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# IDENTITY AND RELIGION SYNCRETISM: SOME REFLECTIONS ON INDIAN MUSLIMS<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

### IDENTITY AND RELIGION SYNCRETISM: SOME REFLECTIONS ON INDIAN MUSLIMS

At 172 million strong, Muslims constitute 14,2% of the Indian population. As the community is hardly monolithic and widely scattered across India, no conclusion drawn on the Northern Muslims can be legitimately applied on Mohammedans from the South, East or West. My overriding goal of this article is to provide several reflections on Indian Muslim community with a touch of variations in their practice and belief. The identity of them is far more complex, yet it remains understudied. This article contributes to the understanding of some characteristics among Indian Muslims. The identity of them is far more complex, yet it remains understudied. In the article I investigate:

- 1) their unique dichotomic identity, such as the distinction between *little* and *great tradition* or the *coastal* and the *inland* division;
- 2) the role of al-Hidayah in the region;
- 3) the interface between Hinduism and Islam.

In particular, I focus on amalgamation of Hindu-Muslim traditions and the emergence of Sufism. This article also presents shortly previous studies on Indian Muslims (Ahmad 1973) and major dispute among scholars (Minault, Das, Robinson 1986) on the nature of Indian Islam. I draw on the concept of 'uniqueness of Islam in India' to engage in discussion about religious syncretism and its manifestations.

**KEYWORDS:** Indian Muslims, South Asia, Islam, Sufis

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## Introduction

South Asia is not a mere frontier of Islam, but an integral part of the Islamic world, making a distinctive contribution to the life of the whole. For many centuries it has been interacting with Hinduism by way of both attraction and repulsion, but it has not severed its links with the heartlands of Islam (...).<sup>2</sup>

Islam is a religion of over 172 million people in India alone. In all likelihood, not many minorities in modern history have been heavily exposed to such a persistent and widespread suffering as the Muslim community in India. The great majority of them struggle with acute poverty, permanent sense of insecurity and also is often treated as *second-class citizens*. As a matter of fact, they have been victims of deliberate slaughters, acts of violence and continual harassment. It led many Muslims to think that the best policy would be to lie low and not draw attention. Among Hindus, in turn, there was a strong view that this subject has been already exhausted. It seems worth quoting here Professor Theodore P. Wright Jr's seminar on Indian Muslims delivered in 1984 in Lahore:

It is somewhat symbolized by kind of statement which I have never heard personally but have had many people quote to me by Hindus that when a Muslim complains about something they say, "you have your Pakistan, now go there". I heard that statement quoted enough that it has become a widespread experience.<sup>3</sup>

Based on the gathered data, reflecting how frequently the subject has been raised among scholars, its significance still seems to be underestimated. Decades have been allowed to pass without asking many important questions about Muslim community in India. It might have happened because either the problem has not been paid enough attention or because we were fairly unconcerned and at heart we took for granted that we had all the answers. Yet, this article engages with a field of study remaining rather distant

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- 2 W. Montgomery Watt, (in:) Aziz Ahmad, *An intellectual history of Islam in India*, Edinburgh 1969.
  - 3 T.P. Wright, Jr., *Seminar 1984: Methodology of Research on Indian Muslims*, S.F. Hasnat (ed.), Lahore 1985, p. 12.

and insufficiently explored in the scientific arena. Consequently, huge areas of Muslim existence in India—such as movements, institutions, identity, social integration or Muslim “caste”—are expressed by only a handful of substantial publications. With one-third of the world’s Muslims now living as members of a minority, crucial question of emergence and growth of Indian Muslims’ identity must arouse a great curiosity in colleges and universities.

It is essential to understand that Islam in India is an enduringly living tradition, an immanent part of its culture. Indeed, India used to be a hotbed of Islamic education institutions since the advent of Turkish rule. Under Muhammad bin Tughluq (1325–1351), thousands of *madaris* have been established in Delhi alone. There were at least thirty in Jaunpur, and 400 large and small *madaris* reported by a sixteenth century traveller visiting Thatta (today, city of Pakistan).<sup>4</sup>

## The Emergence of Indian Muslim Identity

The roots of Islam are very deeply entrenched in the Indian soil. However, while doing research, one should bear in mind there is no such category that includes each and every Indian Muslim. Within India, no generalisation about them can be made as the community is widely scattered across India and certain conclusions drawn on the Northern Muslims cannot be legitimately applied on Mohammedans from Kerala or Tamilnadu.

It is worth noting that Islam in India—and further in South Asia region—is scarcely monolithic. Often called “a Muslim archipelago”,<sup>5</sup> it displays a multitude of variations in practice and belief. In South India Islam was spread through merchants and travellers, in contrast to north India, where Islam was brought by rulers and soldiers. As a result, Muslims from the North tended to adopt emotions-driven policy which often led to communal clashes. Unlike their brothers in the North, South Asian Muslims were over the ages more engaged in non-controversial fields such as commerce or education. “In this way, constructive traditions have been established among Muslims of this region.”<sup>6</sup>

4 M. Hasan, *India’s Muslims. An omnibus. Introduction*, Oxford 2007, p. 11.

5 See: Max L. Gross, *A Muslim Archipelago: Islam and Politics in Southeast Asia*, National Defense Intelligence College, NDIC Press, Washington DC March 2007.

6 M.W. Khan, *Indian Muslims. The Need for a Positive Outlook*, New Delhi 1994, p. 97.

Indeed, the South Asian traditions of Islam offer a compelling alternative and are of greater complexity. Undoubtedly, there have always existed many “Islams”, not just one. The exporting of Islam beyond the borders of the Arab peninsula, particularly into the Indian sub-continent from the 8th century, gave rise to another element of distinction, this time between Arabs and non-Arabs, and within this latter group between the previously converted (khadim-al-Islam), from the time of the very first waves of Islamization, and the newly converted (jadid-al-Islam).<sup>7</sup> To provide another example of distinction, there is the Islam of the theologians and Islam of the subalterns, driven by a ‘great’ and ‘little tradition’. The distinction between the ‘little’ and ‘great traditions’—like in Hinduism—is not only that the former is rural, mass-based, consisting of the unlettered and less formalized, whereas the latter is elite-based urban, reflective and formalized. Although, these distinctions hold valid, the ‘little tradition’ of Islam in India has one distinctive historical characteristic—it is composed to a large degree of the Hindu converts.<sup>8</sup> It is often argued that local Islam was strongly prone to a great number of influences and adopted several customs and traditions originated in pre-Islamic era. For instance, Bengali Islam has absorbed multiple values and symbols which are not necessarily consistent with Qur’anic doctrine. This regional perspective to Indian Islam and its implications on local communities have been elaborated more extensively by Ahmed.<sup>9</sup> He also identified the impact of Islamic clerics and wandering preachers on reinforcement of Islamic rather than local self-identity of rural Muslims which often took place during rural *anjuman*.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, even if Islamic identity became a defining element for some, ‘Muslim unity’ concept has been plainly proved wrong. In India there is no denying that in terms of shari’a ulama-theologian and Muslim peasant have been separated by a yawning gulf of self-identity. Undoubtedly, an average Bengali Muslim largely preferred to shape his life and mindset on account of regional traditions and bonds among local community.

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7 R. Delage, *Muslim Castes in India*, College De France, 29 September 2014.

8 Puja Mondal, *Little Tradition of Islam: Islamization*, <http://www.yourarticlelibrary.com/essay/little-tradition-of-islam-islamization/39383> (accessed: February 2, 2019).

9 R. Ahmed, *Conflicts and Contradictions in Bengali Islam: Problems of Change and Adjustment*, (in:) *Shariat and Ambiguity in South Asian Islam*, Delhi 1988, p. 115; R. Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims 1871–1906: A Quest for Identity*, Delhi 1981.

10 Anjuman (Urdu انجمن) means an assembly, association, gathering or meeting.

Constituting slightly less than 14 percent of India's total population, the Muslim community represents:

the mixture of groups drawn from indigenous people of India, and from successive bodies of Muslim invaders, conquerors and immigrants from outside of Indo-Pakistan subcontinent.<sup>11</sup>

This can be observed not only through their population's distribution but also general acceptance patterns varying greatly depending on whether speaking of the "original" ones or converts to Islam. It can be perceived as two major upper tiers when analysing Muslims in India.<sup>12</sup> While analysing the cultural identity of Indian Muslims, I make a presupposition that culture of Muslims in India is a definite entity having its own distinct identity. The religious tradition of Islam in India comprised two distinct elements, one ultimate and formal derived from Islamic texts and another one proximate and local validated by custom. In India these elements managed to coexist as complimentary and integral parts of common religious system. This pattern was deemed unique for Indian Islam which—according to Ahmad— "had developed in the past because of the constraints of Islam's own struggle for survival in an alienated environment" which took place in the past and which was expected to persist in the future.<sup>13</sup> However, in his paper *Islam and Muslim Society In South Asia: A Reply to Das and Minault*, Robinson disputes this point of view and gives new insight into the problem of Indian Islam. As a preliminary point, he casts doubts on Ahmad's assumption arguing that the coexistence between high Islamic and custom-centred tradition is rather dynamic—significantly stimulated by economy and politics—than unchanging. What is most interesting, he calls into question the concept of uniqueness of Islam in India. He firmly points out that the dichotomic tradition of Islam has existed by and large in the Islamic world, thus India proves no exception here. Over the past fourteen centuries Muslim societies have were likely to move towards, although on occasion away from, the high Islamic tradition. This approach makes India manifestly no different from other countries within the Islamic world. Past two centuries might have been nothing else but a period of considerable vitality in which versions

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11 M.J. Herskovits, *Islam* (Crooke), New York 1927, p. 7.

12 S. Shamim Ahmad, A.K. Chakravarti, *Characteristics of Muslim Caste Systems In India*, „GeoJournal”, Vol. 5, No. 1, Southern Asia — Geography of Contrast, 1981, p. 56.

13 I. Ahmad, *Rituals and Religion among Muslims in India*, New Delhi 1981, p. 15.

of the high Islamic tradition have come to make noticeable inroads into the custom-centred tradition.<sup>14</sup> Robinson illustrates his point with an example drawn from Mines noteworthy research studies on South Asian Muslims:<sup>15</sup>

There is nothing particularly unusual about Mines' Tamil Muslims who behave in an orthopraxy fashion in the city but follow customary practices in the village. It is a common form for those who commute between socio-cultural arenas to dress and behave accordingly. Consider, for instance, those Muslim women who move freely in society in foreign countries but move into purdah when they return to their native lands. Consider, too, those free-dressing professors (...) who don gowns and ties to become visiting fellows (...) Nor is it a concern for some Meos to preserve, as the community Islamises, some practices which mark out their ethnic identity particularly unusual.

As noted by Levtzion whose field of expertise was Islam conversions in particular, the process of Islamization not only in Bengal, but also Anatolia, Java or West Africa was not necessarily in odds with ethnicity and cultural milieu of the converts but, conversely, it often adopted and preserved their own social identity and traditions. In fact, neither departure from past traditions has taken place, nor pre-Islamic customs ceased to be followed. "In this process more people came under the influence of Islam, but they took longer to cover the distance from the former religion to Islam."<sup>16</sup>

A comprehensive and pertinent analysis of Indian Muslims can be also found among voluminous publications of American orientalist, Theodore Paul Wright, Jr., who classifies them into two wide groups—the coastal and the inland Muslims. The latter category was described as "monument-conscious, living in the midst of their Taj Mahals and Red Fort and Char Minars" – those who have not forgotten that they once constituted the ruling elite minority. Wright emphasized the importance of the fact that Hindus pay little or no attention to coastal Muslim trading communities whereas

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14 F. Robinson, *Islam and Muslim Society in South Asia: A Reply to Das and Minault*. Contributions to Indian Sociology, 20(1), 1986, p. 98.

15 See: M. Mines, *Public faces, private voices: Community and individuality in South India*, London: University of California Press, Berkeley 1994; M. Mines, *The warrior merchants: Textiles, trade, and territory in south India*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1984.

16 N. Levtzion, *Conversion to Islam*, Holmes & Meier, New York 1979, p. 19.

the price, inland Muslims tend to pay, is very heavy in terms of riots that occur<sup>17</sup>. Another often raised issue about Indian Muslims is their attitude of being out of touch with present situation owing to their emotional development having atrophied in memories of their once glorious past. The Indian Muslim perception of having ruled over India for thousand years might also have been of utmost importance in the contemporary rise of Muslim nationalism in the subcontinent.<sup>18</sup>

This, indeed, is the principal underlying factor in the lack of realism which marks a great deal of their own planning for the future. Adverse circumstances having led them to the point where the only feasible course is to take a back seat, they are still unwilling to face up to the reality of the situation.<sup>19</sup>

Khan makes also a serious accusation against Muslim leaders blaming them for harking back to the heyday of the Mughal Empire. It leaves Indian Muslims dangerously exposed to incendiary rhetoric of their popular leaders which makes no good but opens old wounds, festers and builds walls among different religious communities. Further on, Khan argues than it is not only the gap between self-definition and reality the Indian Muslims are consumed with, but the “overweening pride which renders them incapable of adapting to present-day conditions.”<sup>20</sup> While perceiving themselves as superior, they have been, in fact, often seen as both socially disadvantaged and regressed on so many substantial levels.

## South Asian Sharī'a. The Role of al-Hidayah

The sharī'a defined once and for all the constitution of the Muslim community. The sharī'a to the Muslim stands for all that the Constitution stands for to the United States of America of more. It established norms for all Muslim institutions and societies which have ever since remained the sheet-anchor of Muslim culture (...) and went far to creating a united Muslim community, in spite of political fragmentation and conflict (...).<sup>21</sup>

17 M.W. Khan, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

18 G. Jain, *Muslims After Partition*, The Times of India, January 7, 1988.

19 M.W. Khan, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

20 M.W. Khan, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

21 H. Gibb, *Studies of the civilization of Islam*, New Jersey 1962, p. 200.

Al-Hidayah more than any other book, has had a great religious significance for Muslim community in the region. It could be found to have encapsulated the shari'a which is—as Gibb has already stated—a core Muslim value which holds the community together at its heart. The author, Shaykh al-Islam Burhan al-Din al-Farghani al-Marghinani was held in high esteem among Muslims and has gone down in history as one of distinguished jurist of the Hanafite school. In British Raj under the yoke of British colonisation, al-Hidayah played a vital role in the development of the Muhammadan law.<sup>22,23</sup> Since the Hanafite school was predominant on the subcontinent, the book has “served for centuries and was a cornerstone of legal studies in South Asian madrasas.”<sup>24</sup> Once it was translated into English by British orientalist Charles Hamilton, “it enabled British colonial judges to adjudicate in the name of shari'a, which amounted to an unprecedented codification of Hanafi law, severed from its Arabic-language interpretative tradition. This served to accomplish two goals, which had been long pursued by the British in India: firstly, it limited the judicial discretion of the *qadis*<sup>25</sup> and the influence of muftis in the shari'a system, reducing their earlier role as “middlemen” between the Islamic legal tradition and the colonial administration and, secondly, it replaced the interpretative mechanisms of *fiqh*<sup>26</sup> by those of English law.”<sup>27</sup>

## The Interface of Hinduism and Islam

The advent of Islam accelerated massive changes in the religious and social outlook of Indian subcontinent. As Islam was a clearly defined faith which had neatly ordered religious system, Hinduism did not succeed in absorbing and merging Muslims in the native population, as it was previously done with the Greeks, Huns, Scythians and Sakas. Having conquered Indian

22 Muhammadan law was a mixture of English and Islamic law applied in British colonial courts in India.

23 W.B. Hallaq, *Shari'a: Theory, Practice, Transformations*, Cambridge University Press (Kindle edition), 2009, pp. 374–376.

24 R.W. Hefner, M.Q. Zaman (eds), *Schooling Islam: The Culture and Politics of Modern Muslim Education*, Princeton 2007, p. 63.

25 *Qadi* is the magistrate or judge of a *Shari'a* court.

26 *Fiqh* (ar. deep understanding, full comprehension) is Islamic jurisprudence, often described as the human understanding of *Shari'a*.

27 W.B. Hallaq, *Shari'a*, *op. cit.*, pp. 374–376.

land, Muslims were convinced of their religious superiority versus hydro-headed Hinduism with its idolatry and elaborate ritual traditions. In spite of dramatic differences that lied between these two communities, it was inevitable that they, sooner or later, should interact with each other. As stated by Prasad “time applied its healing balm to old bitternesses, and cultivated minds on both sides began to desire some sort of rapprochement between the two peoples.”<sup>28</sup> He also notes the manifestation of early Hindu-Muslim intermingling among Turkish invaders who married Indian women and whose offspring naturally became more and more Indian in terms of their identity and culture. “The Indian women who dominated the Turkish household exerted a potent influence in moulding the character of the future generation of Musalmans”<sup>29</sup> and as mentioned by Havell “the traditional devotion and the tenderness of Indian motherhood helped greatly to soften ferocity of the Turki and Mughal nomad.”<sup>30</sup> Undoubtedly, there were many other factors that boosted the process of reconciliation. The Hindu conversions of those who, due to political and economic upheavals, decided to abandon their faith, did not wholly desist from observing their former traditions. Their interaction with Muslim community naturally led to progressive intermingling of two religions and mitigated angularities between them. Islam has brought fresh hope to millions of sufferers crippled by their caste and among many was perceived as a vehicle of social mobility and equality. Then, there were also many Sufi saints who wielded enormous influence on both religions. Figures such as Farid Shakarganj of Pakpattan, Nizamuddin Aulia of Delhi in Northern India and of Ghisudaraz in the South, which I elaborate further in this article, counted their disciples among both Hindus and Muslims and their teachings received a great deal of attention from all men without distinction of caste or creed. In fact, Islam who laid particular stress on the concept of the Unity of God, acted partly as a catalyst for Bhakti cult based on true devotion to God and rejection of “meaningless rituals and empty forms.”<sup>31</sup>

Islam in India has taken up many traits of Hinduism while retaining its basic principles and thus, amalgamating into the native culture in an

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28 I. Prasad, *A Short History of Muslim Rule in India from the Conquest of Islam to the Death of Aurangzeb*, Allahabad, 1931, p. 269.

29 *Ibidem*, p. 269.

30 *Ibidem*, p. 269.

31 *Ibidem*, p. 270.

impressive form. As religious political polarization and religious fundamentalism are steadily gaining impetus, the rich tradition of Indian syncretism has been concealed and temporarily sunk below the surface. There is a vast hinterland of common cultural and religious traditions which have deep cultural roots in both Hindu and Muslim community in India. Within rural areas there is abundant example of common ritual, common saints and common castes that both Hindus and Muslims have adopted unabashedly. Consequently, it gave rise to a particularly complex culture which successfully drew on both traditions.<sup>32</sup> According to Ahmad,<sup>33</sup> due to inherent anthropomorphism of Hinduism some of the famous Muslim saints were involved in the continuous process of syncretisation. The cult of saints may well be seen as a cornerstone of amplifying Hindu-Muslim syncretism.<sup>34</sup> In all likelihood, a communal harmony between both communities was one of by-products of the wide spread of Sufism in India. It may be the case that once bhakti movement swept to power it brought with it a great number of eclectic faiths gradually reducing religious orthodoxy. As pointed out by Lokhandwalla:

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.<sup>35</sup>

As suggested by Khan, a great majority of bhakti saints contributed to the harmonious coexistence of the orthogenetic and heterogenetic elements of the great and little traditions of Hinduism and Islam together in one space.

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32 R. Kanth, *A Muslim Political Culture?*, (in:) *Muslims in India*, Z. Imam (ed.), New Delhi 1975, p. 141.

33 A. Ahmed, *Studies In Islamic Culture In The Indian Sub-Continent*, Oxford 1994.

34 M. Gaborieau, *The Cult of Saint among the Muslims of Nepal and North India*, (in:) *Saints and their Cults: Studies in Religious Sociology, Folklore and History*, S. Wilson (ed.), Cambridge 1983, pp. 291–308.

35 S.T. Lokhandwalla, *Indian Islam, Composite Culture and National Integration*, (in:) *Composite Culture of India and National Integration*, R. Khan (ed.), Shimla 1987, p. 121.

These saints preached the philosophy of life which was close to the social ethics and philosophical problems of the poor and artisans that were common to both the Hindus and the Muslims.<sup>36</sup>

Islam had a profound influence on poets and gurus like Namadeva, Ramanand, Kabir and Nanak in whom we see a happy blending of Hindu and Muslim influences. For instance, Kabir considered the spiritual core values of Hinduism and Islam as, at bottom, close to each other. He drew equal inspiration from both perceiving the God, above all, as a mystic creature.<sup>37</sup>

Hindu-Muslim intermingling kept thriving 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.<sup>38</sup>

Religious syncretism is in fact, broadly displayed within the whole country where innumerable syncretic holy places can be found. In North India syncretism is mainly manifested in Delhi and Ajmer where the shrine (*dargah*<sup>39</sup>) of Nizamuddin Auliya and the shrine of Muinuddin Chisti are located. Both

36 R. Khan, *Composite Culture as a New National Identity* (in:) *Composite Culture of India and National Integration*, R. Khan (ed.), Shimla 1987.

37 J.J.R. Burman, *Hindu-Muslim Syncretism in India*, „Economic and Political Weekly”, Vol. 31, No. 20, May 1996, p. 1211.

38 M. Mohiuddin, *The Elements of Composite Culture* (in:) *Composite Culture of India and National Integration*, R. Khan (ed.), Shimla 1987, p. 94.

39 The word *dargah* is derived from a Persian word which literally means „portal” or „threshold”. It is a shrine built over the grave of a revered religious figure, often a Sufi saint or dervish. It is originally a core concept in Islamic Sufism and holds great importance for the followers of Sufi saints. (R. Delage, M. Boivin, *Devotional Islam in*

Hindus and Muslims visit the shrine as a place of worship to ask for boons at times of calamity. What is particularly interesting, the Hindu grooms of the locality proceed to marry only having prayed in Khwaja Naseruddin Chisti *dargah* also called Chiragh Delhi. Close to Chiragh Delhi there is another one named after Jalauddin Chisti, a disciple of Chiragh Delhi. As he used to meditate inside a forest, he is well known as *Jangal Baba*. Devotees from far-flung background visit his thoughtful spot. Even today, after the demolition of the Babri masjid, Hindu devotees constitute around 90 per cent of all *dargah's* visitors<sup>40</sup>. Since the times of Bhadurshah Zaffar, *Phool Walo Ki Sair* has been a long-standing tradition of flower processions through the historic area of Mehrauli in which Muslim along with Hindus were participating seeking blessings from both a Sufi *dargah* and Hindu temple.<sup>41</sup>

Another illustration of Hindu-Muslim syncretism and *dargah* tradition comes from South India where Sikandar<sup>42</sup> tradition holds critical importance and had a close relationship with the Hindu tradition. 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. 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.<sup>43</sup> 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 called 'marumakkathayam'.<sup>44</sup>

Examples of western Indian syncretism also prove how wide-spread and deeply entrenched phenomenon it is there. Being the most famous shrine of western India, Khwaja Muinuddin Hasan Chisti's *dargah* in Ajmer, is an obvious manifestation of it. Chisti's vital message was to promote peace and

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*Contemporary South Asia: Shrines, Journeys and Wanderers, Devotional Islam in Contemporary South Asia: Shrines, Journeys and Wanderers*, Routledge 2015).

40 J.J.R. Burman, *op. cit.*, p. 1215.

41 S. Brelvi, *During Bahadur Shah Zaffar's Time*, „Hindustan Times”, September 10 1995.

42 See: S. Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses And Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society 1700–1900*, Cambridge 1992, pp. 108–109.

43 *Ibidem*, p. 116.

44 R.E. Miller, *Mappila Muslinms of Kerala*, Mumbai 1976.

amity between Hindus and Muslims and, to overcome caste inequalities and social injustice. His preaching also contributed in shaping the course of bhakti movement in the later years. One of his ardent enthusiasts was Muhgal emperor Akbar the Great.<sup>45</sup> According to Ahmad, the Husaini brahmins also set an outstanding example of high caste syncretism tradition. They also did not refrain from taking inspirations from Islam and transforming them at will. In fact, Muinuddin Chisti was considered a titular divinity for them. They treated Mohammad as one of the Hindu avatars, observed roza<sup>46</sup> during the *Ramjan*<sup>47</sup> in accordance with Islam but also followed burial of the dead. Although they wore brahminical tilak on the forehead, they also accepted alms from the Muslims alone.

As stated by Paul, in Ajaysen and Khakri villages close to Ajmer, there is absolutely no point in Hindu-Muslim division. While the Hindus eat only halal meat, Muslims celebrate all the Hindu festivals. Most of them celebrate Diwali with a full-fledged Laxmi puja just as Id<sup>48</sup> or Shab-e-Barat.<sup>49</sup> Both communities equally tend to visit temples and mosques. The Muslim women also often insist on *phera*<sup>50</sup> like the Hindus, during the marriage ceremony.<sup>51</sup>

Another striking example of Hindu-Muslim intermingling is the tribe Meo.<sup>52</sup> Reverence towards saints, scriptures and customs of both religions also reveal mutual traits of both religions.<sup>53</sup>

Ahmad claims that a significant population of Indian Muslim caste Khojas<sup>54</sup> share great number of commonalities with Hindus as well as their religious customs reveal a direct syncretic borrowing from Hinduism. Such beliefs were encouraged by their leader Rashid-al-din of the 12th century.

45 J.J.R. *op. cit.*, p. 1212.

46 Persian, Urdu word for fasting in Islam during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan (in Arabic known as *sawm*).

47 Arabic: Ramaḍān.

48 Arabic: ʾĪd al-ʾAḍḥā.

49 Arabic: Laylat al-Baraʾat.

50 Hindi: sāt phere; one of the most important features of the Hindu wedding ceremony, involving seven rounds around a sacred fire lit for the purpose amidst the Vedic mantras.

51 S. Paul, *Where Muslims Perform Diwali, Puja*, „The Times of India”, 10 September 1995.

52 See: S.L. Sharma, *Religion and Ethnic Tradition among the Meos* (in:) *Aspects of Social Anthropology in India*, L.P. Vidyarthi (ed.), New Delhi 1980.

53 S. Shamas, *Meos of India: Their Customs and Laws*, New Delhi 1983.

54 Persian: Khvājeh.

The Khojas are believed to have been originally Lohana rajputs.<sup>55</sup> Their leader Sadr-al-din regarded Adam and Ali as the avatars of Viṣṇu, and explained Muḥammad as another name of Maheśa.<sup>56</sup> According to Lokhandwalla, Khojas drew many parallels between Hinduism and Islam. Among many similarities, they continue to celebrate Ekādaśī, Diwali and Holi. In fact, they were not able to resolve to which religion they belonged thus, it was the English court which finally classified them as Shi'ia Muslims. Surprisingly, even the word ,Om' written in Sanskrit was equated by them with ,Ali' written in Arabic.<sup>57</sup>

Also the Bohra Muslims illustrate phenomenon of syncretism particularly well. For instance, their community celebrate Diwali as well as follow Hindu law of inheritance and the practice of charging interest on loans.

Many of the Hindu superstitions have pervaded their households like the 'mag-ni' ceremony (engagement), special perfumes for bride and bridegroom, and the singing of gay or obscene wedding songs. Many of the taboos for pregnant women were borrowed from the Hindus, such as fasting during a lunar eclipse, and taboo of wearing new clothes or the use of henna to avert the evil eye.<sup>58</sup>

All in all, as Islam exercised profound influence on the various facets of Hindu culture and civilization, it could not remain immune from the influence of the latter. Indian converts to Islam often could not get rid of their Hindu notions and practices. They have been borrowed, successfully mingled and finally, absorbed by the new society. In a nutshell, Islam in India was transformed from a simple and puritanical religion, with emphasis on the performance of outward legal duties, to a complex devotional creed in which miracles and superstitions, combined, of course with saint-worship, were of utmost importance.

## Conclusions

Muslims form the largest minority in India. In absolute numbers, they make up the third largest Muslim community in the world after Indonesia

55 A prominent Hindu community of the Kṣatriya Rajput caste.

56 A title of Śivā, a Hindu deity.

57 S.T. Lokhandwalla, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

58 J.J.R. *op. cit.*, p. 1213.

and Pakistan. Although, they have had a long and glorious past in the country, the great majority of them struggle with acute poverty, sense of insecurity being the victims of religiously motivated harassment. It is often raised that Muslims as a community have failed to achieve socio-economic progress even though individually Muslims have in many ways made significant contributions to the arts, culture and even politics of modern India.

The Muslim community in India can be analysed from various perspectives and this research study by no means exhausts the issues raised in the article. Among others, there is: the extent to which ulama and Sufis, coastal and inland or Ashraf and Ajlaf represent differentiated, dichotomic categories. The presupposition which I have made in this article has been proved right. The culture of Muslims in India is a definite entity having its own distinct and unique identity. Thanks to the gathered data, it has been fully confirmed that they are widely scattered across India and absolutely no conclusion drawn on one part of India can be legitimately applied to another. Hence, there is no general category including all Indian Muslims.

In this article, there have been also displayed a few manifestations of religious syncretism and Hindu-Muslim intermingling. It became quite apparent from the illustrations provided in this paper that there is a great deal of syncretic culture and religion at the folk level in India. Nevertheless, it should be noted that even though these selected examples might be extensive, they are not exhaustive for entire rich phenomenon of religious syncretism among Muslims in India. It should rather be treated as an incentive for further reflections and research studies in this area.

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