

Crossing the Threshold: Understanding Religious Identities in South Asia

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Debate over the Hindu and Muslim religious identity, as well as the nature of the two communities' interaction, has generated different answers. To some, it has been an interaction full of conflict and conflict-resolution between two irreconcilable faiths. To others, it remains impossible to reconstruct their history as one of convergence or divergence, due to the considerable variation in their cultures and religions over time. Khan addresses the question from a different perspective. According to her, "the Hindus or the Muslims whom the question addresses are not real characters" (p. 4): The religious identity of the "Self" is not completely distinct from that of the "Other" in medieval India. Thus, the sporadic clashes between Hindus and Muslims have been due mainly to political reasons and occasionally to economic factors, but definitely never to religious differences.

Khan's book dwells on the making of identity in the Indian subcontinent between medieval India and the end of the twentieth century. It seeks to explore the spiritual encounters between the indigenous Hindu traditions and Islam, their historical harmonious coexistence, and their present predicaments, with special reference to the intermediary position of Nizari Ismailism, a Shi'i sect. Based on field research, observation, and personal experience, the author demonstrates with vivid case studies, legends, and folklore how the two peoples had formerly lived by shared deities and how the change of identity based on Hindu nationalism and Islam has wrought havoc.

The book is broadly divided into four chapters. Chapter 1 examines some important terminologies that underpin religio-cultural identities in Indian history. In ancient and medieval India, people were distinguished by socio-religious strata, first by the *varna* system (socio-ritual categories) and later by the *jati panth* (caste and sect) system. A similar thing applied to Indian Muslims, who were hierarchically categorized as Ashrafs (referring to nobles, foreign Muslims) and Ajlafs (referring to converts), but not simply as "Muslims."

The interface between the indigenous Hindu religion and Islam goes beyond the terminological resemblance and reaches the heart of religious rituals and ideologies. In chapter 2, the author cites three modes of interaction

between the two communities. This includes mutual “reliance” on each other’s saints, regular “sharing” of sacred time and space by worshipping each other’s sacred figures, and “borrowing,” through which elements from one religious tradition are assimilated into the other. These three modes culminated in “liminality,” a conscious single phenomenon that looks in opposite directions with its two faces, a distinct territory in itself but with an indistinct border that permits “the smooth passage of ideas, doctrines and practices in all directions” (p. 50).

This bond between both communities started to fade away during the creation of “Orthodoxy,” a religious “enclosure” that ensures clear-cut religious identities for Hindus and Muslims. This historical development is the main focus of the third chapter. Khan identifies several agents that contributed to it: the phenomena of “Sanskritisation” and “Ashrafisation,” which sought to appropriate liminal teachers into Hinduism or Islam, respectively; the rulers’ alliance with a particular religion; the British colonial polarization of the Hindu/Muslim dichotomy; and the revivalists’/reformists’ efforts to suppress any heterodoxy in their respective communities. All of these factors, according to the author, contributed to the emergence of a new identity based on a Hindu/Muslim dichotomy.

In chapter 4, the author regards the notions of nation-state and religion as the last phases in the new identity’s evolution. She mentions several political philosophers whom she considers responsible for consolidating these new identities: for example, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, and Vivekananda on the Hindu side, and Muhammad Iqbal, Abul Ala Mawdudi, and the scholars of Aligarh on the Muslim side.

Overall, on the threshold are the two siblings of liminal communities, namely, the Nizari Ismailis and the Imamshahis, who have ensured the smooth fluidity of religious ideas, doctrines, and rituals between Hinduism and Islam. According to Khan, crossing the threshold (by eliminating, absorbing, or marginalizing liminal communities) has left indelible marks on the region, leading to the creation of two rival and antagonistic states.

The book is well articulated and logically organized. The first two chapters concentrate on the historical identities, while the last two chapters focus on the emerging new identities. Under close examination, however, it is not difficult to discover that the book has been written from a particular frame of reference and for a specific interest group at a particular point of time. Undoubtedly, Sufis played an important role in Indian Islam in their attempt to bridge the gap between the two communities. However, we must not

exaggerate their role. Not all Indian Muslims were Sufis, and not all Sufis in India were submerged in a twilight world of spirituality in which the Hindu and Islamic sacred figures were perpetually or alternately worshipped. The history of Indian Islam is not exclusively hagiographical.

The notion of image-making (Self vs. Other), which is the book's central argument, is questionable. Al-Biruni (973-1048), whose monumental work on India was widely acclaimed, contrasted Islamic culture sharply with Hindu culture. He states that "the Hindus are entirely different from us in every respect... they totally differ from us in religion, as we believe in nothing in which they believe, and vice versa." Referring to the Hindu caste system, he says that "we Muslims, of course, stand entirely on the other side of the question, considering all men as equal, except in piety." (See Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Biruni, *Alberuni's India: An Account of the Religion, Philosophy, Literature, Geography, Chronology, Astronomy, Customs, Laws, and Astrology of India about 1030*, ed. Edward C. Sachau [London: Routledge, 2000], 1:17-19 and 1:100, respectively.)

In Khan's book, we are clear as to how and when the identity was gradually built on nationalistic grounds, but we are not that clear as to how and when the initial normative identity sank into oblivion. Herein lies a lacuna in the historical record. In fact, Khan neither refers to al-Biruni's work nor mentions the impact it might have had on the Hindu or Muslim communities. Other than that, the book is rich in information, useful for those interested in folk religion, and comes at a time of a growing search for common ground between India and Pakistan.

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