

## Introduction

Accustomed to perceiving Hinduism and Islam as fixed, monolithic and distinct categories, one often forgets that a long and complex historical process precedes the comparatively recent emergence of the two main religious blocs in South Asia. Indeed, popular literature and journalism tend to focus on confrontation and difference, whereas peaceful coexistence and constructive exchange make poor news.<sup>1</sup> Is this because positive Hindu-Muslim interactions are mere exceptions or marginal cases within a context where religious identity was defined once and for all in an ideal and remote past, resulting in the existence of perpetually rival communities?

More often than not, direct observation warns us against such general statements. Better than any theoretical discussion, an anecdote will show the complexity of the subject. The event we are going to describe took place recently and thus belongs to the landscape of modern India. The author of this work heard it from the priest of a Shiva temple located in the old bazaar of Katu Shyam, a peaceful Rajasthani village in the Jaipur area, famous as a local pilgrimage centre.

At that time a low wall separated the Hindu temple enshrining a stone lingam, the traditional symbol of Shiva, from a small mosque presumably built by the Mughal emperor Awrangzib (r.1658-1707). In front of it one could see a few graves, the main one being the *mazār* (tomb) of a fakir known as Shahid Baba or Murli Shah.

The priest of the neighbouring Hindu shrine, affiliated to the Shaiva order of Nath Jogis, told us the following story. One day, while his brother was on duty at the shrine, the priest jumped across the wall and plucked a few flowers in the open courtyard of the mosque. Having returned to the temple he prepared himself for the evening devotions, ringing the bell and offering the stolen blossoms to his deity. But suddenly, instead of the usual mantras, he started unwittingly to recite

the *namāz*. Those who witnessed the scene said that he had been possessed by Shahid Baba, the pir of the neighbouring darga. Moreover, during the following days he continued to behave like a Sunni Muslim, reciting his five daily prayers and observing the corresponding rules of purity. His father understood that the Sufi saint was angry because of the robbery committed in his shrine and proposed to offer him in compensation two lemon trees. After this the priest recovered his former 'religious personality'.

The metamorphosis had lasted for a period of forty days, at the beginning of which Shahid Baba had manifested himself to the priest, saying: 'On that day if you had kept the flowers for yourself instead of offering them to Shiva (who is also Baba Adam), I would have killed you on the spot!' Curiously, an oral tradition points to the fact that initially, there was only one shrine. However, the opinion of our informants differed as to its identity: was it a Hindu or a Muslim sacred place? Visiting the same village four years later, we saw that the partition wall between the two shrines had been raised by five feet, but, interestingly, this did not prevent the children of the Hindu priests from continuing to partake regularly of the sacred offerings made to the pir of the darga or shrine.

This temporary transformation of the Hindu priest into a Muslim believer, the legend of a former united or unifying tradition, as well as the persistence of ritual exchanges between the two shrines are far from constituting isolated cases. Numerous examples could be given that would point to the artificial character of religious boundaries, as well as to their relative fragility. While describing two ritual processions which take place annually in Bihar, for example, Peter Gottschalk remarks that they differ only by the heroes they memorialise, Imam Husayn and Durga:

Attempts to categorize these events as Muslim and Hindu demonstrate both the multiple meanings each term allows and the uncertainty which commonly accompanies their use ... Efforts at labeling such rituals as 'Islamic' or 'Hindu' often rely on unclear definitions and thus overlook the often shared identities and participation in each other's lives.<sup>2</sup>

How, then, can one account for the current perception of Islam and Hinduism as two monolithic, distinct and rival faiths? In the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent metaphors that view history through the oculus

of Hindu-Muslim conflict are still very strong. As Carl W. Ernst has it, 'it is often assumed that the conflict between Islam and Hinduism (construed as political entities) is one of the eternal verities', one of the chief reasons being that 'the main distorting presupposition in Indian historical thinking today reads the medieval past in terms of modern religious nationalism. In this view historical events are implicitly seen as prefiguring the partition of British India into an Islamic Republic of Pakistan and an overwhelmingly Hindu Indian Union.'<sup>3</sup>

Although this type of ideological historiography is widespread, it has not prevented a number of more critical writers from asserting the existence of a composite culture emerging out of long-term exchanges; but if some of them go as far as viewing positive interactions as a dominant trait in South Asian history, others argue that in spite of all this the two communities have never ceased to exist as separate religious, or at least, cultural 'enclosures'. Crises, whenever they occur, always reveal the 'fault-line' between them.<sup>4</sup> According to this view, under the pressure of various forces such as orthodoxy, elite culture and state power, the common features that may have earlier emerged start to dissolve into conflicting units. This would prove that 'the composite culture or synthesis is fragile by nature precisely because it is unable to withstand intervention from above.'<sup>5</sup>

Another suggestion is that both the ideas of harmonious coexistence or perpetual hostility between Hindus and Muslims should be rejected as naïve and idealistic constructions, in so far as these communities cannot be defined a priori and once and for all; considerable changes and variations have occurred over time, whether in the form of conversions, sectarian splits or acculturation processes which prevent us from viewing their history as either the convergence or the divergence of two invariable, uninterrupted lines representing 'eternal' Hinduism or Islam.

The exponent of this theory, however, apparently still believes that the traditions represented by Islam and Hinduism, in spite of their multiple and fluctuating forms and the frequent exchanges which took place between them, have never lost their specific features.<sup>6</sup> Again, all these viewpoints are based on the assumption that Hinduism and Islam have always existed as relatively homogenous entities, carefully preserving separate identities.

Which of these theories is nearest to the truth? We would not hesitate

to answer 'none of them'. The question seems like one of those riddles to which there is no right answer because the premise itself is false.

Let us address the issue in completely different terms. Instead of trying to decide whether Hindus and Muslims have been friends or enemies, or if they have been so alternately, one should rather ask the following questions: which Hindus have coexisted and interacted with which Muslims; which Muslims have been hostile to which Hindus; and which Hindus have regarded which Muslims as their enemies?

If we assume that religious groups are not defined once and for all, the idea of two compact and uniform blocs can be only a construct. The Hindus or the Muslims whom the question addresses are not real characters; they belong to an 'imagined community' constructed in opposition to an entity perceived as the 'indigenous Other'.<sup>7</sup> Such constructs, in turn, force us to address the question of identity versus alterity, and lead us to re-examine the broader issue of Self and Other – both at the individual and collective levels. Ultimately this should help us to move away from 'the taken-for-granted, naturalised categories of 'Hindus and Muslims'.<sup>8</sup>

If the personal story of the priest of Katu Shyam shows the complex processes that are at work in the individual psyche, at the collective level also the existence of intermediary and fluid categories have been a constant challenge to our usual bivalent line of thought. The embarrassment of the British commissioner who was entrusted with the 1881 census of Punjab may serve here to illustrate our purpose: 'the observances and beliefs which distinguish the followers of the several faiths in their purity are so strangely blended and intermingled that it is often impossible to say that one prevails rather than the other, or to decide in what category the people shall be classified.'<sup>9</sup>

The presence in South Asia of communities and traditions that could not easily be classified as Hindu or Muslim seemed to defy the Cartesian logic to which most Europeans adhered. How should one understand and define them? In the past, the adjective 'syncretistic' has been often used to describe these phenomena, while terms such as 'hybrid movement', 'amalgam', 'blend' or 'fusion' have been widely resorted to. The concepts of 'acculturation' and 'inculturation' were later introduced to explain how 'composite' forms of religion could emerge through mutual exchanges and influences occurring in a more or less spontaneous way.

Syncretistic traditions have been perceived positively as 'bridging the gulf' between communities. Traditionally, Sunni Sufis, Hindu yogis or ascetics and 'non-sectarian' saints and devotees have been credited with a rapprochement which is supposed to have given birth to these movements through the conscious effort of some religious reformers. Negatively, however, they were seen as forms of 'imperfect' Islam or Hinduism, spontaneous and somehow disorderly creations of the 'popular mind'. Curiously, the possible role of Ismaili Islam in this interplay has never been really explored – a gap which we will attempt to fill, at least partly, in this book.

In the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures*, Hugo G. Nutt clearly links the concept of syncretism to folk religion which is practised, according to him, by rural and urban traditional communities. He views this phenomenon as 'interesting and often curious blends of magical and religious elements of several provenences'. Quoting other authors, he goes on to explain that the concept can be used in two ways: one can speak of 'spontaneous' and of 'guided' syncretism.<sup>10</sup> In other words, for him, conscious or unconscious acculturation is a phenomenon that concerns only popular religious beliefs and practices.

Another term, 'transculturation', as Robert S. Carlsen reminds us, was coined in the 1940s by the Cuban sociologist Fernando Ortiz, to describe a similar phenomenon in the same part of the world. Later this term was more widely employed thanks to the writings of Mary Louise Pratt who uses the words 'contact zones' to refer to social environments 'where cultures meet, clash, and grapple', that should also be viewed as dynamic, interpretive and expressive spaces.<sup>11</sup>

Here, however, this interesting concept is used exclusively to describe a discourse that reflects the victory of a dominant power over a subservient one and is perceived as a consequence of colonial rule. However, as we will see in the cases we propose to study here, such phenomena are not always associated with folk religion or conquest.

In recent scholarship other concepts have been suggested in order to account for the complexity of the so-called 'syncretistic' phenomena. Apart from being an alternative to the idea of 'syncretism', the 'border zone', 'contact zone' or 'shatter zone' concept has also provided an alternative to what scholars have called the 'sectarian trope'. In the same perspective, the concept of 'liminality' has been brought forward. The word 'liminal' (from the Latin *limen*, meaning 'threshold') had been

used at first in the domain of psychology to refer to in-between structures of consciousness. Later, in his studies of religious practices, Van Gennep resorted to it in order to describe certain rites of passage. And finally Victor Turner<sup>12</sup> enlarged the concept to describe whatever is 'intermediary' in the form of 'bridges, gates, doorways, boundaries or social margins', liminal locations being points of intersection between the theological discourses.<sup>13</sup>

The success of the concept of liminality originates from the fact that it can be applied to a wide variety of human phenomena, including histories, cultures, peoples, etc. As an alternative to 'syncretism', however, it may not be fully satisfactory as it does not totally avoid a Manichaean vision and may even imply the idea of something merely transitional,<sup>14</sup> as it seems that ultimately a no-man's land between the boundaries or a threshold has to be crossed. In addition, the concept of liminality may not describe adequately all the phenomena related to 'syncretism' or 'composite culture'.

Tazim Kassam has conceptualised, in an original and constructive way, the striking duality or syncretic mode typical of South Asian Nizari Ismailism. She views it in the form of a 'figure-ground' which can be read as two black faces or as a white chalice according to the perspective chosen by the observer.<sup>15</sup> The passage to a more monolithic category would not consist in seeing one of the two heads as the 'right' one, but in perceiving their lineaments as forming an entirely new object.

Actually, in order to perceive visually phenomena that are related to the concepts of composite culture, syncretism, liminality or contact zone, one can resort to another metaphor, that of Janus Bifrons, the Roman deity who guards the doorway. He is one, although he has two faces that look in opposite directions. The threshold need not therefore be viewed only as a temporary space, a kind of limbo out of which one would eventually have to emerge to return to normality; it may be regarded as a permanent opening into a world of multiple values. It could also suggest a potential anti-structural questioning of certain fixed categories such as religious identities,<sup>16</sup> 'drawing upon a line of thought that emphasizes "fuzzy" thinking as an alternative to bivalent, either/or logic which has dominated the western philosophical tradition from the Greeks to the Logical Positivists'.<sup>17</sup>

The existence of a threshold may even become a source of revolutionary change based on the idea of 'resistance' implied in the desire

to preserve one's original understanding of religion versus normative and orthodox models. Syncretic and liminal traditions or communities can be perceived as cohesive forces in the social fabric, powerful links in the uninterrupted chain of religious traditions. But as they tend to disappear as modern society shapes itself along more monolithic criteria, the open doorways between communities are gradually closed and replaced here and there by boundary walls that rise higher and higher every day. Groups endowed with a composite religious identity are threatened and often obliged to make a drastic choice. The landscape of South Asia and the fate of its inhabitants may have been different if history had not forced so many people to 'cross the threshold'.