops, which were previously in Urdu and/or English, now had added signs in Arabic for the convenience of the alleyway's global visitors. Significantly, this new global clientele did not consist primarily of members of the religious elite. They were for the most part there as initiates, as low-rung missionaries who had come to visit the headquarters of the international movement of which they were a part.

Unlike many reformist movements in other countries of the Subcontinent, the Tablighi Jama'at, along with other Indian reformist groups, has remained apolitical. The members of this organization do not actively participate in local or regional party politics, nor do these groups endorse any political party or movement. This allows it to function unimpeded, for the most part, by government interference (Metcalf: 672). In India, interreligious violence over the past two decades, the events of 9/11, terrorist attacks by radical Islamist groups, and the spread of Hindu nationalism have unfortunately led to increased hostility and harassment from the police and internal security agencies towards Muslims. However, this ratcheting of animosity and attention has been experienced by Muslims all over India, of all religious and political inclinations.

In Pakistan, the following of the Tablighi Jama'at does form a viable and dependable political base for many conservative, reformist political parties, and it has received monetary and ideological support from several administrations there. The political clout of the Tablighi Jama'at in the region cannot therefore be underestimated

(Ahmad: 168; Gaborieau: 39). This political and religious clout, as well as the Tablighi Jama'at's immense grass-roots following, has brought it (very consciously and visibly) at loggerheads with visitors to Sufi shrines and their caretakers. The rivaled following of Sufi saints in the region has made for a less than amicable encounter between these two groups.

## POINTS OF REFORMIST CRITIQUE

While varying on specific theological issues, Sufi reformist groups are generally in consensus on some aspects of shrine practice and belief. Chief amongst these are the veneration of Sufi saints, belief in a saints' intercessory powers, and various ritual practices that accompany these beliefs. The general argument is that veneration of Sufi saints to the extent that it is seen at Sufi shrines places the believer on the slippery slope to idolatry (*but parasti*) and polytheism (*shirk*). Many adherents of shrine-based Sufism bow towards the saint's tomb, and this, say reformists, is antithetical to the monotheistic tenets of Islam. The belief that Sufi saints are able to speak to God on behalf of a petitioning believer, too is considered "un-Islamic" as reformists believe that this unduly elevates the position of Sufi saints. Reformists believe that the marking of saints' death anniversaries (*urs*), offering ritual music (*qawwali*) at Sufi shrines, the presentations of various tokens of faith and veneration (such as colored sheets, flowers and incense) to the saint are all heretical innovations (*bid'at*) and are in variance with "correct" Islamic practice and belief.

The pressure from reformist groups centers on the appropriateness (or inappropriateness) of shrine-based Sufi practice and belief within the fold of Islam. As

discussed previously in this chapter, these reformist groups by no means constitute a monolithic bloc; they often differ considerably on certain theological stances. But they do agree on their opposition to many beliefs and practices of shrine-based Sufism. These beliefs and practices are seen as heretical innovations (*bid'at*) that have become enmeshed with Sufi practice through contact with Hindus. Reformists consider these practices and beliefs to have pre-Islamic, Indic roots, and are thus judged to be outside the fold of Islam. I have briefly discussed some of these contested beliefs and practices, such as bowing before the tomb of the saint (*sajda*), belief in the intercessory powers of the saint (*shifa'at*), or appealing to the saint to use these powers to resolve personal problems (*mannat manana*) in previous chapters. At best, reformist groups characterize these beliefs and practices as superstition. At the other end of the spectrum, many reformist groups assert that adherence to these practices and beliefs is tantamount to engaging in polytheism (*shirk*) and idolatry (*but parasti*). These are very serious accusations that are not taken lightly by adherents of shrine-based Sufism.

There is also a perception among some reformist groups that adherents of shrine-based Sufism pay little or no heed to Islamic law (*shariat*) and what are known as the five pillars of Islam—the profession of faith (*shahada*), prayer five times a day (*namaz*), fasting during the month of Ramadan (*roza*), apportioning a part of one's income to charity (*zakat*), and pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*). Even if contemporary adherents of shrine-based Sufism do themselves follow these prescriptions, reformist groups often claim that adherents valorize Sufi saints and charismatic figures who do not.

While shrine-based Sufism includes adherents from all strata of society, and with quite varied philosophical persuasions and religious motivations, many reformists I spoke

to associated shrine-based Sufism primarily with wandering religious mendicants (*fakir*), and with antinomian sects (such as the Qalandars) who they perceive as reclusive and to live at the fringes of Islamic society. My reformist interlocutors also felt that those drawn to shrine-based Sufism were people committed to other-worldly goals or held these as ideal. Their perception was that the complete surrendering of one's life to the attainment of union with God (*fana*), one of the important tenets of Sufism, was achieved only to the detriment of one's worldly responsibilities. To many reformists I spoke to, this supposed abnegation of worldly duties was antithetical to core Islamic values. They claimed that the idealization of detachment from worldly concerns was not compatible with the teachings of the Quran and the prophet Muhammad. These aspects of Sufism, they told me, had been borrowed from Hindu ascetic traditions.

My reformist interlocutors disapproved quite strongly of this perceived act of “borrowing” from traditions that they saw as polytheistic and wholly other-worldly in their concerns. Many of my reformist interlocutors believed that certain practices and beliefs of shrine-based Sufism had no basis in the Quran, the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (*hadis*), or in the biographical narratives of his life (*sirat*). This, to them, was reason enough to invalidate these aspects of Sufism. In their view, in order to reform shrine-based Sufism, to return it to the fold of Islam, these “new” and “incompatible” practices and beliefs had to be purged; and so long as they continued, adherents of shrine-based Sufism remained precariously on the slippery slope to polytheism, heretical innovation, and idolatry.

I must point out here that the cross-religious appeal of Sufi shrines was not the point of contention for these reformists. My reformist interlocutors did not argue against

the shared sacred space of Sufi shrines per se. It was the kind of practice and belief that Muslim adherents followed there that irked them. It seemed to matter little to Tablighi Jama'at members that Hindus visited Sufi shrines; but they felt very strongly that Muslim adherents should desist from what they considered un-Islamic practices and beliefs. Pete van der Veer (1992) has also noted this in his analysis of "a Sufi Saint's day in Surat" in Gujarat (p. 545).

#### ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN ADHERENTS OF SHRINE-BASED SUFISM AND REFORMISTS

Attempts at reforming Islamic practice are often overt and can be quite adversarial. I personally observed a few such encounters and also heard testimony from adherents of shrine-based Sufism who had been proselytized to. Some attempts at proselytizing were formal and involved structured missionary activities. For instance, one of my interlocutors, Mushtaq, told me of groups of Tablighi Jama'at initiates who travelled through rural areas in the western Indian state of Rajasthan. He came from a community of Mir Mirasi singers, who self-identify as one of the first communities in the north to convert to Islam nearly 800 years ago. Sufi poetry and the verses of the poet-saints of the Bhakti movement (such as Kabir and Gorakhnath) form the core of Mir Mirasi repertoire. Members of this community traditionally have been adherents of shrine-based Sufism. As Mushtaq elegantly stated, "The Sufi saints have cast their cooling shade over our community."

However, this has been changing in the past decade, said Mushtaq. His village and others in the district have experienced heavy proselytizing by Tablighi Jama'at missionaries. These missionaries come in small groups and attempt to convince locals

that their mode of practice and belief is un-Islamic (*islam ke khilaf*). These missionaries encourage villagers to pray five times a day, dress in particular ways, and dissuade them from visiting Sufi shrines and singing. “The things they say!” Mushtaq once exclaimed. “I couldn’t tell you some of the things they say...It’s so terrible!” When I nudged him to tell me he reluctantly continued, “They say that going to a Sufi shrine is a sin on par with marrying your mother! And they say that if you listen to music you will have molten glass poured down your ears in hell.”

Mushtaq said that the members of his community are Muslim through their inherited tradition (*paramparik musalman*), but many are “forgetting their culture” (*apni sankriti bhul rahe hain*). He said that the villagers in his district are mostly illiterate, and when missionaries and preachers come to them and say that what they are doing is un-Islamic, that there is textual proof of this, the missionaries are readily believed. There was some resistance from certain villagers, he said, who bluntly tell the missionaries, “You speak a different language; we speak a different language” (*apki bhasha alag hai, hamari bhasha alag*). The resistance was confined to a few though, and Mushtaq felt that the missionary groups were quite disciplined and firm (*mazbut*) and were gaining ground. He said that as a consequence of the growing clout of the Tablighi Jama’at, he has not been able to sing publically in his own village for the past six years.

Another of my interlocutors in Gulbarga, Nikhad, was a student at the girls’ religious school at the Sufi shrine that I attended each day. Walking back to her home for lunch one day, she pointed out the squat building in her neighborhood where local Tablighi Jama’at initiates organized their weekly gatherings (*ijtima*). She came from a family that was distantly related to the chief custodian (*sajjada nashin*) of the Khaja

Bandanwaz shrine, and her father was a Sufi disciple himself. She too went to the religious school at the Sufi shrine daily for lessons in committing the Quran to memory (*hifz*). The shrine was clearly an important part of her and her family's religiosity. As we walked to her home, I asked her about the Tablighi Jama'at. She said, "They come from outside, set up their assembly halls and instigate people." I asked her what these missionaries said that was so inflammatory. She frowned and replied, "They teach the boys that going to the shrine is forbidden by Islam, and that Khaja Bandanawaz was just an ordinary human being like the rest of us (*voh am admi the*)". We were in a neighborhood that was quite literally at the doorstep of the Sufi shrine, and so I wondered about how much of an impact the Tablighi Jama'at had on the community. Nikhad said that now most of the families in the neighborhood had been drawn in by the Tablighi Jama'at's missionary activity and seldom went to the shrine. Though in Gulbarga on the whole, she said that there was more of an even split between adherents and non-adherents.

A more confrontational instance of reformist activity can be encountered at the death anniversary (*urs*) of Nizamuddin Auliya. This is an event that draws millions of pilgrims from all over South Asia, turning the neighborhood around the Nizamuddin Auliya shrine into a churning mass of humanity. As I have mentioned previously, the death anniversary of a saint is one of the most important and sacred events on a shrine's calendar. It marks the death of the saint, or, in Sufi terms, the union of the saint with God. Often on these occasions, reformists from the Barelvi community rent out the auditorium at the Ghalib Academy (which stands between the Tablighi Jama'at headquarters and the Nizamuddin Auliya shrine), and proceed to lecture and preach



against the “un-Islamic” practices at the shrine. The practices specifically objected to include the celebratory and fair-like atmosphere at and around the shrine, and the practice of making vows to perform certain sacrifices or fulfilling certain tasks in return for the intercession of the saint (*mannat manana*)<sup>25</sup>. Needless to say, passions run high at these events.

Aside from these more structured and planned confrontations, there are many encounters that erupt spontaneously. These are not always as self-consciously aggressive as some of the instances I have cited above, but nonetheless elicit anger, discomfort and concern among adherents of shrine-based Sufism.

I have recounted in the introduction of how, while I was in Gulbarga during the death anniversary of Khaja Bandanawaz, a young college student with whom I had got acquainted approached me looking quite disconcerted. Her family members were adherents of shrine-based Sufism, and her mother worked for one of the academic institutions run by the Sufi shrine. She knew of my research interests and so she started to ask me questions about Sufism: What is an *urs* (death anniversary)? Why is it marked the way it is? Some people say that going to the shrine is wrong, that it’s polytheism (*shirk*); that one can ask for intervention directly from God. Is this true? But why is it wrong to think of the saints as intercessors? Why is it wrong to ask for the blessings of

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<sup>25</sup>This is especially interesting because generally in India, the Barelvi community is considered to be pro-Sufi shrine. The term ‘Barelvi’ comes from the 19<sup>th</sup> century reformist, Ahmad Raza Khan Barelvi, who was a staunch supporter of shrine-based Sufism. Those who adhere to shrine-based Sufism refer to themselves as *ahl-e sunnat wa al-jamat* (people of the Islamic way of life and community), or eponymously as Barelvis. Just as the Dar ul-Ulum Deoband is the preeminent seminary among Sufi reformist Muslims in India, the Jamaia Nizamia seminary in Hyderabad is the seat of religious scholars who are in favor of shrine-based Sufism. However, it speaks to the diversity of thought and opinion in these seminaries that there is no consensus on whether all or only certain shrine-based practices and beliefs should be endorsed.

saints when we always ask our elders for their blessings? The questions came tumbling out.

She was clearly troubled by all these conflicting messages and had come to me to untangle them. I asked her why she was suddenly assailed by these doubts. She told me that she had gone to the shrine to pay her respects to the saint on the occasion of his death anniversary when her friend from college had texted her about her whereabouts. When she had responded that she was at the shrine, he had immediately written back, cautioning her against going there. “He wrote, ‘Don’t you know that going to shrines is against Islam?’”, she said. He had repeatedly texted her admonishing her for being there, telling her that Sufi shrines were a heretical innovation (*bid’at*) and that going there amounted to practicing polytheism (*shirk*). These serious accusations, which flew in the face of the kind of Islam she had grown up practicing and which her elders practiced, were deeply disturbing to her.

I overheard or was privy to similar conversations and arguments among acquaintances, friends and family throughout my fieldwork. The folks participating in these conversations represented quite a demographic range: I have heard arguments over the validity of pilgrimage to shrines at up-market coffee shops in the swanky neighborhoods of South Delhi, and listened in on discussions over the legitimacy of various shrine practices at hole-in-the-wall tea stalls in the alleyways of lower-income ghettos. To a great extent, the credit for this wide-ranging and extensive conversation goes to the Tablighi Jama’at. Their grass-roots missionary activity, based on mobilizing initiates from varying socio-economic backgrounds, has resulted in such discussions being par for course at every strata of urban and rural India.

It is not uncommon at all for opinion on these topics to vary within members of a family. One of my first reformist interlocutors was a woman I happened to meet on my way to Gulbarga. Ameera was a very well-educated woman who was the principal of a girl's college in Gulbarga. My first encounter with her was on a train ride. When I told her that I was headed to Gulbarga to do research on Sufism at the shrine of Khaja Bandanawaz, she told me that "we Muslims" believed that the Sufi shrine was "only a grave". She told me that while many people did go to the shrine and indulge in various rituals there, most of these were not "correct Islam". She said that in "true Islam we believe that Sufi saints are respected and revered people who have been blessed by God. We believe that God showers his grace (*barkat*) on them, and so the belief is that if we go close to them some of this grace will fall on us as well." But the shrine was just a grave, she reiterated, and as it was "forbidden for women to enter graveyards in Islam", she never entered the shrine. She just paid her respects to the saint from outside just like she would do for the dead at any grave. Her narrative spoke of points of unresolved tension: on the one hand, she reiterated how the shrine was just a grave and nothing more; but on the other, she spoke of the saints being blessed and the sites of their burial being exceptional spaces.

I kept up my acquaintance with Ameera throughout my time in Gulbarga, and the tension I perceived in her above narrative revealed itself on other occasions. I once asked her which group or person she felt had the firmest grasp of what correct Islamic practice and belief was. She said that the chief custodian of the Khaja Bandanawaz Sufi shrine, Hussaini Sahab, was the most knowledgeable person when it came to Sufism. She emphasized that he had been educated in America and that he had "correct knowledge" of

Sufism. But in general, she felt that the speaker and preacher, Dr. Zakir Naik, was the most informed person when it came to Islam in general. “He has had debates with prominent people from different religions, and he has won all those debates,” she declared. This response was intriguing to me because while Hussaini Sahab was an inseparable part of the institution of shrine-based Sufism, Dr. Zakir Naik (a hugely popular speaker on topics pertaining to Islam) is staunchly anti-shrine in his stance and has Wahhabi and Salafi affiliations.

I found that this kind of complicated relationship with the Sufi shrine is common among Muslims in India. Sufism certainly continued to hold some draw for most of my reformist interlocutors, perhaps because they were raised in that tradition; but there was an underlying sense of unease about Sufi shrines themselves, and towards the rituals, the beliefs and the pomp associated with them. Much of this disquiet came from association with or influence of reformist thinkers, speakers, or strongly anti-shrine family members. Aameera once told me that her sons were quite clear on where they stood in terms of the Sufi shrine. With a smile on her face, her eyes sparkling, and in tones of admiration and pride, she spoke of her son’s fervor: “My son says that any Muslim who even steps into a Sufi shrine is no longer a Muslim!” She had similar admiration for the anti-shrine (and quite anti-Sufi) stances of the Wahhabis she had encountered in Saudi Arabia during her recent Hajj. Since Saudi Arabia has strong affiliations with Wahhabi clerics, it is the latter’s ideologies that govern the maintenance and running of the holy sites of Mecca and Medina. Aameera spoke of how the security guards at the mosque in Medina were trained in “correct” Islamic practice, and how these guards would make people who were praying in the direction of the tombs turn to face the Ka’ba in Mecca.

Speaking to her and to others like her, I got the impression that to many Muslims in India these days, reformist Islam has a certain aspirational quality. While some of my interlocutors displayed a certain reluctance to abandon the kind of Islam practiced by their ancestors in India in its entirety, there was also a certain charisma and pious purity that they associated with anti-shrine reformism, and especially for Wahhabi Islam that is so strongly associated with the Arabian Peninsula. I will discuss the importance of the Arabian Peninsula to Muslims later in this chapter. For now, suffice to say that for many Muslims in India who are ambivalent on where they stand with regard to Sufism, and especially shrine-based Sufism, the Sufi reformism of the Tablighi Jama'at and the Dar ul-Ulum Deoband seminary offers a certain middle ground. The stances of these groups allows them to consider Sufi saints as respected and blessed figures in Islamic history who are worthy of emulation, but also allows them to distance themselves from shrine-based practice and beliefs. But fundamental to this complex relationship is the seed of doubt towards shrine-based Sufism that reformists are able to sow in the minds of those who are not fervently this or that; something that is achieved by tapping into the desire of many lay Muslims to be better believers and better practitioners of their faith.

The influence of reformist family members and friends in persuading or dissuading adherents of shrine-based Sufism in certain directions cannot be underestimated. These informal and unplanned encounters are certainly not structured to the same extent as reformist-sponsored events and literature. But when the validity of one's religious practice and beliefs is so strongly and persistently questioned by those with whom you have sustained relationships, it becomes a deeply effective tool in furthering reformist ideology.

Defining Sufism in particular and Islam in general, thus no longer remains the domain of theologians, religious scholars, and philosophers. These debates make their way into the homes of lay Muslims through family members and friends committed to different modes of Islamic practice. The voice of religious scholars too has a much wider reach now than ever before. Urdu-language newspapers often give quite a few column inches to religious-themed articles, especially in their Friday editions, while Urdu TV channels regularly allow viewers to call in with questions for the religious scholars featured on various Q&A shows; these scholars then issue rulings (*fatwa*) on these religious queries on air. While most Urdu-language newspapers and TV channels are largely secular in their general content with a few religious-themed features, there are at least two TV channels dedicated wholly to Islamic programming. One of these, QTV, is a Pakistan-based channel that is more sympathetic to shrine-based Sufism. The other, Peace TV, is the brain-child of the reformist speaker, Dr. Zakir Naik. Both channels closely compete for Indian viewership and bring these debates over proper and improper belief and practice to the homes of lay Muslims all over India.

While most encounters are between dissenting lay adherents, television has allowed these lay adherents to become somewhat acquainted with theological arguments and proofs supporting various modes of Islamic practice. This isn't always an even contest, though. Reformist groups, by the nature of their goals, are often missionary, and employ various proselytizing techniques. They are also better organized in structured groups with planned outreach programs, printed literature for lay readership and in some cases, a more solid financial base to fund these activities.

Due to the role of Sufi hospices and shrines in the spread of Islam in India, shrine-based Sufism has been the predominant form of Islam practiced in the Subcontinent. In my estimation, adherents of shrine-based Sufism still constitute a substantial majority of Muslims in India. However, due to the above-mentioned encounters with reformist ideology and active proselytizing by reformist groups, a sustained majority can no longer be presumed. Adherents of shrine-based Sufism are well aware of the growing influence and clout of reformist groups as they are confronted with instances of alternate modes of Islamic practice on a daily basis.

Reformist reaction to adherents of shrine-based Sufism and shrine practice vary considerably on finer theological points. I have had conversations with reformists from the Deoband seminary, the Tablighi Jama'at and the Jama'at-e Islami Hind, and their opposition to shrine-based Sufism has varied in terms of their theological stances and their emotional responses. Interlocutors from some groups have told me that they are not opposed to Sufism or even Sufi shrines, but feel that practice at shrines has deviated from proper Islamic conduct and need to be brought back on track, so to speak. Other reformists see nothing to redeem Sufi shrines. Clearly, there is quite a distance between these two responses. However, as has been discussed earlier in this chapter, there are many specific shrine practices and beliefs to which reformists across the board object. And the point of objection is that to reformists, these practices go against the grain of "true" Islam.

## THE GEOGRAPHIC VALENCING OF THE MUSLIM WORLD

Reformist groups position themselves on a theological and doctrinal high ground in their engagement with adherents of shrine-based Sufism: both lay adherents and specialists of shrine-based Sufism are spoken of as having incomplete knowledge or a misguided notion of both Sufism and Islam. The accusation that Sufism is *bid'at*, a heretical innovation, with practice and belief borrowed from South Asia's non-Muslim inhabitants is common enough. The corollary to this accusation is that reformists represent "pure" Islam, the "original" Islam that was practiced in the Arabian Peninsula at the time of Muhammad.

While adherents of shrine-based Sufism reject this self-representation by reformists, many Indian Muslims who do not have any strong emotional or religious commitments to either group are often convinced of this claim to purity of practice and belief. One such interlocutor spoke to me of her father's Wahhabi perspective, something he had acquired after spending years in the Arabian Gulf. She said of her father's Wahhabi leanings and his opposition to Sufi shrines: "He doesn't believe in doing anything innovative; just what the Quran says". Her remark is very telling. It not only places shrine-based Sufism as being without a basis in the Quran, it also imagines it as something new and thus removed from the sacred time and space of Islam's origins.

Implicit in her statement is the weight given to the link that Wahhabi and Salafi Islam have with the part of the Arabian Peninsula known as the Hijaz, home to the two holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Wahhabi and Salafi reformist groups have quite a bit of draw over Muslims in India. This attraction often rests on the supposition that because



their ideology originated in the Hijaz, the place of Islam's origin, they have a claim to authenticity of belief and purity of practice that other non-Arabian modes of Islam do not have. That Wahhabi Islam traces its origins to 18<sup>th</sup> century Arabia, while shrine-based Sufism is centuries older, is of little consequence in this valenced view of the Muslim world. For many, Wahhabi and Salafi Islam's origins and entrenchment in the Arabian Peninsula give it the patina of authenticity, while shrine-based Sufism's irrevocable links with South Asia automatically render it an innovation.

There is a clear link here between the valencing of time and space that deems one mode of practice as authentic and the other as inauthentic. McClintock, in her book *Imperial Leather* (1995), gives us the concept of "anachronistic space" with reference to colonial imaginings of Europe and the colonized world. She writes,

According to the colonial version of this trope, imperial progress across the space of empire is figured as a journey backward in time to an anachronistic moment of prehistory. By extension, the return journey to Europe is seen as rehearsing the evolutionary logic of historical progress, forward and upward to the apogee of the Enlightenment in the European metropolis. Geographical difference across *space* is figured as a historical difference across *time*. [p. 40].

This is a useful concept in understanding the valenced geography of the "Muslim world". In this instance, however, the privileging of time is reversed, where the old possesses the luster of authenticity, while the new is a deviation from the authentic. And in this valenced view of the world, to travel from the Hijaz outward is to journey from the old to the new; from true Islamic practice and belief to heretical innovation. Here, the religiosity emerging from the center, the Hijaz, is seen as if in isolation, having remained untouched by 1400 years of history and historic change; and Islam in Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa constitutes the periphery, having experienced a change in degree so vast

that it is very nearly a change in kind. Epithets of purity, authenticity, rootedness and Truth are privileges of the center, while the appellations of heresy, innovation, corruption and deviation are meted out to the periphery. For adherents of shrine-based Sufism in India, whose practice and belief are inextricably linked to both Islam and the Subcontinent, this valenced and anachronistic view of space is problematic to say the least.

However, this valenced conception of the Muslim world, with the Hijaz at its center, was not always the prevalent view of the Muslim elite. For centuries, Muslim scholars and the ruling class nurtured the intellectual and cultural life of Islam outside of the Hijaz: in Andalusia, Turkey, the Levant, Persia and India. Under Persio-Turkic and Mughal rule, India very soon grew into an intellectual and artistic hub in the Islamic world. This privileging of the Subcontinent in the geography of the Muslim world would, however, experience a sea-change during the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

This time-period saw the intensification of the colonial hold over much of the subcontinent, and the accompanying stresses from an exploitative power-relationship. In India, the resulting Revolt of 1857 was a massive, but short-lived, uprising of lay-folk and the gentry against the ultimately victorious East India Company in the Gangetic plain. The revolt was followed by a brutal show of force by the British in India, where much of the oppression was directed at Muslims (lay and elite) who were singled out as primarily responsible for the uprising. The abortive revolt also marked the bloody end of the Mughal Empire, whose borders had receded to encompass not much more than the

city of Delhi.<sup>26</sup> The fall of the Mughal Empire, the violence meted out to lay Muslim subjects by the British, and the growing colonial discourse of the general decline of Islam and Muslims in South Asia no doubt weighed heavily on Muslim intellectuals of the time.

In response to this rhetoric of decline and the grave existential crisis that had gripped the intelligentsia of North India, many Muslim thinkers of the time looked to the Arabian Peninsula as a source of unerring authority, intellectual revival and active religious discourse. While the influence of the Hijaz on South Asian Muslim intellectual life began much earlier in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, this trend continued to grow through the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries also saw an upsurge in socio-religious reform movements in South Asia among Hindus, Zoroastrians and Sikhs, and the reformist zeal among Muslim groups was part of this broader moment of self-reflection in the face of colonial contact (Metcalf 2006: 270). Among Muslims, reformist thinkers were inspired by the growing strength of Wahhabi Islam in the Arabian Peninsula, and often travelled to the Hijaz and were in dialogue with scholars at seminaries in Mecca and Medina, contacts which, Zaman (1997) notes, reinforced the “memories and myths of origin somewhere in the Middle East” (p. 273-274).

Socio-religious reform was a cause taken up by Muslim intellectual and ruling elites of a variety of sects and orders. Among them were both proponents of shrine-based Sufism and those opposed to it. Most of these reformist leaders were involved in animated discourse and intense debate over issues of practice and belief with intellectuals

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<sup>26</sup>A detailed account of the revolt, the events leading up to it and its aftermath can be found in Seema Alavi's (1998) book *The Sepoys and the Company: Tradition and Transition in Northern India 1770-1830*.

in the Hijaz; and this was true regardless of whether these thinkers were Sufis, Wahhabis or Salafis. As Zaman (1997) writes:

Many Muslims have... thought of themselves all along as the descendants of people who came to India from outside, and they have sought prestige and local influence on the basis of claims to foreign descent. The sense that as Muslims they are part of the greater Muslim world, and memories of historical contacts with, or origins in, the Arab Middle East, Iran, and Central Asia, do form part of the communal identity of Indian Muslims and they have done so in the past. [p. 273]

Considering the socio-political context of 19<sup>th</sup>-century South Asia, it is easy to see that the draw of the Hijaz for South Asian Muslims was not only an intellectual one, but also a deeply emotional one: as a seat of renewed intellectual vigor and as a reminder of Islam's origins. This sentiment is resonantly rendered in the following verses of Muhammed Iqbal, one of South Asia's foremost Sufi thinkers of the modern era:

*phir utha valvala-e yad-e mughilan-e arab*  
*phir khincha daman-e dil suye bayaban-e arab*<sup>27</sup>

Once more rises the tumultuous memory of the thorn-bushes of Arabia!  
Once more are my heart-strings pulled towards the deserts of Arabia!

*ajami kham hai to kya, mai to hejazi hai meri*  
*naghma hindi hai to kya, lay to hejazi hai meri*<sup>28</sup>

So what if my pitcher is not of Arabia? My wine is of the Hijaz;  
So what if it's an Indian song I sing? My melody is of the Hijaz!<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> پھر اٹھا ولولہ یاد مغلان عرب / پھر کھینچا دامن دل سو بیابان عرب

<sup>28</sup> عجمی خم ہے تو کیا، می تو حجازی ہے میری / نغمہ بندی ہے تو کیا، لی تو حجازی ہے میری

<sup>29</sup> These verses are found in Iqbal's seminal work *shikwa aur jawab-e shikwa*, in which the poet first rants against God on the abject state of Muslims in the contemporary world, and then responds in the voice of God to these complaints.

By the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the geography of the Muslim world had witnessed a major shift in focus, from a worldview centered in Indo-Persia to one ensconced in the Hijaz.

Needless to say, this attachment to the Hijaz did not always translate into agreement with the Wahhabi mode of Islam prevalent there. One of shrine-based Sufism's most prominent advocates in South Asia was Ahmad Riza Khan Barelvi, whose defense of shrine-based Sufism, *hussam al-haramain 'ala manhar al-kufr wa al-main*, was in fact written in the Hijaz as a rebuttal to dissenting Wahhabi scholars (Sanyal 2005: 103-107).

The shift in focus was certainly not always a straightforward one. Zaman (1997), in examining the ideologies of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century reformist, Sayyid Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi, has pointed out that the geopolitical orientation of many Muslim thinkers was complex, displaying “both the attachment to the Middle East and a highly developed sense of India's cultural contribution to it” (p. 275). However, with the growth of Wahhabi and Salafi reformist movements in South Asia in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and with the growing number of Muslims who are immersed in Wahhabi modes of Islamic practice through migration to the oil-rich Gulf states, the shift in focus away from South Asia and towards the Hijaz has often translated into the delegitimizing of South Asian modes of Islamic practice and belief; and this view has been taken up by many Sufi reformists as well (who do not self-identify as Wahhabi and Salafi). To many lay Muslims in India, both emotional and intellectual alignment with the Hijaz has now become emblematic of true faith and proper practice.

In contrast to this trend, I found that scholars and leaders among adherents of shrine-based Sufism resist this valenced configuration of the world, and attempt to assert South Asian Sufism as a legitimate and essential form of Islamic practice, and India as sacred ground in the Muslim World. Ernst and Lawrence (2002) have argued that, “for the devotee...the origin of Chishti Sufism is less important than its experience. Its path to God is experienced in Mecca and Ajmer at the same time that it is experienced in Jerusalem and Baghdad” (p. 2). I would add, however, that the geography of Chishti Sufism and Sufism’s origins has become increasingly important in a religious and political environment where the validity of shrine-based Sufism as a form of Islamic practice is called into question, and where questions of Muslim identity are now tied irrevocably to notions of regional and national belonging.

To summarize the premises of this chapter: pressure from reformist groups thus makes itself felt at many levels. There is the charge that adherents of shrine-based are “un-Islamic”, not “good Muslims”, or are not Muslim enough. Adherents are confronted with this from theological quarters through exposure to and engagement with reformist religious scholars, and from encounters with family members, friends and neighbors who are drawn to various reformist groups. This leads to the more concrete pressure to give up certain shrine practices and beliefs, or to give up shrine visitations altogether. Both these pressures are backed by a), various theological and scriptural arguments that often invalidate any practice or belief that does not have direct and explicit doctrinal sanction; and b), by reformist claims to religious authority that are bolstered by a valenced view of the “Muslim world” with its center in the Hijaz and the rest of the world as its periphery.

These demands to conform to a certain form of Islamic practice and belief are based on particular modes of religious interpretation. However, they are couched in the language of inalienable authenticity and an unshakable claim to the Truth. In responding to this kind of critique and pressure, adherents of shrine-based Sufism find ways to counter the argument at all the levels at which it is deployed: in theological and doctrinal terms, in terms of legitimate sacred spaces, and in terms of the valenced geography of global Islam. I will discuss these responses in greater detail in chapter 4.

### III. RELIGIOUS AMBIGUITY AND COMMUNAL HARMONY: THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE “GOOD MUSLIM” IN POST- INDEPENDENCE INDIA.

In this chapter, I examine the mode of religious subjecthood that is favored by the Indian nation-state, and how ideal Muslim subjecthood in particular is imagined.

Through a detailed examination of the treatment of Muslim figures in state- and non-state media, I show how the figure of the “syncretic” Muslim, whose religiosity is not rigid and bounded, is positioned as the ideal Indian Muslim.

Religious subjecthood in India favors any religious identity that is ambiguous, amorphous, “syncretic” or “composite”. When markers of various religions are found overlapping in the practice or belief of a particular community, it is talked about with admiration and positive interest in the popular media and to some extent in South Asian academic scholarship, among the intelligentsia and by the opinion-makers in politics, entertainment, art and literature. I characterize these folks as “secularists” as their positive attitude towards composite customs and practices stems from a notion that such “syncretism” advances the cause of Indian secularism and national unity. There are also the “spiritualists” who are found in these strata of India’s intellectual elite. These spiritualists often paint a picture of religion and faith in the broadest of brush-strokes, emphasizing commonalities among multiple faith-systems, while downplaying differences and linear religious identities. To them, “syncretic” or “composite” traditions exemplify these commonalities in lived and reified terms. The narratives of both



secularists and spiritualists broadly promote the ideal of Indian multiculturalist secularism, the defining characteristics of which I will discuss in the pages that follow. Within this larger framework of Indian multiculturalist secularism, Sufism gets swept up by both secularists and spiritualists as an exemplar of Indian composite culture. In this chapter I show how Sufism is co-opted and rendered in this construction of ideal Indian religious subjecthood, and how this ideation pressures adherents of shrine-based Sufism to express their identity as Indian Muslims in very particular ways.

I encountered the notion of a religiously ambiguous (and therefore appropriately Indian) Muslim identity in various iterations throughout my fieldwork. The Mughal emperor Akbar and the poet-saint Kabir are perhaps the most visible of such tropes, and I therefore examine their use in greater detail in this chapter. These tropes are present in what I characterize as secularist narratives in both state- and non-state media. Such secularist narratives also appropriate Sufi saints and the sacred space of Sufi shrines into this imagining of acceptable manifestations of religiosity, and Sufism on the whole is portrayed as emblematic of India's culturally composite ideal. This chapter traces the emergence and context of such religious subjecthood and its points of manifestation in the popular Indian imagining.

I contend that while the position of shrine-based Sufism within this imagining appears to be favorable to adherents of shrine-based Sufism, it in fact imposes ways of being Muslim that are not entirely acceptable to adherents. This adds another point of pressure that shapes the narratives of adherents in their assertion of a Muslim identity.

## NON-BOUNDED RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AND THE “GOOD MUSLIM”

The framing of religious identity and religiosity has been a very important part of the construction of national subjecthood in modern India. A good way to gauge this interwoven relationship is by looking to state- and non-state media, which give us cues to the zeitgeist of contemporary India. The treatment of historic figures in state-produced media (such as state-run television channels, or state-produced school texts) and in non-state media (such as movies, commercial TV, and books of fiction and non-fiction) gives the observer an insight into the kinds of religiosity that are broadly considered as being congruent with an Indian national identity in the public imagination. These cues and clues are visible everywhere, and it is hard to ignore once you become aware of their forms.

I still remember distinctly a conversation I overheard in the eighth grade. Two of my friends were studying for their upcoming History and Islamic Studies exams. One of them seemed very confused about the two Mughal kings, Akbar and Aurangzeb. Her friend had this clarification for her: “Just remember: in history class, Akbar is good and Aurangzeb is bad. But in Islamic Studies class, Aurangzeb is good and Akbar is bad.” In retrospect, I wish had my little anthropologist’s notepad back then. But as it stands, this overheard snippet struck me even then as presenting two very different notions of a religio-political ideal. Why is it that these two remarkable emperors – Akbar and Aurangzeb – are framed in such contradictory ways? Akbar, so glorified in the secularist narratives of the government-generated history textbooks, and Aurangzeb made out to be such a villain in the same? What do these divergent narratives tell us about how the

“good Indian Muslim” is defined both by the state and in the popular imagination? And how can we understand the imagining of Sufism in India within this context?

The project of “national integration” embraced by the Indian nation-state after independence in 1947 has resulted in particular constructions of what a “good Indian Muslim” is. The bloody partition of India and the creation of Pakistan placed Muslims starkly as the Other within the Indian national imagining. If Pakistan was a nation created for South Asian Muslims, then how could Muslims who had remained in India be framed in ways that firmly established them as Indian?

Over the 65 years since independence, an image of what this “good Indian Muslim” looks like has emerged: an image of a fully “integrated” and “assimilated” Muslim who cannot be considered an outsider to the Indian nation. These terms are of course value-loaded, and connote the Indian nation as fundamentally Hindu in character. In this construction of Indianness, the onus of assimilation (regardless of Islam’s presence in, and impact on the Subcontinent for nearly a millennium) falls squarely on Muslims. Against this political and cultural backdrop, the character of the “syncretized” or religiously ambiguous Muslim emerges as the ideal of Muslim religious subjecthood. In fact, the religiously “syncretic” Muslim, who is constructed as truly Indian because of his/her lack of a bounded religious identity, becomes emblematic of inter-religious harmony in general. Before I explore this construction further, it is important to deconstruct Indian secularism and its predominant narratives.

An important part of the ideology of the Indian nation-state is its unique brand of secularism. Secularism in India is not defined negatively, but positively. That is, it is not defined as the *absence* of religion in the functioning of the state and the public sphere in general, nor as just the *absence* of discrimination on the basis of religion. The Hindi word for secularism is the Sanskritic construction, *dharmanirpekshata*, which literally means ‘lack of religion-based biases’. However, it is widely understood both by those in government and by governed citizens as an acknowledgment of, or an openness to, the *presence* of diverse religious representation in the public sphere. And in state- and non-state secularist narratives, it is often framed not merely as the acceptance of “religion” in the abstract sense of the term; within the context of Indian secularism, the understanding is that space in public discourse and in public action must be given to *religions*, as real, functioning entities, with their accompanying rituals, practices and beliefs<sup>30</sup>.

Freedom of religion is a right guaranteed to all citizen of India, but this freedom involves the incorporation of diverse religious practices and symbolism into the activities and rhetoric of public institutions, rather than through their exclusion. Thus, it is not uncommon for scientists at the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) to visit temples as a group prior to the launch of a satellite – visits that are often reported by the media. Similarly, hosting *iftar* parties to mark the breaking of the day’s fast is de rigueur for politicians and political parties throughout the month of Ramadan, and politicians

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<sup>30</sup>When I write of “religion” in the plural, it is of course with an acknowledgement that such a generalization comes with many problems. There are belief-systems in India that are not recognized as religions by the state. Many belief-systems and associated modes of living practiced by indigenous communities in India are either not granted official recognition, or are subsumed under the label of “Hindu”. While Buddhism and Jainism are recognized as separate religious groups by the state, this is mostly nominal, as members of these groups also often get lumped in with Hindus for most bureaucratic purposes (as in the case of the Hindu Marriage Act).

(Muslim and non-Muslim) will often pay visits to Sufi shrines before launching their electoral campaigns. It is in the same vein that one encounters religious symbolism in the form of portraits of Hindu deities, Oms, Swastikas, Nativity scenes and crucifixes, images of Mecca, Medina and Sufi shrines, calligraphic renditions of Quranic verses etc. in government offices, put up there by employees.

Those who object to such overt inclusions of religion in the public space are few, and I have found that any objection is often frowned upon as a mark of being “un-secular” in the public arena. So what does it mean to be secular in India? And this is a pertinent question especially for public figures and institutions active in politics and media. As is clear from the above discussion, to be secular in India does not mean being a-religious in one’s public dealings, and institutions do not have to be overtly disconnected from expressions of religiosity in order to be secular . To be secular in this sense is to positively re-affirm religio-cultural diversity; to display tolerance and an acceptance of different faith-systems.<sup>31</sup>

Key phrases that usually occur in conjunction with the term ‘secular’ in public discourse are ‘communal harmony’, ‘national integration’, and ‘unity in diversity’. The first phrase is used to indicate the amicable co-existence of Indian citizens who may be members of different faith-systems. The latter two terms indicate an emphasis on the unity of India as a nation despite the huge variety of life-ways found within its territorial boundaries. Thus, the implications of being non-secular within this context are grave, as it implies the disruption of peace among India’s citizenry, and risks the disintegration of the state.

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<sup>31</sup>I deliberately use the word ‘display’ here. It often seems in India, that whatever your personal motivations and inclinations may be, an outward show of such inclusiveness is a must.

To emphasize this brand of secularism, I use the term ‘multiculturalist secularism’ to refer specifically to the Indian context, as this term points to the inclusionary aspects of secularism’s Indian manifestation. It points to the idea that secularism in this avatar emerges in the Indian public discourse as the glue that binds the diverse peoples of India.

This definition of secularism ties in with the positive connotation of the term ‘syncretic’ in India, as it too refers to the layering of multiple identities. Many Indian scholars and intellectuals use ‘syncretism’ to mean the successful blending and layering of a multiplicity of socio-cultural and especially religious identities (T. Stewart and C. Ernst 2003). Indian intellectuals see ‘syncretism’ as a phenomenon that aids in India’s goal of maintaining ‘national integration’ and ‘unity in diversity’.

The Indian state has routinely broadcast messages promoting national integration for decades now, largely through state-controlled media such as the state-run television channel Doordarshan, and through state-published civics, social science, and history textbooks. State-sponsored public service messages have been produced by state-institutions such as the Lok Seva Sanchar Parishad (Council for Public Service Communication), Films Division, and the National Council of Educational Research and Training, and are aired on Doordarshan or printed in school texts and advertising. These have been especially successful in disseminating notions of how the diverse Indian nation is imagined as a cohesive unit through the popularization of slogans such as ‘Unity in Diversity’ (*anekta main ekta*), and ‘Unity in Integrity’ (*akhandta main ekta*).

One of the most iconic of these messages is the song and accompanying video “In Harmony” (*Ek Sur*) (1988). In this piece, prominent movie stars, sports persons and

artists, along with common folk from India's rural and indigenous communities, sing the words, "My melody joins with yours, and so we create our harmony" (*mile sur mera tumhara, to sur bane hamara*) in many of the official languages of India. An earlier Doordarshan channel film produced by Films Division titled, "One, Many, and Unity" (*Ek, Anek, aur Ekta*) (1980) is a charming animated short that depicts a group of young children learning the lesson of strength in both unity and diversity from an older girl. Animated against whimsical and colorful backdrops, all the children are uncolored line-drawings. In the end, the children are colored-in as a chorus of children's voices sings "The citizens of India are one people, though they may be diverse in color, appearance, clothing and language" (*hind desh ke nivasi sabhi jan ek hain, rang-rup vesh-bhasha chahe anek hain*).

Most of these public service messages do not explicitly address the issue of religious identity and religious difference, but there is a subtext on religion that is evident in most of them. These messages rarely ever depict overtly religious figures or symbols such as people praying, or even celebrating religious festivals. At the most, these state-produced national integration messages feature characters who are dressed in a way (usually stereotypical) that marks them as belonging to a particular religious minority (a turbaned Sikh man, a bearded Muslim with a skull cap, a priest in a white cassock, or a Buddhist monk). But these characters do not figure prominently, or make a show of their religious identity; their presence can be seen as only a token acknowledgement of religious diversity in India.

What is so striking, however, is this very lack of prominence given to overt religiosity in a country that is otherwise brimming over with religious expression. As I

watched these videos I began to realize that these state-produced national integration shorts and advertisements placed Culture front and center. That is, they showcased Indian art, architecture, music, dance, sport, and India's linguistic diversity. In this secularist imagining of India's diversity, however, religion decidedly takes a backseat as an acceptable marker of an Indian citizen's identity. Religion finds a place in this imagining of India only in so much as it contributes to the variegated cultural landscape of the nation. Where aspects of religious difference threaten to mar this portrait of national unity, they are ignored.

The kind of religious subjectivity that becomes evident in this mode of imagining India is one where notions of commonality are promoted over any iteration of fundamental difference. The idea is that though the garb of religious scripture and ritual is different, 1) these differences are only superficial, and the core values of all religions are the same, and 2) those who practice these different religions are united in their common "Indian culture", which is their primary identity. These two tenets of commonality are what Indian secularists and state and non-state secularist messages transmit.

Nowhere did I find this mode of religious subjectivity more explicitly conveyed than in the northern Indian state of Himachal Pradesh. It's a commonly heard aphorism in India that the only way to see India is by train. This certainly occurred to me as I travelled on the historic train-route from Kalka in the Gangetic plains to the small town of Shimla in the foothills of the Himalayas. Throughout the journey, I was mesmerized by public service messages that had been posted on the walls that hugged the mountainside along the tracks. These were official signs posted by the railway



authorities of Himachal Pradesh. There were a limited number of messages in both Hindi and English that cycled through, and there were two that were most striking.

One was a famous quote of Mahatma Gandhi: “The Allah of Islam is the same as the God of Christians and the Iswar of Hindus.” The other was a couplet by the medieval Indian poet-saint, Kabir:

*pothi padh padh jag mua pandit bhaya na koye  
dhai akhar prem ka padhe so pandit hoe<sup>32</sup>*

You may read a thousand tomes; you leave this world no wiser;  
But understand the four letters of 'love', and then you are wise indeed.

The impetus to find commonality among all religions is clear in the former message.

And being a quote from a 20<sup>th</sup> century Indian leader so closely associated with the formation of the Indian nation, it is well-situated in the context of Indian nation-building.

The medieval couplet, however, requires some parsing.

The medieval poet-saint Kabir is regarded as one of the foremost figures in what is commonly referred to as the ‘Bhakti Movement’ in India (*bhakti* means ‘devotion’) that spread in waves throughout the subcontinent from the 14<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. I will examine the figure of Kabir more closely later in this chapter, but to understand the significance of this couplet it is important to know that one of the hallmarks of Kabir’s poetic and philosophical tradition is his staunch rejection of the religious authority vested in texts and the clergy. His deep suspicion of textually and ritually-based religion cuts across religious lines; he was equally irreverent towards the Muslim preacher in his Friday pulpit and the Brahmin in saffron robes. Kabir’s notion of God was not merely monotheistic, but non-dualist and wholly unconnected to all overt religious trappings. To

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<sup>32</sup> पोथी पढ़ पढ़ जग मुआ पंडित भाया न कोय / ढाई आखर प्रेम का पढ़े सो पंडित होए

him, knowledge (and love) of God was to be found within the believer (within any believer), and not in the texts or rituals of the tradition he is born into.

Now going back to the couplet:

You may read a thousand tomes; you leave this world no wiser;  
But understand the four letters of 'love', and then you are wise indeed.

The term *pothi* that Kabir uses quite literally means ‘tome’ or ‘book’, but Kabir often uses it to refer specifically to religious texts and scripture. The couplet then is not a rejection of the written word, but a rejection of the infallibility of religious textual authority, be it the Quran, or the Geeta. Thus understood, it is clear how this couplet could be seen as being very much in tune with the Gandhian notion that differentiated religious nomenclature does not reflect the Truth, which he sees as fundamentally unified. It is not hard to see that these “public service messages” are not as extraordinary as they appear *prima facie*. Understood in a particular way, they are congruent with the idea that if religious differences are only superficial, religious differences need not be emphasized and promoted (and perhaps ought not to be) as an acceptable form of national cultural diversity.

It is important to note that these public service films and messages I have discussed above and others like them cannot be considered merely propaganda pieces produced by the state and its bureaucratic apparatuses. They have now attained iconic status in India, becoming cultural reference points for citizens across generations. The slogans and messages broadcast through these media have permeated into the “national ethos” of India, so to speak, and have become an integral mode through which many Indian citizens imagine the Indian nation.

As I began fieldwork in India, I approached concepts such as “national integration” and “unity in diversity” with some skepticism. I had grown up with these messages, but thinking about their place in the Indian imagination, I wondered if they were now not merely glib slogans churned out by the state’s efficient (and quite creative) propaganda mill. I presumed that they were far removed from the ways in which most Indians, plagued by basic concerns over food and livelihood, perceived India. It didn’t take long, however, for my cynicism to give way to a more complex understanding of the place that these concepts occupy in the imaginary of the average citizen. I found that the various defining concepts of Indian multiculturalist secularism, such as diversity (*vibhinnata, anekta*), oneness or unity (*ekta*), and integrity (*akhandta*) are the primary mode in which most Indians I encountered (across class, caste and religious affiliation) imagine the *ideal* of India.<sup>33</sup> The realities of daily life in India are painfully obvious to the average Indian citizen, but the Platonic ideal of India is certainly inflected by notions of communal harmony, inter-religious concord and the successful unification of a vivid and variegated citizenry<sup>34</sup>. Indian popular media for the most part have also embraced this rhetoric. Much of Indian popular cinema, news media, and India’s social and

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<sup>33</sup>It is important to note, however, that I rarely encountered anyone who credited the state with contributing to the achievement of this ideal. Though my interlocutors often echoed terms used in state-produced messages, they rarely identified the state as being the source of this ideology or rhetoric.

<sup>34</sup>A film was produced in the time that I was in India titled, “The Unheard Voices of India”. This film was the brainchild of director and author, Saeed Mirza. Soon after the unspeakable violence of Godra, a town in Gujarat where Hindutva mobs systematically butchered hundreds of Muslims, director Saeed Mirza found himself disenchanted and devastated. One of the many who had believed in the ideal of a multiculturalist secular India, Mirza undertook a journey across the country, speaking to Indians from an impressively wide array of socio-economic backgrounds about what they thought India was all about. The film documents this journey, and the people that Mirza encountered in his travels. What is most striking about this film is that people across India, regardless of religion, caste, economic class or level of education, articulated a belief in the viability of a multi-religious, multi-lingual and multi-ethnic India. In a brief presentation preceding a showing of this film, Mirza stressed that these responses were entirely unprompted; asked an open ended question about what they envisioned the promise of India to be, most of his interlocutors expressed their hopes in the language of multiculturalist secularism.

intellectual elite have been staunchly enthusiastic in their support of this multiculturalist agenda.

Accompanying this imagining of the ideal Indian nation is, of course, the construction of the ideal Indian citizen. And as has been discussed above, this ideal citizen may embody any number of India's innumerable lifeways, but rarely one that embodies a bounded or linear religious identity.

#### CONSTRUCTING INDIAN MUSLIM SUBJECTHOOD

The corollary to the negative valencing of a bounded religious identity is the positive valuation accorded to religious identity that is ambiguous, or assimilative. As discussed above, the term 'syncretic' is often used to characterize such religious identities or traditions in India, and does not carry much of the negative baggage associated with it in Euro-American academic discourse.

This favorable view of religious identities with fuzzy boundaries in secular forums is apparent to anyone who follows reporting in any of the major Indian dailies, or the news and feature reporting on any of the innumerable television channels broadcast throughout India. During the Hindu festival of Dussehra, for instance, there were innumerable feature articles about artisan families who, for generations, had been making the giant wicker effigies of the demon Ravana, which are ritually set ablaze during this festival. Over and over again, these reports highlighted the fact that these families were Muslim, yet engaged with great pride in the ritual and celebration of a Hindu festival.

As ubiquitous as such narratives that positively value assimilative or ambiguous religious identity are, just how much they inform perceptions of religious difference and

identity was brought home to me only many months after my arrival in the field. I had been invited to the home of the chief custodian of the Khaja Bandanawaz shrine in Gulbarga at the time that the Sufi saint's death-anniversary was being marked. I sat on cushioned mats on the floor of this beautiful 14<sup>th</sup> century house with the women of the household (the chief custodian's wife, his sister, his sister-in law and others) as hot breads, meats and curries were brought out fresh from the kitchen. Also present was a young woman, Manmeet Kaur, who had come to interview as a candidate for a teaching position in one of the colleges run by the shrine's Education Society.

As we sat around talking, the conversation drifted to the ongoing rituals and festivities that marked the saint's death anniversary at the shrine (a very important occasion in the calendar of any Sufi shrine). Speaking to Rabia, one of the women of the household, Ms. Kaur (a Sikh) expressed her pleasure in being able to visit the city and the shrine on this auspicious occasion, and having thus had the opportunity to learn about a religious community that she did not know very much about. She said that one gets a skewed image of Muslims in the media. She continued to say that it was refreshing to be able to interact with Muslims more intimately, and to find out more about Islam. Rabia nodded in response and reflected on her own childhood, growing up in a cosmopolitan environment. "You know", she said, "my family was not very religious. And I grew up in a very secular and multicultural environment. When I was young, most of my friends were not Muslim." And then, frowning slightly, and with a thoughtful look in her eyes, Rabia acknowledged, "So, when I was growing up, I myself did not know what Islam was, and what it really was to be a Muslim." And in a moment of sheer dissonance, Ms. Kaur enthusiastically responded to Rabia's solemn admission: "Yes! Yes! That's very

good!” What, to Rabia, was a lacuna in self-knowledge, was, in Ms. Kaur’s estimation, a positive expression of religious identity. Rabia’s lack of a conscious and strongly affirmed religious identity struck Ms. Kaur as an asset rather than as a liability.

This brings me back to the proposition I made at the outset of this chapter: that in India, the “good Indian Muslim” is one who has a fuzzy notion of his/her religious identity. Throughout my explorations of Indian multiculturalist secularism I found that the use of the term ‘syncretic’, more often than not, is applied to Muslims whose religious identity leaves room for ambiguity. I found that the Islamic influences on Hindu practice, belief and custom are rarely identified as ‘syncretic’. The positive perception of a ‘syncretic’ form of Indian Islam does not seem to translate into similar epithets for Hindu life-ways that have also been shaped by Islam. Popular nationalistic rhetoric often speaks of how India has always absorbed its “invading” hordes, and has in turn transformed those who sought to conquer it. Though the transformative powers of conquest and migration are acknowledged as being mutual, what is usually highlighted in this particular strand of rhetoric is how those who have come to India have become “Indianized.” It is as though there is some default ‘Indianness’ that is then transferred to the outsider who ventures in. That this notion of ‘Indianness’ is itself a product of millennia of cultural layering and amalgamation is part of India’s secularist amnesia.

The invading hordes usually conjured up (by both Hindu and secular nationalists) are Muslim. Nadir Shah, Mahmud Ghaznavi and Muhammed Ghouri are famously reviled figures from India’s past, painting a picture of rape and pillage across the Gangetic plains of North India. Against this backdrop, figures like the Mughal Emperor Akbar, the medieval poet-saint Kabir, and Sufis are portrayed as notable exceptions to an

otherwise uniformly violent Islamic legacy. Secularist narratives frame them as syncretic or assimilative, and stories of their lives and legacies emphasize their incorporation of “indigenous” Indian beliefs and life-ways. I place the term ‘indigenous’ in quotes because the logic of such a narrative makes sense only if Islam (as opposed to Hinduism) is placed as perpetual outsider to the nation; where Muslims can be regarded as Indian only if they adopt aspects of Hindu life-ways. Such reasoning is especially problematic if we consider that contemporary Hinduism is itself ‘Islamized’ (and even ‘Christianized’) in so many ways.

To highlight this bias, I will analyze media portrayals of Akbar and Dara Shikoh, and Kabir in the following pages. I have chosen to pay special attention to the portrayal of these figures in the popular media as opposed to the academic historiography, because I feel that these are more widely accessible and accessed by the Indian public; this makes them better reflections of the Indian secularist zeitgeist. Also, I analyze these historical figures rather than contemporary ones because I feel that in looking at how India’s past is constructed in contemporary India provides us with an insight into how historical narratives are colored and molded to fit the narratives of present. To quote Carl Ernst (2004), “The main distorting presupposition in Indian historical thinking today reads the medieval past in terms of modern religious nationalism” (p. 19). I would add here, that this notion of “religious nationalism” extends to secularist understandings of Indian religiosity as well.

I conclude this section with an analysis of how shrine-based Sufism is co-opted into these secularist narratives. These figures and institutions have become the poster-children of the secularist media in India (sate- and non-state). The ways in which they

are represented by state- and non-state media will shed light on the favored modes of religious subjectivity in India today.

#### IMAGINING AKBAR AND DARA SHIKOH

The Hindi-language film *Jodhaa-Akbar* (2008) features this intriguing scene: The young emperor Akbar sits in his open court. An argument has been ensuing about treaties Akbar has negotiated with the Rajputs, the recalcitrant princes on the fringes of the growing Mughal Empire. In the midst of the debate, one of the three Muslim clerics present at the court objects to Akbar's recent marriage to the Hindu Rajput princess, Jodhaa. The cleric, dressed in black and grey, with a chest-long, severe, white beard and a high Persianesque turban, finds the match distasteful and an insult to Islamic custom. Akbar responds by saying that he has entered into the union having taken the interests of the state into consideration. The three clerics then insist that the Hindu princess not be given access to most of the living quarters and that no Islamic law be changed on her account. The clerics are interrupted in their tirade by the distant voice of the princess Jodhaa herself, who is heard singing a devotional song for the Hindu god, Krishna. Akbar, seemingly mesmerized, rises and leaves the court in the direction of the singing. The court is dismissed, leaving the clerics rather stunned. The film is replete with such images, where bellicose Muslim hardliners are present in stark contrast to Akbar's open tolerance and proclivity for inter-religious melding.

Most renditions of Akbar in popular culture also highlight his deep attachment to Chishti Sufism. This connection is an important one as shrine-based Sufism is also often placed in the same category as Akbar in the national secularist rhetoric in India. Other aspects of Akbar's policies that are highlighted are his removal of the *jiziya* (a state tax



on non-Muslims in lieu of military service), his inclusion of Hindu noblemen and artists in his court (including his storied prime minister, Birbal), and his creation of the iconoclastic religion, *din-e ilahi*.

All of these snippets of policy and personality are found not only in the massively popular genre of Bollywood cinema, but are also common in children's literature, and in school history texts and other biographical writings on Akbar. Akbar continues to persist in the modern secularist imagination, the scholarship discrediting certain claims made in these media notwithstanding. Scholars (Nizami 1989; Ali 1992; Khan 1992) have pointed out, for instance, that Akbar was not quite the tolerant and open-minded man in his youth as he was in his later days. And certain aspects of his reign may be more apocryphal than based on evidence. Akbar's religious convictions also developed over a considerable period of time. As a youth, Akbar was drawn to religious orthodoxy and narrow interpretations of Sunni religious practice and belief. It was only as a middle-aged man that doubts about a singular path to Truth began to trouble Akbar. Also important is that while Akbar in his later years did encourage inter-religious debate at his court and became more open to vastly new ideas of faith and worship, he did not perceive himself as merely a student of these multiple schools of thought. Nizami writes that by around 1581, Akbar may have begun to think of himself as a religious leader and teacher in his own right (p. 130). Akbar's creation of the *din-e ilahi*, a new religion that combined tenets of many different religions created dilemmas among his courtiers over how to respond to what would have certainly been a heretical move from most perspectives. His taking on of a prophet-like status could thus be seen as more of a divisive rather than a uniting force. Additionally, the scholars have suggested that

Akbar's control of the Muslim clergy was more the result of his desire to control various factions in his court, and to restrain rival power-holders in state affairs. That is to say, Akbar's motives in his engagement with various religions and religious figures were complex, and his stances were problematic to many of his contemporaries. This scholarship notwithstanding, the public imagining of Akbar is hardly nuanced.

The picture that emerges in the popular imagining of Akbar is one of a benevolent, secularist emperor who snubbed the orthodox clergy (who are presented as narrow-minded), and united his religiously diverse empire under a banner of tolerance and multiculturalism. For instance, Akbar's control over the Muslim clergy is presented not as political expediency in these media, but as a sign of his dismissal of Islamic textual orthodoxy. Cartoons and comic books that recount the legendary escapades of Akbar and his witty minister, Birbal, also often present the Muslim clergy as calculating and intolerant characters, a suitable foil for the character of the all-embracing and magnanimous Akbar.

The clearest and broadest manifestation of the state's contribution to this narrative can be found in social science and history textbooks. Most schools in India follow syllabi set by the central or state governments and use state-prescribed text-books put together by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT). These resources too present Akbar as the "good Muslim" battling, and finally overcoming negative Islamic influences in his court. Here, for instance, is an excerpt from the current class VII history textbook, *Our Pasts – II* :

(Akbar) was interested in the religion and social customs of different people. It made him realise that religious scholars who emphasised ritual and dogma were

often bigots. Their teachings created divisions and disharmony amongst his subjects. This eventually led Akbar to the idea of *sulh-i kull* or “universal peace”. This idea of tolerance did not discriminate between people of different religions in his realm. Instead it focused on a system of ethics – honesty, justice, peace – that was universally applicable. [*sic*] [pp. 54-55]

This excerpt is striking in the normative nature of the claims made, but also in the very objective manner in which these normative claims are presented.

The historical figure who is most contrasted to Akbar (in both these state-produced texts and in the popular non-state media) is Aurangzeb. Also a Mughal king, he was Akbar’s great-grandson, and last of the stronger Mughal rulers. In comparison to the eulogizing on Akbar’s policies, the above-quoted history text book finds little of redeeming quality in Aurangzeb’s reign. In these texts and other media, Aurangzeb, the sixth and last of the great Mughals is cast as a villainous and intolerant figure. Much is made of his campaigns against unruly warlords and the defiant Sikh and Maratha kingdoms. Even though Akbar has perhaps an equally bloody record of suppressing rebellion (Lehman, n. d.). I have recounted early in this chapter the disparate treatment of these two figures in school history texts and in Islamic studies lessons.

Also revealing is the contrast made between Aurangzeb and his elder brother, Dara Shikoh. Dara Shikoh was the heir apparent to the throne, but was ousted and assassinated by his younger brother, Aurangzeb, in his bid for imperial authority. There is consensus in the historiography that Dara Shikoh was of a more mystical and philosophical bent of mind than his younger brother. As part of his spiritual pursuits, Dara Shikoh acquainted himself with various Hindu philosophical texts, such as the Upanishads, and was in dialogue with both Sufi and Hindu spiritual figures and scholars (Srivastava 1998, Schimmel n. d.).

This is usually presented in stark contrast to the more dogmatic piety of Aurangzeb. What is important here is not so much the fact that the brothers differed in temperament, but that Dara Shikoh is presented as an ideal in state- and non-state media, whereas Aurangzeb is wholly vilified in the popular secularist imagining. To quote that eternal source of “common” wisdom, Wikipedia: “Dara devoted much effort towards finding a common mystical language between Islam and Hinduism”. And it is this penchant that places Dara Shikoh squarely within the mode of acceptable Islamic behavior in the secular and multiculturalist rhetoric in India today. An article in the Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society that discusses these two figures shows how these roles are reversed in the prevailing rhetoric across the border. Writes the author of this article:

It will be observed that the day religion relaxed its hold on man, the animal urge got hold of him and the society started decaying. (Aurangzeb) tried his best to bring his people to the right path but could not achieve much success for the moral canker had gone deep. [p. 294]

In contrast, Aurangzeb’s name is often used as an insult in India; someone who dislikes music and dance, or is perceived as being excessively puritanical is derisively called an ‘Aurangzeb’!<sup>35</sup>

#### CONJURING KABIR

Another figure who is usually held up as the ideal of Indian Muslim subjectivity is the poet-saint Kabir. Unlike Akbar, who had the weighty bureaucracy of an empire

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<sup>35</sup>But of course, this is not to generalize that these figures are universally idolized and vilified on either side of the border. As is indicative in the conversation about Akbar and Aurangzeb that I recounted at the beginning of the chapter, there are competing discourses within India regarding these historical figures. However, the *prevailing* narrative in India, as seen in state-generated rhetoric and in the multiculturalist and secularist rhetoric of non-state media, favors figures who can be framed in narratives of pluralism and religious assimilation.

taking note of his acts, Kabir came from an impoverished background. There is, therefore, little in terms of concrete data about his life. What we have are hagiographies by his disciples and his verses. Most of what is transmitted about Kabir's life is largely apocryphal and more lore than history. There is consensus in the scholarship that Kabir was an orphan raised by a family of Muslim weavers some time during the reign of Sikander Lodi in the late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> centuries (Lorenzen 1991; Sethi 1984; Hedayetullah 1977). In his writings, Kabir openly and harshly rejects both formal Hinduism and formal Islam, but found adherents from both these communities. The agreement ends here. The lacuna left by reliable historical scholarship is however amply filled by legends that detail Kabir's life.

The lore surrounding Kabir in popular culture, however, continues to be contested and is deeply tied in with the politics of religious identity in the Subcontinent. Whether Kabir was *actually* a Hindu or a Muslim seems to have occupied the minds of many very soon after his demise. As Sethi writes,

The Kabir-panthis, in the absence of an adept spiritual guide, became more Vaishnavite in outlook and tried to bring their preceptor into the Brahminical fold. By the advent of the eighteenth century, new themes had been added to the life of Kabir... Thus according to some, Kabir was the son of a Brahmin woman. [p. 5]

Questions have also been raised about the religious affiliations of Kabir's religious teachers. Some traditions suggest that the saint Ramanand of Banaras was his *guru*, while others point to Sheikh Taqi of Sufi persuasions.

This lore of religious ambiguity is also evident in the most widely held story of Kabir's death. The tale is told that on Kabir's death a heated feud broke out between his Hindu and Muslim followers. Both groups wished to accord Kabir the funerary rites of

their particular religious practice. In the midst of this conflict, the devotees realized that Kabir's body had been transformed into a heap of flowers. These flowers were then divided among the followers, who then accorded their share with the rite they deemed fitting.

The modern, secularist spin on this tale can be found in Sethi's biography of Kabir:

Silenced, the two groups divided the flowers between them... The haze of ritualism, which for a while had blurred their vision, lifted, and the disciples felt ashamed, realizing that even in his death Kabir had vindicated the futility of such formal beliefs. [p. 42]

In the story, as it is told by most, the devotees did not, even till the end, let go of what they considered appropriate ritual practice (which Kabir's poetry so pointedly derides). The replacement of Kabir's body with flowers merely allowed for the dispute at hand to be resolved. However, the secularist narrative, as is seen in Sethi's rendering of the tale, usually highlights an ambiguous religious subjectivity that is neither here nor there. In many ways this narrative is a metaphor for Indian multiculturalist secularism; where the solution to the complexities of a diverse citizenry is to find a middle-ground where all can claim ownership to and share in some usually undefined notion of the Truth. As with figures like Akbar and Dara Shikoh, this spin on the narrative can be seen in government-issued history texts as well. This is what a state-produced grade XII History textbook has to say about Kabir:

Diverse and sometimes conflicting ideas are expressed in [Kabir's] poems. Some poems draw on Islamic ideas and use monotheism and iconoclasm to attack Hindu polytheism and idol worship; others use the Sufi concept of *zikr* and *ishq* (love) to express the Hindu practice of *nam-simaran* (remembrance of God's name)... What this rich corpus also signifies is that Kabir was and is to the present

a source of inspiration for those who questioned entrenched religious and social institutions, ideas and practices in their search for the Divine. [p. 162]

What is highlighted here is that Kabir drew from various religious traditions. That he rejects textual and bounded modes of religiosity is also presented in a very positive light. The highly normative nature of this passage is also quite representative of the secularist narratives in state-produced media. This passage also provides a great example of the ways in which multiple religious strands are woven together in these secularist narratives: Kabir's rejection of institutionalized religion, Sufism, and Hinduism.

There are other religious figures and mystics who, like Kabir, have emerged as seminal figures in defining an ideal of religious subjectivity in India. Sai Baba and Guru Nanak are two who are perhaps most similar to Kabir in their treatment in secularist narratives. There are other less widely known figures, such as Shishunala Sharif Sahib in Karnataka, who embody the kind of religious ambiguity and "syncretism" that have been highlighted in the examples provided thus far.

While the poetry of Kabir has been part of the folk song traditions of many communities in rural India, the past decade has seen a resurgence of interest in Kabir among the intellectual elites in urban centers. While I was in India for my fieldwork, a massive project (funded by the Ford Foundation), titled simply 'The Kabir Project' was unveiled in New Delhi. This project included four full-length documentary films based on the life and poetry of Kabir, a series of audio CDs of the folk singers featured in the films, and a set of beautifully rendered books with the poetry of Kabir in the original and in translation. The films, launched all over India, in turn spawned many exhibitions and concerts centered on the life and works of Kabir.

This burgeoning interest in Kabir's poetry among India's urban elites (especially among India's youth) has been accompanied by a similar growth in interest in Sufism and Sufi poetry among this demographic.

## THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE SYNCRETIC SUFI

In the preceding pages I have outlined how certain Muslim political and religious figures are framed as being "syncretic" and religiously ambiguous, and therefore as ideals in the secularist narratives in India. Tied into these constructions of ambiguous (and therefore desirable) Muslim religiosity is shrine-based Sufism. It is significant that political figures such as Akbar and Dara Shikoh, and religious personalities like Kabir and Sai Baba are linked in the historiography by their association with Sufi Islam.

In histories of South Asian Sufism, Sufi saints and masters are co-opted into the notion of the syncretic Muslim and Sufi shrines become loci of inter-religious dialogue and exchange (Saiyed 1989, Siddiqi 1989). Shrine-based Sufism, especially Chishti Sufism, is characterized as having an ecumenical bent. In these secularist narratives, the inclusion of Hindu imagery (such as motifs of Radha and Krishna) in Sufi poetry, the inclusion of many Indic ritual motifs at Sufi shrines, and the non-Muslim following of these saints are pointed to as supporting evidence. In contrast to this positive presentation of Sufi shrines, reformist Islam is usually presented more negatively (Gaborieau 1989, Baljon 1989) and early Muslim reformist figures such as Shah Waliullah and Sayyed Ahmed Barelwi are presented as anti-shrine and also as incongruent with Indian multiculturalist secularism.



This formulation is evident in media that is produced by both private and state sources. In all of these cases, Sufism is upheld as the emblem of Hindu-Muslim unity in India. This rhetoric often emerges in the context of certain rituals of the Sufi shrines or certain shrine events. Attending major shrine events is par for course for members of the political elite, and at the start of political campaigns. But particular events in the calendar of prominent shrines get held up as representative of the ecumenical nature of Sufi practice and belief.

Two such events of note are the Procession of Flower-Sellers (*phool valon ki sair*) in Delhi associated with the Sufi saint Shaikh Bakhtiyar Kaki, and the Spring (*basant*) festival that is associated with the shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin. Both events draw considerable public attention, and are often reported on widely in all news media. The Procession of Flower-Sellers is what it states: the flower-sellers in question wind their way through the Mahrauli district of New Delhi. Important to this event is that the flower-sellers stop at both the Hindu temple of the Goddess Jagmaya and at the shrine of the prominent Sufi saint, Khaja Bakhtiyar Kaki. The procession is led by *shahnai*<sup>36</sup> players, and the event draws devotees to both the temple and the Sufi shrine. This event has grown in grandeur over the decades. The start and finish, and each stop, is well attended by dignitaries and political figures. Presidents, Vice-presidents, Prime Ministers, and Governors have often attended this event, which always includes a special program where these figures speak on the symbolism and the importance of this event to the cause of inter-religious harmony.

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<sup>36</sup>The *shahnai* is a long reed instrument played in North India. It is an instrument that is commonly played at wedding ceremonies, both among Hindus and Muslims, and is thus strongly associated with festivities.

The Spring festival as celebrated at the shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin certainly grabbed my interest as an ethnographer much more. This celebration is one that comes with a story. Knowing the story behind this annual ritual is important to understanding the ways in which it is marked at the shrine. The legend goes that the saint Hazrat Nizamuddin's favorite nephew, Taquiuddin Nooh, had died. The saint had been mourning this loss deeply, and had become reclusive. He had shut himself away, had not spoken to anyone, and no one had seen him smile for months. This had distressed all his followers, but especially his ardent disciple, the poet Amir Khusro. One day in spring, Amir Khusro saw a group of women dressed in yellow, carrying yellow flowers, making their way to the temple. He asked them what was going on, and they told him that they were dressed in the colors of spring and were going to make offerings of flowers to mark the arrival of spring. This caught the fancy of Amir Khusro; he wished to make a similar offering to his Master, Hazrat Nizamuddin. He dressed himself like the women – in yellow robes, decked in jewelry, and carrying mustard flowers – and proceeded to his Master's hospice (*khanqah*). On seeing Amir Khusro dressed in such an outlandish fashion, singing songs to the spring, Hazrat Nizamuddin could not help but smile – the first in many months. Since then, the spring or *basant* festival has been marked with great ceremony at the shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin.

Traditionally, *basant* at the shrine of Nizamuddin Auliya is marked by a procession of the resident Sufi singers (*qawwal*). They wear turbans and stoles dyed yellow for the occasion, they carry freshly gathered bunches of yellow mustard flowers, and walk slowly into the shrine singing centuries-old songs about the Spring season

written by Amir Khusro. The hereditary caretakers of the shrine too, adorn themselves in yellow turbans and sashes and make offerings of yellow flowers to the saint.

When I visited the shrine of Nizamuddin Auliya that day in February, this is what I awaited as I sat in the courtyard of the shrine. And as expected, the hereditary caretakers began to appear, wearing yellow and distributing sashes the color of spring to shrine visitors. The singers eventually made their entrance, sporting their mustard flowers and singing their songs to the saint.

Soon, though, another large group of celebrants flooded the shrine. They were also dressed for the occasion, carrying baskets of yellow and orange marigolds. They were welcomed into the shrine by the caretakers, and distributed marigolds to all at the shrine. I learnt that this second group had walked from a local park a few kilometers away, as they do annually during *basant*. Leading this group was Ashutosh Krishan, a contemporary Indian artist and collector. He was dressed in saffron and yellow robes; he wore earring, bangles, and anklets, and his troupe certainly brought an added flamboyance to the spring festival at Hazrat Nizamuddin. What was traditionally a celebration performed by the resident singers and caretakers of the shrine, was now being co-opted and embellished by a group entirely unrelated to the shrine in any historical or ritual sense. They brought their own visual and semantic interpretation of this Sufi tradition with them, and in the process transformed the sacred space of the Sufi shrine.

The procession of the shrine's ritual musicians is a re-enactment ritual that commemorates the devotion of Amir Khusro to his Master, and has ritual significance to adherents of shrine-based Sufism as a marker of a significant event in the life of the saint

and his devoted disciple. The new group of people who walk to Nizamuddin every spring seeks to recreate this event, but in its own fashion. Krishan often leads this group dressed as he imagines Amir Khusro to have dressed: in gender-bending clothing, and arriving with much flamboyance. To Ashutosh Krishan and his group, though, this is not an act of pure ritual reenactment. To them, the celebration of this primarily Hindu festival at the mausoleum of a Muslim saint carries with it messages of inter-religious harmony and cultural melding. The event calendar on Krishan's website boasts of the spring celebration at the Nizamuddin shrine thus: "From the burst of the first yellow and mustard at Basant Panchami (the Spring festival), a syncretic celebration with Khwaja Nizamuddin and (the Hindu goddess) Saraswati."

Krishan's spring entourage at the shrine of Nizamuddin, an annual event, has now become part of a larger multi-media performance-art project called *The Genda Phool Project*, or Project Marigold. The website for this project has this explanation:

The marigold is widely considered an "Indian flower" and is grown and used extensively in India, but it is native of Mexico, and came to India only about 500 years ago with the Portuguese, thus challenging assumptions of what is "Indian" and thus becoming the flower of exchange and universal syncreticism. Genda hence is a marker for, all at once – love, brotherhood, internationalism and positive energies. We have chosen such a flower to celebrate, it is such a universe that we want to lose ourselves in...

In this context, the space of the Sufi shrine, co-opted into this larger project, then begins to mean so much more to Ashutosh Krishan and his group. I corresponded with Krishan over email, and was able to ask him about his goals and inspirations for the spring walk to the Sufi shrine. He said,

We [who are involved in the *genda phool* project] celebrate festivals and try to revive natural, organic ways of celebrating seasons and festivals, so it was part of that larger effort. Normally we have a Basant Panchami [the Hindu spring

festival] celebration but a few years ago we also started celebrating Sufi Basant with this walk... [The motivation behind this event is] to celebrate Basant! And to take more and more people to the blessed house of Khwaja ji [Hazrat Nizamuddin] on this very special day, that somehow has now just become a denominational ritual but holds great significance for all *mureeds* [disciples] of Baba [Hazrat Nizamuddin] and Khusrau... [The people at the Sufi shrine] have always been welcoming, and I am friends with the people at the *dargah* [shrine], so we normally plan the walks and visits in close collaboration with them... I feel blessed every time I go to the [shrine], and it seems that Khwaja ji [Hazrat Nizamuddin] is watching over us like a benevolent, intimate friend. Also, in Delhi, where there are no old temples, I feel this is one of the places that is really charged with spiritual energy, and surely one of my most loved spots in Delhi.

It is apparent that the shrine of Nizamuddin Auliya is loaded with meaning for Krishan.

And it is a feeling not limited to him. Over the past decade, Sufism and the sacred spaces of Sufi shrines have begun to symbolize a notion of “universal syncretism”, to use Krishan’s words.

Sufism also gets brought up at secular events outside of the shrine’s environs in high frequency. While in India, I visited Aligarh, a small town in a few hours South of Delhi, along with a study abroad group from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. While there, we had the good fortune of attending the graduation ceremony of the Aligarh Muslim University<sup>37</sup>. The guests at this event were the Oscar-winning composer, A. R. Rahman, and the Urdu author, Dr. Gopichand Narang; they were both conferred honorary degrees by the University. The keynote speaker at the graduation ceremony was Gopal Krishna Gandhi, a grandson of Mahatma Gandhi and the governor of West Bengal. There was much pomp and circumstance and the general theme of the speakers seemed to be inter-religious harmony and the depoliticization of the Urdu-Hindi language divide.

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<sup>37</sup>The Aligarh Muslim University is a secular institution. It was founded by a prominent Muslim reformist of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Sir Sayyed Ahmad Khan, and was structured on the lines of British universities. Though a secular institution, the University does attract a substantial number of Muslim students from all over India.

A.R. Rahman spoke first. In introducing him, the vice-chancellor of the university spoke of his commitment to Sufism, which he referred to as “Eastern mysticism”. He also said that Rahman was a “symbol of (Indian) composite culture”. At the ceremony, the keynote speaker, Gopal Krishna Gandhi spoke of Aligarh Muslim University being the kind of institution that was in a position to combat Islamic extremism. Towards the end of his address he brought up the figure of Dara Shikoh. In very poetic and flowery language, Gandhi nostalgically spoke of Dara Shikoh as a builder of bridges and wondered what India would be like had the rightful heir to the throne – Dara Shikoh – not been killed by the likes of Aurangzeb, and if it was him who had reigned. This was followed by a round of loud applause from the audience. Gandhi then transitioned to speaking about Sufism as the hope against forms of religious intolerance and extremism in India.

Aligarh Muslim University is an institution that caters to a religiously diverse student body, and is a secular academic institution; however, it was begun with the goal of providing Western-style higher education to Muslim men, and has historically attracted a pre-dominantly Muslim student-body. Muslims formed a majority of the audience and participants at the graduation ceremony. However, as a secular institution regarded very highly in India, it is interesting that Sufism was brought up so often by the speakers (Hindu and Muslim alike) at the graduation ceremony. It is almost as if any mention of inter-religious concord and the fight against terrorism (topics of great import in contemporary India) must necessarily come with a garnishing of Sufism.

Throughout my stay in India I was able to attend innumerable seminars, film screenings, concerts and art exhibitions that celebrated India’s cultural diversity. At

practically every event, Sufism was given pride of place. One such event was Jashn-e Aman (meaning, Celebration of Peace), and featured a movie about national integration and a performance by classical singers in the *drupad* style<sup>38</sup>. The cover of the booklet distributed at this event featured the word ‘peace’ (*aman*) written in Urdu calligraphy in the shape of a whirling Sufi dervish.

#### PROBLEMATIZING THE PRO-SUFI STANCE

Secularists and spiritualists speak in glowing terms of the Hindu motifs found in Sufi poetry and point to the use of regional Indian languages in Sufi verse. In addition to this, they also often highlight commonalities between Sufism and Hindu mystical traditions: Sufi saints are associated with the poet-saints of the Bhakti movement (like Meera, Gorakhnath, Tukaram, etc.), the Sufi philosophical strains of *wahdat ul-wajud* and *wahdat ul-shuhud* are linked to the Vedanta school of philosophy (or even characterized as having borrowed from this Indic school), and forms of Sufi meditative breathing are paired with Yogic breathing exercises.

Adherents of shrine-based Sufism too speak, with no little amount of pride, of Sufism’s contribution to Punjabi and Hindavi poetry, and often celebrate the overlaying of Indic and Perso-Arab motifs in these verses (a topic that I will address in depth in the next chapter). However, the association of Sufism with Hindu traditions by secularists and spiritualists often lacks nuance and results in the portrayal of Sufism as a mere offshoot of Yogic practice, Vedanta philosophy, and the Bhakti movement. Sufism often

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<sup>38</sup>The *drupad* style of classical music is a very old tradition in North Indian classical music, usually considered to be pre-Islamic in origin. Songs in this style of music are long devotional pieces in praise of various Hindu gods and goddesses. What is striking is that the most eminent exponents of this style of music are Muslim, and the tradition is passed down through these Muslim families. The performers at this particular event too, hailed from one of these prominent Muslim families.

gets characterized as a step-child of Hinduism; a religious, spiritual, and philosophical entity that had no life-history outside the South Asian context.

Take this paragraph from a book titled *Sufi Thought*, by S. R. Sharda (1974). He writes:

Sufi literature of the post-Timur period shows a significant change in thought content. It is pantheistic. After the fall of Muslim orthodoxy from power at the centre of India for about a century, due to the invasion of Timur, the Sufi became free from the control of the Muslim orthodoxy and consorted with Hindu saints, who influenced them to an amazing extent. The Sufi adopted Monism and wifely devotion from the Vaishnava Vedantic school and Bhakti and Yogic practices from the Vaishnava Vedantic school. By that time, the popularity of the Vedantic pantheism among the Sufis had reached its zenith. [p. 95]

The uncomplicated equation of certain Sufi schools of thought to pantheism aside, this fairly typical construction ignores the rigorous philosophical debate among Muslim intellectuals that existed independent of Hindu philosophical streams, and that thrived centuries prior to the Mughal era. From a reading of this paragraph it remains entirely unclear if Sufism has any positive link with Islam at all. From this perspective, it seems as if Sufism grew intellectually only after “adopting” various concepts directly from Hindu philosophical and mystic traditions.

Not only do secularists and spiritualists often conceive of Sufism as owing its intellectual identity to schools of Hindu philosophy, Sufism is also often thought of as being pure spirituality and philosophy, being entirely “free” of what is seen as religious (specifically Muslim) baggage. This conception of Sufism without the “encumbrance” of Islam was brought home to me time and time again during my fieldwork in India. Soon after my arrival in New Delhi, I attended the launch of the book, *Sufism – the heart of Islam* (2009) by Sadia Dehlvi. Ms. Dehlvi was a committed adherent of shrine-based



Sufism, and was herself on the Sufi path, having entered into discipleship (*muridi*) with a Sufi master (*pir*). The event was at The Attic, an elite venue for art shows, poetry recitals, experimental plays and such. After her presentation, where she spoke of Sufism being at the core of Islam, the session opened up for questions. One woman in the audience asked, sounding quite troubled, “But by saying that Sufism is at the heart of Islam, aren’t you limiting Sufism in some way? Maybe other people trace it to other sources.” Ms. Dehlvi responded by pointing to the origins of Sufism at the time of Islam’s inception, but said that the wisdom of Sufism was one that was not limited by its historical roots in Islam. The member of the audience who had raised the question was not satisfied with this response.

I encountered such resistance to seeing Sufism as Islamic many times during my research in India. In a personal conversation, Ms. Dehlvi too said that she was questioned about Sufism’s place in Islam frequently from secularist and spiritualist quarters. She said that she understood that these apprehensions came from the stereotyped image of Muslims in the media. The mention of ‘Islam’ or ‘shariah’ frightens them, she said. And so her audiences (who are mostly spiritual or secular-minded Hindus) are comfortable thinking of Sufism as a “sect outside of Islam”; as something not so “rigid”, or something perceived as being close to “idol-worship.”

There is an odd paradox at play in the way Sufism is imagined and desired by secularists and spiritualists. On the one hand, there is a desire to think of Sufism as being above or beyond religious labels, while on the other, Sufism is conceived of as the most acceptable form of Islam (for India and for the world). One can surmise from this juxtaposition of desires that Sufism is acceptable to secularists and spiritualists because it

is thought of as not being quite Muslim. To them, it is the perceived lack of “Muslim-ness” that makes Sufism the most desirable mode of Islamic practice and belief. There is a desire among secularists and spiritualists to construct a notion of Sufism (and by implication, of Islam) that is non-threatening in its *supposed* lack of adherence to Islamic strictures.

These secularists and spiritualists consider themselves “pro-Sufi” or even self-identify as Sufis. They often position themselves as supporting Sufism and being opposed to reformist ideology. Many who hold this favorable view of Sufism and Sufis are almost always antagonistic to reformists and view them with deep suspicion. As one of my interlocutors, a left-wing activist and journalist, once said to me, “It is easier for a Wahhabi to wield a gun than for a Sufi to.” This highly problematic and simplistic construction of religious identity and proclivity towards violence does however give shrine-based Sufism in India an advantage.

Secularists also take a pro-Sufi stance in more concrete ways. An on-going dispute between Hindutva groups and Sufis over rights to a shrine in Karnataka is a good example of this. This small shrine of the saint Baba Budhan has become the site of a protracted legal and religious dispute, in which right-wing Hindu nationalist groups have claimed that the Sufi shrine was “originally” a Hindu shrine. The dispute is now at the level of the State High Courts, and legal aid and funding for the Sufi custodians of the shrine has come primarily from secularist activist groups.

I have mentioned my visit to this shrine earlier in this chapter. While there, I had the opportunity to meet with a boisterous group of secular activists. These folks, mostly

middle-aged men from a secularist group in Bangalore, had come to the small plantation town of Chikmagloor for some court hearings and testimonials with regard to the shrine. Sitting in their small hostel room by the market, we engaged in a long and animated discussion of the issue at hand. They told us that in this dispute, the shrine family and adherents of shrine-based Sufism have received very little support from the larger Muslim community in the area for precisely the reason that the issue concerns a Sufi shrine. It evokes less passion among the mostly-reformist population. As one of the activists succinctly put it, “If this were a dispute over a mosque, it would be an entirely different matter.”

These activists and the community of Sufi adherents have very little in common; but a common desire for a particular outcome has brought these socially and religiously disparate people together. Another activist involved in the proceedings said, “We are all mostly atheists, but we think people should have the right to practice their religion.” These secularist groups perceive the claims of ownership over the Sufi shrine by Hindu nationalist groups as a threat to the ideal of Indian multiculturalist secularism, thus making strange bed-fellows of atheist secularists and hereditary custodians of a Sufi shrine.

It is also true that the kind of exposure that Sufism has enjoyed over the past decade due to this resurgence of interest among secularists and spiritualists is unprecedented: the showcasing of Sufi saints and Sufi poetry by the news and popular media, concerts and seminars on the topic, books, and magazine and newspaper articles abound. Recently, Sufism has also been positively associated with projects aimed at forwarding inter-religious dialogue and bettering strained relations with Pakistan.

In 2009, the Times of India newspaper and Jang, a news-group in Pakistan, launched a joint initiative called Aman ki Asha (meaning, Hope for Peace), which they promote as “an Indo-Pak peace project”. Seminars, discussion panels, speeches, newspaper articles and concerts in the major Indian cities were organized (and continue to be organized) as part of this initiative. The music concerts are the most publicized and most popular of these events, and most of them prominently feature “Sufi music”. Each of these concerts usually features two well-known musicians – one from India, and one from across the border, and at least one of these two musicians is always part of the Sufi tradition. These events draw huge audiences as Sufi music has gained immensely in popularity over the past two decades. These concerts include musicians who are traditional Sufi *qawwal*; professional singers whose repertoire is predominantly Sufi in its focus, but who now perform mostly in the concert setting; or “fusion” artists who mesh rock with South Asian classical styles and draw from Sufi poetry for their repertoire.

While it can be argued that most people who attend these concerts are there just for the music, increasingly these and other Sufi-related venues have begun to carry a lot of meaning for many in India. This is part of the general growth of interest in Sufism that India has seen over the past two decades. Sufism, for many, has become the poster-child of “communal harmony” and Indian secular democracy; a panacea for inter-religious violence and distrust. For others, it is a spiritual solution to what they see as the problem with religion these days. More and more, the sight of young men and women in faded jeans and washed-out t-shirts has become a common one at Sufi shrines in the metropolises of India. Drawn from the local colleges and universities, they sit among the crowds in

rapt silence, often swaying to the music with their eyes drawn shut, or gazing intently into the crowds around them, absorbed in some deep thought.

This wave of new interest is evident not only among India's urban youth, but also among an older demographic. Dancers, musicians, artists, authors, poets and lay folk of all ages seem to be drawing inspiration from Sufism to spur their work and to color their perception of their socio-religious world. One of my interlocutors (an adherent of shrine-based Sufism) once remarked, her tone betraying mild exasperation, "Everything is Sufi these days!" It is these young and old enthusiasts that primarily constitute the categories of secularists and spiritualists of which I spoke earlier. But what do they see in Sufism that draws them to Sufi ritual audience (*sama*), to Sufi poetry, and to Sufi shrines? What is it that makes shrine-based Sufism such an attractive poster-child for Indian multiculturalist secularism?

I posed this question to Sohail Hashmi, an activist, a film-maker, and an author who writes on issues related to religion and secularism in India. In response, he painted a complex portrait of socio-religious trends over the past several centuries in the Subcontinent. He said that several centuries ago, when the revival of Brahminical Hinduism threatened to reassert the low-caste status of artisanal groups in South Asia, many of these groups looked to the Bhakti movement (a religious and spiritual movement that spanned several centuries in medieval India, which questioned the legitimacy of organized religion) or embraced to Islam via Sufism. It is against this historic backdrop that the current interest in Sufism (and the saints of the Bhakti movement) begins to make sense.

The late 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a resurgence of inter-religious violence and vitriol, peaking with the demolition of the Babari mosque in Ayodhya by Hindu-nationalist mobs and the retaliatory violence that followed. Hashmi said that in the aftermath of the “frenzy” that was Ayodhya, there was a growing realization that “secularism was alien” to India; that “the separation of religion and politics is not possible here”. At this point, both Hindus and Muslims in India began looking for a “secular tradition within the Indian ethos”. In the early 1990s, after the demolition of the Babari mosque, a major multi-city concert-series was organized by SAHMAT, a group that Hashmi was deeply involved in. The series aimed at “question(ing) the artificially created boundaries between people” and which featured the verses of Sufi and Bhakti poets. This event, said Hashmi, was about “foregrounding the secular, Indian tradition” and saw the revival of interest in Sufism. “This is the Indian ethos,” he said, “working and creating together.” And it is in this context, too, said Hashmi, that the Sufi shrine with its shared sacred space becomes important: the mantle of providing this “secular space” falls to the Sufi shrine.

An intriguing instance of the ways in which the sacred space of the Sufi shrine has permeated the imagination of India’s youth as an emblem of diversity is the tremendous amount of attention the shrine of Nizamuddin Auliya has begun to receive from members of the Queer community in Delhi. I recounted in the previous chapter the spring festival marking the gesture of Amir Khusro that brought a smile to his beloved Master’s face. The poet Amir Khusro’s devotion to his Master, Hazrat Nizamuddin is legendary.

It is important to note here that the Sufi poetry of South and Central Asia (be it in Persian, Hindavi, or Punjabi) is replete with erotic imagery. In these verses, both God

and the Sufi Master are likened to the beloved, and the poet-disciple is the ardent and enraptured lover. Coupled with the gender-neutral pronouns in Persian and the predominant use of only masculine pronouns in the Islamicate poetry of South Asia, the homoeroticism of these verses is striking to the novice reader. Amir Khusro's verses to Hazrat Nizamuddin, too are replete with homoerotic and gender-bending imagery. Take these famous verses for instance:

*chap tilak sab cheeni re mose naina milayke*

*bal bal jaun main tore ran rijva  
apni se kar dini re mose naina milayke*

*khusro nijam ke bal bal jaye  
mode suhagan kini re mose naina milayke<sup>39</sup>*

You have made me lose myself with just a glance of your eyes.

I sacrifice myself to you, O dyer of cloths;  
You have colored me in your colors with just a glance of your eyes.

I, Khusro, give myself to you, O Nizamuddin  
You have made me your bride with just a glance of your eyes.

I will not delve into a discussion of homoeroticism in Sufi poetry, or of notions of homoerotic love in medieval India here<sup>40</sup>. But what is especially interesting to me is that these two figures, Amir Khusro and Hazrat Nizamuddin, have captured the imagination

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<sup>39</sup> छाप तिलक सब छीनी रे मो से नैना मिलायके / बल बल जाऊं में तोरे रंग रिजवा / अपनी सी रंग दीनी रे मो से नैना मिलायके | / खुसरो निजाम के बल बल जाए / मोहे सुहागन कीनी रे मो से नैना मिलायके |

<sup>40</sup>Scott Kugle provides a provocative and much-needed analysis of gender ambiguities and homoeroticism in Sufi literature and cosmology in his essay, *Dancing with Khusro: Gender Ambiguities and Poetic Performance in a Delhi Dargah* (2010). With regard to Khusro and his sensuous verses, Kugle asks, "Can we read such examples of Khusro's poetry as an expression of his sexual orientation?"(256) Though the question, and the theme of this essay, is provocative by its very nature, Kugle's handling of the subject is both nuanced and considerably understated.

of the Queer community in Delhi. To many of them with whom I spoke, Amir Khusro's open and brazen love for Nizamuddin, and his love poetry of so many centuries ago, seemed to reflect their own desire for social and political change. A 2001 book, "Same-sex Love in India: Readings from literature and history" by Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai (both of whom are active members of the LGBT-rights movement in India) defines the relationship between Amir Khusro and Hazrat Nizamuddin as homoerotic, and perhaps even homosexual. It certainly may be that projecting our contemporary notions of homosexuality and romantic love on actors from centuries in the past is an act of anachronism; but the fact remains that these Sufi figures have taken on specific meanings for the Queer community in India today.

On many evenings I would find members of the Queer community (many of whom were active in the LGBT-rights movement in Delhi) at the shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin. They sat with all the other visitors to the shrine and listened to the ritual musicians singing the love-poetry of Amir Khusro. They were never there openly as members of the Queer community, and in a sense, they did not transform the physical space of the shrine in as visible a way as the group led by the artist Ashutosh Krishan did. But certainly, their imagining of the saint and his disciple, their reception of the sung poetry at the shrine, and their communication of these experiences through texts, and through their activism, shapes the ways in which the shrine and its inhabitants are perceived.

It is also a significant point that in Sufism, the *listeners* of poetry and song are considered spiritual agents, and the act of ritual audition is especially important in Sufi



practice. Therefore, especially within the Sufi paradigm, *how* someone listens and *how* one understands what is being listened to, is a deeply powerful process. Within this paradigm, the very presence of these Queer listeners, if you will, is radically transformative.

It is evident by now that to many in India, shrine-based Sufism has begun to symbolize something much more than the link between the human and the divine. For them, the shared space of the shrine is a salve for the dysfunctions of a profane world. In this imagining, shrine-based Sufism has a role that is at once sacred and profane. Against the backdrop of India's multiculturalist secularism, where the overlapping of multiple sacred traditions is the marker of secularity, this is not so unusual.

This (re)construction of Sufism as emblematic of multiculturalist secularism, broad-strokes spirituality, and social harmony was preceded by a steady secularization of some aspects of Sufi practice in the Indian public arena. To a certain extent, this was a global phenomenon. Translations of the poetry of Rumi and Hafez, for instance, were widely disseminated throughout Europe and America after being bowdlerized of its Islamic content, and the remixed versions of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's ecstatic renditions of *qawwali* became staples at dance-clubs and raves globally in the 1990s. Most who read Sufi poetry in translation read it outside of its socio-religious context, and an entire generation knows *qawwali* as Sufi "dance music" and not as a component of Sufi ritual audition.

India too saw a similar trend for several decades after independence, where the secularization of *qawwali* played out through Indian cinema. *Qawwali* in the movies

became a secular affair: a setting for flirtations between hero and heroine, a stage for contest between romantic rivals. The metaphors of the devotee as the lover and the Sufi Master or God as the beloved, was appropriated by the heteronormative plots of Bollywood cinema. Sufism, as a religious and philosophical tradition, rarely made an appearance in these highly choreographed numbers.

What is singular about the past decade is that Sufi ritual practice is now being given yet another layer of meaning, a fact that Sohail Hashmi's words clearly reflect. Shrine-based Sufi practice is now valued by a variety of people who do not necessarily identify themselves as adherents of shrine-based Sufism. While Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan is still played at discos and "Sufi-rock" remains ever popular in India, renditions of Sufi poetry and discussions of Sufism in the public arena have for the most part lost their entirely profane garb.

During an elite Sufi concert I attended, for instance, one of the performers was Rabbi, a rocker famous for his rock renditions of Sufi poetry. He told the audience that the current generation "need(s) to contemplate and reflect more"; that they need to "reclaim the niche" between being a Sufi and a rocker. Comparing the video of Rabbi's 2004 hit number, 'Bullah, I know not who I am' (*bullah ke jana main kaun*), with the video for Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's 1995 rendition of 'My beloved has come home' (*mera piya ghar aya*) is telling. Both songs are by the 18<sup>th</sup> century Punjabi Sufi poet Bulleh Shah. Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's video makes absolutely no gesture towards the Sufi underpinnings of the verses and instead tells a story of a war-veteran returning home. Rabbi's video, on the other hand, features a montage of stark portraits of faces from across the subcontinent set against a backdrop of cities, mosques, temples and fields. The

video flashes Bulleh Shah's poignant verses in translation across the screen as Rabbi belts the verses out. Where Bulleh Shah's verses make way for electronic funk interludes in the Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan video, they occupy center-stage in Rabbi's.

As far as Indian movies are a gauge of socio-political and economic trends in India, the presentation of Sufism in Bollywood cinema provides another striking example of this sea-shift in how Sufism is now viewed. As has been mentioned earlier, *qawwali* in Indian movies was almost entirely secular in its presentation, full of innuendo and referencing only romantic human love. This changed from the mid-1990s, when *qawwali* in the movies was moved off the romantic plot-lines and back into the Sufi shrine. Silver-screen *qawwali* no longer frames only romantic love, but more often than not is presented as a backdrop for commentary on the broader human capacity for love – love of the divine and, increasingly, love of the Other. Any movie made that has even a semblance of a message about inter-religious co-operation or the futility of communal strife features a *qawwali* sung not by a star-struck hero, but by *qawwals* at Sufi shrines.

Apropos to the attraction of the sacred space of the shrine to the Queer community in Delhi, the controversial film, *Fire* (1998) is important to note. This film explores the lesbian relationship between two sisters-in-law from a Middle-Class family in Delhi. The film reaches its denouement at the shrine of Nizamuddin Auliya, where the two lovers who have finally decided to break away from their abusive marital home decide to meet.

I have discussed how religious subjectivity in India is valences towards religious identities and practices that are seen to be unbounded and amorphous. And apropos to

this, secularists and spiritualists now identify Sufism as having a suitably unbounded religious character. The cinematic lens has been refocused on this conception of Sufism, and it is this perceived attribute of Sufism that is presented as emblematic of the aspirations of secularists and spiritualists in India.

This trend is evident not only in the arena of popular entertainment, but in the arts, in academic scholarship, in the proliferation of Sufi-themed seminars, feature articles, and public lectures. There is now more of a focus on Sufi philosophy, on the literature produced by Sufi thinkers and saints, and on the legacy of Sufism in the Subcontinent today. Sufism has begun to stand for the aspirations and hopes of a generation that has seen the devastating effects of inter-religious violence from the demolition of the Babari mosque in Ayodhya in 1992 by a mob of Hindu nationalists, to the brazen violence of Mumbai at the hands of Islamic radicals in 2008; from the attacks of September 11 to the ensuing “War on Terror”. In this religio-political environment, Sufism is seen by many as having the capacity to bridge the divide between multiple religious factions. It is seen as a refuge by those who find commonalities between various faith traditions – by secularists and spiritualists alike.

Ewing (1997) presents a parallel trend of religious co-option mobilized in Pakistan, both in its conception before 1947 and its inception in the decades that followed. She writes that

in the process of injecting a positive content (to the label of Pakistani Muslim), aspects of Muslim practice...became the focus of competing interpretations. In the same way, Sufism and the pir have been caught up in this discursive process of what is and is not the true Islam that Pakistan should embody. [p. 66]

The Sufism co-opted and transformed by the Pakistani nation-state, however, is a stark contrast to the syncretic imagining of Sufism in Islam. The kind of Sufism envisioned to suit the purposes of the Pakistani nation was a rarified and philosophically-oriented mode of Islamic belief; it was Sufism purged of its hagiographical narratives of miracles, and rituals associated with the Sufi shrine (pp. 69-71). By contrast, the secularist and spiritualist narratives that have permeated state- and non-state media in the post-independence era have focused on assimilative shrine rituals, Indic and Hindu motifs in South Asian Sufi song and poetry, and have given prominence to the sacred-space of the Sufi shrine.

The broader values and ideals that Indians today associate with Sufism were made evident to me by the witty remark of Ashish Khanna, one of my interlocutors. A young journalist and photographer, Ashish had converted to Islam after being drawn to its beliefs and philosophies through Sufism. He and I once met at a coffee shop to chat about his beliefs and about shrine-based Sufism. He asked me what my research interests are, and among other things I mentioned that I was particularly interested in how Indian secularism plays a part in the formation of a religious identity in India. I added, “And the idea of secularism is constructed so differently in India than it is in say, France.” Ashish chuckled and quipped, “Yeah, definitely! Indian secularism is Sufi secularism, and French secularism is Wahhabi secularism!” His remark, though tongue-in-cheek, reflected the association that many of my interlocutors make between shrine-based Sufism and notions of plurality and multiculturalism.

This perception of Sufism has proved to be a mixed blessing for adherents of shrine-based Sufism. Adherents are not averse to Sufism being given this task; in fact, I

found that my interlocutors were quite enthusiastic towards the potential that Sufism and the shared sacred space of the shrine. It is clear to adherents of shrine-based Sufism, especially to those who have strong ritual or familial association with a Sufi shrine, that Sufism and the sacred space of the Sufi shrine are invested with a lot of social, religious and political symbolism in contemporary India.

However, what is very problematic to them is that the sacrality of shrine-based Sufism is appropriated and then *transformed* by those who would place this task on its shoulders. In its appropriation, secularists and spiritualists mold the sacrality of Sufism and the Sufi shrine into a form that adherents of shrine-based Sufism do not recognize as true to its character. In this transformed state, Sufism is often presented as part of the Hindu tradition, or otherwise lacking in a core Islamic identity. The often simplistic subsumption of Sufism under the umbrella of Hinduism, and/or the construction of Sufism as pure spirituality without its socio-religious context within Islam, is not something that adherents of shrine-based Sufism acquiesce to. To them, such an appropriation undermines the fundamentally Islamic roots of Sufism and their own identity as Muslims.

As has been discussed above, embedded in the notion that a “syncretic” and unbounded religiosity is the ideal of Indian religious subjecthood is the idea that a linear and bounded religious identity is not quite Indian. This added pressure to conform to certain modes of religiosity is layered over the already complex and problematic imagining of Muslims as the Other in India.

The paradox of which I wrote earlier in this section (that to many secularists and spiritualists, Sufism is the most amenable form of Islam because they perceive it to be not very Muslim at all) is at the core of this process of undermining. Secularist and spiritualist claims of this kind may not be something most folks encounter at a personal level; the majority of adherents of shrine-based Sufism are from the lower socio-economic bracket and have little occasion to engage with secularists and spiritualists, who more often than not are part of the upper middle-class and the English-speaking urban elite . However, secularist and spiritualist arguments in “favor” of Sufism, as well as the valenced position of composite religious traditions in India, are stances many adherents encounter through TV programming, newspapers, and the movies nearly every day. Growing interest in shrine-based Sufism in the public sphere has meant increased exposure to the ways in which it is imagined by secularists and spiritualists. The notion that the practices and beliefs of shrine-based Sufism are more “syncretic” than they are particularly Muslim gets hammered home from various quarters, and on all forms of non-religious media available to the average Indian.

For adherents of shrine-based Sufism, their links to India are deeply meaningful as they see Islam to have spread throughout the region primarily through the teachings of Sufi saints. The subordination of nationality to religiosity or vice versa is not an identity-choice that my interlocutors found to be of any value. To be regarded as truly Indian was important to them, and thus the pressure to conform to a certain conception of Sufism and Muslimhood quite evidently bore down on them. It was unacceptable to them that being Muslim somehow interfered with their ability to be Indian; and they did not acquiesce to

the many ways in which secularists and spiritualists removed Sufism outside of the context of Islam in order to lionize it as an ideal of Indian religious subjecthood.

## RELIGIOUS AMBIGUITY AND THE RHETORIC OF ‘COMMUNAL HARMONY’

What is striking in these narratives that I have discussed above is not so much that religiously “syncretic” figures are usually presented in a positive light in India, but that most of these figures are in some way “originally” Muslim. That is, these narratives place these Muslim figures (Akbar, Dara Shikoh, Kabir), and the institution of shrine-based Sufism as being open to spiritual paths and teachings outside of Islam. In this construction, being recognized as indisputably Indian requires the presentation of an assimilative and composite religiosity, and the onus of proving national loyalty and belonging falls on Muslims rather than on Hindus (who are considered “naturally” a part of India’s cultural ethos). And these Muslim figures and institutions are upheld as ideals of Indian religiosity and are presented as promoting “communal harmony”.

Again, I am hard-pressed to find an example where a religious figure of Hindu origin is held up as promoting religious harmony through their “syncretic” practice and belief. The only personality who comes to mind is Gandhi, who brought together the teachings of so many different faiths into his formulation of non-violent action. And yet, Gandhi is also constructed more as a modern *political* and *social* player, rather than as one who was significant in religious or spiritual terms<sup>41</sup>. And even then, Gandhi is not framed as “syncretic”; influences of Christian and Buddhist teachings on his ideologies are highlighted in biographies, text-books and popular media, but his religiosity is never questioned as being anything but Hindu. And certainly, there is never an implication that

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<sup>41</sup>This is especially peculiar, considering that Gandhi was a deeply spiritual man.



Gandhi was a *better* Hindu because of these cross-religious influences. This is markedly different from the way the previously-mentioned Muslim religious and political figures have been handled in these media.

One explanation for this is that Muslims in India continue to be framed as outsiders in most media. Even though Islam has been an Indian entity for nearly a millennium now, Muslim culture and life-ways are identified as separate from Indic modes of practice and belief<sup>42</sup>. The persona of the Muslim as an outsider was further exacerbated by the partition of the Subcontinent and the traumas that accompanied it. One of the major ideas that was used to justify Partition was the “two-Nation Theory”: the idea that Hindus and Muslims were peoples of separate and incompatible nations; that these two communities could not co-exist in an equitable fashion within the same state. This theory gained immense traction and eventually did lead to the creation of the separate state of Pakistan, which was ostensibly the new homeland of South Asia’s Muslims.

Only *ostensibly*, because a significant number of Muslims lived in what remained Indian territory; Muslims who could, or would not, move to Pakistan due to ties to family, land and livelihood, and some fundamental attachment to India as a political entity. The dilemma, if I may use the term, for the Indian state then is how these masses of Muslims who were “left behind” were to be characterized. If Pakistan was framed as politically the Other, then Muslims within India had to be framed in a way that identified them as unquestionably Indian.

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<sup>42</sup> I have reservations using the term “Indic” to indicate modes of religious practice that are “indigenous” to India or pre-Islamic for several reasons. One is that it results in the equation of the geographic identity of India with the religious identity of Hindu/Buddhist/Jain/Sikh. This necessarily excludes Islam and Christianity as Others, and as perpetual outsiders to India.

This is where notions of how India itself is characterized ties in with the ideal of a “good Indian Muslim”. If India is an entity conceived to have existed in a particular form before and after the arrival of Muslims, then for Muslims to be truly Indians, they must assimilate into some perceived default mode of “Indian-ness”. This creates the ideal of the “syncretic” Muslim who is not substantially different in his/her practice and belief from the average (and presumed Hindu) Indian, and also therefore not part of a distinct “nation”.

What kind of a national ethos constructs a religiously ambiguous subjectivity as the ideal? Ewing (2008) writes that the way in which the character of a nation is imagined defines modes of acceptable citizenship and religio-political subjectivity. “The state makes claims on the loyalty of its inhabitants through identification with the nation and its specific forms of culture, a process of imagining a shared experience that simultaneously marks various forms of social difference” (p. 2). Ways in which the Indian nation is imagined have resulted in very different ways in which various minority groups are positioned within it. Just as Turkish masculinity has been stigmatized in the German imagining as distinctly the Other, certain forms of Muslim subjectivity have been painted as incompatible with the Indian multiculturalist secular ethos, and others as appropriate.

Sabah Mahmood, in her article *Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire* (2006) writes of how secular states create a certain kind of political and religious subjectivity. She details how the kind of secularism found in the United States creates a religio-political subjectivity that is congruent with its political formation. In her view, secular states not so much tolerate religious differences, as remake them into appropriate

subjectivities. She writes that the current “theological campaign” of the United States seeks to civilize and discipline Muslim subjectivity, through theological prescriptions and interpretations of Islam, an agenda that is echoed by “secular liberal Muslims” (239). Though I find Mahmood’s assessment of the allegiances of liberal Muslims to be very problematic in its firm assertions, it is clear that there is a certain kind of religious subjectivity that is favored by the secular American state over others.

Indian secularism is a very different beast, however. While a certain idea of secularism is fetishized in Europe and America, secularism in a very different avatar is held up as an ideal in India. There are a few who cast a polity bereft of religious influence as desirable (India’s staunchly Marxist enclaves, for one). However, the general consensus seems to be that a government, a ruling elite, and a civic society that embraces a richly variegated religious landscape is best suited to India. This is a very different notion than that of Bernard Lewis who speaks of a clash between Western a-religious secularism, and the non-secular Islamic world. In the Indian rhetoric of national integration and multiculturalist secularism, the clash is not imagined as being between a-religiosity and religiosity. It is instead one that pits religiosity that sees diversity of religious practice and beliefs as multiple paths to the same truth against religiosity that defines piety in more singular and linear forms.

This is markedly different from the kind of Muslim subjectivity identified by Hindu nationalists as being appropriate. Blom Hansen (1999) has characterized the nationalist vision of India thus:

The Hindu nationalists desire to transform Indian public culture into a sovereign, disciplined national culture rooted in what is claimed to be a superior ancient

Hindu past...According to the movement, the Indian nation can only be reinvigorated when its rightful proprietors, the Hindu majority, resurrect a strong sense of Hindutva [Hinduness]. This majoritarian call for Hindutva combines well-established paternalist and xenophobic discourses with democratic and universalist discourses on rights and entitlements, and has successfully articulated desires, anxieties, and fractured subjectivities in both urban and rural India. [p. 4]

The Hindu nationalists thus envision Muslims as belonging either outside of the Indian nation, or as a compliant and submissive Other governed by a Hindu majority. In this imagining, the “good Muslim” is one who accepts his/her position as the outsider or as the Other, and the category of “good *Indian* Muslim” is virtually oxymoronic.

In contrast, Indian secularists see India as a religiously composite nation. The ideal Muslim to them is therefore one who is also composite and assimilative in his/her religiosity. The question then arises: Why does the onus of assimilation, even for secularists, fall primarily to the Muslim? Why is such an act of osmosis not expected overtly of Hindus? Here it must be admitted that there is a bias even within Indian multiculturalist secularism towards imagining India as having some essentially Hindu core. However, it is not so much that secularists see India as a fundamentally Hindu nation (with Hinduism defined as a religion in the Protestant sense of the term). Instead, Hinduism is itself imagined as composite and inherently Indian. In this view, Hindus need not be consciously assimilative, since assimilation is seen as the inherent and natural character of Hindus for millennia<sup>43</sup>. Thus, though Hindu nationalists and Indian secularists speak at cross-purposes and have very different goals, the resulting religious subjectivities championed have a core assumption in common.

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<sup>43</sup>Non-theistic religions such as Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism are not seen as antithetical to the category of “Hindu”.

From this perspective, the more “non-assimilative” and “textually-bound” religion of Islam is capable of being congruent with Indian multiculturalist secularism only in a consciously “syncretic” form.<sup>44</sup> It is no wonder that a political figure such as Akbar is seen as having contributed to communal harmony, and the poet-saint Kabir is considered “the apostle of Hindu-Muslim Unity” (Hedayetullah 1977). In such a rhetorical environment, the questions posed by Mamdani (2004) in his book *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim* become pertinent. He asks: “Could it be that a person who takes his or her religion literally is a potential terrorist? And that someone who thinks of religious text as metaphorical or figurative is better suited to civic life and the tolerance it calls for?” (p. 20).

In the Indian case, the question that needs to be asked is not so much if the literal interpretation of religious texts is compatible with secularism and modernity, but rather, if bounded and non-assimilative modes of religiosity are entirely incongruent with a religiously diverse public sphere.

The Indian brand of multiculturalist secularism has produced a certain imagining of appropriate religious subjecthood. Integral to this imagining is both how the Indian nation itself is perceived and how minority religions are positioned within it. This chapter has examined how the category of the “good Indian Muslim” is constructed within this secularist narrative.

Certain religious and political figures are held up as ideals of Muslim subjectivity in India. Secularist narratives in India are replete with images of the non-threatening,

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<sup>44</sup>The question remains as to why Christianity has not generally received a similar treatment in this national secularist imagining, and would be an interesting question for a future project.

“syncretized” Indian Muslim. Key among these are the Mughal emperor Akbar, the Mughal prince Dara Shikoh, the 14<sup>th</sup> century poet-saint Kabir, and shrine-based Sufism in general. Contrasted with these “ideal types” is the figure (often a caricature) of the textually rigid, dogmatic, and narrowly pious Muslim. Multiculturalist secularism in India thus favors Muslim religiosity that is “syncretic” or religiously ambiguous. Within this narrative, syncretism and ambiguity are held up as contributing towards “communal harmony”, which is seen as fundamental to national integration and the stability of the Indian state. Lost in this grand narrative is a place for a less-ecumenical mode of religious piety that may not echo the multiculturalist rhetoric of the state, but is nonetheless not orthogonal to the nation’s naturally diverse religious landscape.

In the following chapter I will discuss how the assertions of a Muslim religious identity by adherents of shrine-based Sufism are informed by and are a response to this mode of religious subjecthood favored in India, and the pressures to conform to reformist interpretations of proper Islamic practice and belief.

#### IV. MULTIPLE IMAGININGS OF SUFISM

At the end of the bustling alleyway that wends its way from the busy thoroughfare of Mathura Road and into the heart of New Delhi's Nizamuddin neighborhood is the Sufi shrine of the saint Nizamuddin Auliya; at the mouth of this lane is the headquarters of the Muslim reformist group, the Tablighi Jama'at. As one walks through this alleyway, the clots of young Tablighi Jama'at missionaries (with their characteristic chest-length beards, loose tunics and pajamas that stop just above their ankles), and the shops and stalls selling reformist literature, prayer-beads, skull caps and kababs give way to the world of the Sufi shrine, with streams of men, women and children making their way to the sacred space of the shrine ahead. At this end, one passes small cubby holes selling rose-petals and incense, prayer-beads and amulets, colorful posters and trinkets with Sufi themes, CDs and cassettes of Qawwali performances, and booklets with hagiographies, histories of famous shrines, prayers and Quranic verses. This journey, from the mouth of the alleyway to its heart, is in many ways a lived metaphor for a journey between two ways in which Sufism is imagined.

Across the road from this alleyway is the tomb complex of the Mughal king, Humayun. A large quadrangle here enclosed by crumbling 16<sup>th</sup> century walls witnessed the annual Jahan-e Khusro Sufi music concert series in mid-February 2010. One of the performers at this event, Rabbi Shergil, introduced himself as a "part-time Sufi, and a full-time rocker". A guest of honor present at this concert, a member of the current government, said at the start of the concert that Sufism was one face of Islam, while

terrorism was another face of Islam, and it was up to the world to decide which face of Islam we will have. This was met with a round of applause from the largely upper-class audience. But, interestingly, this was the only time the word 'Islam' made an appearance during the entire event. There was no mention of Allah or Muhammad, except when it was part of a Qawwali that was sung. This was in some sense, Sufism without Islam, and here we find a third imagining of Sufism.

Adherents of shrine-based Sufism must contend with all of these ways in which Sufism is conceptualized: their own, the way reformists construct an ideal of Sufism, and the way spiritualists and secularists construct it. And it is vis-à-vis the latter two (often competing) conceptualizations that adherents of shrine-based Sufism must assert their own identity as Sufi Muslims in India. I think of these two different ways of conceptualizing Sufism as pressures to be not just a certain kind of a Sufi, but fundamentally, a certain kind of Muslim. Any assertion of a Muslim identity by adherents of shrine-based Sufism is thus a negotiation between these pressures.

Pressure from reformist groups comes in the form of critique of shrine practice and belief. As has been discussed in chapter 2, and as is suggested by the term designating them, the goal of many reformists is to reform Sufism. At a basic level, it is a goal to alter the character of contemporary Sufism, to make it conform to reformist interpretations of Islamic doctrine. To assert their identity as Muslims vis-à-vis this strong opposition, adherents of shrine-based Sufism must establish their practices and beliefs as fundamentally Islamic – not just as compatible with Islam, but as being inalienably Muslim.



Secularists and spiritualists in India pose a very different kind of problem for adherents of shrine-based Sufism. While reformist opposition is quite overt and obviously adversarial in many cases, the pressures on religious identity that come from secularists and spiritualists are not so apparent, and are in fact couched in a pro-Sufi stance. In chapter 3, I discussed the kind of religious subjecthood that the Indian nation-state favors. While this kind of religious subjecthood is ostensibly valenced towards shrine-based Sufism, it too undermines the Muslim identity of its adherents. Claiming a staunchly Muslim identity in this context also involves an assertion of Sufism's Islamic roots. But such an assertion must not at the same time be seen to negate other forms of identity and belonging that are equally important to Muslims in India: linguistic, regional, cultural and national.

These two sources of pressure on their religiosity leave adherents of shrine-based Sufism in a bind: where the very perception of Sufism as not quite Muslim positions them as outsiders to one faction, and as part of the in-group to the other. In the previous chapters I have delineated these two sometimes competing pressures in detail. In this chapter, I will examine how the identity-narratives of adherents of shrine-based Sufism is a response to both these pressures, and how their assertion of religious and national identity navigates between these.

## ENCOUNTERING AND COUNTERING THE DOUBLE-BIND

In her book *Arguing Sainthood* (1997), Ewing posits a “return to an older usage of the concept of hegemony as a control over public discursive space, a phenomenon that must be distinguished from consciousness” (p. 5). She elaborates:

Discourses constitute subject positions, but the experiencing subject is a nonunitary agent (perhaps better described as a bundle of agencies) who – in part through the experience of competing ideologies and alternative discourses – operates with a potential for critical distance from any one discourse or subject position, including a discourse of modernity. [p. 5]

Where Kathy Ewing examines how individual experience and subjecthood are formed in the face of these “competing ideologies and...discourses”, in this chapter I ask how these individual experiences and agencies also function to assert “truths” about the identity and character of a larger community or cohort.

Adherents of shrine-based Sufism encounter pressures to construct Sufism (and, by implication Islam) in particular ways from reformists, and from secularists and spiritualists. The latter group would like to imagine Sufism as unencumbered by Islamic scripture and doctrinal injunctions; as retaining a few aspects of Islam, but as borrowing heavily from Hindu ritual and philosophic traditions. To them, this is a happy mix – representative of India’s “composite culture” – and is paradoxically the ideal form of Islam for India since it is perceived to be not quite Muslim. But it is this notion of being not quite Muslim that undermines the self-identity of adherents as Muslims.

The legacy of constructing Sufism as owing a debt of identity to Hinduism is a legacy of orientalism that continues to linger in India among scholars and lay folk. Ernst (2004) has noted that orientalist assertions that Sufism was not part of Islamic belief and practice were based “on an abstract definition of Islam that was often derived from the hostile context of European colonization of Islamic countries.” These narratives posited “that Sufism was ‘derived from’ Neoplatonic, Christian, Buddhist, or Hindu sources” (p. 6). This legacy of orientalist scholarship persists not only among secularists and spiritualists, but very prominently among Sufi reformists as well. The reformist

contention is that practices and beliefs associated with Sufism are un-Islamic. The primary argument on their part is that these practices and beliefs have no basis in Islamic scripture. Like orientalist scholars of centuries past, who sought to find the “origins” and “sources” of everything,<sup>45</sup> many reformists view Sufi practice and belief as derivative of Hindu traditions and therefore as heretical innovations.

In an odd assemblage of ideas, the reformist message that shrine-based Sufism is in many ways un-Islamic is reinforced by the secularist and spiritualist claim that Sufism has little to do with Islam. Many secularists and spiritualists consider themselves to be proponents of Sufism; and yet, it is Sufism taken out of its socio-religious and historic context within the fold of Islam<sup>46</sup>. Reformist views too position shrine-based Sufism at the fringes of or even outside the pale of “correct” Islamic practice and belief.

Adherents of shrine-based Sufism encounter the pressure to be “more Muslim” from reformist groups; and as Muslims, they experience the pressure to be “more Indian” from secular quarters. Underlying these dual pressures is the presumption that these categories are to some extent mutually exclusive; that a choice has to be made between one and the other. Confronted with these complex demands on their religiosity, and their national and cultural identity, adherents of shrine-based Sufism respond with an equal

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<sup>45</sup>Carl Ernst (2005) has discussed this quest for origins or “Quellenforschung” in his piece *Situating Sufism and Yoga*. I bring this concept up in greater detail farther in this chapter.

<sup>46</sup>I found it quite interesting that right-wing Hindu nationalists, too, tended to frame Sufism as something Muslims had “borrowed” from Hinduism. The most intriguing encounter I had with someone of this opinion came early during my fieldwork in Gulbarga. I was visiting an acquaintance of a relative there, and it came up that I was doing research at the Sufi shrine. The man of the house immediately perked up at this and he confided to me that he had done extensive research in Sufism. He said that he had found the Hindu roots of Sufism, and claimed that he had found verses of the Bhagawat Geeta in the Quran! He also made the odd claim that the phrase *Allah Hu!* (He, Allah), a Muslim declaration of the Godhead, was basically the same as the words *allah hoon* (I am Allah) in Hindi; this he said was the same as the Vedantic declaration, *aham brahmasmi* (I am Brahma). While his views were on the extreme end of the spectrum, they are not unusual, and adhere to a general pattern common in right-wing Hindu rhetoric. It is one that identifies Hinduism as the source of all wisdom and philosophy.

measure of complexity. Faced with such a double-bind<sup>47</sup>, adherents of shrine-based Sufism use their identity-narratives to stake an equal claim to being both Muslim and Indian, and present a construction of their identity that weaves together notions of religious authenticity and national belonging.

It became evident through my early conversations that adherents of shrine-based Sufism used narratives of Indian multiculturalist secularism in claiming legitimacy for shrine-based Sufism; that is, they seemed to be aligning shrine-based Sufism with modern values of multiculturalism and egalitarian democracy. However, as my time in India progressed, I came to see that though the language of multiculturalist secularism used by my interlocutors to assert their identities vis-à-vis reformist critique was very similar to the idioms deployed by secularists and spiritualists, these two groups were not necessarily aligned. Both reformist groups as well as secularist and spiritualist quarters sought to define Sufism and Islam in ways to which adherents of shrine-based Sufism did not acquiesce.

Leve (2007) has used the term “double-bind” in her analysis of the appeal to human rights via secularism made by Theravada Buddhists in Nepal. In speaking of the incongruity of Theravada Buddhist notions of the self, or more appropriately the denial of the self, and the construction of the self inherent to the ideal of “human rights”, she writes of “an irreconcilable tension between what Buddhists do and the subjectivities they inhabit when they call on human rights, and the acts and identities those rights are supposed to guarantee” (p. 79). Adherents of shrine-based Sufism too are faced with a

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<sup>47</sup>I would like to acknowledge W. E. B. Dubois’ work *The Souls of Black Folk* for its excellent explication of this notion of a double-bind for African Americans. It is a concept that is germane to the pressures on ways of being and ways of conceiving of one’s position in society for marginalized peoples all over the world.

similar bind where the occupation of the category of “good Indian Muslim”, as defined by the secularist narratives of the Indian nation-state, necessitates the negation of a staunchly Muslim identity.

Adherents of shrine-based Sufism counter these multi-faceted pressures using multiple registers – scriptural and doctrinal, and socio-political. These multiple registers enable adherents to position themselves as Muslims, as Indians, and as active members of a modern world; and in doing so, posit new definitions of ‘Muslim’, ‘Indian’, and ‘modern’ subjecthoods. In asserting the legitimacy of shrine-based Sufism, adherents lay claim not just to ways of being Muslim but also to ways of being Indian. The arguments put forth by my interlocutors to legitimize shrine-based Sufism were certainly attempts to trace its roots to the beginnings of Islam; they were also arguments made in dialogue with, and apropos to contemporary social, political and religious pressures.

There are of course numerous and complex issues that shape the way Muslim identity is constructed in India. I have discussed previously the valencing of a composite religious subjectivity in India, the lingering burden of Partition-era politics, and the ways in which being Indian and being Hindu are defined; these factors all contribute to this complexity. Adherents of shrine-based Sufism, however, are subject to pressures on their religious identity from two very different sources (reformists, and secularists and spiritualists) that often strain at their religious identity from two very different (and sometimes orthogonal) directions.

In effect, adherents of shrine-based Sufism encounter multiple hegemonies in their assertion of religious identity. I have previously discussed the hegemony of Hijaz-

centered, Salafi and Wahhabi Islam. This hegemony is for the most part experienced by Muslims globally, since most Muslims in the contemporary world live outside the Arabian Peninsula, and practice regional modes of Islam. Even though, demographically speaking, the “rest of the world” wins the contest, I have previously discussed how the Arabian Peninsula continues to dominate the valenced geography of the Muslim world. In this hegemonic conception of the Muslim world, shrine-based Sufism (be it in South, Central or Southeast Asia, or West Africa) is continually marginalized as antithetical to mainstream Islamic belief and practice by reformist groups and influential seminaries, scholars and preachers. Thus, even though shrine-based Sufism is perhaps the predominant form of Islam practiced in India, adherents of shrine-based Sufism increasingly find themselves on the back-foot, having to defend their practices and beliefs in the face of strong reformist critique.

In India, in addition to this hegemony of reformist Islam is the hegemony of Hinduism. This hegemony can be seen in the form of Indian religious subjecthood that favors a “syncretic” or a “composite” Muslim identity. It also manifests itself in the constant harassment and undermining faced by most Muslims from Hindu nationalist groups (who claim India is essentially Hindu) and from the Indian state’s bureaucratic apparatuses (who intimidate Muslims in the name of internal security).

Responses to critique from reformist groups do not occur in a socio-political void. Adherents of shrine-based Sufism are well aware of the various pressures on their claims to religious authenticity and national belonging. They thus counter reformist pressures at various levels: 1) positing doctrinal arguments in favor of shrine-based Sufism, 2) marking the shared ritual space of Sufi shrines as necessary for the contemporary world,

and 3) claiming South Asia as a valid and vital source of Islamic practice and thought. Significantly, these acts of countering also play out in dialog with discourses on religious subjecthood in India. Arguments in the defense of shrine-based Sufism are thus imbricated with assertions of a particular kind of Indian Muslim identity.

In framing their assertions of religio-political identity as they do, adherents of shrine-based Sufism are responding to both reformist opposition, and the appropriation of Sufism by secularists and spiritualists. In the face of reformist critique, adherents find that they must address the fundamental accusation that shrine-based Sufism is un-Islamic, that it has veered from the path of what reformists define as “true” Islam. Countering this critique involves providing doctrinal proof for the legitimacy of shrine practice and belief, and claiming Sufi shrines as legitimate Muslim sacred spaces (along with mosques). Adherents pose these arguments against reformist rhetoric as Muslims who are staunchly Indian; a demographic to be reckoned with, and not dismissed as constituting the periphery of the “Muslim World”. But in taking these stances, adherents of shrine-based Sufism are also speaking to secularists and spiritualists, whose appropriations of Sufism, and whose characterizations of what it means to be Indian and what it means to be productive members of a modern world often undermine the self-identification of adherents as Muslims.

In responding to these multiple pressures on their socio-religious identity, adherents of shrine-based Sufism thus deploy narratives that simultaneously position them as vital players in a modern, cosmopolitan India, and that assert their claims to an origin in Islam’s pre-modern past.

## THE TEXTUAL REBUTTAL

Reformist groups in India levy the very serious accusation of being un-Islamic on adherents of shrine-based Sufism. As mentioned, accusations of idol-worship (*but parasti*), polytheism (*shirk*), and heretical innovation (*bid'at*) are very openly made against adherents; accusations that adherents do not take lightly. Proofs given by oppositional reformist groups against shrine-based Sufism are usually drawn from the Quran, the Hadis (sayings of Muhammad), and the Sirat (biographical anecdotes from the Prophet's life). One of the ways in which adherents of shrine-based Sufism respond to this is by presenting textual counter-proofs that validate specific practices.

Early in my fieldwork I was able to attend lectures on Quranic exegesis (*tafsir*) at the religious school (*madrassa*) at the shrine of Khaja Bandanawaz. This religious school was primarily a school for boys, where they are taught a standard curriculum<sup>48</sup> that trains them in the memorization of the Quran (*hifz*), its formal recitation (*qir'at*), and in basic Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqha*). The school is a good-sized open hall within the shrine complex, adjacent to the tomb of Khaja Bandanawaz. Annexed to this larger school building is a smaller anteroom that functions as a religious school for girls. The religious school for girls is much more limited in its scope. A few female teachers come in every weekday to tutor the girls in the memorization of the Quran, which they are tested on annually (for a certificate) by one of the male teachers from the boys' school next door.

At my request, the chief custodian of the shrine, Syed Shah Khusro Hussaini (henceforth Khusro Sahab), had asked one of the teachers from the boys' school to lecture on Quranic exegesis in the girls' annex. I would show up at the girls' school

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<sup>48</sup>This curriculum was set by the Jamia Nizamia seminary in Hyderabad. This seminary, as opposed to the Dar ul-Ulum Deoband, is largely a pro-shrine seminary.



every day close to noon. The little room would be packed with girls aged about four to sixteen. The whole room would be a-buzz with their murmured recitations as the girls sat cross-legged on floor mats, rocking back and forth, attempting to memorize the Quran. Occasionally one of the female tutors would linger on from the morning's session (the girls' school was technically open only till mid-day), but more often than not the girls would be working on their own. Many of the very young girls left at noon, but a few of the older girls stayed on to listen to the lectures on Quranic exegesis, which I realized was an unusual treat for them.

Maulvi Sahab, the religious scholar and teacher who gave these lectures on Quranic exegesis, proceeded with his lectures every day, tackling each book of the Quran in turn. A stern-looking man in appearance, Maulvi Sahab was a genial and engaging teacher, who was passionate about his work and also clearly enjoyed interacting with his students. He often digressed from the formal exegetical analysis to narrate incidents from other parts of the Quran that were related to a particular verse we had just read, or to clarify a particular point being made. He also often cracked jokes to enliven his lectures, grinning broadly as the students giggled shyly at his droll humor. As this religious school was part of a Sufi shrine, the mode of Islam taught here too was favorable to shrine-based Sufism; and often Maulvi Sahab would narrate episodes from the Quran or bring up verses that he felt validated some aspect of shrine-based Sufism.

He often brought up an episode from the Quran (in Surah Maryam) to make a case for the validity of shrine practice. In this episode, the aged Zakariyah, on seeing that unseasonal fruit often appeared in Maryam's room, prays for a child there. He is soon blessed with his son, Yahya (John). Here, Maryam's status as a saint or a friend of God

(*waliya*) ensures that divine blessings (*barkat*) shower down on her and her surroundings. These blessings rub off on others in close proximity to her. Maulvi Saahab used this incident as proof that a saint (*wali* or *waliya*) can be used as a means (*wasila*) to access God.

Another Quranic proof used was quite an intriguing one. Here Adam, after his fall from Paradise, takes the name of (as-yet unborn) Muhammad as a means (*wasila*) to have God forgive his trespasses. Similarly, Maulvi Sahab also recalled a traditional account of the actions of Ayesha, one of Muhammad's wives, to counter the claim that only living saints can be used as a means to God. In this narrative, Ayesha advises a group of petitioners who are desperate for rain at the time of a drought to merely make a hole in the roof right above Muhammad's grave: the unobstructed connection between the deceased Muhammad and the heavens would be enough to bring rain. Ayesha, herself considered a saint, is here suggesting that the deceased Muhammad be used as a means to reach God. Maulvi Sahab pointed to the latter two instances to highlight the legitimacy of using saints and prophets who were not alive as a means to connect with God; one of the points of contention among various groups being whether only living saints and prophets can be used as a means to access divine grace.

Many of my interlocutors also used non-Quranic sources, such as the hagiographies and teachings of Sufi saints to validate current practice. Some brought up Nizamuddin Auliya's view that bowing in reverence (*sajda-e ta'zim*) is vastly different from bowing as an act of worship (*sajda-e 'ibada*). Thus, if the intent of bowing before the tomb or a shrine custodian was to show respect or reverence, it did not violate the fundamental tenet of monotheism (*tauhid*). One highly revered Sufi master in Delhi I

spoke to, Nizami Sahab, added that proof of the difference between these two kinds of bowing could be found in the Quran as well. He recounted the episode in the Quran when God, on fashioning Adam from a lump of clay, commands the angels to bow before his new creation. “This, naturally”, said Nizami Sahab, “is an instance of reverential bowing, and not of worshipful bowing.”<sup>49</sup>

Maulvi Sahab, at the shrine’s school in Gulbarga, also often recalled episodes from the hagiographies of Sufi saints and biographical narratives of various prophets that he then used as validation for shrine practice. One instance in particular stood out to me. During one of his lectures at the religious school, Maulvi Sahab mentioned in passing that music was antithetical to the spirit of Islamic law (*shariyat*). I asked him how this could be reconciled with the use of music as part of ritual at Sufi shrines, something that could be routinely observed at the shrine at which he was a preacher and teacher. He replied that music had not been a part of Islamic ritual practice before its advent in India. However, when the Sufi saint, Moinuddin Chishti, arrived in India he found that it was an important part of Hindu practice. And so, keeping in mind the cultural practices of the region, music was incorporated into Islamic practice in the Subcontinent. He added after a pause:

But music is different from song-and-dance. Popular songs usually include things that are far removed from the Truth. But in Islam there is no injunction against *music* per se. The Prophet himself has said that our voices lend beauty to the Quran. And it is said that the Prophet’s caravans were led by those who sang to

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<sup>49</sup>The Quranic account of the fall of Satan is markedly different from Biblical narrative. In the Quran, God commands all the angels to bow before his best creation, Adam. All the angels, except for Satan (*iblis*), comply. Satan refuses to bow before Adam stating that he will submit only to God and to no other. God then punishes Satan for his disobedience. This account places Satan in a very grey area. I have heard accounts (especially from Sufi quarters) that position Satan as the greatest of believers because of his refusal to bow before no one but God, even at God’s command.

ease the hardships of the journey. So music and humming are not wholly prohibited in Islam.

He said that context was important in this regard; the type of music, its purpose and above all, the intent (*niyyat*) of those who sang and those who listened was very important. He then recounted a narrative from the hagiography of Nizamuddin Awliya. It is known that though music was very often a part of ritual practice at Nizamuddin Awliya's Sufi hospice (*khanqah*), he himself never participated in ritual audition (*sama*). When asked why this was so, he responded succinctly, with a clever play on words that is unfortunately lost in translation: "I do not do it, but I do not object to it either."<sup>50</sup>

Maulvi Sahab, and numerous other adherents of shrine-based Sufism I spoke to, emphasized that such a refusal to judge the actions of others as wrong at face-value came from a belief that it was not the act, but the intent (*niyyat*) behind it that was of paramount importance. The importance of the intent of the believer was emphasized to me over and over again by a variety of interlocutors. This was in fact, one of the main reasons given to me for the cross-religious appeal of the Sufi shrine; it did not matter if the devotees at the shrine were not Muslim as the intent of the believer was key.

I also often encountered conversion and miracle (*karamat*) narratives that were used to bolster the argument in favor of shrine-based Sufism. These are different from the narratives I have mentioned above because they are not based on authoritative texts as markers of religious legitimacy. The charisma of a given saint, his powers, and the miracles experienced and witnessed at the shrine were seen as proof in and of themselves. Coupled with tales of miracles performed by the saint during his life and beyond were conversion stories. Interlocutors at various shrines often recounted stories of Hindu

<sup>50</sup>*In kar na-mikonam, vali inkaar na-mikonam.* این کار نمی کنم ولی انکار نمی کنم!

followers of a saint who had embraced Islam through Sufism. Also quite common were narratives of anti-shrine reformists humbled by the charisma of a given Sufi saint.

My interlocutors often recounted personal experiences with the saint's power. As I have mentioned, the death anniversary of Sufi saints is an event that draws huge crowds to the prominent shrines. At the shrine of Khaja Bandanawaz, most of the pilgrims in attendance are from the rural areas of Deccan India. One such pilgrim I spoke to was an old woman from a village not too far from Gulbarga. Her clothes and her possessions told me that she was quite poor, and so making the journey to the shrine would not have been easy both in terms of her age and her income. I sat by her and started up a conversation. I asked her about what had drawn her to the shrine. She told me of how, years ago, her very young son had been separated from her among the throngs of pilgrims outside the shrine. The boy had later been found circumambulating the tomb, which to the woman was nothing short of a miracle. She said that it was the saint who had led this young child to the tomb and to safety amid the hundreds of thousands of people gathered for the event.

I found that the death-anniversary of a Sufi saint is a great venue to hear miracle and conversion narratives of this type. Preachers and scholars from various religious institutions are invited to deliver sermons at the shrine, and these sermons are often broadcast on speakers throughout the shrine complex for the benefit of all gathered. I heard miracle narratives that were part of these sermons, as well as from personal conversations with pilgrims at the shrines.

A miracle narrative that I heard often during the sermons at the shrine of Khaja Bandanawaz is one that has parallels in the hagiographies of many other South Asian Sufi saints. The shrine complex of Khaja Bandanawaz houses the shrines of his close relatives and descendants as well. One tomb that is quite popular among visitors is that of his great-grandson. The story goes that a renowned Sufi master from another town, Sayyed Ahmad Sher Sawar, had travelled a great distance to meet Khaja Bandanawaz. What was singular about this saint was that his powers were so great that he rode a lion (his epithet, Sher Sawar, literally means ‘one mounted on a lion/tiger’). As Sher Sawar approached the hospice of Khaja Bandanawaz, the latter’s great-grandson, Nadim Allah, decided to challenge the powers of the visitor. To outdo the lion-riding Sufi master, Nadim Allah sat himself on a wall and commanded it to move, which it promptly did. Amazed by the powers of Khaja Bandanawaz’s great grandson, Sayyed Ahmad Sher Sawar deemed himself unworthy to meet the saint himself and returned whence he came.

On hearing of this battle of miracles, Khaja Bandanawaz reprimanded his great-grandson for his impertinence. Unable to bear the displeasure of this great saint, Nadim Allah “walked into the Unknown” (*ghaib main chale gaye*), and never returned. The site of his disappearance continues to be very popular among pilgrims to the shrine. I have detailed the significance of this tomb to adherents in chapter 1. This miracle narrative is especially interesting since the power of Khaja Bandanawaz himself is only implied, thus rendering its unstated potential even more awesome<sup>51</sup>.

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<sup>51</sup>Simon Digby, in his essay *To Ride a Tiger or a Wall* (1994), has analyzed this particular form of hagiographical anecdote in detail. This anecdote is not unique to the shrine of Khaja Bandanawaz, and is one that is commonly narrated all over South Asia in reference to other Sufi figures. Digby notes that it can be found further afield as well. In this essay, Digby delineates the context of the wall-tiger narratives as one of competition between rival Sufi figures. Here, the power of the Sufi Master, who is established in his

Stories like these are common in the hagiographic tradition of South Asia. Sufi saints encounter rival Sufi masters and Yogis (masters of the Yogic traditions), and in the duel of miracles that often ensues, the Sufi saint central to the tale is able to surpass his challenger's powers. The 21<sup>st</sup> century heirs to this tradition are narratives of the encounter between the living Sufi saint (now entombed in a shrine<sup>52</sup>) and the doubting reformist. Two prominent issues are addressed in these narratives: 1) the continued hold that Sufi shrines have on Muslims and on the population of India in general; 2) moments when the power of the saint is perceptibly experienced.

A sermon that I heard during the death anniversary of Khaja Bandanawaz is a case in point. The preacher was a teacher at the shrine's religious school and began by posing a question: When the saint sat at his hospice (*khanqah*), a steady stream of people visited him. But why do so many thousands flock to the shrine now – hundreds of years later, when he is nowhere to be seen? “What is the solution to this conundrum?” he asked. He said that this was the question one could pose to the Tablighi Jama'at, the Ahl-e Hadis and the Jama'at-e Islami (various reformist groups currently active in India). “This is not a question that I pose! This is the question that God poses (to those who doubt)!” His voice thundered through the loud-speakers as he reached the crescendo of

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hospice (*khanqah*), is challenged by a Sufi figure who is not sedentary. The symbolism of riding a wall is linked with this rooted form of Sufi power and authority (p. 100-102). I have recounted this tale as I heard it at the shrine, but Digby reports this particular version of the anecdote as it is rendered in the *armughan-I sultani* (p. 124).

Nile Green (2004) has also contextualized “competition narratives”, especially those between Hindu and Muslim figures. Closely examining the cult of Shah Nur, Green paints a complex picture of a religiously plural landscape in Deccan India where these narratives of competition reflected competition over adherents whose religious identities were not always rigid and bounded.

<sup>52</sup>A primary belief among adherents of shrine-based Sufism is that Sufi saints do not die in the same sense as others. Sufis are on the path to oneness with God. This oneness is achieved only when the Sufi is able to totally surrender the Self or destroy the Self (*fana*) into the presence of God. This point of destruction results not in the death of the Sufi saint, but in his continued sustenance (*baqa*) within the being of God. Thus, the saint is believed to be alive in his tomb, a concept known as *zinda piri* (living sainthood).

his point: that there was no reasonable explanation for this except that the wonder of the saint's continued draw and charisma was God's doing; that the continued powers of the saint were meant to remind humanity of the Unknown (*ghaib*).

He then went on to speak of an encounter he had with a member of the Jama'at-e Islami<sup>53</sup>, whose son had gone missing. The man had oddly been convinced that his son would be found at a Sufi shrine. When pressed on why this was so, it emerged that the child had been conceived after the man's wife had asked for a Sufi saint's intercession. Emphasizing the irony of the situation, the preacher pointed out that this man, who made it his business to spread literature against shrine-based Sufism, was now going to Sufi shrines looking for his son. "This is the power of the saint," he concluded, "He has turned the circumstances of this man so, that he who once was totally against Sufi shrines, is now having to seek a miracle from Sufi saints in this manner!" This declamation was met with great appreciation from the audience of scholars and preachers in the shrine mosque, and I observed many of the lay pilgrims seated in the shrine-courtyard nodding in appreciation.

On visiting any prominent Sufi shrine in India, it is very easy to presume that adherents of shrine-based Sufism have no cause to feel threatened by reformist rhetoric and proselytizing. The sheer number of people at these shrines on any given weekday speaks of their immense popularity, and the massive numbers of people who travel great distances for the death anniversaries of even relatively minor saints speaks of the

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<sup>53</sup>While the Tablighi Jama'at and the Dar-ul Uloom Deoband seminary self-identify as Sufis (but as Sufi reformists) the Jama'at-e Islami Hind is a staunchly anti-Sufi. Their rhetoric is very much Salafi in character, with highly rationalized notions of religion and religious practice. In India, they are an a-political group (as are most Muslim religious groups in India – the Muslim League in Kerala being an exception to this). In Pakistan, however, the Jama'at-e Islami is very active in the political arena, and is a key player in regional and national electoral politics.



immense hold that these institutions and figures have on the religious imagination of India's people. However, any conversation with committed adherents does not take long to veer in the direction of reformist critique of shrine-based Sufism. And this is especially true of adherents who are closely associated with shrine-based Sufism – descendants of a saint, shrine functionaries, Sufi scholars and masters, teachers, preacher, students at the shrine, and daily visitors.

The sermon that I recounted above is a good example of this. It was one among around ten hour-long sermons delivered during the death anniversary of Khaja Bandanawaz. These sermons were broadcast from a mosque at the shrine that was packed with adherents; it was broadcast on loudspeakers scattered throughout the large shrine complex, which was bursting at the seams with hundreds and thousands of pilgrims. The absolute numbers at the shrine for the event would have led anyone to believe that shrine-based Sufism remains entirely unaffected by the activities of anti-shrine reformist groups. And yet, every sermon at some point directly addressed the issue of anti-shrine stances on the part of reformist groups. Arguments were presented directly in response to various aspects of reformist critique, and were intended for a lay audience. The need to confront the anti-shrine rhetoric of reformist groups seemed urgent, and the animosity towards these groups and their anti-shrine messages was palpable.

Doctrinal and theological arguments in favor of shrine-based Sufism were used to refute specifically the reformist claim that shrine-based Sufism had little or no basis in Islam. Such arguments were deployed to assert the legitimacy of specific shrine practices

(such as bowing before the tomb or the use of music in shrine ritual), or to validate the general concept of sainthood (*waliyat*) and saintly miracles (*karamat*).

Along with this, miracle and conversion narratives presented Sufi saints and their shrines as conduits of God's power, and therefore as living proof of their legitimacy in and of themselves. Sufi saints trace their spiritual descent (through a chain of master-disciple relationships) to the prophet Muhammad, and through him, to Adam. The past miracles of a saint during his lifetime, and the miracles that continue to be experienced centuries after a saint's passing, thus make the shrine a living connection to Islam's past and its beginnings. The continued experiences of pilgrims at saints' tombs tie miracle stories from centuries past to the very lived reality of shrine practice today. My interlocutors saw the validity of shrine-based Sufism as self-evident in this lived connection with Sufi saints, and in the continued interaction with their charisma and power as friends of God. However, the growing influence of reformist groups certainly placed them in a defensive stance, which compelled them to respond to reformist critique with doctrinal proofs of the validity of shrine-based Sufism and the reiteration of the God-granted power of Sufi saints.

#### ISLAMIC VALUES AND A SECULAR, DEMOCRATIC INDIA

While I did hear all of the above-mentioned narratives quite frequently, I also very often encountered a different kind of argument in favor of shrine-based Sufism. Adherents would identify certain values as fundamental to Islam, and then point to shrine-based Sufism as being a reification of these values. That is, my interlocutors spoke of themselves and fellow adherents, their practices and beliefs, and the shrine space itself as being reflective of core Islamic values. Importantly, they saw shrine-based

Sufism as being in a unique position to make concrete these values, due to its fundamental character. My interlocutors often pointed out to me that groups antagonistic to shrine-based Sufism lack the capacity to bring these ideals to bear.

My interlocutors identified inter-religious dialog and cooperation, unifying diverse peoples, and equality among citizens and subjects as some of the core messages of Islam. And intriguingly, my interlocutors used terms like “communal harmony”, “national integration”, “secularism” and “democracy” to give voice to these values. That is, the language used to articulate these Islamic values overlapped with the narratives used by the modern Indian nation-state to articulate its own core values. Many of my interlocutors were separated by hundreds of miles and had never met or been in correspondence; they belonged to varied socio-economic classes. And yet over and over again, they brought up these aspects of shrine-based Sufism, and consistently used the lexicon of Indian multiculturalist secularism to express them.

I once attended a seminar organized by a Sufi master and shrine custodian in Delhi to commemorate the life and works of the great Indian Sufi poet Amir Khusro. A poet, musician and inventor, Amir Khusro was one of the most devoted disciples of the saint Nizamuddin Auliya. He wrote and composed beautiful poems for his master in Persian, the court language of the time, and in the language of the people of the Gangetic plains, Hindavi. His poems contain Persio-Arab imagery, as well as Indic motifs. The seminar that I attended was held in the neighborhood of Nizamuddin, in a hall adjacent to another minor Sufi shrine. There were mostly lay Muslim men in attendance, and the few women who were there (including me), were seated at the back of the room. The audience sat on cushioned mats on the floor, while the participants in the seminar were

seated at a table on the dais. The speakers were Sufi teachers, religious scholars, and professors of religion and history at various Universities.

Many speakers at this seminar spoke of Amir Khusro's contributions to interreligious concord. One among them declared that the 13<sup>th</sup> century poet had been a "champion of secular democracy". That Amir Khusro would have no conception of secular democracy as we know it now was of little consequence to the speaker. In his talk, the term "secular democracy" was used to express the more abstract value of finding commonalities amongst diverse cultures. Khusro's work here is seen as a step in the direction of that "composite" and "syncretic" culture so valued in secularist and spiritualist narratives in India today.

On another occasion, Abdul Ghani Sahab, an adherent who was also the librarian at the shrine of Khaja Bandanawaz in Gulbarga (and an interlocutor with whom I spent considerable amounts of time), told me that the saint never discriminated against people of different religions, and all were welcome at his lodge if their intentions were pure. "It was about national integration, you know," he added. The phrase "national integration" here seems quite out of place, considering that Khaja Bandanawaz was a 14<sup>th</sup> century saint in Deccan India. But here, the phrase "national integration" is being used to articulate the idea that the Sufi hospice was a place where diverse peoples were brought together by common desires and goals. I could go on ad infinitum. Over a year of research in India I heard narratives of this sort very often.

I don't want to suggest here that these terms and phrases are merely stand-ins for other abstract values. Phrases like "national integration" and "communal harmony"<sup>54</sup> are so enmeshed in the Indian national ethos, and so value-laden that it would be naive to suppose that they did not possess some inherent meaning of their own; meaning that was independent (but not necessarily separate) from the values identified as fundamentally Islamic by my interlocutors. That is, these terms were not being used as merely *substitutes* for what, to my interlocutors, were core Islamic values. By using these phrases my interlocutors were suggesting that there were definite points of congruence between core Islamic ideals and the ideals of a modern, religiously and culturally diverse India. That the two are not incompatible; that being part of the *ahl-e sunnat wa al-jama'at* (the term used by adherents of shrine-based Sufism to self-identify), and being integrated members of the Indian secular democratic nation-state are not mutually exclusive states of being; that they are in fact irrevocably connected.

I have thus far not engaged much with the issue of Hindu nationalism and its place in this mosaic. However, one encounter during my fieldwork does call for me to dip my toe into this other complex pool of religio-political relations. Early during my research in India I had the opportunity to visit the shrine of Baba Budan in the Southern Indian state of Karnataka. I have previously described how this shrine has been a site for contestations over sacred space between adherents of shrine-based Sufism and regional Hindu nationalist groups. The former claim the site as the shrine of the Sufi saint Baba Budan; the latter contend that it was originally a shrine of the Hindu figure Dattatreya, and that it was appropriated by Muslims as a Sufi shrine. The shrine had long catered to

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<sup>54</sup>My interlocutors invariably used these terms in English, even if they were speaking Hindi, Urdu or Kannada.

both Hindu and Muslim pilgrims to the site by providing ritually-blessed offerings in the form of Sufi *tabarruk* and Hindu *prasad*. The site is now, however, a transformed space. The communal dispute that emerged in the early 1990s has now been brought to court. The site has been cordoned off with metal barricades and barbed wire fencing by the State till a legal decision is taken. However, big rallies of Hindu nationalist supporters still occur outside the shrine, and the community of Sufi adherents who claim descent from the saint still lives in the villages surrounding the shrine.

I had visited this shrine as a child, as part of a family excursion to the beautiful countryside of Karnataka's coffee plantations. I have very positive memories of the shrine and its beautiful, mist-swathed environs. The shrine had been a relatively organic site, blending in with its surroundings; moss-covered steps led to a shrine complex that was partly a built structure and partly a cave. Inside, the shrine was chilly, humid and dark. Niches in the cave area were lit with oil-lamps, and parts of the wall were moist with seepage from natural springs. I have little recollection of the actual tomb of the saint, but I do remember receiving flowers and sugar from a Muslim attendant as well as from a Hindu priest.

When we visited the shrine in early 2009, however, it was a transformed place. The natural browns and greens of the original shrine complex were interrupted by bright blue railings and the entire site was cordoned off with a barbed-wire fence. The effect was jarring and violent. Entry into the shrine complex was barred due to a court-order. A few adherents paid their respects to the saint from beyond this barbed wire fence, and their offerings of incense, flowers and coconuts were managed by an attendant who sat by the entrance. Some of these adherents had travelled from very far to be here, and were

visibly disappointed at not being able to enter the sacred-space of the shrine. The family of hereditary shrine custodians and Hindu nationalist groups were embroiled in this battle over a sacred space that had long been shared. I have recounted that interestingly enough, the Muslims of the area were mostly apathetic to the cause of the Sufi shrine since most had reformist leanings, and that aid for the hereditary custodians of the shrine had come from secular activist groups rather than from the Muslim community around the shrine.

While there, Dr. Bigelow and I had the opportunity to have an extended conversation with a few shrine adherents. Some were members of the community, who claimed descent from the saint. A couple of the men had been posted to the shrine as representatives of the state to supervise its handling as a disputed site. We were ushered into a bare room that had been constructed outside of the shrine complex that housed a desk and a few simple chairs.

Asked if they acquiesced to the sacred space of the shrine being shared by Hindus and Muslims (as it had been for as far back as people could remember), one of the community members, Sayyed Pasha, said to my colleague and me, “This is India! In India, it’s imperative that we move forward together. We shouldn’t look at creed or caste.” Then smiling, and pointing to each of us in the group he continued,

Now look...you are here, she is here, we are here. She is Christian, she is Hindu, I am a Muslim, but we are kindred. We just have different religions. This is India, and in India we must walk together. In our language we say that we are *bharatiya muslim* (Indian Muslim). In India, we must take everyone along as we move forward; whether one is small, or big, we gather everyone as we walk. Our kinship expands from this, and so this is of benefit to us as well. We must not pause to differentiate and say, ‘No, he is Hindu; he is Muslim; he is Christian...Fighting for the Truth; that’s what *jihad* is. Sitting amidst each other

with love; that's what humanity is; just as we're sitting here now—Hindu, Christian and Muslim.

Sayyed Pasha's remarks were made apropos to Hindu nationalist claims to the shrine's space. But his narrative, and many others like it that I encountered through the course of my research, reveal much about the ways in which adherents of shrine-based Sufism assert their identity as Muslims and as Indians. Here, our interlocutor had drawn a link between being Indian and being Muslim, and how each affected the other: the ideals of togetherness, of kinship across religious lines were ideals at the core of both the Indian nation and of Islam. In making a statement about shrine-based Sufism and the nature of the shrine space, Sayyed Pasha felt it necessary to draw on both identities – national and religious – to make his point.

Through such interactions with numerous interlocutors I also got the sense time and again that adherents believed that the seeds of what we now term as secular democracy or multiculturalism or pluralism, were all planted in India centuries ago; that the basic values that lie at the core of these concepts were ones that were not only embraced by Sufi Muslims, but often originated with them. And to these adherents of shrine-based Sufism, it is these same basic values that continue to be reified by them in 21<sup>st</sup> century India.

This notion of continuity and of the legacy of Sufism was most clearly articulated by one of my interlocutors, Dr. S. L. Peeran. Peeran Sahab, as I addressed him, was a charismatic and passionate individual. He was a retired judge and committed Sufi who ran an organization dedicated to the study and dissemination of Sufism in Bangalore.



This organization published journals in both English and in Urdu, and held gatherings where religious figures and scholars would speak about Sufism to a lay Muslim audience.

Peeran Sahab and I had many deeply interesting conversations about Sufism that lasted for hours at a stretch. During one such conversation, he told me that democracy in India was possible only because Sufis had brought Islam's message of equality to India, and because they had questioned the very basis of Hinduism's caste-centered hierarchy. The simple example set by Sufi hospices and shrines, which were open to all regardless of class, caste or religion, had resulted in a major shift in how people perceived their position within society. It had made democracy more easily acceptable and adoptable in India. To him, the advent of Islam in India (via shrine-based Sufism) and the open-door policy of Sufi shrines and hospices had set the stage for modern Indian secular and democratic institutions.

On a similar vein, one of my interlocutors at the shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia, Nooruddin Sahab, on being asked about the importance of Sufi shrines today, said to me very forcefully: “[The Sufi shrines] is where national integration<sup>55</sup> is forged. If there weren't places like the Sufi shrine in India, then you might as well erase the word ‘secularism’ from the Indian constitution!”

My interlocutors often pointed to the shrine space itself as proof of the congruence of these two categories: being a Muslim who adhered to shrine-based Sufism, and being a secular and modern Indian. The shared sacred space of the shrine and the

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<sup>55</sup>The term ‘national integration’ is often deployed in state and non-state rhetoric to describe the unity of India as political and cultural entity. I unpack this term in detail in chapter 7.

cross-religious appeal of the messages conveyed by South Asian Sufi poetry were seen as exemplifying *both* the ideals of Islam, and those of Indian multiculturalist secularism.

One of my most intriguing interlocutors was an aged Sufi scholar and master whom I had got to know in Delhi, Nizami Sahab. I once asked him what he thought the importance of Sufism was in our contemporary world. As we sat in his century-old home in the back-alleys of the Nizamuddin neighborhood, his eyes twinkled as he answered, “Uniting people (*milap*), bringing people together. This is Islam, and this is Sufism.” I then asked him if this task of uniting people was ongoing; if it was something that could be seen happening now. He raised his eyebrows, and with great enthusiasm he said, “Of course it’s ongoing! And where else but at Sufi shrines do you see it?! It is there that people are brought together.”

Again and again my interlocutors at Sufi shrines presented me with the juxtaposition of the Indian state’s multiculturalist secular rhetoric and conceptions of Islam’s core messages. Early in my research, I sat with other female students in the religious school at the shrine of Khaja Bandanawaz in Gulbarga as the head of the religious school, Maulvi Abdul Razzaq Sahab expounded to us on Sufi Islam. When I first arrived at the Sufi shrine in Gulbarga, he had asked me to present him with a list of questions that I had about Sufism, which I had promptly done. Since he was a religious scholar, I had asked him mostly theological questions regarding Islamic law and how it pertained to Sufism. When it came time for me to leave Gulbarga, Maulvi Abdul Razzaq Sahab made a special appearance at the girls’ school for a few days in order to answer my questions, and to expound on Sufism in general.

During these lectures, he touched briefly on theological issues, but for the most part he emphasized the humanitarian aspects of Sufism. To illustrate his point that Sufism embodied the message of service to all humanity, he recounted how Khaja Bandanawaz had enjoined his followers to be like the large tree in the courtyard of the shrine (a tree that still stands in the shrine), which withstood the intense heat of day but provided shade for so many. Then, much to my surprise, the Maulvi recalled a public service message that he had heard years ago on the state-run television channel, Doordarshan: “Service to mankind is service to God” (*mano-seva hai prabhu seva*).<sup>56</sup> This message, he said, captures the essence of Sufi Islam. It was extremely interesting to me that he had identified a core value of Sufi Islam in a state-produced message, and that he considered the phrase to best capture a core tenet of Sufism. At another point during this same lecture he said that we must serve humanity and regard it as one whole. “All humans are part of this whole, as of one body.” He then recited a verse by the medieval Persian poet Sa’adi:

*bani adam azai-e yek pikarand  
keh dar afarinash ze yek goharand*<sup>57</sup>

The children of Adam are as limbs of one body;  
In their glory, they are of the same essence.

He continued: “So this is *tasawwuf*: to wish for your brothers what you’d wish for yourself. And your brother could be Hindu, he could be Christian, he could be Muslim.”

<sup>56</sup> The maulvi’s use of this phrase is doubly interesting because it employs the term ‘*prabhu*’, a Hindu word for God.

<sup>57</sup> بنی آدم اعضای یک پیکرند / که در آفرینش ز یک گوهرند

Maulvi Abdul Razzaq Sahab was drawing on quite varied sources to convey the message of Sufism: from medieval Persian poets to state-sponsored public service messaging.

One interaction during my fieldwork that has stayed with me was with my primary interlocutor at the shrine of Nizamuddin Auliya, Nooruddin Sahab. One evening in winter he and I were sitting at the foot of Nizamuddin Auliya's tomb and discussing Sufism (as we often did). I posed the same question to him that I had posed to so many other interlocutors: what he thought the contemporary importance of Sufi Islam was. He looked out at the throngs of people at the shrine who circumambulated the tomb or sat by the ritual musicians as they performed, and said with sudden energy:

Look at this! Different kinds of people are here at the shrine! Rich, poor, men, women, young, old, Hindu, Muslim. They all come here because of Hazrat Nizamuddin. They come here and sit together, and no one asks what your religion is. Islam does not teach people of different religions to hate each other. No religion teaches that!

At this point I recalled a line from a poem penned by the eminent Sufi philosopher-poet of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Iqbal. And I said, "As Iqbal wrote, 'Religion does not teach enmity amongst people' (*mazhab nahin sikhata apas main bair rakhna*)."

At this, Nooruddin Sahab became pensive. He looked out into the crowd of shrine visitors, nodded slowly and in a steady voice completed the verse, "We are Indian, we are Indian by birth, and India is ours" (*hindi hain ham, hindi hain ham vatan se; Hindustan hamara*). In echoing his sentiment in Iqbal's verse, I had quite forgotten that the line I had recited had been from one of India's national songs. But Nooruddin Sahab's completion of the verse brought new layers of his narrative into perspective. Whereas I had recalled the words of Iqbal only as words penned by a modern-day Sufi philosopher, Nooruddin Sahab had just driven home his point that the identities of being

Muslim and being Indian were enmeshed in the fabric of the Sufi shrine. His completion of the verse made the sentiment being expressed not just words of Sufi wisdom by virtue of their author, but words that were marked explicitly as Indian. To him, the relevance of Sufism lay in the reification of an ideal that he saw both as Muslim and as Indian.

My interlocutors often also pointed to Sufi poetry performed as part of the *qawwali* repertoire as exemplifying this coming together of people and cultures. As I have discussed in the context of the poet and Sufi devotee Amir Khusro, many *qawwalis* have both Islamicate and Hindu motifs. Performers are very conscious of this, and will often highlight this meshing of metaphors by interrupting their singing to point out the mixing of motifs and language. One ritual musician, while performing to a more intimate gathering at the home of one of my interlocutors came to a verse in the *qawwali* where Amir Khusro refers to the saint Nizamuddin Auliya as ‘Manmohan’ (another name for the Hindu deity, Krishna). He paused here to point this out, and then went on to say, “Allah understands Hindi, and Bhagwan (an Indic name for God) understands Urdu.” This was interesting commentary on the highly politicized issue of Hindi and Urdu in South Asia, where the former language gets deemed a Hindu language while the latter is identified as a Muslim language.

These narratives, at face value, are quite similar to the ones heard from secularists and spiritualists in their pro-Sufi arguments. They present Sufism as compatible with the values of a secular nation-state. What differentiates these from the narratives that originate from adherents of shrine-based Sufism is their commitment to keeping the conversation about Sufism centered on Islam. To secularists and spiritualists, Sufism is often a stand-alone entity (often more closely linked to Hinduism than to Islam).

Whereas to adherents of shrine-based Sufism, the potential to unify that Sufism possesses is not of value only because it reaffirms the ideals of a modern multiculturalist nation-state; it has immense value because of its origins in the very core of Islam – the Quran, the teachings of Muhammad, and the insights of the Sufi masters. We can see in the instance I have recounted above for instance, where Peeran Sahab links democracy in India today to the advent of Islam centuries ago, that to adherents Sufism embodies the fundamental values of Islam. These values have not originated with the Sufi masters. They are present in the Quran and are reflected in the teachings of Muhammad; and the Sufi masters have merely been able to recognize and exemplify these messages already inherent to Islam.

The direct link that my interlocutors saw between Islam and the values of a multiculturalist secular democracy was nowhere more evident than when they recalled Quranic verses that they identified as especially important. They cited these verses when speaking of what they deemed core values of Islam, but also pointed to how these values were especially relevant and essential in the modern world. They saw reflected in these verses principles of pluralism, religious tolerance, and the acceptance of a diverse religious milieu as the norm. And significantly, they considered shrine-based Sufism to be in a unique position to reify these ideals.

Throughout my year in India, there were a few verses from the Quran that my interlocutors often brought up. For instance, adherents often quoted verse 13 from the book, The Private Apartments (*al-hujurat*) of the Quran with emphasis on the words:

*yā 'ayyuhā an-nāsu 'innā khalaqnākum min dhakarīn wa 'unthā wa ja `alnākum shu `ūbāan wa qabā'ila lita `ārafū<sup>58</sup>*

O mankind! Indeed, we have created you from a man and a woman, and have made you into various peoples and tribes so that you may know one another. (49:13)

Nizami Sahab, the aged scholar whom I have previously quoted, once recounted an instance from his youth when some of his acquaintances had said to him that as a Muslim he could not fully accept, and could not be a willing part of a multiculturalist nation-state like India. This proposition had been made against the backdrop of the religiously divisive politics that preceded India's partition and independence in the late 1940s. He told me that he had responded by quoting the above verse, and had pointed out with great relish that being Muslim was in no way inimical to the acceptance of diversity.

Another verse I heard in a similar context was verse 48 from the book, The Table (*al-ma'ida*) of the Quran. It is a long verse, but the part of this verse that my interlocutors recited was:

*likullin ja `alnā minkum shir`atan wa minhājāan wal law shā'a al-lahu laja `alukum 'ummatan wāhidatan wa lakin liyabluwakum fī mā 'atākum fāstabiqū al-khayrātī<sup>59</sup>*

We have made for each of you a law and a way. And if God had willed it so, He could have made you as a single people. But so that He might try you in what has been given to you, so strive with each other in virtues. (5:48)

Asghar Ali Engineer, one of my interlocutors, referenced this same verse in an article published through his Center for Study of Society and Secularism. He writes:

<sup>58</sup> يٰٓاَيُّهَا النَّاسُ اِنَّا خَلَقْنٰكُمْ مِّنْ ذَكَرٍ وَّاُنْثٰى وَجَعَلْنٰكُمْ شُعُوْبًا وَّقَبٰٖٓٔلَ لِتَعَارَفُوْٓا

<sup>59</sup> كُلُّ جَعَلْنَا مِنْكُمْ شِرْعَةً وَّمِنْهَاجًا وَّلَوْ شَاءَ اللّٰهُ لَجَعَلْنٰكُمْ اُمَّةً وَّاٰحَدَةً وَّلٰكِن لِّيَّبْلُوْكُمْ فِىْ مَآءِ اٰتٰنِكُمْ فَاَسْتَبِقُوْا الْخَيْرٰتِ

As against power, the Sufis for ages carried on a dialogue with the people of other religious groups, with Jews, Christians, and Hindus in India. While kings and sultans grabbed power causing so much bloodshed, the Sufis followed the Islamic civilisation's values and pursued the unity of people — Muslims as well as non-Muslims... The Quran also lays emphasis on pluralism. According to the Quran, Allah could have created one people but He created diversity and plurality so that He can test us and it is better to cooperate with each other in good deeds.

Two other Quranic references I often heard were from the books, The Cow (*al-baqara*) and The Disbelievers (*al-kafirun*). The first line of verse 256 in the former was one such verse:

*lā 'ikrāha fī ad-dīni*<sup>60</sup>

There is no compulsion in religion. (2:256)

And verse 6 of the latter:

*lakum dīnukum wa liya dīni*<sup>61</sup>

Unto you your religion, and unto me, my religion. (109:6)

Interlocutors presented these verses as proofs of Islam's acknowledgement and acceptance of a plural world.

These verses are quoted by many others who wish to point to the pluralistic aspects of the Quran. However, what makes the use of these verses by my interlocutors interesting is that they see shrine-based Sufism as being uniquely able to live by the Quranic messages of tolerance and acceptance. They especially considered the shared sacred space of the shrine as a site where this message was reified and reproduced: a message that they emphasized was common to both Islam and the modern Indian nation.

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<sup>60</sup> لَا إِكْرَاهَ فِي الدِّينِ

<sup>61</sup> لَكُمْ دِينُكُمْ وَلِيَ دِينِ



As one of my interlocutors said, “Muslims don’t go to temples; Hindus don’t go to mosques. But everyone can come here as believers. The Sufi shrine is a platform for secularism.”

## MARKING BOUNDARIES

Not surprisingly, I found that adherents of shrine-based Sufism kept any discussion of Sufism grounded in Islam. This can be seen as a response to both anti-shrine reformist groups, and pro-shrine secularists and spiritualists. In deploying Quranic verses, narratives from Muhammad’s life, and insights of revered Sufi saints such as Nizamuddin Auliya and Rabia Basri, adherents of shrine-based Sufism are very clearly speaking to reformist critiques of shrine-based Sufism. These text-based narratives are deployed as positive markers of an essentially Muslim identity. Claiming a position within the fold of Islam vis-à-vis secularist and spiritualist narratives, on the other hand, involves acts of distancing and negation as well.

As has been discussed in the previous chapter, secularist and spiritualist narratives often characterize Sufism as closely related to, or even derivative of, Hindu Vedantic traditions. Staking out a Muslim identity in response to such appropriations involves asserting Sufism’s independence from Hindu traditions. This is not a straightforward task as adherents of shrine-based Sufism are well aware. As I have outlined above, adherents are very accepting of, and even promote the link that shrine-based Sufism has to India, its languages, and its adoption of regional customs into its Islamic practice. This deep connection to India is important to adherents of shrine-based Sufism, and yet this connection is often used by spiritualists and secularists to dissociate Sufism from Islam. I

found that in negotiating a path between these various pressures, adherents rejected outright any suggestion that Sufism borrowed or originated from Hindu philosophic and theological traditions. At the same time, however, they wholeheartedly embraced Sufism's deep ties to Indic ritual traditions. Adherents got around the bind they faced by characterizing these as shared "culture" or shared "customs", rather than specifically religious practices.

These acts of alignment and distancing can be clearly seen in the following lines from the introductory page of the website for the International Sufi Centre. This introduction was written by Dr. Peeran, a trustee of the organization and the editor of their English-language magazine, *Sufi World*, and their Urdu-language magazine, *Anwar-e Sufiyya*:

The Ulama (religious scholars) of the Government of Saudi Arabia have declared Sufism or Tasawwuf or Irfan, its study and practice as Polytheism i.e. shirk and as not being within the tenets of Islam. Nothing can this be shorter than a lie. This charge has been met by scholarly writings down the centuries by eminent saints and scholars of Ahl e Sunnat wal Jama'at. Sufism has not drawn its practices from Greeks or Vedanta. If there is any similarity, it is purely coincidental. Several great religions have similar teachings and all aim at reaching the Truth through various methods. Sufism or Tasawwuf or Irfan has totally arisen from Holy Quran, precepts of Prophet sallallahu alaihi wasallam and from the lives of his companions... (The International Sufi Centre) is an attempt to expound and show that, there are no contradictions in the teachings of Islam and Tasawwuf or Sufism. Both teach humanism and calls up mankind towards love, peace, and brother-hood to achieve higher thoughts through its practices. [sic]

The negotiation underway here is quite sophisticated, and precarious. On the one hand, the many shared traditions between South Asian Sufi Islam and Indic ritual practices, and the similarities between many Islamic and Hindu philosophical strains is used as ammunition by oppositional reformist groups in questioning the validity of

Sufism. On the other, these same connections are often highly valued by adherents of shrine-based Sufism as markers of Islam's implicit message of pluralism and of their sense of national belonging.

A conversation I once overheard at the Khaja Bandanawaz shrine highlighted the complexity of the stance adopted by my interlocutors. The head of the shrine's religious school, Maulvi Abdul Razzaq, was discussing Sufism with the shrine's secretary, Muhammad Rasheed. They were talking about the net of flowers, known as the *jhela*, which decked the enormous dome of the tomb of Khaja Bandanawaz during his death anniversary. At this shrine, the *jhela* was put in place jointly by a Muslim and a Hindu family who had undertaken this task for centuries now. In reference to this joint effort the Maulvi said to Rasheed Sahab, "It is this humanity that goes by the name of Sufism." (It is important to note here that he used the Arabic word for Sufism, *tasawwuf*.) He continued:

Not making a distinction (based on religion)...only looking at the intent (*niyyat*) in people's hearts...Hazrat Bandanawaz never discriminated between people. Whoever came—Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Jew, Sikh—he would glance into their hearts and determine if their intentions were sound. Nothing was hidden from him – everything appeared plainly to him. This is *tasawwuf*.

Muhammad Rasheed Sahab then said, "You know, I had never heard of the word *tasawwuf* before I came to work at the shrine! I had heard of Sufism, but not of *tasawwuf*." The Maulvi let out a short amused laugh at this, and said, "Sufism is just something new...for younger folks. The real complex stuff is what we call *tasawwuf*. And I have delved deeply into the study of *tasawwuf*."

I was intrigued by this differentiation being made between the English term 'Sufism' and the Arabic/Persian term '*tasawwuf*'. I had not heard such a distinction

made before. A few weeks later, as I sat with fellow students in the shrine's religious school for girls, I asked Maulvi Abdul Razzaq Sahab to elaborate on this. The Maulvi gave his characteristic smile, accompanied by a quirk of his eyebrow, and said,

The two become different, you see. The sense of 'Sufism' these days is tantamount to taking good things from here, good things from there...there being good and bad in all religions. Things have thus got mixed up. And so those who oppose us think that *tasawwuf* is separate from the Quran and the teachings of the Prophet. But this is not true at all.

He then brought up the Mughal prince, Dara Shiko (who is also a darling of secularists and spiritualists in India), who translated many works from the Sanskrit to Persian and also wrote commentaries on Hindu texts. The Maulvi said,

Dara Shiko wrote a book called 'The Confluence of the Two Seas' (*majama'ul bahrain*). It is an exceptional book. It's hard to get a hold of, but if you do, you must read it. In this book (Dara Shiko) looked at the works of Sufi and Hindu saints in order to understand the concept of monotheism (*tawhid*). Now this can be called 'Sufism', but not '*tasawwuf*'.

The Maulvi's ruminations on 'Sufism' and '*tasawwuf*' amazed me. He was clearly distinguishing between mystical and philosophical traditions that were entirely grounded in Islam (*tasawwuf*) from traditions that drew from multiple sources – Sufism. While the latter was certainly worthy of praise and consideration, it was different from the former in that it was not entirely Islamic in its sources.

The Maulvi's words make apparent a clear dissonance between the way secularists and spiritualists conceptualize Sufism and the way adherents do. While to most academics and non-adherents, the word 'Sufism' is merely a translation of the term '*tasawwuf*', the Maulvi sees them as different approaches to understanding God – one Islamic, and the other not entirely so. Non-Islamic understandings are not by definition false (as the Maulvi often said, "There are good things in all religions."), but they do not

form the basis of what adherents of shrine-based Sufism practice and believe. Here, the boundaries of shrine-based Sufism, or *tasawwuf*, are being delineated vis-à-vis those who would question its Islamic identity, and those who would take its kinship with non-Islamic mystic traditions too far.

It is clear from the above narratives that my interlocutors who were adherents of shrine-based Sufism equated Sufism with open-mindedness and acceptance of difference. They also saw oppositional groups (both Salafi and Wahhabi groups, and Sufi reformist groups) as insular and intolerant. They perceived this intolerance to be directed not only at non-Muslims, but of course, at adherents of shrine-based Sufism as well.

This kind of distancing from other anti-shrine reformist groups came out quite clearly in a conversation I had with the chief custodian (*sajjada nashin*) of the Khaja Bandanawaz shrine. He said that whatever kind of Islam is being taught through the shrine-run Education Society, or at the shrine's religious school is "Islam through Sufism", which he defined as "moderate Islam". He continued, "Even in the shrine *madrassa* we avoid any kind of extremism... Students get trained in the light of Sufism – a softer Islam." He then spoke about Muslim "fanatics" and their hard-line interpretations of the Quran. He added, "I call them fanatics (and not fundamentalists) because a fundamentalist would actually have to be broadminded after studying these things.

I encountered these acts of distancing quite frequently. There was a sense among my interlocutors that strict literal interpretations of the Quran and Hadis (prophetic sayings of Muhammad) were misplaced or even wholly inaccurate. Many of my interlocutors perceived Salafi and Wahhabi Islam to be on the slippery slope to terrorism,

something that maligns all Muslims, and many placed Sufi reformist groups in this category as well. One of my primary interlocutors at the Nizamuddin shrine, Nooruddin Sahab, expressed this sentiment as he lamented the state of Muslim religious education in South Asia. He said,

People don't want to send their children to religious schools any more. And can you blame them? In many of these schools little children are brainwashed and even handed guns! They twist young minds. They have brought a bad name to Islam!

While the extent of this correlation between religious education and religious violence may be highly exaggerated, the concern among my interlocutors about the need to be wary of certain kinds of religious education was palpable<sup>62</sup>.

Thus, in their worldview, where being an adherent of shrine-based Sufism brings with it open-mindedness and acceptance of plurality, oppositional groups represent a tendency towards intolerance and hatred. To them, shrine-based Sufism was antithetical to “fundamentalism”, “terrorism”, “extremism” and “religious violence”. It was not merely a difference of opinion and approach, but a dichotomy between “true Islam” and misguided doctrine; in effect, it was a mirroring of the stance of Muslim reformist groups. In this dichotomous view, shrine-based Sufism was congruent and contiguous with both the fundamental principles of Islam and with multiculturalist secularism of India. The values of these two entities – Islam and India – were not mutually exclusive. In fact, they were aligned on multiple counts. And it was shrine-based Sufism that was the point of congruence.

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<sup>62</sup>As one interlocutor said, the alarm evident in his tone, “We’re all really worried about my nephew. He’s started going to the mosque every day!”

Adherents of shrine-based Sufism time and again spoke of how their beliefs and practices reflected this congruity. They especially emphasized the shared sacred-space of the shrine as being uniquely capable of making real the entwined values of Islam and multiculturalist secularism. To them, adherents of shrine-based Sufism, through their embodiment of these values, were in a position to stand as examples to other Muslims as well as to non-Muslim Indians. Thus many adherents I spoke to considered themselves not only true Muslims, but also true Indians by virtue of their commitment to the shared values of Islam and multiculturalist secularism.

This dichotomy that adherents of shrine-based Sufism emphasize is of course, problematic. As I have mentioned above, at a fundamental level it mirrors the dichotomies that Muslim reformist groups present vis-à-vis shrine-based Sufism. It is problematic in another way: by positioning themselves as uniquely embodying the values of multiculturalist secularism, adherents of shrine-based Sufism in effect place anti-shrine groups as antithetical to these same values. Inter-religious relations in India continue to be strained by the legacies of colonial policy and the politics of partition. Added to this are the events of the past decade (starting with September 11) that have made Muslims suspect in the eye of the police and among many non-Muslims in India. In such an environment, it is certainly not easy being a Muslim in India. It is doubly difficult if you are a Muslim who, by virtue of your beliefs and practices, is positioned as incongruous with the values of modernity, secularism, and democracy.

However, it is important to note that adherents of shrine-based Sufism frame their narratives in response to multiple pressures on their religious identity. Confronted with the sharp criticism of Muslim reformist groups, and with the blunt-edged force of

secularist and spiritualist appropriation, adherents of shrine-based Sufism respond with incredible complexity. Their narratives navigate the multiple pressures to their religious identity, while also establishing an inalienable link to the Indian nation-state.

## AUTHENTICITY AND BELONGING

To conclude this chapter, and to draw the main themes of this dissertation together, I will now discuss what has been at the heart of the identity-narratives of those who adhere to shrine-based Sufism: narratives of authenticity and belonging. These two notions – authenticity and belonging – are deeply interconnected. Narratives of religious authenticity especially, often have roots in topography and territory. Places of birth and death and resurrection, the confluences of holy rivers and the bubbling of sacred springs, sites of revelation and miracle, and the earthly playgrounds of gods and demons – all of these create an irrevocable bond between heaven and earth. It is not surprising then, that claims to religious authenticity and claims to belonging are bedfellows.

Such claims to religious authenticity are often counterintuitive, and lead to notions of belonging that are not situated at what is presumed to be the “point of origin”. But perhaps my use of the term ‘counterintuitive’ here too is telling. It comes from an essentialist (and Orientalist) understanding of authenticity, where the point of origin is fetishized. Ernst (2005), in his piece *Situating Sufism and Yoga* cautions against the need to look to origins to establish the authenticity of any practice and belief. There is a compelling urge to look to some hoary past, some point of origin to find the reason for something now being true. He writes,

Once influence has been established, it is felt, one has said something of immense significance; the phenomenon has been explained – or rather, explained away.



There is in addition an implicit evaluation in this kind of language. ‘Sources’ are ‘original’ while those ‘influenced’ by them are ‘derivative’. [p. 15]

Such a fetishization of the source both in academic scholarship, as well as in the popular media, lead many to presume that religious authenticity too, must inevitably derive from such a point of origin (real or imagined).

Islam, especially, has been vulnerable to such presumptions. Mecca as the center of the “Muslim world” has captured the imagination of scholars, adventurers, and the lay observer for centuries now. The idea of Muslims the world over bowing in prayer in the direction of Mecca several times a day, and the image of the churning masses of Muslims during Hajj have evoked both a sense of awe and a sense of bafflement about this notion of Islam’s “center”. At its extreme and most overt, this fetishization of Islam’s center can be seen in the reactionary material produced by such radical evangelical Christians as Jack Chick, or even Rush Limbaugh.

At a subtler, yet no less incendiary level, the idea that Islam (and every Muslim believer) is inevitably oriented towards Mecca is one that permeates religio-political rhetoric in Euro-America, and in India. I have heard some variation of the line, “He is a Muslim first and an Indian later” innumerable times during visits to India, and it is a notion that is readily believed by many. Among Hindus, I have often heard people say that while a Hindu is undeniably a part of the fabric of India, Muslims don’t feel as much of a sense of belonging to the nation. Among the more secular (and politically-correct) intellectual elite in India, certain kinds of Muslim-ness are characterized as threatening and others as non-threatening; those that threaten, are those that are seen to be focused

“too much” on notions of the Muslim world or the *umma*. Here the presumption is that such a focus confuses the believer in defining a motherland.

Such geographic valencing and orienting occurs among Muslims as well. These days, the hegemonic narrative among Muslims (especially among Salafis and Wahhabis) is certainly focused on the Arabian Peninsula in particular, and the Middle East in general. Muslims with such an orientation regard the kind of Islam practiced in the Arabian Peninsula and by the Arabic-speaking world as more authentically Muslim than the Islam practiced elsewhere. I have discussed in chapter 2, that the point of origin of Islam is the region of the Arabian Peninsula known as the Hijaz, where the holy cities of Mecca and Medina are located, and where the primary events that mark the inception of Islam played out. It is not just that Muslims in this part of the world regard their own form of Islamic practice and belief to be the authentic form, but that many Muslims all over the world now subscribe to such a notion. As I have pointed out, this was not always the case, and the geographic valencing of the “Muslim world” has changed substantially over the past millennium.

I label this interest in the Hijaz as the “center” of Islam as a fetishization because it ignores other foci of Islamic piety and religious practice. Sufi shrines in South Asia and in West Africa, for instance, draw many millions of pilgrims. At the death anniversaries of popular Sufi saints, their shrines attract pilgrims in the millions. More recently, the annual meetings of the Tablighi Jama’at (a Sufi reformist group) in Raiwind in Pakistan have rivaled the numbers seen in Mecca during the Hajj. I have discussed this previously, but I reiterate here that biases in academia and the media favoring this perspective – that the Hijaz is indeed the center of the Muslim world – discounts other

lived modes of Islamic practice and belief found in other parts of the world. (And it is important to keep in mind also that the majority of Muslims in the world live outside of the Middle East.)

In this dissertation, I have drawn attention to narratives used by adherents of shrine-based Sufism to claim religious authenticity as Muslims – narratives that focus on their history and their present realities in the Subcontinent. However, the deep spiritual relationship to the Hijaz runs deep among many Muslims the world over – be they Sufis, reformists, Sufi reformists, Wahhabis or Salafis. But it is significant that to many, the Hijaz is perhaps a primal or primordial point of origin – different from lived, remembered points of origin. The latter is consciously shaped by historical narratives, and the memories of them constructed for each subsequent generation; the former is a point that is beyond history, and that surpasses memory.

#### HISTORY, MEMORY, AMNESIA

I have mentioned history and memory above, and will now delve into these concepts in greater detail. The intertwined notions of authenticity and belonging require the nurturing of particular historical narratives and the preservation (and construction) or certain memories. They also of course involve copious amounts of amnesia that purge contradictory or counterproductive strands of memory from narratives of the past.

Adherents of shrine-based Sufism, Muslim reformist groups, as well as the secularists and spiritualists who have been so influential in shaping Indian religious subjecthood, have all been involved in the constructions of such histories and memories. Their narratives can be seen as iterations of, or reflections of, the memories and the

histories that they hold to be true; but they are also tied to present realities as to the past. Maurice Halbwachs' (1992)<sup>63</sup> insight that in constructing religious memory, groups “reconstruct the past” within the context of both the texts and traditions left by the past, and the extant realities of the present (p. 119) certainly rings true within the contexts that I have discussed throughout this dissertation. Halbwachs emphasizes this link between the past and the present in the collective memory of social groups and sees the manifestations of collective memory – religious beliefs, language, reconstructions of the past etc. – only as remembrances of the past; but these remembrances rely on present frameworks for their reconstructions (p. 188). That is, the collective processes required to construct and reconstruct the past exist in, and are framed by, the present. This creates a duality in the process of memory-making tied inexorably to both past and present.<sup>64</sup> For adherents of shrine-based Sufism, their past as the bringers of Islam to India, and their present as reifying Islamic and Indian values through the sacred space of the shrine, come together to form their identity-narrative as Indian Muslims.

Their construction of their present as authentically Muslim is certainly an “ideological project”, to use a term from Le Goff (1992:1), where it is conceived in direct relation to historical trajectories linking particular pasts. While Le Goff's notion of both

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<sup>63</sup>Halbwachs' collected writings were translated and published as a single unit only many decades after they were written. This later translation was published as the volume: *On Collective Memory* (1992).

<sup>64</sup>Halbwachs' thoughts on the construction of the past are insightful. However, in thinking about the construction of religious memory, he over-emphasizes the dichotomy between “dogmatic” and “mystic” groups. While individuals may be mystics, they too leave behind legacies that are taken up by groups of disciples, descendants or lay-followers. The collective memories of mystically oriented groups, though sometimes amorphous, are nonetheless collective reconstructions of the past in ways that are similar to dogmatic religious groups. The long tradition of Sufi hagiographies, the detailed charts that trace master-disciple lineages back to Muhammed in the past and to present disciples, the existing Sufi shrines that are at once monuments of remembrance as well as sites of contemporary worship and belief – all these speak of collective memories that rival the texts and rites of dogmatic religious traditions.

the past and present being “ideological projects” is presented via psychological theories of memory, and linguistic constructions of time, it is a useful concept in understanding the weaving of these historical narratives in claims to religious authenticity. What gets defined as the past is subject to change, and certainly subject to debate. Adherents of shrine-based Sufism and reformists often engage in contestations over the validity of historical narratives that are used to justify contemporary religious stances. Here, there is both the act of myth-making, as well as of reality-making. Miracle narratives from hagiographies are essential parts of historical narratives, and are often subject to contestation and doubt; the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad are also identified as valid or dubious; and contemporary narratives of the power of Sufi belief and a saint’s charisma are added to the canon of similar narratives.

Amidst all of this talk of memory and history, we must remember to delve into the act of forgetting. My ruminations on this theme have been deeply informed by Marc Augé’s work, *Oblivion* (2004). In this slim but critically rich volume Augé critiques our current obsession with remembering past injustices, and points those who must needs forget their “incommunicable memory” in order to live (p. 87). I would add here, that imperatives to remember presume that there is but one history to be remembered. What happens when ritualized or contrived remembrance necessitates the forgetting of other historical narratives?

In contemporary India, the rise of Hindu nationalism has been accompanied by such a need to remember the ways in which the “native” Hindus of India have suffered at the hands of the “invading” Muslims and the missionizing Christians. In these narratives, there is amnesia concerning a variety of competing (or at least undermining) historical

narratives – the massacre of Buddhists at the hands of Brahminical dynasties in ancient India, the shaping of contemporary Hinduism through contact with Islam and Christianity, and the impracticality of conceiving of India as anything but a crossroads of diverse linguistic, religious, political, economic and ideological histories.

Thus, in a broader and more abstract sense, for the notion of Hindu nationalism to live on, or for the notion of India as a fully integrated (and integrative) entity to persist, involves the purging of various strands of Indian history and national memory. Similarly, for reformist narratives of “true Islam” to ossify, requires the erasure of many trajectories of Islamic thought, belief and practice. Seen in this light, the narratives that adherents of shrine-based Sufism draw on to claim their identity as Muslims and as Indians are narratives that *induce* memory in the face of such amnesia.

Various trajectories of the past that are chosen to establish legitimacy in the present have links that are not only temporal, but also topographic. These linkages may be very site-specific: a certain tale of a miraculous recovery is associated with the shrine of a certain saint, Mount Ararat is established as the site for the landing of Noah’s Ark, etc. These linkages are also often macro in scale. Thus, the authenticity of Wahhabi groups may be drawn from their political and religious inception in the Hijaz; and though this movement emerged in the modern era, nearly a millennium after the birth of Islam, this geographic congruence is a powerful marker of legitimacy. Similarly, narratives of the advent of Islam in India via the teachings of Sufi saints inexorably link Sufism not only to the history of Islam, but also to the Subcontinent as a geographic entity.

Which narratives are given precedence over others, which are embellished and which erased, draws our attention to where belonging is claimed and where it is not; where certain geographies are given primacy and where others are not. Constructions of the past and the present thus bear associations with not only the *then* and *now*, but with the *here* and the *elsewhere*. Both time and space become essential in these narratives of identity, and link claims to being with claims to belonging.

It is not my intent here to delegitimize certain narratives of identity and history and to validate others. On the contrary, it is my desire to emphasize the inevitability of such constructions and reconstructions of memory, especially since they are dynamic responses to ever-changing lived realities. To echo Carl Ernst's view: "Those who deny the significance of historiography are most likely to be at the mercy of their own presuppositions" (p. 18). Ranajit Guha, in his book, *History at the Limit of World-History* (2002), traces our obsession with keeping the story straight, so to speak, to a notion of "World History" that equates the recounting of history with a narration of facts. Guha proffers an alternative view by (re)introducing us to a form of an historical account – *itihasa*, which could be found in the Subcontinent in pre-colonial times. This form of historiography represented "a traditional account relayed from generation to generation" (p. 51). In the historiography of "World-history" the focus rests primarily on the point of origin or the sole author of the "story", who is then invested with authority for his (yes, invariably "his") experience and subsequent account of it (p. 55). As Guha succinctly puts it, "experience stands for truth in the European narrative" (p. 63). On the other hand, *itihasa* involves a telling and a retelling of the past, where a sense of wonder at the narrative is "not tied to any particular experience and exhausted, therefore, by retelling"

(p. 67). Guha's discussion of *itihasa* is useful in bringing into perspective the idea that competing narratives of history do not lose their value when contradicted by "mainstream" historical narratives. The linkages drawn in these alternative narratives; the genealogy of tellings and retellings; the setting, the audience and the purpose of narration are all vitally important in understanding our pasts and our presents.

Through the above discussions I have attempted to show that constructions of the present, as well as the past, as they play out in claims to authenticity and belonging, are part of a dialogic process – a dialog among various actors in the present that then necessitates the selection or omission of certain histories and memories; and also a dialog among these various pasts, that compete, that reconcile, that obviate.

The identity-narratives of adherents of shrine-based Sufism must be seen in the larger context of the identity-narratives of Muslim reformist groups, as well as the identity-narratives of India as a nation-state. In their assertions to an identity as Muslims, adherents of shrine-based Sufism weave together narratives of religious authenticity and national belonging; they assert claims to certain pasts, and the validity of their place in the inceptions of both Islam and India. These assertions in turn reinforce their claim to a position of authority and legitimacy within the fold of contemporary Islam and present-day India.



## CONCLUSION

In this dissertation I have shown that assertions of religious identity and intra-religious debates must be understood within the context of broader debates on issues of national and religious subjecthood. Adherents of shrine based Sufism, in responding to reformist Muslim critique of their beliefs and practices, both assert their identity as Muslims and as Indians. Here, their assertions of religious identity are enmeshed with notions of regional and national belonging. In staking a claim to the essentially Islamic nature of their Sufi practices and beliefs, adherents of shrine-based Sufism are also defining Islam in terms that position it as inexorably tied to the Indian Subcontinent.

The responses of adherents of shrine-based Sufism to reformist critiques of their practices and beliefs are thus embedded in larger discourses on what it means to be a Muslim in India. In the preceding chapters I have detailed how adherents are faced with a double-bind. On the one hand, the practices and beliefs of shrine-based Sufism are subject to very vocal and aggressive critique by reformist Muslim groups. Oppositional reformist groups claim that these practices and beliefs are tantamount to polytheism and idol-worship, that they are heretical innovations that deviate from the true teachings of Islam. The accusation that their practices and beliefs are un-Islamic flies in the face of adherents' own assertions of a Muslim identity.

On the other hand, secularists and spiritualists among India's intellectual elite often characterize Sufism as derivative of Hindu philosophical traditions, and point to the "syncretic" character of shrine-based Sufism as evidence of the fluid nature of Sufi belief.

Thus, while this narrative of syncretism places adherents of shrine-based Sufism as conforming to the ideal of Indian religious subjecthood and positions them as “good Muslims” in India by virtue of being perceived as not staunchly Muslim, such a narrative also serves to undermine adherents’ own self-identification as devout Muslims. The identity-narratives of adherents of shrine-based Sufism must therefore be understood as a response to these dual pressures, and as an assertion of not just a Muslim identity, but an assertion of their identity as Indian Muslims.

Adherents of shrine-based Sufism find themselves in a complex web of identities. As Muslims, they are called to legitimize their position within the fold of Islam and justify their modes of practice and belief by newer reformist groups; as Indians, their sense of national belonging is often questioned in a part of the world where matters of religion have fundamentally shaped its political geography. To adherents of shrine-based Sufism, these are identities that are not separate, but intertwined. And it is to these identities that need not be simplified and ought not to be unraveled, that they continually assert a right.

#### ADDING OTHER VOICES

I have mentioned that most of my research was carried out among adherents of shrine-based Sufism. I found it challenging to give equal emphasis to work among members of Sufi reformist groups for various reasons: in Gulbarga, it was my need to build a close relationship with the Sufi shrine community without being seen to fraternize with their antagonists; and in Delhi, I could not make any headway as a Hindu woman solely through personally introducing myself to Tablighi Jama’at initiates, and contacts to

facilitate introductions were very hard to come by. I was able to compensate for this dearth of material from within reformist groups through encounters and engagement with lay Muslims with reformist ideologies.

Looking ahead to research beyond this dissertation, a priority will certainly be to balance my already substantial ethnographic work among adherents of shrine-based Sufism with research among Sufi reformist groups. This would include a concerted effort to find ways to access interlocutors who are active members of these groups – both members of the structural hierarchy as well as lay initiates. Some of the contacts I was able to make during the last few weeks of my research (and thus was not able to follow up on) are ones who could potentially facilitate such introductions and meetings. I am especially keen to explore the women's study-groups that are an important part of the Tablighi Jama'at's work.

Reformist narratives of religious identity too are subject to similar pressures to religious and national subjecthood as those of shrine-based Sufism, though their responses to these pressures are different. As Muslims in a country where they are in a minority, reformists are no less aware of the weight of religious subjecthood in India. Their staunchly a-political stance (which contrasts with the highly political nature of reformist Islam in Pakistan), their very public statements against Islamic extremism and militancy, and their close involvement with the Indian state regarding rulings on Muslim personal law<sup>65</sup> are all shaped by the complex relationships that minority religious groups

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<sup>65</sup>While India has a uniform penal code for all citizens, there is no such uniformity in the realm of personal law. In this system, Muslims are granted their own civil code, under which polygamy is legal; adoption and inheritance laws too differ, as do laws pertaining to divorce. This system has come under harsh criticism, and is a cause taken up by Hindu nationalist political parties who call for a uniform civil code. However, the implementation of such a uniform civil code is highly unpopular among most Muslims, and

in India have with the state. I will explore reformist narratives further in the next stage of my research.

I am also keen to include the voices of more women of both Sufi reformist and shrine-based Sufi persuasions. Looking back at my fieldwork, I am not surprised that so many of my interlocutors are men. My attendance of the girls' religious school in Gulbarga did allow me to build some close relationships with female adherents and teachers, and one of my other main interlocutors in Delhi was also a female adherent. However, since the institution of the Sufi shrine – very much a male bastion – was the main springboard for my research, nearly all my primary interlocutors are men. As I return to the field for my follow-up research, I hope to make up for this lacuna in the voices I have represented through my work.

On a similar vein, my focus on the Sufi shrine meant that I was not able to develop relationships with adherents who only occasionally visit the Sufi shrine. To be sure, most of my interlocutors were lay adherents and not ritual specialists or scholars. They were adherents of shrine-based Sufism who worked at clerical and managerial tasks at the shrine, or whose own personal interest had led them to become spiritually involved with the Sufi shrine. However, a vast number of adherents are members of the rural poor who are able to visit the Sufi shrine only occasionally. These folk are often the target of very aggressive proselytizing by reformist groups, and I believe it would greatly enhance my research to be able to include their voices in this work as well.

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is also opposed by others who believe that changes in laws have little effect on the way Indians conduct their daily lives (As a case in point, the banning of dowry under the Hindu Marriage Act has not in the least bit abated the giving and taking of enormous dowries in India). There have been many highly controversial cases that have brought these separate civil codes under scrutiny. Many of these high-profile rulings and acts, such as The Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act 1986, have pitted the Indian state, women's rights groups, and conservative Muslim groups against each other.

## RESPONSES AND COUNTER-RESPONSES IN ACADEMIA

This dissertation is certainly part of a larger movement within academia that has sought, especially over the past decade, to humanize Muslims and add nuance to public discussions of Islam. I have added my voice to this movement by presenting the interconnectedness of Muslim identity with national identity in a country that is not generally considered part of the “Muslim world”, and consequently by expanding and problematizing the construction of the “Muslim world”.

Having said this, I think it important to note that academia is also currently experiencing a backlash of sorts against the lionization of shrine-based Sufism in the popular media and in foreign policy circles. Throughout these past seven years of work towards a doctoral degree, I have often encountered cynicism among academics towards Sufis (and towards liberal/progressive Muslims) who deploy narratives of pluralism. Expressed in the form of questions at conferences or as comments during conversations about research topics, I encounter resistance from academics to the notion that such narratives could possibly be authentic, or truly meant. It is as though a demand is being made that claims to religious identity and legitimacy be remote from one’s socio-political milieu; that the moment they are acknowledged as responses to lived and messy realities, they lose the patina of credibility.

I find such cynicism disturbing, and I hope that this dissertation will introduce an added dimension of complexity to our discussions of Sufism. I hope that through this dissertation I have been able to show that responses to various pressures to their religious identity as Muslims are not merely a matter of expediency and calculated strategy for

adherents of shrine-based Sufism. The self-identification of adherents as staunchly Indian and devoutly Muslim comes from a deep interconnectedness that they experience between these markers of identity.

## REVISITING AUTHENTICITY AND BELONGING

Even though a majority of Muslims the world over practice some mode of shrine-based Sufism (I estimate this on the basis of the fact that Muslims in North and Sub-Saharan Africa, and South, Southeast and Central Asia primarily adhere to shrine-based Sufism), the prevailing hegemony is that of anti-shrine reformism. This hegemonic rhetoric seeks to position shrine-based Sufism as having deviated from Islamic texts, Islamic law, and from the origins of Islam in the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE. Adherents of shrine-based Sufism in India respond to this attack on their legitimacy as Muslims by asserting the essentially Islamic nature of their beliefs and practices. They reaffirm their roots at the point of Islam's inception, and establish their core values as contemporary reflections of Quranic teachings and the life of Muhammad.

The hegemony of Hinduism in the Indian nation-state imposes the link of being Hindu with being Indian. While this hegemony cannot be denied, challenges to it are strong enough to not be ignored. Many other religious identities vie for a link with the Indian nation. Religious and linguistic minorities and members of indigenous communities are just some of these. While adherents of shrine-based Sufism are granted such an association by secularists and spiritualists in India, it is not often on the terms that the former desire. For my interlocutors re-forging these links, and reconstructing the

historical narratives that frame these links is an important part of claiming both a Muslim identity and an Indian identity.

I would like to conclude this dissertation with an account of a personal encounter with one of my interlocutors that brought home just how important the enmeshing of a national and religious identity is for adherents of shrine-based Sufism. During the latter half of my fieldwork, I got to know an aged Sufi scholar in Delhi, Nizami Sahab. Some of my conversations with him brought home the deep ties that Muslims have to India as a political and an ethical entity; his narratives also conveyed the strong kinship that adherents of shrine-based Sufism feel between their mode of Islamic practice, and the historical and the contemporary landscape of India.

Nizami Sahab lives very close to the shrine of Nizamuddin Auliya, and was himself a descendent of the saint. I did not get to see him frequently, but on the few occasions that I was able to visit him at his home, our meetings lasted for many hours. His home was an old set of buildings that had been added to in a haphazard fashion over the decades. It stood in an open flag-stone courtyard with green and blue wooden doors, a swing and an old gnarly tree. Nizami Sahab is a tall lean man of more than eighty years who walks with only a slight stoop and the aid of a cane. Whenever I saw him, he always wore a loose white tunic and pajamas, and a tall mustard hat that was a marker of his Sufi order. Nizami Sahab's father had been acknowledged as a Sufi master by his peers and followers, and Nizami Sahab, too is regarded a Sufi scholar. Many eminent and committed Sufis I had met during my fieldwork had insisted that I meet him and talk to him; and I was privileged enough to be able to do so.

Nizami Sahab is a sharp man with keen, expressive eyes. Whenever we met, he spoke untiringly and lucidly of innumerable issues, and I was happy to listen. On one such occasion (a meeting that lasted six hours!), he spoke to me of his family's history in great detail. He brought out old photographs, maps and deeds. He showed me copies of what seemed to be old documents – from around the time of the British in India. They were deeds and titles written in beautiful Persian hand. He told me that these were deeds that granted all the lands around the shrine of Nizamuddin Auliya to his family. He said that his family had arrived in India ages ago, before the first Muslim rulers had arrived. The Hindu rulers at the time had said that they would consider the Ka'ba a temple, the Quraish (the tribe of Muhammad) as Brahmins, and Muhammad as the head of their clan; thus, his family would be accepted as a part of their society. He then said, "If India is not our home, then what is?"

The photographs he showed me were in sepia and black & white. They were from the early to mid-twentieth century, and were images of important gatherings of prominent members of India's movement for independence. There were photographs of his father seated among eminent personalities of whom I had read in my school textbooks. All of these were photographs that were taken in that very same courtyard through which I had just entered his home. He told me that his father had been a staunch opponent of the creation of Pakistan. He added, "Ours is the tradition of India," and recalled that centuries ago, it was here that his family had found refuge on leaving the Middle East.

Nizami Sahab told me of his father's association with such figures as Jinnah and Gandhi. When Gandhi had emerged from one of his many long fasts, Nizami Sahab's



father had visited him at his bedside, seating himself on the floor beside Gandhi. On a later occasion, Gandhi had visited Nizami Sahab's father in that very house. Gandhi had sat at the threshold by the shoes outside, waiting for entry. Nizami Sahab's father had gone to greet and welcome Gandhi in person. Gandhi had then said that both he and Nizami Sahab's father were men who would readily sit amidst the dust, and would not feel low for it; but the dignity of this was something the world did not understand.

Listening to Nizami Sahab tell me of his family's legacies and looking at these images and these documents, the historicity of where I was and who I was with became evident to me. I also found Nizami Sahab's narratives to be poignant. They spoke of an irrevocable connection that he, like so many others, feels towards the Indian nation and to the geography of where they call home. His Muslim ancestors had made a home in India and had in turn shaped the Indian nation in a multitude of ways. The waves of Muslims who had found their way to India, either fleeing conquest, or leading it, and had made the Subcontinent the locus of the Islamic world for centuries; the mode of Islam that he practiced was now irrevocably Indian, as India itself was unquestionably and deeply shaped by the roots that Muslims had grown in its soil. The centuries old titles and deeds that Nizami Sahab showed me reflected a sense of belonging to the landscape and geography of the very neighborhood that he lived in; the photographs of eminent leaders of the freedom movement and the tales of their many meetings in the courtyard of his home were expressive of his belonging to the political entity that was the Indian state; and there was, of course the overwhelming feeling that as a Muslim he was an inalienable part of the Indian zeitgeist, past and present.

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