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Hindu-Muslim Syncretism in India

J J Roy Burman

Hindu-Muslim syncretism in India has deep cultural roots which has survived political and social upheavals. There are numerous syncretic shrines across the country which even today continue to attract people of both faiths.

THE rise of fundamentalism in recent years in India has obliterated the deep rooted syncretism in Indian culture. In India, few have studied the syncretic phenomenon of local religion, though many have studied it in terms of formation of composite culture. According to Rasheeduddin Khan, Indian civilisation has been profoundly affected by two fundamental traditions: the Indo-aryan cultural stream which provided vedic philosophy, and the Indo-Muslim strand of culture based on the intertwining of 'bhakti marg' and Islamic Sufism. "It is not surprising, therefore, to realise that the composite culture in India originated in an environment of reconciliation, rather than refutation, co-operation rather than confrontation, co-existence rather than mutual annihilation of the politically dominant Islamic strands" (1987:36). Khan, thus, strongly refutes the history advanced by the orthodox scholars who view the medieval period in India as being marked by religious intolerance and communal wars between the Hindus and Muslims.

Khan considers the notion of Hindu religion a misnomer. According to him, the term includes people of different religious ways which "gives Hinduism a flexibility and resilience and a tradition base wide enough to cover the syndrome of Indian culture. That is why sometimes the revivalism of Hinduism takes the form of revivalism of Indian culture, symbols, values, idioms and traditional pattern of living. It does not take the particular form of the revival of a faith because there is no such ordained, integral and defined faith to be revived. Hinduism's religious content has been generally referred to as brahminism, while the term Hindu which was used by the ancient Persians, Greeks and later by the Arabs and the central Asian people, referred essentially to the ethnic geographic identity of inhabitants in and around Indus valley" [Khan 1987:42]. Khan further states that the term Hindu does not occur at all in our ancient literature, the first reference of it being in a tantrik book of 8th century AD. Aziz Ahmad (1994) thinks that the inherent anthropomorphism of Hindu religion at the popular level helped in syncretisation of some of the famous Muslim saints. According to Gaborieau, the cult of saints has been one of the religious steps which has promoted Hindu-Muslim syncretism in India. The proliferation of Sufism in fact became one of the important mechanisms of ensuring communal harmony between the Hindus and the Muslims.

What is sociologically relevant is that many of the local saints were supported only by certain sections of the population, determined either by locality, social or professional group. There is thus a sort of a patron-saint relationship. For example, Khwaja Khijr protects all castes associated with water: washermen, water carriers and boatmen. Similarly, blacksmiths invoke the name of Hazrat Daud, who is none other than biblical king David. Oilmen ('teli') and dyers ('ranrez') follow saints whose family names refer to the professions, namely, Hasan Teli and Pir Ali Ranrez. Many of the saints are also linked with curing certain specific diseases. Instances of saints curing sterility are galore. Sakhi Sarwar is believed to cure eye problems; Makhdun Saheb exorcises the possessed; Sheikh Sadhu cures melancholia; Guga pir and Saheb Madar cure people of snake bites [Saiyad 1989]. Such saints are frequented both by Hindus and Muslims and also by people of other faiths.

Many scholars feel that the bhakti movement in India has been to a large extent responsible for promoting eclectic faiths and lessening the religious orthodoxy. Lokhandwalla states, "The Sufi and bhakti movements blurred the differences between the two religions so much that it was very common till very recently to have a sadguru or a pir having a common following of Hindus and Muslims. And no pir or sadguru ever forced a Hindu or Muslim to give up his religion for any other. The medieval age was the period when sufi and bhakti thought and practice blended and coalesced at many points" [Lokhandwalla 1987:121].

Rasheeduddin Khan also states that most of the bhakti saints tried to harmonise the orthogenetic and heterogenetic elements of the great and little traditions of Hinduism and Islam. These saints preached the philosophy of life which was close to the social ethics and philosophical problems of the poor and artisans that are common to both the Hindus and the Muslims.

According to Abid Husain, the bhakti movement led by Ramanuja had a great impact on both the Muslims and the Hindus. Ramanuja's attempt at transforming the Hindu gods into human forms like Ramachandra of Ramayana greatly facilitated this. Also, Kabir, who attempted to simplify the notion of god as a mystic object, regarded the spiritual foundations of Hinduism and Islam as one and found equal inspiration in both.

Right from ancient days syncretism is linked to the shrines which are dedicated to the objects of nature. This is perhaps due to the fact that humankind has to depend on nature for its sustenance. Pir Jharion or 'saint of the woods' in Sind was perhaps one of the earliest saints to have preached about syncretic values. The wandering saintly beggars like Guga Pir or Zahir Pir ('king of the serpants') are also counted among ancient syncretic saints of India [Ahmad 1994].

The syncretic trend continued to thrive even during the Moghul rule. Both Babar and Humayun had broad visions and inclination to support Islam and Hinduism. However, owing to their short rule, not many positive steps could be initiated. It was Akbar who took decisive steps in this direction. Akbar removed the Jizya – pilgrim tax for the Hindus – immediately on assuming power. He also passed a law treating both Hindus and Muslims in the same way. Hindu epics like Mahabharat, Ramayan, and vedic literature were translated into Persian at his insistence for the convenience of Muslim readers. Later, Dara Shikoh translated Hindu theological texts like Upanishads, Bhagwat Gita and Yoga Vashishtha into Persian. He wrote a book, *Majmaul-Bahrain* ('The Meeting Place of Two Oceans'), a comparative study of Hindu and Muslim mystic philosophy. He even wore a ring on his finger with the inscription of 'prabhu' in Sanskrit on it [Mohiuddin 1987:94].

Recent research also helps to dispel wrong notions harboured by the common masses about Islam in India, particularly with reference to Aurangzeb. "Modern research has revealed a surprising fact that even Aurangzeb granted jagirs to a large number of temples. Again, the wars between Muslim and Hindu rulers have been represented as religious wars, conveniently ignoring that the armies of Muslim rulers contained a large number of Hindu soldiers and vice versa" [Mohiuddin 1987:101].

In East India

East India has witnessed a less rigid Muslim rule and consequently, the impact of Islam too has been of an unorthodox variety. Besides Manipur, Islam is perhaps least orthodox in

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Assam. No wonder that there is a great deal of communal harmony between the Assamese-speaking Muslims and Hindus. Not only is there a great deal of social interaction between the two communities but there is some amount of ritual borrowing as well. This gets manifested in 'Jikir', Muslim devotional songs, which are sung in exactly the same tone and tune in which the Hindu devotional songs 'Nam' are sung. Moreover a few 'Jikir' contain praise of Hindu god 'Hari'.

A peculiar culturo-religious ritual of mock selling and buying of new born infants between the Hindus and Muslims is prevalent in Assam [Siddiqui 1992]. This ritual is believed to enhance the chances of survival of the babies. In this system if the purchaser is a Muslim, the seller is a Hindu and vice versa. Though these children grow up in their own communities the mock-buyers are treated as foster parents. Some kinship terms are also applied to the purchaser who have appropriate roles on all important occasions in the life of the children thus purchased. Siddiqui also states that in Kamrup some of the Hindu and Muslim families enter into ceremonial friendships which compel them to help each other during periods of crisis. These families are treated as kin for all practical purposes.

The sacred complex of Hajo, about 32 km north-west of Guwahati, is a confluence of three religions: Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism. The Hindu have a temple of Hoygrib which is believed to have been constructed above a Buddhist stupa. Hoygrib, literally meaning horse's neck, is considered according to the Hindu texts an incarnation of Vishnu. The Muslim mosque on the other hand is considered to be 'Puamecca', i e, one-fourth of Mecca. It is believed that Giasuddin, a religious man, founded the mosque on Garurachal hill and had the sanctity of Mecca attributed to it. All the three communities, the Hindus, the Muslims and the Buddhists, have respect for each other's shrine. At the time of 'Bahag Bihu' (spring festival) Muslims and Buddhists join the ceremonies held at the Hoygrib temple. In the month of Magh when thousands of Muslim devotees throng to celebrate the annual 'urs' at Puamecca, Hindus also pay obeisance at the shrine and take candle and incense sticks with them.

In Bengal the syncretic tradition is mainly evident in rural areas but there are a few dargahs in the cities and towns which are frequented even by the Hindus. The dargah of Moula Ali, for instance, in Calcutta is believed to be frequented more by the Hindus than the Muslims. The most famous syncretic ritual of West Bengal is perhaps the 'Saty Pirer Mela' (fair of the true pir), held in Hooghly district. The popular worship of 'Satyanarayan' by the Hindus itself is supposed to have been borrowed from the Muslims. In Bengal the patron saint of butchers was honoured by the Muslim name of Gazi Mian and the Hindu name of Satya Pir, identified by some Hindu poets as Yogi, by others with Satyanarayan or Vishnu. Homage to him was encouraged probably with mixed motives of superstition and policy by Sultan Husain of Gaur [Ahmad 1994; Roy 1983].

In rural Bengal there are many shrines which are worshipped by the Hindus by one name and by another name by the Muslims. The devotional songs of Lalan Faqir which eclectically praise elements of Hinduism and Islam are equally popular among Hindu and Bengali Muslims. Lalan Faqir is believed to have been a Hindu by birth but was reared by a Muslim family when he was abandoned in childhood. Lalan is also popular in Bangladesh.

For Muslim and Hindu peasants of Sundarban the cult of Bonbibi is much more important than other major gods and goddesses. Saba Naqvi Bhowmick states, "In response to their environment the locals have evolved a religion which is a curious mix of animism, pir-ism and Shakti cult... The three most popular cults of the region are those of a Shakti-like figure named Bonbibi, a legendary pir called Mobrah Gazi and a tiger-god named Dakshin Ray. The legends of the three deities are inextricably woven together. There are many variations of the legends attached to these folk deities. The most popular version among the local villagers (both Hindus and Muslims) and holy men called faqirs, describes the conflit between Bonbibi, the protector of humans, and Dakshin Ray, the tiger god, in colourful detail." The temples of Bonbibi near the forests are usually simple mud structures, but the ones inside the villages are quite elaborate and the deity of Bonbibi stands alongside a number of consorts, many of whom have Muslim identities.

Ashim Roy (1983) has challenged the orthodox view that the pir tradition is a deviation from Islam. He avers that the syncretic tradition was useful to the Islamic cause in Bengal as also to the later purificatory revivalist movements. The emergence of neo-converts (among the Muslims) with roots in the Bengali culture, who identified themselves both with Islamic great tradition as well as with the local masses and their needs, lacked the ashrafi orthodox outlook. He also states that in order to make Islam acceptable to the masses, apart from Bengali language, it had to incorporate the medium of cultural communication through adoption of idioms and symbols rooted in Bengali culture. This necessitated Islamic religious, semi-religious and secular historical traditions along with mystical writings. Many pirs thus placed the Islamic traditions in a Hinduised framework. One of the pirs with considerable backing even went to the extent of equating the Islamic concept of 'nabi' with the Hindu concept of 'avtar', and introduced the Prophet of Arab as 'avtar of Kaliyug'.

S Narayan (1980) writes that Rajgir in Bihar which is sacred for the Hindus, actually offers a syncretic religious complex which has Muslim, Buddhist, Sikh and tribal shrines as well. The Shivangrishi Kund in Rajgir is also known as 'Makhdoon Kund' among the Muslims. The main idgah lies in close proximity to the Laxmi Narayan temple, an important shrine of the Hindus. These shrines offer a ground for interaction among followers of different faiths and represent the complexity of the Indian civilisation at the micro level.

In West India

In western India the syncretic tradition is not only wide-spread but also deeply entrenched. The dargah of Khwaja Muinuddin Hasan Chisti of Ajmer in Rajasthan is perhaps the most famous shrine of western India. Chisti's main effort was to promote harmony between Hindus and Muslims, to combat caste inequalities and fight other social evils. His preaching also made a profound impact on the course of bhakti movement in the later years. Akbar was a staunch supporter of Chisti's preachings.

Lokhandwalla (1987) states that the priests at the dargah of Muinuddin Chisti used to ask the Muslims to wear green sacred thread so that the Hindus may not feel out of place. S L H Moini (1989) writes that the shrine of Muinuddin Chisti appointed Hindus in senior positions of management like, 'Mutawwalli' (custodian) and 'Amin' (revenue officer). Participation of the Hindus in ceremonies at the shrine in an official capacity, the grant of stipends and daily allowance to 'zunnerdars' (Hindu priests), 'bairagis' (Hindu faqirs) and fixation of their shares in daily 'langar' (free food) reflected the increasing presence of non-Muslims in the internal management of the dargah. The presence of the Hindus in no way breeded tension or friction.

Aziz Ahmad (1994) writes that the Husaini brahmins represent the most outstanding example of high caste syncretic borrowing from Islam and transforming them at will. They considered Muinuddin Chisti as a titular divinity. They honoured Mohammad as one of the Hindu avtars, fasted like Muslims during the Ramjan and also buried their dead. They wore brahminical caste-marks on forehead but accepted alms from the Muslims alone.

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Sumita Paul (1995) reports that in Ajaysen and Khakri villages close to Ajmer, Hindu-Muslim divide makes no sense. The Muslims celebrate all the Hindu festivals and the Hindus eat only 'halal' meat and bury their dead. In most Muslim homes, Diwali is celebrated with a full-fledged Laxmi puja just as Id or Shabe-Barat. People of both the faith equally visit temples and mosques. The Muslim women also often insist on 'phera' – seven rounds around the fire – like the Hindus, during the marriage.

The Meo, a so-called ex-criminal tribe, reveals traits of both Islam and Hinduism. Reverence towards saints, scriptures and customs of both religions are clearly visible among them [Shama 1983]. S L Sharma (1980) writes that the Meos in spite of conversion to Islam, fought the Muslim rulers bitterly all through the history. But at the time of partition when they came under the spell of Tabligh – an agency which worked for perfect Islamisation of the Meos – a communal conflict occurred with the Jats, and the Meos fled to Pakistan. But this has not altered the basic elements of their tribe and they retain their elaborate kinship system based on the clans. Most of the Meos in Rajasthan even now celebrate Hindu festivals like Holi, Dassera and Diwali.

In Gujarat there were many communities where both Hindu and Muslim ceremonies were resorted to for solemnising a marriage. In Kathiawar and Kutch, the services of saraswat brahmins and quazis were sought for the proper completion of marriage rituals. Ahmad (1994) writes that the Khojas reveal a direct syncretic borrowing from Hinduism. Such beliefs were encouraged by their leader Rashid-al-din of the 12th century. The Khojas are believed to have been originally Lohana rajputs. Their leader Sadr-al-din regarded Adam and Ali as the avtars of Vishnu, and explained Mohammad as another name of Mahesha. The Lohanas, who originally believed in Shakti cult, also retained some of their older religious practices before conversion to Islam.

Lokhandwalla (1987) writes that Khojas yet continue to observe Ekadasi, Diwali, Holi, etc. They were not sure to which religion they belonged and it was the English court which declared them to be Shias of Islamic branch. Lokhandwalla further states, "The Khojas drew many parallel between Hinduism and Islam. The word 'Om' written in Sanskrit was equated with 'Ali' written in Arabic... The Hindu pantheon of nine avtars was accepted readily and the tenth, the Kalki avtar... was claimed to have appeared in Arabia. The word Kalki was transferred to 'Nakalanki' meaning spotless, pure to correspond to the belief of Imams and the Prophet being sinless and pure (masum)... The Koran was referred as Atharva Veda and the five Pandavas were equated with five pure bodies (Panjatan). Mohammad was at times placed parallel to Mahadev, and Ali seen as Vishnu. All the early missionaries lived and dressed as Indians and took up Indian names" (p 110).

The Bohra Muslims too have a number of customs like the Hindus such as the Hindu law of inheritance, the practice of charging interest on loans and the celebration of Diwali as the new year day in their business lives. Many of the Hindu superstitions have pervaded their households like the 'magni' ceremony (engagement), special perfumes for bride and bridegroom, and the singing of gay or obscene wedding songs. Many of the taboos for the pregnant women were borrowed from the Hindus, such as fasting during lunar eclipse, and taboo of wearing new clothes or the use of 'henna' to avert the evil eye.

In Maharashtra, in spite of the fight between Hindu and Muslim rulers for many centuries, relation between the masses of the two faiths was quite cordial. Not surprisingly, syncretic shrines are found in cities like Mumbai, Pune, Aurangabad, Savantvadi and Ahmednagar. They are also found in smaller semi-rural areas like Ghodegaon, Junnar and Kalyan. Interestingly, even Shivaji's grandfather held Muslim saints in veneration and had named his sons Shahji and Sharifji after the name of his Muslim teacher Shah Sharief [Ahmad 1994].

Haji Malang is perhaps the second most popular syncretic shrine after Shirdi in Maharashtra. Haji Malang is located about 12 km south of Kalyan in the suburbs of Mumbai. The shrine is situated at a slightly higher elevation at the base of a mountain pass which must have been frequented by several warring Hindu and Muslim soldiers and long distance traders. The sacred complex of Haji Malang comprises of four dargahs and temples of Santoshima, Maruti, Durga, Waghjai, Ganesha, etc. The shrine is managed by a trust with the Hindu brahmin family of Ketkars as the chief hereditary trustee. There are Hindu and Muslim priests to oversee the daily rituals. Traditionally, Hindu and Muslim festivals are celebrated together by both the communities and donations for the same are raised jointly as well. However, it is said that after the demolition of the Babri masjid there has been a significant drop in the number of Hindu devotees visiting the shrine. Mutual suspicion is also believed to have grown due to the political interference of the Shiv Sena which has rechristened the place of Sreemalang. They have also renamed the saint as Machindranath. A few more deities also have been installed recently within the sacred complex [Roy Burman 1995].

The Tadvi Bhil tribesmen of Satpuras reveal an element of Hindu-Muslim syncretism wherever they reside. The Muslim converts among them invariably keep Hindu names and do not discard the practice of clan-based kinship and the tradition of clan exogamy. The Muslim Tadvis take pride in tracing their Rajput antecedence. They also participate in the traditional Tadvi festivals.

In South India

Susan Bayly (1992) provides Madurai, which has a long association with Sikandar tradition, as an illustration of Hindu-Muslim syncretism. "By early 18th century, Sikander, the warrior hero had come to be widely identified with the martial clan deity Skanda (Murukkan Subramanya). His shrines most of which are situated on elevated cross or rocky outcrops, featured terracota images in the shape of mounted warriors; these closely resemble Tamil cult images of the horseman deity Ayyappa" (1992:108-09). Bayly writes that throughout south India new dargahs are being founded and endowed by pious Tamil and Dakshini worshippers, many of whom are Hindus. In Madurai, for instance, the dargah of an Arabic pir, Hazrat Tahurullah Shah Qadri, was recently built by the brahmin proprietor of a local bus company.

The dargah tradition in south India reveals a close relationship with the Hindu traditions. The dargah of pir Hazarat Hamid Shah Awliya is one such famous syncretic shrine. According to Bayly (1992) Awliya Saheb is believed to have freed one of the wheels of the chariot of the Hindu deities during the annual processions through his miracles. This is a striking example of the way in which many such sources have come to portray Muslim cult saints as sponsors or protectors of Hindu holy places. According to the texts, Kanchipuram dargah even allows the local temple authorities to show their gratitude for the saint's patronage by allocating him a share of the temple's sanctified 'prasadam' (offerings).

Bayly notes three trends of pir cult tradition in south India: (1) Link with saivite devotional tradition; (2) Theistic vaishnavism, (3) Link between the pirs and the Tamil 'ammas' or mother goddess tradition. "The Natharwalli dargah in Trichi is regarded as an exceptionally potential repository of barakat. Natharwali has been a figure of great power in Tamil country, and at some point in the pre-colonial period the cult had become one of the many regional devotional traditions which transcended formal boundaries between Tamils and Dakshinis, coastal and hinterland people, traders and cultivators, and practitioners of 'standard' and 'folk' Islam" (1992:116). She further notes that the Muslim saint has always been a figure who may leap the boundaries between 'Hindu'

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and 'Non-Hindu', 'Islamic' and 'Non-Islamic'. Pir is a figure of the forest; he inhabits the same domain as the 'demonic' spirits and marauders who lie beyond the margins of the settled social order. In formal Hinduism this world of dangerous uncontained forces is the resort of the divine at its most awesome and terrifying. More specifically, this is a saivite world, a place of Sakti divinities and of Lord Shiva and the terrible Lord Bhairava, hideous ascetic" (1992:120).

The tradition of saivite myths are found extensively in the 'Tazrika' literature in south India. They usually relate to the miracles performed by wandering saints during travels through wilderness. In the Natharwali story, the pir and his party are saved from starvation in forest when a herd of deer offers them milk to drink. "At the most generous level the flow of milk is an image of divine munificence: it is to be seen as the waking up of God's love and mercy and a proof of the saint's capacity to provide succour, fulfilment and spiritual nourishment to those who follow him".

Bayly mentions the sufi saint Kat Bava (forest father) who became extremely popular in 18th century Tamil Nadu. It is said that he saved lives of seven maidens from the hands of dacoits in a forest. These female figures are identified with saivite 'saptamatrikas', i e, the seven-figured corporate representation of the goddess which appears in the temple iconography and 'sthalpurana' texts throughout Tamil Nadu. Some versions of the Kat Bava legend even state that the maidens were brahmin by birth.

The syncretism is also manifested at Sabrimala in Kerala. It is customary for the devotees who visit the temple of Ayyappa to first pay their obeisance to the shrine of a Muslim saint named 'Vavara' or Vavarswamy, located at Erumeli. From Erumeli the devotees go dancing in a manner called 'pettathullal' and proceed to a pond for dip. After the dip they climb up to the temple of Ayyappa throwing pebbles into the gorge located along the road. It is believed that Vavara is actually an incarnation of Ayyappa and had helped him during his fight with 'asuras' (demons). Miller (1976) thinks that Ayyappa, a common deity in the south, made an alliance with Vavara, an Arabian pirate leader. Ayyappa did not want him to become a Hindu and constructed a mosque for him at Erumeli.

Miller also draws attention to the Mappilas who worship Hindu saints in spite of being Muslims. Their mosques resemble the Jain temples. Their women, like the Hindus, tie 'tali' around their necks after marriage. Most importantly, they follow the matrilineal system, 'marumakkathayam', like the Nayars. S F Dale and M G Menon (1978) mention that during 'Nerccas', the biggest festival of the Mappilas, rituals combining Islamic and local folk traditions are performed. Thus, while the focal point of each Nerccas is the reverence shown to a pir, Shaikh Shard, the festival as such is conducted within a ritual framework based on the traditional form of worship of local folk deities. Nerccas appears to be an adaptation of non-Muslim festivals like 'Yelas' 'Purans', which are linked to post-harvesting gaiety.

In North India

The Hindu-Muslim intermingling has been deep in North India. Despite the communal strife between the two communities over long periods, ties of friendship and tolerance are not unknown in this region. The shrine of Nizamuddin Auliya in Delhi is perhaps the most famous syncretic shrine after the shrine of Muinuddin Chisti in Ajmer.

Sheikh Nizamuddin was a pious man whose tolerant outlook offended the orthodox mullahs. Pinto (1989) mentions a Hindu woman who "has been visiting the dargah for over last thirty years to ensure that her only surviving child continues to live" (1989:114). Also, "one poor Hindu who had

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just come to Delhi lost his five-year old daughter in a road accident... He approached the Pirzada to help him to get the body released from the Police morgue... and he was assisted even for cremating the body" (1989:116).

The dargah of Khwaja Naseeruddin Chisti or Chirag Delhi is a well known syncretic shrine in Delhi. Khwaja Naseeruddin was a disciple of Nizamuddin Aulia and preached religious tolerance according to the sufi traditions. It is said that when Nizamuddin Aulia was trying to construct a mosque, Mohammad-bin-Tughlaq, the king, was also constructing his fort in Delhi. Because of this there was acute shortage of labour. The king asked Nizamuddin to postpone construction of the mosque. But when the latter did not abide, the king got annoyed and ordered all the Telis (oil suppliers) to stop providing oil to Nizamuddin so that he would not be able to kindle lamps. When Naseeruddin Chisti came to know of this he went to Nizamuddin and converted all the water in a small reservoir into oil. Since he restored light to the shrine he became popularly known as Chirag Delhi. Even now Hindus and Muslims visit his shrine to ask for boons. Hindu grooms of the locality proceed to marry only after praying at the shrine.

Close to Chirag Delhi there is another dargah by name of Jalauddin Chisti, a disciple of Chiragh Delhi. He is also known as 'Jangal Baba' since he used to meditate inside a forest, the trees of which were not cut or felled by anyone. People from far-flung places frequent the shrine to ask for boons at times of calamity. Even today, after the demolition of the Babri masjid, 90 per cent of the devotees of the shrine are Hindus. The forest around the shrine has been declared as reserved forest by the Delhi Development Authority.

Right in the heart of Delhi, near the Old Fort, there is a dargah of 'Matka Pir' which is frequented by devotees irrespective of caste or creed. An annual 'urs' (fair) is held for three days at the dargah. During the 'urs' a chadar is taken out in a procession to the Divya Bhairon temple and is brought back after taking a circle around the temple (a sort of respect to the deity). Similarly, during the annual puja of the Divya Bhairon temple, representatives of the dargah take offerings to the temple. The dargah is looked after by Hindu and Muslim assistants or 'sevaks'. At present a Hindu woman hailing from a wealthy industrialist family, works as a sevak.

'Phool Walo Ki Sair' is an old tradition originating in the times of Bhadurshah Zaffar when long processions (comprising both Hindus and Muslims) used to go from Ajmeri gate to Mehrauli with a great fun fare. The emperor also used to visit the fair and distribute flowers among the people [Brelvi 1995]. 'Phool Walo Ki Sair' even now holds political significance, the prime minister being an occasional visitor to it.

In Kashmir, where it is believed, that religious fundamentalists are responsible to terrorist activities, the secular credentials of the state is an age old phenomenon. According to many scholars the 'rishi cult' was mainly responsible for this. Bamzai (1962) quotes Abul Fazl's observations about the rishi cult: "The most respected people of Kashmir are the rishis who, although they do not suffer themselves to be fettered by traditions, are doubtless true worshippers of god. They revile not any other sect and ask nothing of any one; they plant the roads with fruit trees to furnish the traveller with refreshments; they abstain from eating flesh and have no intercourse with other sex. There are two thousand of these Rishis in Kashmir". P N Bazaz (1995) opines that though the Kashmir valley embraced Islam in the 14th century, a tolerant variety of religion emerged there. Lal Ded or Laleswari, the hermitess, harmonised shaivism with the basic tenets of Islam and reasserted the cardinal principle of Kashmiri culture. The rishis who flourished later under the rule of Zainul Abidin carried the torch of humanism, religious tolerance and Hindu-Muslim amity. Living humble lives of poverty, selflessness, service and simplicity, remaining aloof from political controversies or governmental powers, the 'rishis' wielded tremendous influence over the educated and the illiterate. Many of them had both Hindu and Muslim names and it was often difficult to discern whether they were Hindu or Muslim.

What Bazaz has written about Kashmir is true for the entire country. It becomes quite apparent from the illustrations provided here that there is a great deal of syncretic culture and religion at the folk level. The happenings at Ayodhya or Mumbai cannot erode the deeply entrenched syncretism. If syncretism had been given due recognition, the syncretic dimensions – which are in all probability associated with the Babri masjid or Chrar-e-Sharief – could have been highlighted.

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