Beyond Ethnicity? Being Hindu and Muslim in South Asia

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Introduction
This paper addresses a question I have visited before in my work which is, as the title suggests, what does it mean to be simultaneously Hindu and Muslim? The partners of the combine can easily be substituted by other combinations involving being simultaneously Hindu and Christian or Muslim and Sikh/Christian and Buddhist/Jewish and Christian. The early part of the paper will appraise some of this complex ethnic universe in South Asia and elsewhere. The second part of the paper will review the conceptual vocabulary used to describe this universe. I regard this section, to use a Sufi metaphor, as a further maqam (station, halting place) in a journey that has time and again negotiated with and interrogated the idea of the syncretic and also attempted to contend with the question of an alternative that will describe states of identity that are seen as mixed, impure, even heretic and most certainly, confused and a source of contamination. I conclude with a more contemporary case from our times of a person whose self-description was of a Hindu-Christian monk. The larger issue I have lived with for some time is, how do these states of living, feeling and being, destabilize boundaries of religion, sect and denomination? In terms of numbers this refers to the cultures of a fairly substantial population since the South Asian population comprises one-fifth of the world’s population (Stein 2001). The region is home to the largest concentration of Muslim population in the world.

Three significant themes need to be foreground in the contemporary discussion of religious identities: the consequences of cultural encounter for the histories of castes and communities; the possibility of dual or triple religious affiliation expressed openly or unconsciously; and, dimensions of liminality articulated through varied registers. These manifest as a series of identities that are seen as ‘border line Muslims’, ‘half Hindus’ or ‘half Muslims’, or ‘half Christian’ (whatever the components of the ‘half’ may be).

References

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How does one approach the theme of cultural encounter? One obvious way in the subcontinent is to narrate a history of conquest, iconoclasm, conflict and underwrite a politics of writing historical wrong. But there are other ways. The political theorist, Rajeev Bhargava, uses the metaphor of the palimpsest, the idea that something is altered yet bears traces of its original form.¹ One visualizes here a stone that is constantly written over or an artist’s palette, witness to the magical play of colours, the emergence of endless new shades through flow and combination. We know of Tibetan civilization that became Buddhist but could not quite overwrite its past of the Bon religion (Snellgrove 1967). The pilgrimage site of Mount Kailash is resonant with the overlapping symbolism that is Hindu and Jain, Buddhist and Bon and is what draws the inveterate Himalayan trekker, philosopher-psychoanalyst Madhu Sarin season after season. Fisher’s recent ethnography of the Thakali of Nepal who inhabit the borderlands of central Nepal wryly comments that scholars have seen Hinduism, Buddhism and shamanism together intensifying their influence on the Thakali (Fisher 2001). Sylvain Levi commented in 1905, that the traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism are so closely interwoven in Nepal that it made no sense to see Nepalese gods as either Hindu or Buddhist.

The coming of Islam and Christianity to the Indian subcontinent resulted in a phenomenal cultural encounter. India’s encounter with Islam opened up new connections with West Asia, just as Buddhism linked India with East Asia (Kulke 1990). ‘Conversion’ intensified the available plurality that had already seen the efflorescence of the vaidika and non-vaidika religions, the challenge of the sramana traditions of Buddhism and Jainism, the many adivasi cosmologies, the atheist Caravaka and the agamika-tantrika schools as also the wave of devotional traditions that would become such a prominent theme through the medieval period. Friedhelm Hardy refers, in addition, to the somewhat autonomous world of grama or village religion that involved, from the point of view of the vaidika Brahman, heterodox vulgarities of village cults involving the consumption of alcohol, smoking opium, shedding blood, killing animals, eating meat, states of possession (Hardy 1995). South Asia has had more complex identities than any other region of the world.

The idea that peoples, regions and cultures have had more than one religious affiliation, however unacknowledged and silenced, has gained some currency. Ashis Nandy reminds us that for a Japanese it is possible to be simultaneously both Shinto and Buddhist. Shintoism, the original religion of Japan, involved the worship of local deities called kami that were later introduced into Buddhism so that Buddha and Bodhisattvas were identified with local deities.² Similarly in China no absolute boundary demarcated Buddhism from Confucianism (the cult of the ancestors). A community in Vietnam continues to incorporate both Hindu Ahier Cham and Muslim Awal Cham sections, representing the yang (male) and yin (female) principles, respectively.

In South Asia, some enumerations relating to India mention 600 odd bi-religious communities and there are even thirty-eight tri-religious communities according to K. Suresh Singh (Singh 1992, cited in Nandy 1995). Describing these groups in terms of bi-religiosity and tri-religiosity, however, presents problems as these categories elude the rather high levels of internal differentiation within these communities. Further, the phenomenon of overlapping and blurring of identities is far more pervasive than
has hitherto been suspected and I will merely indicate the range in the subcontinent which requires far greater attention from researchers.

We know today of a large number of identities that have at a historical juncture occupied an interstitial space, straddling two or more religious traditions. My own familiarity is with the Muslim Meos of India and Pakistan, who are today one of the largest Muslim communities of the subcontinent and with the Merat of north-western India. The Rawat–Chita–Merat comprise a complex group formerly called the Mer and were divided into Hindu–Muslim–Christian sections. Significantly the Hinduism of the Hindu Rawat was described as hardly recognizable and the Muslimness of the Merat was viewed as similarly evanescent! They not only intermarried but their cosmologies inhabited by gods, goddesses, spirits, pirs, and ancestors were shared. The psychologist, Morris Carstairs, describes secret cults called kunda or kachli panth whose practices challenged the dominant discourse with respect to caste, gender and sexuality so that even what is called incest is redescribed as a mode of worship (Carstairs 1961).

Across the subcontinent there are many groups whose cultures suggest that it is possible to be simultaneously Hindu and Muslim. Castes and communities associated with storytelling and the performing art traditions in South Asia have had particularly nubile identities. In western India the Langas, the Manganiyars and the Mirasis also defy categorial classification. In eastern India the role of the Baul singers is particularly illustrative. These singers are classified as Muslim but their identity transcends our simplistic classifications, ‘Hindu’ and ‘Muslim’ and is expressed in one of the world’s most profound traditions of mystical music. I have a lurking suspicion that Jayadeva’s poetry that carries Krishna bhakti to new heights might have absorbed the theme of love that is sensual and adulterous from Baul songs. It is no coincidence that the annual congregation of some 10,000 Bauls takes place where Jayadeva, the author of Gita Govinda was born. This twelfth century lyrical masterpiece became crucial to the making of a new literary culture in India as it inspired music, painting, sculpture and drama. Gayatri Spivak writes of the ‘poetic counter theology’ of the famous Baul singer, Lallan Shah fakir (1774–1890) in which advaita becomes the abstract God of Islam. The nirakar, the formless, combines with the dualist urge to rupa (manifestation or form) so that Khadija, Mohammad’s eldest wife is Allah (je khodija a sher to khobai) but also the chief goddess (Spivak 1999).

Like the cultures of performing artists, those of peasant and pastoral tribe-castes have hitherto been ‘mixed’. I deliberately use the hyphenated tribe-caste to highlight that these were also not walled-off social formations. The data is telling. The 1921 Census records that there were 47.3 per cent Hindu and 33.4 per cent Muslim Jats (besides others who were Sikh). In this respect they were similar to the Rajputs (27.7 per cent Muslim and 70.7 per cent Hindu) and Gujars (25.3 per cent and 74.2 per cent Muslim) (Edye and Tennant 1923). Wink points out that the culture of Jats and Gujars had a significant Persian component (1990:138). The Ahirs likewise had Muslim branches even as the Mewatis and Mirasis had Hindu populations.

Ruling and warrior castes and the so-called Sudra castes of the subcontinent also suggest significant religious complexity. In the region of Rajasthan, with which I am more familiar, the category ‘Muslim’ includes the Musalman Rajputs, Khanzadas, Desi Musalman, Kayamkhans and Sindhi Sipahis (Kothari 1984). In Uttar Pradesh we know of the Malkanas who claimed to be neither Hindus nor Muslims and preferred to be called Mian Thakur. Helena Basu points out that the Jadeja Rajputs of Gujarat who were described as ‘half Muslim’ employed African (Muslim) Sidi slaves as cooks.

Some of this description comes from the early censuses of the twentieth century, that one can see as a dialectic between the imposition of homogeneity by the state and a mirroring of ethnic complexity that emerges from the interstices. Regrettably research on the Census, as Peterson points out, has ignored
mixed identities with the exception of the Anglo-Indians (Peterson 1997). The world of scholarship, in general, has not given much cognizance to the phenomenon of overlapping identities, interpenetrating cultures and religions, and the transgression of boundaries. Only now as ethnicity, nationalism, militarization overtake the worlds we inhabit and boundaries are etched in blood and genocidal violence have we woken up to the realization that possibly the world itself, its past and present, needs to be described differently. There is some very significant recent work on South Asia that challenges ethnic faultlines (see, for instance, Silva 2002; Gilmartin and Lawrence 2000; Gottschalk 2001). The importance of these cultures for both the writing of history and ethnography and the larger understanding of religion and cultural encounter can hardly be overemphasized.

This is not to deny that the boundary making enterprise is not also a constant for the worlds these cultures inhabit as also within themselves. State Shintoism is quick to decry the mixing of popular Japanese practice. Official recognition of the Bon religion from Tibetan Buddhism dates only to the current Dalai Lama who has recognized it as a living tradition. Reformist and purist trends in state and civil society have frequently sought to purge the popular of ‘corrupt’ and ‘depraved’ practices. Performing artists have been recruited by nationalist ideologues, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh.

Challenges of Conceptualizing This Universe: Liminality

When I first began my work on the Meos of India and Pakistan there was hardly any vocabulary that would capture the complexity of a culture that was simultaneously Hindu and Muslim. The search for a language to describe the phenomenon of blurring and interaction has taken scholars in varying directions advocating varied concepts such as ambiguity, fuzziness, the idea of the border and frontier, the hybrid, and, of course, the age-old syncretic. Some of this work marks a shift of interest from boundary to borderlands, borders being conceived as frontiers that are zones of interaction. This reverses the erstwhile conception of the frontier as a space to be mastered and conquered by an imperial/racial project. Anzaldúa asserts, ‘To survive the Borderlands you must live sin fronteras (without frontiers) be a crossroads’ (Anzaldúa 1987). Border zones are seen as arenas of partially realized identities, manifest contradictions and deliberate ambiguity. Uberoi (1999) elaborates on this using the metaphor of a revolving door for Afghanistan. Islam comes in through one door and Buddhism goes out through another.

Liminality and Syncretism

A range of new research has brought out the syncretisms of world religions. There are the hypothesized beginnings of Christianity from the dissenting Jewish sect of the Essenes; the Jewishness of Jesus; and the derivation of aspects of Christian and Judaic belief such as the worship of the Madonna or the celebration of feasts and festivals from pagan traditions. Hence, Gunkel’s description of Christianity as syncretic. The view of the Christian community as separate and distinct from Judaism. Van der Veer has highlighted that the very term syncretism is associated with the rise of Protestantism and the decline of the absolute authority of Catholicism that had pronounced on the syncretic as the heretical (Van der Veer 1994).

The association of Mecca with the pagan ritual involving priestesses of three goddesses has frequently been written about. The Egyptian feminist writer, Nawal El-Saadawi, pointed out that the practice of kissing the black stone housed in the Ka’ba shrine derives from pre-Islamic practice. She has since been accused of heresy and almost forced to divorce her husband in accordance with a law that requires Muslims not to remain married to apostates. Ismailism draws upon Pythagoras and Aristotle, Christianity and the Manicheans and upon Judaism. Sufism grew in Mesopotamia, Eastern Iran, and Khorasan where it was influenced
by Buddhist monastic ideals. Later period influences included those of neo-Platonism, Christianity and Central Asian and Indian asceticism (For a discussion, see Schimmel 1992).

In South Asia, Dumont viewed orthodox Brahmanism as syncretic contrasted with a sect. Puranic syncretism has been pointed out frequently (Chakrabarti 2001). Sikh holy scripture incorporated the verses of Kabir and Farid I or Farid II and Bhikan the Sufi (Uberoi 1999). That syncretism is strategically deployed in the history of religions has been demonstrated again and again. Eaton shows in relation to Bengal how syncretism was actually used to further conversion. Distancing himself from the use of orthodox and unorthodox, fundamentalist and syncretic as unproductive terms, Eaton argues that Islam in Bengal absorbed an enormous amount of local culture so that it was never regarded as foreign. Eaton maintains that it is inappropriate to speak of ‘conversion’ of Hindus to Islam, instead what occurred in the Bengal context was an expanding agrarian civilization whose cultural counterpart was the growth of the cult of Allah. A simultaneous syncretism and anti-syncretism is manifest in movements of social and religious reform such as the Brahmō and Arya Samaj and more recently in the Vishva Hindu Parishad.

In the west the so-called New Age Religion has produced new sycretic combinations. One version combines tantra, wicca, spirit possession and Christianity. There is in existence a highly syncretic post modern Christianity. Wilson mentions that nearly a quarter of the west’s Christian population now believes in reincarnation rather than a realizable Heaven. There is also a new emphasis on Christ’s humanity, his role as an ethical teacher rather than merely on divinity. Ideas of the Original Sin (of children being born of sin) and of damnation have similarly been given up (Wilson 1999). Feminist theologians have been emphasizing the idea of a gender-neutral God who ought to substitute the idea of God as exclusively male. Black cults are similarly syncretic variants of Islam and the Baptist religion. Further, syncretisms have married western ideas of individualism and liberalism with Christianity and socialism with Islam.

The question is how does one theorize these identities? For one thing Asian religions did not stress singularization that was associated with the institutional framework of Christianity and the idea of heresy. For people embedded in a traditional world religious view, liminality followed from a quest for the power of the transcendent. It meant, what has been called, a policy of double insurance: if one’s own gods were not powerful enough, others might provide a better guarantee of the fulfilment of desire. For persons located in modernist contexts liminality derives from the quest for a moral life, in which inherited traditions might be drawn upon but are also subject to scrutiny and other spiritualities might become potential sources of insight and guides to living.

Lest it be concluded that liminality relates to only premodern, folk theologies one might mention two particularly well-known contemporary persons of our times. Ramakrishna Paramhans (1836−86), one of the greatest Indian sages and mystics, said to have experienced moksha in his lifetime, and who actually lived for brief durations as a practicing Muslim and Christian. The Gospel of Ramakrishna brings out how in his state of ecstatic illumination he experienced himself as a woman, Jew, Muslim, Jain and Buddhist as he beheld the varied manifestations of God, as Christ, Mohammad and also as the Divine Mother, as Sita and Rama and Krishna.

Gandhi’s life and work illustrates the point. Ramachandra Gandhi points out Gandhi’s rejection of exclusivist identities. ‘He was a Hindu, but insisted that he was simultaneously also a Muslim, Christian, Jew, Buddhist, Jaina, etc.: a believer in the truth of all faiths’ (Gandhi 1994: 9). Madan points out that his Ram Raj recalled no mythic Hindu past, but the Asokan vision of Dhamma (Madan 1998:230–1). Gandhi also acknowledged the enormous influence of the moral teaching of Christianity on his thoughts particularly the Sermon on the Mount and declared, ‘Jesus has given a definition of perfect dharma.’6 Nandy has similarly pointed out that

Notes
1 Presentation, at, International Conference on Living Together Separately: Cultural India in History and Politics, organized by Academy of Third World Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, 19–21 December 2002.
2 A Japanese has been known to respond to the question, are you Buddhist or Shinto? with the mocking answer, Shinto is our religion for times of happiness and Buddhism for times of sorrow!
3 See Kothari in conversation with Bharucha (Bharucha 2003).
5 Elsewhere, I have critiqued the syncretic and the hybrid as inadequately theorized formulations of the subject under discussion (Mayaram 1998).
6 Indeed, Gandhi’s first biographer commented, ‘I question whether any system of religion can absolutely hold him. His views are too closely allied to Christianity to be entirely Hindu; and too deeply saturated with Hinduism to be called Christian, and his sympathies are so wide and catholic that one would imagine he has reached a point where the formulae of sects are meaningless’ (cited in Madan 1998: 230n).

References


