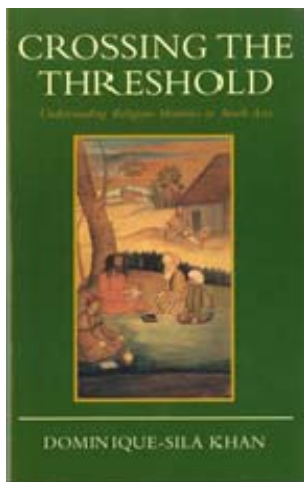




The Institute of Ismaili Studies



Crossing the Threshold *Understanding Religious Identities in South Asia*

Dominique-Sila Khan

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The question 'Who is Hindu, who is Muslim?' and how they came to be defined as such is explored in this book. By analysing documents as well as field data, the author demonstrates how the answer to this question is complex and nuanced. She argues that the perception of Islam and Hinduism as two monolithic and antagonistic faiths is so deeply ingrained that the complexity of their historical development and the convergence of their shared cultural heritage and lived experience is often ignored. The author explores the developments which gave rise to the emergence of distinct identities. In particular, she explores the role played by Ismaili Islam in this intricate interface of South Asian religious traditions.

The work is the culmination of a long period of research on Hindu-Muslim interactions that began in 1990. It includes a brief introduction that lays the groundwork for the research presented in the following four chapters. Chapter one provides a historical survey, chapter two examines the close-knit relationships between the Hindu and Muslim communities, chapter three challenges the view that the categories Hindu and Muslim emerged through an organic or natural process while chapter four examines how the process was gradually reinforced although pockets of resistance remain. The conclusion provides examples of these pockets of resistance in the contemporary period with the author concluding that "cracks have already appeared in the carefully erected boundary wall between what is supposed to be 'Islam' and 'Hinduism'".



Guiding Questions

- Why is the notion of a spectrum useful when considering the diversity of religious movements in South Asia?
- How is this notion relevant in understanding other religious groups today?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the notion of liminality with regard to understanding the shaping of religious traditions?
- Why is it important to have permeable definitions of practices in living religious traditions such as Islam?
- How can tensions and rifts between faith based communities be reconciled through a greater understanding of their historical development?

Who is Hindu, who is Muslim?

In *Crossing the Threshold*, author Dominique-Sila Khan questions the modern perception that there is a “pre-existing faultline” between Hinduism and Islam. She says that despite its variations, scholarship still perceives Hinduism and Islam as entities with distinct and ultimately divisive characteristics. To counter this notion she offers a fresh framework within which to understand the interaction between adherents by beginning with the premise; “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?” (Khan, 4). She argues that the assumption that Hindus and Muslims constitute homogenous groups points to an inaccurate conclusion of constructed and ‘imagined communities’ that exist in opposition to one another. One needs to move away from the view of Hinduism and Islam as fixed categories.

After re-framing the questions one should ask, Khan sets up the book’s main argument in her introduction. She reviews colonial, post-colonial and modern European scholarship and remarks on their inability to deal with communities that are not easily considered strictly Hindu or Muslim, such as Hindu Yogis or Sunni Sufis. She explores key concepts that have been



applied to the diverse communities in the South Asian context. While “syncretistic traditions have been perceived positively as ‘bridging the gulf’ between communities”, they are also viewed as imperfect, spontaneous or “disorderly creations of the ‘popular mind’” (Khan, 5). While “transculturation” or “contact zone” reflect the dynamism of these groups, they are “used exclusively to describe a discourse that reflects the victory of a dominant power over a subservient one as is perceived as a consequence of colonial rule” (Khan, 5). These concepts cannot encompass the full spectrum of cross-community interaction because they assume the existence of a structured and absolute religion. It is in this academic gap that, according to the author, an adequate analysis of the role of Ismailism in cross-community interaction has not been sufficiently pursued.

Standing on the Threshold

Upon this critique of modern scholarship, Khan builds her own framework. She praises Tazim Kassam’s metaphor of South Asian Nizari Ismailism as the image of two black



Image of the two faces or chalice as described by Tazim Kassam

faces that can also be seen as a chalice depending on the perspective of the observer. The fact that neither perception can be claimed as the correct image helps Khan make her argument for a middle area, which she calls a threshold. The threshold is not a temporary space for a “syncretic” community, but “a permanent opening into a world of multiple values” (Khan, 6).

This concept allows Khan to pursue her anti-structural argument against fixed categories of Hindu and Muslim. Ultimately, her notion of a permanent threshold asks the reader to consider stepping out of the binary framework of Hindu versus Muslim into a nuanced, granular approach to religious identities – an area in which South Asian Nizari Ismailism could be better understood. She implies that the threshold space may even be the space in which non-



bounded communities, like Ismailis, can preserve their original understanding of religion against the orthodox and homogenizing forces of modern South Asia that firmly distinguish Hindus and Muslims.

Historical backdrop

Khan spends a great deal of the first chapter of her book on historiography, reflecting on the lacuna between written history and historical reality to critique “who is a Hindu and who is a Muslim.” Her thorough historical consideration can be daunting in its detail though important in its premise. She questions how identity is formed and expresses concern that the modern misperception of the so-called perennial Hindu-Muslim binary obscures a clear understanding of socio-politics in ancient India. Her analysis of history attempts to demonstrate that ancient India, from at least seventh century BC, was characterised by various religious movements and the co-existence of different practices. Orthodoxy did not prevail, but rather groups existed in opposition to the ‘other’ and would define themselves as such. Struggles between different groups were

territorial, not religious – an anachronistic word when applied to this time period. Khan astutely remarks that:

“...the self-perception of the local population appears to differ considerably from the later interpretations of the Europeans, whose desire to compare the local traditions with monotheistic religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam inevitably led to certain misconceptions and misunderstandings.” (Khan, 12)

After deconstructing the Hindu-Muslim binary, Khan categorises the variety of interactions between different communities. She makes the compelling point that these exchanges were defined more by caste, family traditions or specific spiritual leaders rather than homogenous religious groups. Her threshold framework explains that these meetings were like a doorway through which ideas, doctrines and practices passed. These were not between people who belonged to an orthodox form of Hinduism or Islam, but between groups who formed overlapping identities, such as the case of the Ismailis. Khan states that “What is important for us



here is to try to grasp the huge diversity that characterises the religious beliefs and practices prevalent in medieval India” (Khan, 21). Khan’s use of anecdotal evidence is particularly effective and illustrative.

Khan provides an interesting argument on the use of the terms Hindu and Turk as they were probably used in the past. The term Hindu would have been “applied exclusively to the Brahmanical upper castes” while the category Turk would have been “restricted to the higher class Ashraf Sunni Muslims strictly adhering to the sharia” (Khan, 25-26). They were not used for the entire population and should be “viewed as ‘extremes’ in the religious continuum of South Asia, something comparable to blue and red in the colour spectrum” (Khan, 26). This metaphor of a spectrum is more relevant than simply using the binary of black and white as a spectrum allows for “the existence of ‘intermediary shades’” (Khan, 26).

During colonial and post-colonial periods, “encounters between Islamic and indigenous religious cultures were believed to occur exclusively at the level

of ‘popular’ beliefs and practices” (Khan, 31). However, recent scholarly advances in the field have shown intersections at a higher level, especially with learned poets and mystics. Khan refers to two broad categories of these types of interactions; the first includes “modes of ‘alliances’, ‘sharing’ and ‘borrowing,’” and the second refers to “a process which may be termed ‘overlapping’, that is connected with ‘liminal’ traditions and communities” (Khan, 32). Khan proceeds to give the example of Pir Baba’s temple in Gujarat where service is jointly performed by a Hindu and Muslim priest and the darga of Shakarvar Shah in Rajasthan which attracts both Muslim and non-Muslim devotees. She makes the argument that divine or healing power transcends religious boundaries and does not heed religious identity. However, while common saints and sacred spaces can be



Shrine of Imamshahi community in Pirana



seen as symbols of communal harmony, they can also result in communal conflict. Khan cites the example of the Imamshahi community in Pirana whose devotees have a myriad of opinions on the origin and affiliation of the shrine located there. Khan states:

“Some consider it a Sunni Sufi darga, others as a shrine belonging to the Twelver Shii tradition, while yet another group views it as a ‘purely’ Hindu place of worship. There are even people who are aware that its tradition is rooted in Ismailism, and a few others who insist on its ‘syncretic’ nature, refusing to call it by the name of any known religious tradition” (Khan, 39).

Liminal Communities

With regard to this ‘borrowing’ of tradition, Khan emphasizes that it “is a conscious process through which elements from a different tradition are integrated into one’s own worldview to stress the profound unity of the Divine despite the plurality of vision” (Khan, 40). She claims that the result of this process is not necessarily innovation or the creation of a new religious



Manuscript binding: tooled leather.

Detail

Manuscript from the Institutes collection of Gujarati and Khojki manuscripts

movement. Khan cites the example of the South-Asian Nizari Ismaili *ginan* tradition in that the composers borrowed from the indigenous traditions. Having said this however, Khan goes on to state that the term ‘borrowing’ can only be applied to the tradition post-19th century as prior to that, “*gināns* are a typical example of the ‘overlapping’ process which resulted in liminal phenomena” (Khan, 41).

Hindu-Muslim interface can therefore be thought of as an open doorway whereby various traditions meet, mingle and mix in the threshold. What is of the utmost importance in this doorway is that universality triumphs sectarianism, which allows followers to preserve their distinct religious associations. Identity can become blurred in these liminal communities; however, it is this blurring that allows



Roman Deity Janus Bifrons, the god of doorways

them to become the custodians of the threshold. Khan compares this to the ancient Roman deity Janus Bifrons, the god of doorways, who has two faces pointing in opposite directions. Although they are part of a single head, the faces look in different directions, “one towards the wide sphere of Islamic movements, the other towards the complex continuum of indigenous/Hindu religions” (Khan, 44).

In examining liminal communities, Khan argues that they do not emerge spontaneously but rather as the result of complex factors. She argues that the Nizari Ismaili tradition of South Asia can help shed light on how and why a religious movement can appear liminal. One of her main arguments is that the practice of *taqiyya*, or precautionary dissimulation, used by Ismaili da'is and pirs allowed them to have a dual

identity. They also had a specific strategy of conversion which they employed “by accepting and integrating a certain number of beliefs and practices of the people they wished to convert” (Khan, 44). Their doctrine was presented as the culmination of, and not negation of, all earlier faiths including the Indian religions.

Creating Orthodoxies

From the 18th century, the influence of colonialism, orthodox reform movements and nationalism “split the Divine” such that threshold groups were made to choose, to be either Muslim or Hindu, and project a coherent, historical system of religion. The collection of the census data by the colonial British authorities in the 1800s imposed fixed, religiously defined categorisations on liminal communities. This artificial, imposed boundary, Khan argues, is still not fully complete. Hinduism and Islam did not emerge as separate spaces through a natural or organic process. The politics of Partition further accentuated earlier divisions and cemented the modern perception that Hindus and Muslims are inherently different with distinct, conflicting



boundaries.

Khan holds that pre-1866, the markers of Nizari Ismaili identity were nebulous. A series of events, including the 1866 Aga Khan Case, meant that the Ismailis, who themselves consisted of diverse groups, were fractured. Prior to this time, this liminal community lived with a more fluid sense of itself. The lifting of *taqiyya* illustrated that many previously isolated Nizari Ismailis began to affiliate with other religious trends. These divisions contributed to the formation of a demarcated Ismaili identity and led some Ismailis to project the tradition as a whole system.

After an exhaustive consideration of modern South Asian history, Khan returns to contemporary South Asia in an attempt to prove that threshold communities still exist and continue to resist the pressure of picking a side. Similar to her weighing historiography against what she considered the historical realities of everyday life, as illustrated in chapter one, she uses ethnographic data of groups in India at the micro level that do not reflect the intentionally constructed binary of

Hindu versus Muslim. For Ismailis, this has meant constant adaptation to “new historical circumstance and to a changed cultural environment” (Khan, 123).

Conclusion

The value of Khan’s book is her debunking of the perception that Hindus and Muslims are inherently at odds with each other. She offers a nuanced understanding of who is Muslim and Hindu and takes the readers outside rigid academic frameworks into the granular reality of the phenomenon in the field. Her thorough re-examination of history and conception of a new framework fleshed out by ethnographic data is an important contribution to the study of religion in South Asia, which can sometimes focus on elite political culture at the expense of lesser-known and diverse groups. Ultimately, her argument for a middle ground, like a threshold, where groups can exist without picking a distinct ‘side’ opens a new door in scholarship that can cogently explain the role of groups like the Ismailis in the socio-political fabric of South Asia.



Further Readings

1. Asani, Ali. *Ecstasy and Enlightenment*. London, 2002.
2. Esmail, Aziz. *A Scent of Sandalwood: Indo-Ismaili Religious Lyrics (Ginans)*. London, 2002.
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4. Sheikh, Samira. *Religious Traditions and Early Ismaili History in South Asia: Some Historical Perspectives on Satpanthi Literature and the Ginans*. Available on the IIS website on http://www.iis.ac.uk/view_article.asp?ContentID=109472



900 year old Hindu shrine of Lord Shiva in the Kashmir valley that has Muslim priests

“This book is a timely contribution to the ongoing debate on religion and religious identity in contemporary South Asia.”

Yoginder Sikand, *Muslim World Book Review*, 25:4, 2005