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The Tale of the Hidden Pir

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India
DOMINIQUE-SILA KHAN

Histories tell us how, threatened by state power and by various pressure groups, resisting communities have chosen to go underground, surviving clandestinely as a whole or partly concealing their activities. This phenomenon testifies to the permanence of dynamic, antinomian trends in societies. A particular type is expressed by the tales of religious dissimulation – practised by Jews, Christians, and Muslims – referred to in the Islamic idiom as *taqiyya*.

South Asian history shows that, in the past, the huge diversity of beliefs and practices ensured not only a certain amount of tolerance but a great deal of interactions, exchanges, and even the existence of overlapping identities. This is still the case in contemporary India, although shared space and times in religious life tend to diminish, mainly owing to the increasing Hindu-Muslim divide that started to emerge about one century ago.

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Converts and the Making of European Islam
by Stefano Allievi

is a most recent phenomenon – might be proportionally devalorized in the future. However, starting from the second generation, we witness a sort of 'normalization' of the relationships and of the social separation of functions between converts and immigrants. It is not without reason that second-generation intellectuals compete with converts, but it is especially noteworthy that they also cooperate and mutually support each other in the battles over cultural hegemony fought against the first-generation leaders, or those coming from the Muslim countries. The converts, in their 'dual position', appear to be able not only to serve a function in the relationship between Islam and the public space, but also in the transition between the Islam of the fathers and that of the sons, in unison with the second generation. In a way, the converts foreshadow a tendency of the second-generation Muslims towards an Islam that is no longer an inherited tradition, brought from the native country, but a conscious choice. To sum up, the converts are in the ideal position to perform a function in the passage from Islam in Europe to Islam of Europe, and then in the creation of a European Islam. They are, after all, nothing more than Europeans of Islamic adherence, who cannot be qualified as immigrants or as bearers of a foreign culture. Consequently, they are also producers of an Islamic culture with a European inclination. They are in fact at the same time the product and the mediators of the meeting between Islam and Europe. A Europe that is also, without knowing it, the European part of the Islamic *umma*. To conclude, they globally perform a function that promises to have important consequences for the very self-definition of the European Islam, and perhaps also of the Islam 'of origin'.

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The Tale of the Hidden Pir

The precautionary concealment of Islamic traditions in predominantly Hindu communities has become more urgent in the face of growing Hindu right-wing fundamentalism. From the Arya Samaj to the Sanatan Dharm movement, the RSS and the VHP Hindu leaders posing as reformists and 'revivalists' made all possible efforts to convince various Hindu – generally low-caste, tribal or 'liminal' groups – to discontinue Muslim traditions and customs, which they regarded as 'impure' or non-Hindu. The response to these pressures is far from having always been positive: apart from those who fully accepted these dictates or started open resistance, a number of communities opted for concealment. Interestingly, dissimulation, ceasing to be a unique feature of some Shi'a communities, became a more general practice that extended to much wider spheres of society. An interesting illustration of this phenomenon is the tell-tale story of the Diggy Kalyanji temple located to the south of Jaipur, Rajasthan.

Invisible pirs

The pilgrims or tourists who visited the shrine 15 or 20 years ago still remember that it was a simple underground chamber where the devotees – Hindus and Muslims – came to bow in front of the grave of a mysterious Sufi saint, that had been erected side by side with an icon of a Hindu folk deity. Local priests, posing as Hindus, were doing the usual service of the *mazar* (grave). After a Hindu trust took over the management of the structure it was decided to lock this underground and to build a brand-new temple above, in front of an old, dilapidated tower where one can still admire classical sculptures representing various Hindu deities. Brahmins were entrusted with the regular worship. It did not take long before new generations of ignorant pilgrims started to regard this place as a 'pure' Hindu, Brahmanical temple, not even being aware of the existence of a 'hidden treasure'. However, as soon as the tomb had been abandoned various disasters took place in the small town of Diggy. This was immediately interpreted by the local pandits as the 'wrath of the pir'. To prevent further problems, they took the following decision: the Brahmin priests would secretly visit the underground twice a day and perform, as earlier, the ritual washing of the grave and the usual offerings. Besides, on the top, at the temple level, a rectangular enclosure was erected around the symbol of Shiva, to prevent the devotees from unwittingly 'treading on the pir' of whose existence they were not aware, but whose *barakat* had been fully recognized by the 'pure' Hindu priests. If all my elder informants knew about the existence of the sacred grave, it is a young Muslim living in the nearby city of Malpura who told us the story: recently he had seen, with his own eyes, the *mazar* located in the secret underground chamber; entrusted with the renovation of the dilapidated walls the painter had been taken to the place by one of the Brahmin priest's sons who was – a noteworthy detail – his best friend.

A case that may appear similar to a certain extent is that of Panna (Madhya Pradesh). The ordinary visitor and devotee can no longer see the *mazar* of Mahamati Prannath (traditionally referred to as Nishalank Budh Avatar and Imam Mahdi), the 17th-century

Guru of the Pranami faith (Khan 2002); the underground tomb is now entirely hidden by a structure consisting of a platform on the top of which the *Qulzam Sharif*, the Pranami Holy book, is installed. There is also a world of difference between the openly disclosed ideas and the 'clandestine' doctrine of the Pranamis. For instance, while the modern literature portrays the sect as a basically Hindu tradition, the *Qulzam Sharif* is described by the founders themselves as the 'Sahebi' or 'Imam Qur'an', and their religion is constantly referred to as 'Islam' and 'Din-e Islam Haqiqi' – one of the traces of its Ismaili origin. In this respect, the underground Sufi saint of Diggy, like the invisible Mahdi of Panna, could also be compared to one of the hidden (living) pirs of the present *imamshahis* of Gujarat – an offshoot of the Nizari sect (Khan and Moir 2000). Along with some of his followers, the Sayyid who claims to be the direct descendant of Imam Shah practises *taqiyya* to protect his community from the Hindu fundamentalist wave: in doing so he reproduced the typical behaviour of the earlier South Asian Nizaris during Sunni rule. There are other, even more original ways to conceal a pir, not necessarily connected with a conscious or unconscious Shi'i *taqiyya*. As spies have always known, there is no better hiding place than one's own body. Is that why, even in modern India, so many Hindus are allegedly possessed by a pir? Far from being simple cases of 'primitive' spirit possession, these stories often have interesting consequences: while becoming the *savari* of a Muslim saint or martyr, the Hindu devotee temporarily adopts a new religious identity, revealing at times a surprising knowledge of Islamic, Qur'anic terminology of which he claims to be otherwise utterly ignorant. These phenomena should not be misconstrued hastily as mere superstitions or idolatry. Apart from being genuine traces of an older, half-forgotten Sunni Sufi or Ismaili heritage, these practices are, in popular milieus, powerful and natural means of ensuring mutual tolerance and maintaining communal harmony, unless... True, if we look at the case of that upper-caste trader who has joined the ranks of Hindu right-wing organizations: far from his residence he behaves like an uncompromising, fierce ideologist of 'Hindutva', but when he returns home he never forgets to make offerings to the 'invisible pir' symbolized by an oil lamp (*chirag*) installed inside a recess of his room. This pir is not a simple household spirit but a real Sufi saint whose spiritual teaching had once been accepted by the trader's ancestors without formally converting to Islam.

The colour of *taqiyya*

The underground motive – strongly reminiscent of the symbol of the Christian catacombs often wrongly imagined as places of concealment – has its parallel in other 'clever strategies' used by communities who wish to pose as 'full-fledged' Hindus to dissimulate Islamic features. As religious identities in South Asia came to be more sharply defined, essentially in terms of two antagonistic blocs, colours were used among the symbols that served to demarcate the two 'communities': saffron for Hinduism, green for Islam. For instance, many local shrines

that, seen from outside, once looked exactly the same – rough, square white-washed structures – started to display saffron and green flags, while the walls of Muslim *dargahs* were often painted green. However, the re-Hinduized, 'liminal' – I would rather say crypto-Islamic – shrines had to face another problem: if the leaders of the sects wished to pose as genuine Hindus, at the same time they were reluctant to discard altogether what had been for centuries their sacred heritage. This is why they resorted to one of the 'clever strategies' to which I have been alluding: the ornate draperies (*chadar*) covering the holy graves of their founders and spiritual masters, which were usually green, were not removed but hidden by other *chadars* of saffron hue placed on the top. If colours symbolize and signify, so do words. Nothing is simpler than avoiding the accusation that a supposedly Hindu place of worship looks like a Muslim shrine: in many cases changing its name is enough. *Dargah* will become *samadhi*, the pir a guru, the *murids* become *shishyas*, the term *mukam* can be explained as a corrupted form of *muktidham* (place of salvation), and the etymology of Pirana, the main centre of the *imamshahis*, is rendered as Prerna (Divine inspiration). But to what conclusion does all this lead? There is no denying that resistance increases along with reaction. Besides, dissimulation has its limits – as is also well known in history. If it is a fact that Islamic markers increasingly go underground in contemporary communities who wish to be accepted as full-fledged Hindus, it is equally true that tradition is stronger than caution. This is revealed by simply peeping into a locked underground or 'lifting the veil': the Islamic colour – dear to the hearts of those sincere devotees – still shows through the apparently self-asserting but in reality infinitely light veneer of 'Hinduness'.

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