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Beyond Essentialised Religion: Lived in Experience, Popular Religion and Syncretism

Rama Shyam*

Mystical religion is more immediate and tends to be more help in time of trouble than a predominantly cerebral faith. - Karen Armstrong (1997)

By religion, one generally understands the faith one follows by virtue of ascription. At the same, time it is considered that the only faiths existing in the world are the ones that are widely spoken of such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and so on – religions with distinct boundaries that are considered closed to those who are not co-religionists. The tendency is to look upon these world religions as essentialised criteria of one's identity – a distinct marker of one's social self that readily marks out the 'other' as different and therefore alien to the worldview of the 'religious self'. This article is an attempt to look beyond such stereotypes by attempting to examine various perspectives and arguments that have tried to comprehend the layers of the human self manifest in societal interactions at all levels and across established religious communities. The most interesting aspect is the dichotomy between textual religion and lived religious experience–something that goes beyond a mere theological understanding of the central tenets of particular religions; for it must be accepted that it is only through ritual practices in the society that the existence of different religions can be validated. Such religious experiences are also subject to intercommunity exchanges, considering that human society is based on the basic premises of mutuality and interdependence. Contrary to a homogenised understanding of religious groups, we are met with people who interact, borrow and reciprocate in the face of proximity to different cultural and religious groups, thereby also modifying their own patterns of living and thus making such practices all the more popular. It may be argued that very few religions are wholly immune from some degree of syncretism. Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism from their very beginning combined many different ideas and rituals. What becomes apparent here is that it is characteristic of communities to fall between religious and cultural traditions.

Introduction

The first paper in a series of five ends on the note that any sociological understanding of the phenomenon of *religion*[1] demands a comprehension

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of the interlinkages between religious expression and politics of identity. Taking this as the precursor to the forthcoming argument in the present paper, it would do good to delineate the central focus that would circumscribe the concepts to be discussed here. The key argument in the paper is built around "religion as faith"[2] (Nandy 1990), closer to the quotidian practices of everyday human existence. By religion, one generally understands the faith one follows by virtue of ascription. At the same time, it is considered that the only faiths existing in the world are the ones that are widely spoken of such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and so on–religions with distinct boundaries that are considered closed to those who are not co-religionists. In fact, the tendency is to look upon these world religions as essentialised criteria of one's identity–a distinct marker of one's social self that readily marks out the "other" as different and therefore alien to the worldview of the "religious self."

This article is an attempt to look beyond such stereotypes by attempting to examine various perspectives and arguments that have tried to comprehend the layers of the human self manifest in societal interactions at all levels and across established religious communities. Much scholarly debate has gone into the categorisation of the "sacred" and the "profane" vis-à-vis religion, and yet when we look around us, seldom do we find a clear distinction between those that are religiously sacred and transcendental as opposed to the ones that are worldly, mundane or profane. This dichotomy between the religious and the *non*-religious is more strongly put forth through scriptural texts that are considered as the true repositories of knowledge pertaining to religious behaviour, but at the same time laying down detailed descriptions of everyday social behaviour as well.

However, the most interesting aspect is the dichotomy between textual religion and lived religious experience – something that goes beyond a mere theological understanding of the central tenets of particular religions; for it must be accepted that it is only through ritual practices in the society that the existence of different religions can be validated[3]. Such religious experiences are also subject to intercommunity exchanges, considering that human society is based on the basic premises of mutuality and interdependence. In fact, contrary to a homogenised understanding of religious groups, we are met with people who interact, borrow and reciprocate in the face of proximity to different cultural and religious groups, thereby also modifying their own patterns of living and

[1] Emphasis added to remind the reader that despite ambiguity over the use of the term *religion* to define the phenomenon in question, it has been used in this paper in the absence of any other qualifying term to describe "religious experience", "religious expression", "religious processes" etc.

[2] Discussed briefly in the conclusion.

[3] No act of worship can exist without some conception of the divine, nor can a religion function

thus making such practices all the more popular. It may be argued that very few religions are wholly immune from some degree of syncretism. Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism from their very beginning combined many different ideas and rituals. What becomes apparent here is that it is characteristic of communities to fall between religious and cultural traditions.

Qualifying this succinctly, Mayaram (1997) has to say that "With respect to India, K.S. Singh points out that there are few persons in India who are not immigrants and that every community recalls its migration in its folklore and history. Bilingualism characterises 64.2 per cent of all communities in India (Singh 1992 cited in Mayaram 1997). The British, he points out, classified caste Hindus in opposition to animists whereas even brahminical groups are known to go to a witch doctor." Such illustrations readily point towards the shifting bases of identities and in turn expose the futility of theories that tend to bifurcate different lifeworlds straight down the middle as "either" versus "or."

The purpose of the present article is to understand such dynamics of the social and the religious self through the processes of conversion and "syncretisation."[4] In doing so, the article has been divided into three major sections. Section II revolves around religion in everyday life practices and delineates the concepts of popular religion, syncretism and a comparative analysis of liminality and hybridity in order to understand the phenomenon of syncretism in a more nuanced light. This section examines a wide gamut of scholarly writing that has been produced to explain the significance of the above concepts vis-à-vis sociology of religion. Section III deals with ritual practices, literary and cultural traditions, power dynamics and the significance of religious places that validate the syncretistic nature of religious traditions across all societies. This section essentially draws from instances of rituals relating to everyday well-being, agricultural cycles, fertility cults and traditional cures. The idea is to visit religious syncretism in all its various manifestations in human lifestyle and coexistence patterns.

Section IV brings in a culmination of the above sections in the social construction of syncretic identities that are fluid and "dynamic not static, changing not fixed, more like rivers than mountains" (Eck 2001:9). It also attempts to examine modes and motivations of religious conversions and the resultant identity that arises out of such phenomena. The concluding section of the paper attempts to draw linkages between syncretism and the discourse of pluralism within the broader context of the secularism debate and the menace of communalism that engulfs society today. This section attempts to examine the relevance of syncretic religious orders in the present socio-political context through

[4] Derived from "syncretism" –a term that has been discussed in detail in the paper.

an analysis of lived realities as opposed to dogmatic religious stereotypes.

Understanding Concepts

Taking into consideration that this is a largely theoretical paper, it becomes important to deal with certain concepts that are relevant to its purpose. At the same time, it is important that one gets a grip of such concepts prior to looking into how they are experienced in reality and practised among communities and groups through interactions and interdependence. One needs to begin with the generic idea of religion in everyday life as opposed to the watertight compartments of religion as something transcendental and not related to worldly pursuits. Scholars like Bordieu and Durkheim have fundamentally conceptualised religion as the "sacred" and thus radically different from everyday life. But the ethnographic accounts of religious observances help in understanding the subtle relations between religion and everyday life.

Speaking of India, Tanaka (2003) explains the transcendental aspect of Hinduism closely linked to the everyday life and also the political domain. As Tanaka (2003:864) describes, "many political leaders seek the renouncers or other *sanyasis* because they need to evoke the legitimacy of the *sanyasi* to give an aura of legitimacy to their own political activities. Furthermore, the self-maximising aspect in the form of seeking out gods to solve the practical problems of life, involves both Hindus and non-Hindus alike. Hindu gods are sought by non-Hindus and the gods of other religions by Hindus, thus making religious activities a domain in which conventional communal boundaries may be crossed. It is therefore a key zone in which social interaction and mutual understanding may occur across communities." This account implies that religious activities in day-to-day life are considered to be pragmatic or practical and this also marks the entry of the concept of "popular religion" or that which is readily evident.

What is Popular Religion?

Despite its significance in establishing a crucial thesis, yet religion in everyday life or popular religion is not completely devoid of the complexities of power relationships characteristic to human society. In fact, the first attempt at understanding popular religion was through defining it as "a process of exclusion" as the "other" religion. It is discursively positioned in an oppositional relationship to the established religion of the elite, which is supposed to represent the classical tradition, legitimated by the ancient texts (Bandyopadhyay 2004). Such a

definition of popular religion implies what Bandyopadhyay (2004) sees as an unconscious acceptance of the elitist stereotyping of certain practices and beliefs as "popular" or not conforming to the accepted ethical and moral standards or epistemological norms of the elite.

The above discourse on popular religion is rooted in the argument of class-consciousness where it "reflected the social protest of the subordinate classes against their social superiors and their ideologies of domination" (Natalie Davis as cited in Bandyopadhyay 2004:78). However, the same discourse also acknowledges the fact – though in a much wider sense of the term – that popular religion means quite simply the religion of the vast mass of people; popular in the sense of its widely favoured form (Barry Reay as cited in Bandyopadhyay 2004). It is this form with its wide appeal that is important to the argument in this paper and one needs to understand that "popular" aspects of religion have not been easily noticeable owing to the power relations inherent in religious identities.

A strong belief in the theory of ascription and out of habit became the tendency of labelling, where Europe was labelled as Christian, Persia as Islamic, Burma as Buddhist and so on. But, Ling (1978) argues here that, in spite of this official labeling, the content of popular belief and practice did not alter greatly; the Burmese went on believing in the spirits of the forests and water and mountains; the Persians went on drinking wine and making music in spite of the ban on these by Islamic orthodoxy; and Europeans went on practicing witchcraft and magic in spite of the fact that they were considered as "black art" by the Christian orthodoxy. All these practices were "incompatible with orthodoxy and, equally if not more important, were subversive of religious political authority" (Ling 1978:11).

Ling (1978) here categorises the study of religion in at least three senses viz.: religion as ultimate meaning, regimented popular religion and spontaneous popular religion. An extract from Ling's (1978) writings would be the most relevant to bring out the ethos of the category in which he puts "spontaneous popular religion." He explains that majority of the people in the world, whether they be Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Christians or so on, practice their religion within the contextual framework of their history, culture and national existence, "where they are subject to all sorts of real, mundane pressures, and where they are pursued by the tax-man, bemused by television advertising, haunted by the fear of unemployment or illness, or by many another modern demon" (Ling 1978:12-13). Such a referential study of religion practised by the masses is indeed very different from the one that works on the basis of the codified canonical texts of each religion and more so as it is the "literate and the elite who have the capability to produce

Though this categorisation also takes into account a certain amount of difference between the literate and the illiterate or between the "elite" and the "masses", yet the significance lies in the importance it imparts to religion as a lived experience that has its echoes in everyday life chores. The most important aspect of religious experience is perhaps captured in the form of the social interactions between communities, resulting in cultural exchange and adaptations that might emerge out of a fundamental ethos of mutuality governing human instincts. Right since the beginning, human societies have been characterised through interdependence – with nature, animals, or between fellow human beings.

In fact, the ethos of mutual aid has been a guiding factor in the evolution of societies over ages. Kropotkin (1914) has explained this as man's instinct to be guided in his acts, not merely by love, which is always personal, but by the perception of his oneness with each human being. "In the practice of mutual aid, which we can retrace to the earliest beginnings of evolution, we thus find the positive and undoubted origin of our ethical conceptions; and we can affirm that in the ethical progress of man, mutual support – not mutual struggle – has had the leading part" (Kropotkin 1914:222-23). Certainly, religion as a social phenomenon cannot be considered as an exception to this ethic of coexistence and this is where comes in the urge to "sink differences"[5] through syncretic practices.

Perspectives on Syncretism

The history of the usage of syncretism goes back a long way to the times of Plutarch who referred to the behaviour of the Cretans who, despite conflicts among themselves, closed ranks or stood together as one when an external enemy attacked them (Eliade 1987). Etymologically speaking, the word "syncretism" could most plausibly derive from the Ancient Greek prefix syn, "with", and krasis, "mixture" which combined in words such as syngkrasis, "a mixing together, compound" (Stewart and Shaw 1998). This also has a reference to the way Hermann Usener (cited in Eliade 1987) rendered it as "mishmash of religions." The initial perception of syncretism was a pejorative one as a phenomenon that was a pollutant to the purer forms of religions, but explaining syncretism within the framework of permeability of religious phenomena, Eliade (1987) retains that no definition of syncretism is possible without a specific context and that the term cannot serve as an adequate description of homogeneous sets of phenomena.

[5] Oxford English Dictionary denotes syncretism as an "attempt to sink differences and effect union

The Dictionary of Sociology (Fairchild 1944 cited in Roy 1993) defines syncretism as, "The process of amalgamation of conflicting, or at least different, parties or principles of cultures–more specifically assimilation of foreign groups. The foreign elements disappear as psychological and cultural entities into the majority, and the majority adopts both the individual and a selection and adoption of their cultural traits." Generally speaking, syncretism has been associated with folk religion with reference to practices of primitive societies only and Wuthnow (1988 cited in Roy 1993) states that, "These kind of beliefs and practices also suggest some clues about the relations between popular religion and social environment. Popular religion has been most evident in relatively non-modern societies."

Both the views presented above reflect a deep prejudice regarding the sociology of religion. Fairchild's explanation of the disappearance of the foreign elements, somewhere suggests only the immigrants or the minorities getting syncretised. We have seen in the case of India how syncretism or adoption of religious traditions has been an all-embracing phenomenon."[6] Wuthnow's comment on popular religion being most evident only in "non-modern societies" "appears to be rather high-browed and tilted in favour of the world religions" (Roy 1993).

In fact, it appears odd to speak of a "mixed" religion, "mixed" culture or "mixed" language since all these phenomena in principle always have heterogeneous precursors that cannot be brought under one fold. Syncretism essentially focuses on the permeability and fluidity of religious situations. It has been rightly said by Peter van der Veer (1998:208) that "This can be seen as such a broad process that indeed every religion is syncretistic, since it constantly draws upon heterogeneous elements to the extent that it is often impossible for the historian to unravel what comes from where." This is where Eliade (1987) says that a social presupposition for the rise of syncretism can be the coexistence of various groups.

The coexistence of various groups in society can never be devoid of power dimensions and this readily gets reflected in the different forms of syncretism, as explained by Roy (1993). He has classified syncretism into five categories based on the political situation under which it operates:

(a) Defensive syncretism that relates to two or more ethnic entities when threatened by an external power;

(b) Aggressive syncretism emerges when two or more ethnic groups come together as a strategy of social mobilisation to attain political control over an alien territory or group;

(c) Recessive syncretism involves a process of borrowing religious traits by one or more ethnic groups from the external oppressive power so as to mobilise people to overthrow the oppressor;

(d) Adaptive syncretism occurs when minority groups and majority groups coexist without any political subjugation or clashes and in fact the minority groups borrow some of the majority religious faiths;

(e) Pragmatic syncretism involves a multi-ethnic situation where two or more equally powerful groups share political power and consciously or otherwise syncretise their religions in a selective manner.

Another aspect that can be added to this classification is that conceived by Hayden (2002) who brings in the idea of a syncretism that emerges from the competitive nature of human beings. The argument here is rooted in the debate that underlies the alignment of syncretism with the discourse of tolerance or with the violation of categories. Beginning with the discourse of tolerance, Hayden argues that the idea of syncretism as a prerequisite for communal amity has been questioned by Peter van der Veer (cited in Hayden 2002). Veer suggests that "'syncretism in India is a trope in the discourse of "multiculturalism" and that scholarly discussion of "syncretic" phenomena such as Hindu worship of Sufi saints usually omits consideration of conflict or of the processes of expansion and contraction of religious communities.

According to Hayden (2002), the key here lies in looking at syncretism as a processual phenomenon that may be better viewed as a temporal manifestation of relations between social groups, which continue to differentiate themselves from each other. Whereas the first view that syncretism represents tolerance presumes stasis, the second brings in the dimension of time into the analysis. Hayden explains this temporal basis of syncretism as one that is based on competition rather than tolerance. However,[7] even competition occurs within the presupposition of coexistence and it takes us back to adaptations and exchanges that effect syncretism between communities.

[7] For a better understanding of this perspective, one should refer to Hayden, R.M. 2002. "Antagonistic Tolerance: Competitive Sharing of Religious Sites in South Asia and the Balkans," *Current Anthropology* 42(2):205-31.

While it is usually considered that religious texts govern the lifestyles of communities in a very significant manner, these lifestyles seldom succeed in overcoming the historicity, the physicality and the temporality of the human life situations that are both fluid and dynamic unlike the set doctrines of dogmatic scriptures and this is what goes into adaptive and pragmatic syncretism between groups. Illustrating this, Lotsuro (2000) – in spite of being a nun (Belonging to the Mao tribe of North Eastern India) – states, "Our contention is that Christianity needs to be rooted in the Naga soil first. Only then can it genuinely transform it."

Concepts Contesting Syncretism

The discussion around syncretism remains inadequate if one does not bring in the challenges it faces from other concepts derived from different modes of social interaction. Mayaram (1997) points out that though syncretism is the term most often used to describe the encounter between religions, it retains an ontology of poles, the dualism of the self and the other. This, she says, tends to signify the abnormality of the moment. Mayaram (1997) furthers the argument saying that the mixing of religions in syncretism assumes mechanistic proportions where "religious authority becomes a single voice rather than the competing bazaar of interpretations that it usually is. Religions become the legitimate great traditions while the margins are seen as inhabited by aberrant little traditions" (Mayaram 1997).

According to the argument above, syncretism tends to ignore multiplicity of meaning which human agency seeks to comprehend the cosmos around. It restricts itself to a binary opposition of "syncretism" and "antisyncretism". Under such circumstances, Mayaram (1997) chooses to use the term "liminality" a term that takes into account a third space that seeks to transcend the binary mode of thought and understanding. In a way, it also does away with the sacred-profane categorisation through a peculiar combination of reverence and irreverence to the gods. This is clearly evident in traditions where gods are made fun of through poetic burlesque.[8] This is explained in terms of popular religion, where the profanation of divinities is a way of mocking political structures, thus rising up in protest against the hegemony of the oppressor.

Another concept that comes closer to such a discussion is that of "hybridity" espoused by Homi Bhabha (cited in Mayaram 1997) as one

[8] In Mayaram's account, Bhim is associated with much of the comic relief in the Mewati Mahabharata. For more details, refer to Mayaram Shail; "Rethinking Meo Identity: Cultural Faultline, Syncretism, Hybridity or Liminality?" in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. XVII, No. 2, 1997.

of the most recent concepts of cultural theory that expresses the intercultural encounter. Hybridity suggests how two entities combine to produce a third, particularly referring to cross-cultural kinship/marriage. However, even this concept falls into the trap of the "pure" versus the "hybrid." Countering this, Mayaram (1997) argues "this not only reproduces a racial understanding of the universe (in contrast to the multiraciality of the hybrid), but is also a historical as it ignores the constant intermixing, intermarriage, and migratory diasporas that have occurred across centuries."

For Khan (1997), the empirical diversity of interactions between communities cannot be subsumed under "hackneyed concepts such as "syncretism" and "folk religion" (Khan 1997:21). She believes that such terms are used as a matter of convenience for a lack of better understanding of the various factors that lead to a contemporary phenomenon. Sila Khan cites the definition of Michael Pye (quoted by Kassam cited in Khan 1997:22) which says that, "syncretism is the coherent yet somewhat uneasy coexistence of elements from diverse religious contexts. Even when a smooth cohesion has been achieved the various elements often seem to maintain their potential for conveying independent meanings." She argues that such definitions are merely descriptive and can by no means explain the mechanism which lies behind a particular phenomenon.

Despite all such conceptual distinctions, it is important to recognise that there is an element of translatability between the hybrid, the syncretic and the liminal all pointing towards the shifting bases of social identities that can never be explained in absolute terms of reference. People, in most cases, often follow multiple religious traditions without necessarily drawing boundaries between them, even though they may affirm their overt allegiance to one religion at a given time. Here lies the analytical significance of the study of the concept of religious syncretism as an independent phenomenon (Das 2003). At the same time, such phenomena are better understood through illustrations of experiences.

Syncretism as Lived Experience

I come from a state of India that has been evoked time and again for its syncretic elements. However, it never occurred to me during my growing years that such elements have such a significance vis-à-vis sociology of religion. It is then that I realised that we do not make efforts to mark out

the syncretic elements of our society since they are very much present in our consciousness and are an integral part of our lives and seem quite natural and obvious. What made me sit up and look at this "obvious" phenomenon is the description of a ritual that takes place in the Shiva temple of Tarakeshwar, which is perhaps the most important pilgrimage for Hindus in West Bengal. Roy (1999:46-47) narrates:

> The *Charak puja* is an annual feature of the shrine when thousands of devotees from all over the state assemble there. During the *puja*, the first '*niler bati*'-lamp for *Nil puja* is kindled in the name of the Muslims. Both the Hindus and the Muslims pour milk on the "Shivalinga."[9] Interestingly, at the Brahmanpara (hamlet of the Brahmins) there are two *pir*[10] shrines—those of *Bare pir* and *Chhote pir* (elder and younger *pir* respectively). On every Tuesday and Saturday in the Bengali month of "Baisakh"[11] the Hindu villagers offer fruits at the shrines and they take a collective lunch at the shrine of the *Bare pir*. These *pirs* are incidentally known locally as Tarak Baba's *pirs*. Apart from these, the Hindus also offer the milk of a milching cow after 21 days of its delivery of the calf. These apart, there is also an interesting myth which is popular in the area and is associated with a Muslim devotee to the shrine of Tarakeshwar. It is believed that long back when a Muslim devotee carrying milk as offering was refused entry into the temple by the attendants, he was confronted by Baba disguised in the form of an old man under a tree. After hearing his woes Baba accepted his bowl of milk and miraculously the attendant found it lying within the precincts of the temple which was locked at night. It is also commonly known that many Muslims of Ramnagar and adjoining villages occasionally visit Tarakeshwar temple for asking boons. Often young Muslim boys too join their Hindu friends carrying pots from far-flung places of their residence on foot.

This is but one instance among numerous that bear testimony to the patterns of coexistence that are found across the world. In fact, syncretic traditions can be classified according to their significance with regards to various quotidian practices among religious communities. Khan (1997:21-22) proposes an interesting classification of these phenomena of interactions between communities through worship of deities and saints:

- Divine power or charisma (*śakti* in the Hindu tradition, *barakat* in the Islamic one) may attract devotees, regardless of their origin, around a particular religious figure. For example, the

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[9] Phallus of Lord Shiva worshipped by Hindus as one of the most important symbols of Hinduism.

[10] A *pir* is a Muslim mystic who can act as a mediator between God and human beings. A *pir* is believed to unite with god in the Sufi tradition of mystical Islam.

[11] First month according to the Bengali calendar which starts from middle of April and is celebrated for the first summer harvest that is reaped in most parts of India.

worship of a Sufi saint like Muinuddin Chishti by Hindus and the cult of a goddess performed by Muslims, with the hope of securing a boon.

- There is, in some situations, a tendency to cling to one's former beliefs. For instance, some Muslims continue to worship a Hindu deity as they did before their conversion while "deIslamised" Hindus (a much lesser known phenomenon) still perform a cult at the *dargāh* of the Pir who converted them.
- All over the subcontinent a number of Muslim saints are still regarded as the guardians and protectors of a Hindu or Jain shrine. For example, Khan cites the following instances from different parts of India: Vavar is the guardian-deity of the god Ayyappa at the shrine of Sabarimalai in Kerala, some Draupadi temples of Tamil Nadu are protected by Muttal Ravuttan, Bar Shah is worshipped at Saundatti (Karnataka) near the shrine of the Goddess, Angar Shah at the entrance of the Jain sacred complex of Shatrunjaya, near Palitana in Gujarat. In all these cases the Hindu devotees generally bow before the Muslim saint before making their offerings to the deity, whereas Muslims occasionally come to revere the god or goddess at the site.
- The last phenomenon described in the above classification would include the so-called "syncretistic cults", i.e. where Hindu and Muslim elements seem to coexist within one single tradition and where the saints have a dual identity. Khan illustrates this phenomenon through practices recorded by scholars in different places. For example, the legend of Satya Pir in Bengal recorded by Roy (1983:214-17) and the celebrated cult of the *Panch Pīr* (ibid. 213-15), the Imamshahi sect (Ivanow 1938:19-70) or Ramdev *Pīr* (Khan 1997).

Khan (1997) further clarifies the difference between the first and the last phenomenon. For instance, Muinuddin Chishti is not worshipped by the Hindus because he himself or his teaching "look Hindu", nor is a *devī* revered by Muslims because they view her as an Islamic saint, whereas deities like Ramdev are regarded by Hindus as an *avatār* of Vishnu and by Muslims as a saint of Islam. Based on this classification syncretic traditions can be described under deities that are propitiated for physical well-being through votive offerings and thus include border deities who are worshipped for protection from evil, cults related to agricultural cycles, and sacred spaces like *Sufi* shrines that are the most popular symbols of Hindu-Muslim syncretism in India. Another most significant contribution to syncretism has emerged through cultural interaction between communities in the realm of literature, arts, music, etc.

However, though Khan's classification may provide an order of semblance in describing syncretic practices, such interactions are certainly not restricted to Hindu and Muslim communities in India. Syncretic practices abound all over the world and among innumerable groups that live together.

Well-being and Votive[12] Offerings

As discussed earlier, there is very little difference between religion and everyday life since human actions tend to be guided by their beliefs. This comes especially handy when faced with everyday problems of diseases, injuries and other crises related to physical, social or economic well-being. Speaking particularly about Hindu religion, Tanaka (2003:864) suggests that the "self-maximising aspect in the form of seeking out gods to solve practical problems of life involves both Hindus and non-Hindus alike." This makes religious activities a domain in which conventional communal boundaries may be crossed. It is therefore a key zone in which social interaction and mutual understanding may occur across communities. Examples from the state of West Bengal in India abound in such syncretic practices.

Syncretic elements are most prominent in the villages of Sunderban where the vagaries of nature take a heavy toll over the lives of the people in the form of getting killed by wild animals while going into the dense forests to collect honey, etc. Roy (1999) says that in almost every village with Hindu-Muslim population, the shrines of *Bon Bibi* and *Ghazi Shaheb*[13] are most common. At villages like Gobindokati, both Muslims and Hindus assemble at the shrine of *Ghazi Shaheb* during *Ghazi mela*[14] and worship both *Ghazi Shaheb* and *Bon Bibi* at a shrine. Hindu priests and Muslim *maulana*[15] both propitiate the deities and conduct the ritual where boons are asked for. In the districts of North Bengal often Hindu and Muslim boatmen are found to perform "Ganga *puja*" (worshipping river Ganga). This again is a manifestation of the unity of human efforts to control the fury of nature. In a village called Majhergram in Burdwan district of West Bengal, the *Manasatala* (shrine of the snake goddess), for Hindus is also the *pirerthān* (seat of the *pīr*), for the Muslims. Women from both communities worship at the shrine to ward off small pox from the village.

[12] Votive ritual is performed in fulfilment of an initial vow to carry it out; it is a rite of thanksgiving (repaying one's debt to a god). The primary motivation is self-maximisation in nature (Tanaka as cited in Das 2003:868).

[13] Refer to Roy, Burman J.J. 1999. "Hindu-Muslim Syncretic Trends in West Bengal," *Indian Journal of Secularism* 3(1):40-49 for details on the legends of Ghazi Shaheb and Bon Bibi.

[14] Fair.

[15] Muslim Priest.

Cults related to healing practices have been operating abundantly outside the institutionalised realms of religions. Robinson (2003) observes that, practices and beliefs of healing which are central to the organisation of this kind of cultic activity are commonly shared across religious boundaries. A Muslim healer in Madras may meditate upon Allah in order to draw the powers of the goddess *Shakti* into himself to confront demonic possession among Christians, Hindus or other Muslims. There is a cultural agreement on the ideas of evil and misfortune that shape such practices. Robinson (2003) also draws parallels between such practices and the beliefs of Charismatic and Pentecostal Christians the world over, who believe that they can attain these spiritual powers through prayer and can use them particularly to heal people of physical ailments.

Kiernan (1998) mentions the synthesis of Zionist teachings of healing into the Zulu traditions in South Africa. Coming to call it the Zulu Zionism, he notes that at the heart of every Zionist meeting, a prayer and Bible service is followed by a healing rite. The first of these is clearly Christian, while the second corresponds to rituals of affliction which have been part of the fabric of indigenous society. When misfortune strikes, majority of the Christian Zulus can have recourse to African ancestors as an additional or separate source of help and "while experiencing some tension, they see no contradiction in appealing to distinct sets of religious meaning under the common label of "spirit", albeit in different phases of worship" (Schutte as cited by Kiernan 1998:76). It has been stated that there are no efforts made to Christianise the ancestor spirits or to indigenise Christian beliefs; nevertheless, there is a negotiation that happens between two sets of religious practices that coexist side by side.

In his highly descriptive treatise on syncretistic traditions in Bengal, Roy (1983) mentions about the pirification of a tree-spirit. In the village of Giriśgangāsāgar in the Medinipur district, a banyan tree was held sacred as the supposed abode of Nekurśani-*pīr*. As it was situated on the way to the local court of justice, both Hindu and Muslim litigants resorted to it in the belief that the *pīr* would favour their law-suits. Votive offerings to the *pīr* consisted of pieces of red rags tied to the branch or clay horses kept at the bottom of the tree. Such examples reflect a highly pragmatic approach to religion, which comes as a ready recourse in times of emergency and such pragmatism clearly cuts across dogmatic religious identities.

Very interesting is the case of the Chinese religious beliefs where monotheism has never been important and in local observances. Shen (local gods or spirits) abound. According to Fried (1999), geomacy or *feng-shui* (wind and water) is a very important component of ancient

forms and the lives led upon them. The health and wealth of a family was believed to depend upon the favourable geomantic location where one lived and where one would be buried. Despite all efforts of Christianising these beliefs, the Christian missionaries could not succeed in their mission of spreading a monotheistic religion in China. In fact, the Chinese society looked upon the building of churches anywhere without regard to *feng-shui* with much contempt. Fried (1999) also notes that the negative Christian attitudes towards ancestors as objects of veneration are also a source of hostility. This disregard of Chinese beliefs has not held Christianity in good stead and it is considered that Christianity propagated as a monotheistic faith will be closer to death in China if it does not resort to a syncretic reconciliation of belief systems.

In another case, Gold (2005) writes about the Sufi shrine of Mir Badshah located in the main bazaar of Gwalior in Madhya Pradesh in India. The shrine is very active with the local merchants visiting it everyday before opening their shops. It is crowded during weekly performances of the rhythmic Sufi devotional music called *qawwāli*, and also during the five-day annual *urs.*[16] "Crucially for the shrine's success—since only 6 or 7 per cent of Gwalior's population is Muslim—the vast majority of its visitors are Hindu" (Gold 2005). What comes through is the propitiation of Mir Badshah's shrine purely out of economic reasons where the Hindu merchants in the bazaar ask for higher profits in their business from the saint irrespective of his religious affiliations.

Cults Related to Fertility and Agricultural Cycles

Another area where syncretic elements have been found to exist in abundance is related to agriculture and fertility. Food has certainly been the fundamental basis of human existence since the beginning of the human society. Along with this necessity came the human capabilities to negotiate with nature and the cosmos with regard to hunting, gathering and consumption of food. This inevitability also led to ways of appeasing spirits and other natural beings so as to retain the balance between humans and the universe for a harmonious coexistence. Most of such elements are reflected through agricultural and fertility rites. For instance, in the case of Malays in Malaysia, the economy is directly or indirectly based on small-scale fisheries, supplemented by wet-rice farming, horticulture and the collection and utilisation of jungle products as well as coastal resources (especially shellfish). In portraying their

traditional worldview, the emphasis will be on the role of spirits and forces in the context of economic activities.

What is important is, how these beliefs have been negotiated with the Islamic influence in the area. Larsen (Internet source) mentions that, even if the use of magic is not acknowledged by the sources of Islam, this does not prevent *elements* of the Islamic religion from being separated from their original contexts and used for the purpose of magical rituals. Sometimes Islamic prophets, and other persons associated with the history of Islam, are appealed to in rituals through the use of incantations. Throughout history these beings have become associated with various objects or parts of nature which are pertinent as means of production to the fisherman. Thus Noah is the prophet of the boat, Solomon of the net and Khir of the sea. By seeking their cooperation, the outcome of an expedition at sea is more likely to succeed. The reference to Islam creates a sense of legitimacy in the use of magic. Though most of these practices are considered un-Islamic where everything is considered to be Allah's will, yet the hapless fisherman who has met with misfortune may look around for other explanations. He may have prayed to God for a safe and bountiful journey at sea, but is not able to settle with the thought that the outcome should be accepted as God's will and that any rewards will not come until later. Such an idea is hard to accept if bad luck continues for longer periods. This is when the fisherman turns to magic.

The most ancient vegetation cult in the world goes back to the Dionysian cult in Greece. The original Rite of Dionysus is almost universally held to have been a "wine cult," concerned with the cultivation of the grapevine, and a practical understanding of its life cycle. The place of origin of the Hellenic Dionysian Mysteries is unknown, but they almost certainly first came to Greece with the importation of wine, which is widely believed to have originated, in the West, around 6000 BC in one of two places, either in the Zagros Mountains (the borderlands of Mesopotamia and Persia, both with their own rich wine culture since then) or from the ancient wild vines on the mountain slopes of Libya/North Africa (the source of early Egyptian wine from around 2500 BC, and home of many ecstatic rites), quite probably from both. The Hellenic world, after Alexander's conquest, spread the cult of Dionysus internationally to Egyptian Alexandria, where he was associated with Osiris (eventually merging with him as Serapis); to Palestine, where he was associated with the Baals, and even the Adonai of the Jews (who had Dionysus imposed on them by the Hellenes); and most far flung of all, to India, where he became associated with Shiva, the Hindu god symbolised by the *linga* (phallus).

The Chinese element of Shamanism (*wu*) has also been a major ingredient of religious belief and though Christian missionaries shunned

it, this interdependence of the human organism and the environment in geomantic and in dietary terms formed one of the characteristic beliefs underlying the philosophy of Taoism[17] and it also comes close to the relation between other agricultural and fertility cults. Fried (1999:65) mentions that one aspect of this system was the division of the cosmological unity into a duality *yang* and *yin*. *Yang* included the sun, brightness and day whereas the moon, night and darkness were *yin*. Women and all female animals were *yin*; males were *yang*, although each category partook of the other. The less *yang* a man had, the less manly he would be and similarly, the more *yang* a woman had, the more masculinity she would show. Even dietary items contained amounts of *yang* and *yin* and too much or too little of them in food would cause illness.

Roy (1983) describes one of the syncretic fertility rites of Bengal in India. Bengali Muslims made *pīrs* of local non-Muslim gods and in Mymensingh district, Manāi-*pīr* appeared as the pirified Hindu god, Kārtik, and the rites and fertility beliefs pertaining to his adoration were almost identical with those of local Kārtik celebrations (*Kārtik-vrata*). Unmarried women propitiated the *pīr* for good husbands and married women worshipped him for pregnancy. On the day of Manāi *pīr's shirni*, the women sang about the *pīr* and the ceremony was concluded by the village mullah reading out the *sura fātiha*[18] from the Quran. Roy (2002) also writes that the most common reason for the general masses to frequent the syncretic shrines is to pray for fertility. In most of the *dargāhs*, women are found to tie strings or green bangles while asking for a boon to have children. At some places like Anushkura village in Kolhapur district of Maharashtra, India, the Hindu and Muslim peasants celebrate the pre-sowing and post-harvest ceremony around a sacred grove placed within the agricultural fields.

Sacred Spaces

Gold (2005) argues that Sufi shrines have long been one of the arenas in India where Hindus interact with Muslims religiously depicting patterns of intercommunal cooperation toward the worship of local saints and deities. Gaborieau (2003) notes that despite the fact that fundamentalists

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[17] These belief systems fashioned into one coherent philosophy by Laotzu about 2300 years ago came to be known as the philosophy of Taoism and gave rise to the religion of the name (Fried 1999).

[18] First verse of the Quran: In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful. /Praise be to God, The cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds; /Most Gracious, Most Merciful; /Master of the Day of Judgement. /Thee do we worship, /And Thine aid we seek. /Show us the straight way, /The way of those on whom/ Thou hast bestowed Thy Grace, / Those whose (portion)/ Is not wrath, / And who go not astray. (Translated by A.Yusuf Ali 1934)

and modernists – having a common inspiration – have hoped for the shrines to disappear, the shrines are still there and as alive as ever. Gaborieau (2003) expresses his conviction that the shrines will continue to remain decisive meeting points of religious communities in the Indian landscape. These shrines determine the importance of sacred spaces vis-à-vis religious syncretism and continue to be centres of power, interaction and legitimacy in the realm of the lived religious experiences of people.

Seeking to explore the relationship between space as construction and sacred as the defined, Parkin (1991:2) states: "…to talk about the sacred is to think and talk about space, and to some extent vice versa; that when people speak and write about the sacred, they tend to essentialise it in terms of places occupied by it; and that discussion of human spaces is likely, eventually, to refer to a central point imbued with extra-human, or spiritual, significance." Illustrating his point through sacred groves called *Kaya* in the Giriama county in Kenya, Parkin (1991) takes the case of the Mijikenda–a syncretic combination of eight tribal groups. The *Kaya* is physically demarcated by a large ring of forest and is symbolic of the moral order of the entire Giriama county. Any upheaval in this moral order akin to any crisis in the Giriama county is dealt with through a ritual cleansing of the *Kaya* by the *Kaya* elders. Hence, the Kaya with its unbounded significance is believed to affect and be affected by what goes on in Giriama county.

The *dargah* of Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti, situated in Ajmer district of Rajasthan in India, is probably one of the most famous shrines venerated by people from all communities. Illustrating the immensely syncretic appeal of Ajmer and looking upon it as a paradigm for the South Asian city, Mayaram (2005) writes that Ajmer-Merwara, as it was called in the colonial period, is a terrain that is highly meaningful for a plurality of religious sects. It houses Pushkar, which has the only Brahma temple in the country and is one of the "centres" of the Hindu sacred world. The pilgrimage also witnesses one of the largest animal fairs. The United Presbyterian mission at Beawar was the first Christian Mission to be established in Rajputana and controlled operations in western and central India from Ajmer. The city presently has also the only Parsi (Zoroastrian) temple in Rajasthan, three Sikh gurudwaras and Pushkar also has an all-India centre of the Saivite-Sakta Nath ascetics. Ajmer has also Jain and Buddhist (and before Independence, Jewish) populations. It is a seat of the plurality of god and goddess cults and ancestor shrines, the Ramdev cult of the Dalit and erstwhile untouchable castes as also Hindu and Islamic tantrik practices.

Interestingly, Saiyed (2003) brings out the importance of the saints and dargahs in the lives of Muslim women all over the world and, in India, in the lives of non-Muslim women also. According to Smith (cited by

Saiyed 2003:254), "The shrine is a place in which women can be together, or alone, can be in communication with a personage considered in some senses to be able to help them with the kinds of personal problems in which the high God may seem too remote to be interested." However, for Saiyed (2003), the socio-structural factor that draws Muslim women to dargahs is more important. The segregation of sexes has prevented Muslim women from participating fully in public prayers and worship. There, therefore, has to be a substitute for the mosque, and the dargah is this "functional alternative." An additional social-structural reason for women's strong faith in and devotion to saints arises out of the insecurities and anxieties to which they are prone on account of their deeper involvement in the recurring crises of family life.

Cultural Syncretism through Art Forms and Festivals

Another aspect of syncretism and especially the one that enjoys the highest amount of documentation is the one related to interaction between communities in the realm of art and literature and festivals celebrated together. Gathering instances from intercommunity confluence through literature in the Indian context, Waseem (2003) points out that Dara Shikoh's[19] interest in comparative religion can be related to the tradition of Islamic scholarship where attempts were made to establish connections between religions with different shari'ah. We also have *Qāzi*[20] of Lakhnauti, Rukn al-Din Samarqandi who translated the Sanskrit *Amritkund* into Persian and Arabic. Massignon (Waseem 2003) mentions the salutary role of the mystical influence of Islam, such as that of Baba Kapur in Gwalior in Madhya Pradesh, India or the radiant preaching of Kabir, which led to the reconciliation of caste among humble artisans.

Kabirpanthis (followers of Kabir) celebrate in Kabir's hymns the single God, who is personal, and knowable through transcendental revelation. The Sikhs (followers of Guru Nanak), who tried to reintegrate the teachings of Kabirpanthis into Hinduism, have incorporated in their Adi Granth the hymns of a Sufi, Farid Shakargunj (Massignon cited in Waseem 2003). The highly commercial metropolitan of Bombay in India is witness to an immensely syncretic celebration in the fair held in the Mount Mary Basilica, Bandra in honour of Mother Mary. For seven days, in the month of September, the entire city administration organises special buses and other facilities for the devotees from various communities coming into the city to pay their homage and to ask for

[19] Dara Shikoh was the eldest son of Mughal Emperor Shahjahan and was much given to literary pursuits.
[20] Muslim Judge.

boons to Mother Mary. This congregation of devotees also leads to very high commercial activity around the place and is a source of livelihood for many.

Roy (1983) records that the romantic narrative poems on popular Perso-Arabic themes like Yusuf-Zulaikha, Laila-Majnun, Saif al-Muluk-Badi al-Jamal, Lalmati-Saif al-Muluk, Gul-i Bakawali, Zeb al-Muluk-Samarokh, and also on Indian themes such as Padmavati, Vidya-Sundar, Sati Mayna-Lor-Chandrani, and Manohar-Madhumalati remained as popular in the middle Bengali period as later in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when they were turned out on a large scale by the cheap Bengali press of *Battala*.

A less analytical, yet detailed account of Muslim festivals as celebrated with Hindu overtones in the pre-colonial and colonial times, has been recorded by Garcin de Tassy (1997). Another significant instance of syncretism is found in the use of Hindu symbols by those following the Baha'i faith. Garlington (http://www.h-net.org/~bahai/bhpapers/vol2/india2.htm) notes that perhaps the most prevalent and significant Hindu concept/symbol found in many of the Baha'i bhajans of this period is that of avatar. The Baha'i Faith recognises Krishna as a legitimate manifestation of God and this is also true of the Buddha.

Ling (1978) argues that it is not only in the third world countries that Christianity accommodates local elements, the Christian canon popular in the West itself reveals many eclectic forms,

> ...pagan, pre-Christian religion still retained most of its old place so far as the masses of people throughout the Empire (Roman) was concerned. There was, in the first place, a great increase in the amount of elaborate and stately ceremonial in Christian worship, as Christian priests adopted Roman vestments and practices as well as a great deal of assimilation to Roman legal forms, hierarchical structure and organisation. In the second place, popular pagan beliefs and customs found their way into the ordinary day-to-day life of the rural parishes throughout the Roman world.

All such practices establish the space that is invaded by people from different communities and continue to celebrate the essence of living together till eternity.

Formation of Syncretic Identities

The practices detailed in the preceding section are all illustrative of the effects of social interactions at various levels of the society. This takes us back to the beginning of the article that questioned the homogeneous explanation of social identities that are sweepingly determined by the

perception of an essentialised selfhood. Such identities emerge out of either case of interactive coexistence or by virtue of conversion as explained by Khan (1997) at the beginning of the previous section of the paper. Gottschalk's (2000:5) anecdote premised on group identity formed around common interests can serve as a useful reference point in this respect:

In this anecdote, Salman Khan, who describes himself as a Muslim, helps define a group identity held in common with the Hindu family of Ved Singh.

> Two brothers came here with the Delhi sultan. They defeated the local raja and the sultan gave them all the land. The name of our village, Naugrah, means 'new house'. The other brother remained Hindu and settled in the next village. Our families remain close and we go to one another's weddings.

Such relationships that transcend the religious affiliations reinforce the faith in human instincts to live together in mutual respect. These kinds of group identities also mark a break from what Mayaram (1997) terms the master cleavage, the faultline that comprises the image of standard normality whereas the world of everyday, by definition, is reduced to a status of abnormality. Instead, they find their strength from the fuzzy thinking ground that takes into account ambiguity regarding identity claims, a deliberate ambivalence, a preferred ambiguity and a resistance to denominational boundaries. Intrinsic to the ethos of mutuality in human societies is the recognition of commonalities rather than differences that help in formation of allegiances. Singh (1992 cited in Mayaram 1997) points out that communities look more at commonalities than at differences and easily establish rapport when they discover that they have "traits" in common.

However, this quest for commonalities should not be relegated to the order of homogenisation of religious communities, since what is real is the oscillation between identities owing to interstitial spaces in the society that allow for identities that defy classification, that precede an either/or status. In fact, these are the spaces that challenge those who are out to strengthen the master cleavage discussed earlier. As Nandy (1990:77) points out, the most dangerous elements in society are those that hold in contempt the common run of believers. They invoke the classical versions of their faiths to underplay, marginalise or even delegitimise the existing ways of life associated with their faiths. Their aim is always to homogenise their co-believers into proper political formations and, for that reason, to eliminate those parts of religion which "smack" of folk ways and "threaten" to legitimise diversities, interfaith dialogue and theological polycentrism.

One needs to understand that the term "religion" itself was coined to shape categories to suit the patterns of the Western academia. They do not accommodate a syncretic history that dissolves barriers between private and public domains, between local communities and concepts of the nation (Viswanathan 1996). Such categories served the purpose of the rationalist project that undertook categorisation in line with biological or taxonomic classifications integral to natural sciences. As Mayaram (1997) puts it, these disciplines have always ignored the counterprocess of the constant mutation of species and the production of intermediate lifeforms. The legal, political and social sciences are similarly grounded in classification.

The phenomenon of conversion so popularly associated with the formation of interstitial identities has often been at the centre of processes that challenge a classificatory understanding of socio-religious intermingling. Though "conversion" may be employed as a neutral sociological term to understand change of religion, beliefs and practices, this perception of conversion confined to the idea of radical religious rupture, associated with the theoretical understanding of religions such as Christianity or Islam necessarily, leaves analytically unexplored such shifts as multiple transformations of caste and sect observed in Indian society (Robinson and Clarke 2003). Challenging notions of a homogeneous religious identity, sects are characterised by their own philosophical viewpoints that may have been formulated by their founders mostly as a reaction to the present socio-cultural phenomenon that may have been repressive or otherwise exclusionistic (Babb 2003).

Taking conversion as an element of formation of syncretic identities, it can be agued that it is important to look beyond concepts and categories in trying to understand the dynamics of social interaction that results in a range of phenomena that are spontaneous in nature. At the same time, we have also seen how communities do not necessarily have to undergo what may be termed as religious conversion in order to worship or propitiate a saint or a deity who does not align with their overt religious allegiance. What becomes crucial in the everyday lifeworld of human beings is that which propels one towards a faith that cuts across religious boundaries and brings along with it a realistic syncretic appeal of mutual interdependence. In fact, this is what can sufficiently explain the dependence of Hindu devotees on Muslim saints and vice versa – a phenomenon that transcends reason and traditional realms of identification in a situation of crisis.

The Syncretic Discourse: Why is it Important?

A discussion on the relevance of syncretism is not merely valuable to the sociology of religion; rather it has a more significant contemporary

rationale behind it. The key is to understand the discourse on syncretism against the backdrop of a geography of violence in society today. It is needless to say that much of this violence stems from what is supposed to be religious intolerance. Certainly, such bigotry fails to take into account the day-to-day interactions in the human society that translate into an ethos of mutual aid akin to the innate nature of human beings. Upholding this principle, processual terms such as syncretism, liminality, etc. pose a challenge to the Eurocentric way of looking at faiths. As Nandy (1990:71) argues, the Eurocentric perception gradually came to be associated with the dominant culture of the colonial states in the region, it subsumes under it a set of clear polarities; centre *vs.* periphery, true faith *vs.* its distortions, civil *vs.* primordial, and great traditions *vs.* local cultures or little traditions.

Rooted in the secularisation debate, Nandy's (1990) argument revolves around two aspects of South Asian religion: faith and ideology. By faith he implies religion as a way of life, a tradition that is definitionally non-monolithic and operationally plural. He uses the term "definitionally" because

> ...unless a religion is geographically and culturally confined to a small area, it has as a way of life, in effect, to turn into a confederation of number of ways of life which are linked by a common faith that has some theological space for the heterogeneity which everyday life introduce (Nandy 1990:70).

It is in this light that he establishes the difference between Iranian and Indonesian Islams, two cultures which can be said to be divided by the same faith; two forms of Islam that are interlocking, not isomorphic, in relation to each other. By religion as ideology, Nandy means religion as a sub-national, national or crossnational identifier of populations contesting for or protecting non-religious, usually political or socio-economic interests. Such religions as ideologies then get identified with one or more texts, rather than ways of life of the believers and come to denote the relatively purer forms of the religions.

It is this religion-as-ideology approach that the secularisation debate aspires to counter. However, in attempting to do so, it discounts the multiplicity of meanings that emerges out of daily social interactions and human situations. What becomes evident is the discomfort of the notion of secularism with the fluid definitions of self, characteristic to many South Asian cultures. Nandy (1990) suggests that such a self, which can be conceptually viewed as a configuration of selves, invokes and reflects the configurative principles of religion-as-faith and is incompatible with the idea of secularism that chalks out an area in public life where religion is not admitted. Qualifications of this aspect of religion lie in slogans like "we are Indians first, Hindus second" or we are Indians first, then Sikh'.

Religion is constantly relegated to the private background by the public arena which has no space for faith.

It is in such times that one feels unsettled by news items that seem to celebrate the ethos of humanitarian religions like Sufism. Zaidi (2005) reports from Punjab that the "sudden spurt of interest in all things Sufi in Punjab is seen not merely as an assertion of marginalised people but also as a recognition of Sufism's secular[21] ethos." On the one hand, the nation has still not recovered from the deep scars inflicted by the state sponsored pogrom in Gujarat; while, on the other, we still have instances of "syncretic communities or communities with dual identities like the Khojas and the Nizari Ismailis that have flourished in Gujarat" (Roy 2005).

In Gujarat again, we find a foray into the *pranāmi* sect which has been described as a liminal community. According to Roy (2005), Mahamati Prannath, who became the main organiser of the *pranāmi* movement, stressed that the difference between Hindus and Muslims is useless as both are the children of the same God. It is interesting to find that the religious movement organised by Prannath is constantly referred to as *Din-e-Islām* or even simply Islam and the disciples are *momin.*[22] It needs to be mentioned here that Mahatma Gandhi, following his mother and his ancestors, was associated with the *pranāmi* sect. Roy (2005) in his findings mentions that Gandhi's mother used to take him to the local Prannathi temple at Porbandar during his childhood. In the temple, Hindu and Muslim sacred texts were read out and commented upon. The *Kuljam Swarup*[23]–the primary repository of Prannath's philosophy – contains over 18,000 verses written in various languages, including Arabic, Persian, Sindhi, Gujarati and Khadi Boli (Sikand 2003).

Even Nandy (1990) evokes the secularism of Gandhi, deeply rooted in his religious consciousness. Gandhi used to say that he was a *sanatani*, an orthodox Hindu. It was as a sanatani Hindu that he claimed to be simultaneously a Muslim, a Sikh and a Christian and granted the same plural identity to those belonging to other faiths. Traditional Hinduism, or rather *sanatan dharma*, was the source of his religious tolerance. Similarly, the idea of syncretism intertwined with religion-as-faith becomes essential to be recognised as containing the true essence of a human religion that circumscribes various traditions and modes of religious practices.

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[21] "Secular" here would essentially imply an egalitarian ethos rooted in a respect for all faiths and intrinsic human values of equality.

[22] True believers of Islam.

[23] Holy scripture of the *pranāmi* sect. Four books of the scripture deal with Islam, four with Hinduism and the rest consist of verses on personal piety, righteous conduct and the love for God (Sikand 2003).

Following the tradition of the British Anthropologist Robert Redfield, there has prevailed a tendency among scholars to bifurcate religious traditions and practices along the lines of "Great traditions" and 'little traditions'. Redfield (1947 as cited in Harris 1968:192) contributed the folk-urban dichotomy to anthropology – a "vaguely evolutionistic contrast between preliterate, homogeneous, religious, familial, personalised primitive and peasant communities and the literate, heterogeneous, secular, individualised, depersonalised urban society." Naturally, the "folk" comprised the little traditions and the urban elite, with its scriptural texts, was entrusted to bear the Great tradition. Anthropology and sociology of religion has come a long way since then and despite ample instances that refute claims of "either"/ "or" categorisations, we find that this tendency wields sway over much scholarly writings.

Roy (1983), in his excellent work on the Islamic syncretistic tradition in Bengal, upholds such stereotypes and clearly distinguishes between "historical texts" as repositories of the Great tradition, whereas the cult of *Pīr* and oral traditions fall under little traditions. One cannot help, but reflect on such classifications despite being aware of the fact that what is "original" and ancient (such as oral traditions) comes to be termed as "little" as opposed to later modifications – in the form of written manuscripts and printed matter – that are held in high esteem. Similarly, there is uneasiness about "syncretism" itself, "due to the term evoking for some of us the existence of a "purity" or "authenticity" in contrast to which it is defined" (Stewart and Shaw 1994:2). However, as Stewart and Shaw (1998) see it, it also seems unnecessarily limiting to avoid a term which already exists to describe religious synthesis because of some of the connotations it has been attributed. In contrast to the more neutralising terms favoured in postmodern anthropology, the very contentiousness surrounding the concept of syncretism puts us on the track of the concern regarding the politics of religious synthesis.

Syncretism comes across as a process that is ongoing and very much a part of all religious traditions. It is, as Veer (1998) says, an aspect of religious interaction over time. Every religious tradition goes through certain adaptations and accommodations; it originates, takes root and develops through exchanges of belief systems over a period of history and while moving from one locale to the other. It needs to be driven home that despite efforts at homogenising religious beliefs, what has sustained is the syncretic appeal of religious experiences that bring people of different faiths together in a celebration of their mass consciousness that surpasses normative dogmas usually laid down in scriptural texts or orthodox directives. One feels closer to the spirituality of the divine and seeks comfort in what Rabindranath Tagore calls the religion of man (Madan 2004).

When it comes to everyday religious experience, scriptural directives are modified to suit the more practical needs of human beings. This leads to a complete dissolution of the boundaries between the so-called "Great" and "Little" traditions. Theocracy gives way to spiritualism and the quest for happiness and solace translates into the quest for the divine and this amalgamation finally results in a form of religion that has the highest appeal – the most popular among the masses.[24] It is a religion that emerges from the daily lives of human beings and it is virtually impossible for institutionalised or codified doctrines – that are supposed to remain "constant" – to deal with such spontaneity of societal upheavals.

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[24] The term is not used to denote only the "folk" but in order to distinguish the orthodox/clergy from the laity.

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