The conquest of a community

The preconcentrated conciliation of Islamic traditions in predominantly Hindu communities has become more urgent in the face of growing Hindu right-wing fundamentalism. From the Ayodhya site, the RSS and the VHP Hindus posing as reformists and 're-"voters"' made possible efforts to con- vince various Hindus – generally low-caste, tribal or 'liminal' groups – to discontinue Muslim traditions and customs, which they regard as 'impure' or non-Hindu. The re- sponse to these pressures is far from having always been positive: apart from those who fully accepted the changes or started an open resistance, a number of communities opted for concealment. Interestingly, dis- simulation, conversion, and in some cases, the emergence of some of Shira communities, became a more general practice that extended to much wider spheres of society. An interesting il- lustration of this process is the case of the town of Diggy Kalyan temple located to the south of Jaipur, Rajasthan.

Invisible pirs

The pilgrims or tourists who visited the shrine 15 or 20 years ago still remember that it was a underground chamber where the devotees – Hindus and Muslims – came to bow in front of the grave of a mysti- cious Sufi saint (a pir). The area was erected side by side with an icon of a Hindu folk deity. Local priests, posing as Hindus, were doing the usual service of the mosque (graves). After a Hindu trust took over the management of the site, it was decided to lock this un- derground and to build a brand new temple above, in front of a Hindu temple, where one can still admire classical sculptures representing various Hindu deities. Brahmins were entrusted with the religious duty. It did not take long before new generations of ignorant pilgrims started to regard this place as a 'pir' hindu, Bo- mish temple, not even being aware of the existence of a 'hidden treasure'. However, as soon as the tomb had been aban- doned, various disasters took place in the small town of Diggy. This was immediately interpreted by the local pandits as the 'return' of the Saint in response to the need for spiritual help. Later, they followed the advice of an underground chamber, and started further pro- blems, they took the following decision: the Brahmin priests would secretly visit the un-derground twice a day and perform, as et- riy, the ritual of 'swastic' and distribute saffron and white flags, while the walls of Muslim structures Ð started to display saffron and green flags, while the walls of Muslim dar- gahs were often painted green. However, the re-Hinduized, 'liminal' – I would rather say crypto-Islamic – shrines had to face another problem: if the leaders of the sect wished to pose as genuine Hindus, at the same time they were reluctant to discard all- toogether what had been for centuries their sacred heritage. This is why they resorted to one of the 'clever strategies' to which I have been alluding: the ornate drapery (chadar) covering the holy graves of their founders and spiritual masters, which were usually removed, were not but hidden behind other saffron showing their place.

A particular reference to the phenomenon of underground Sufi saints is made here. In this respect, the underground Sufi Saint of Diggy, the invisible Mahdi of Panna, also being compared to one of the hidden living (living) pir of the present imamshahs of Jaisalmer Ð an offshoot of the Nizari sect (Khan and Mor 2000). Along with some of his followers, the Sayyid who claims to be the direct descendant of Imam Shah practic- es taqiyya to protect his community from the Muslim fundamentalist wave in the area. He reproduced the typical behaviour of the other South Asian Nizari during Sunnite rule. There are even, more original ways to conceal a pir, not necessarily connected with a conscious or unconscious Shi'ite taqiyya. As spies have always known, there is no better hiding place than the own body. Is that why, even in modern India, so many Hindus are allegedly possessed by a pir? Far from being simple cases of 'primit- ive' spirit possession, these stories often have interesting consequences: while be- coming the savior of a Muslim saint or mar- tyred, Hindu devotees are supposed to have re- newed religious identity, revealing at times a surprising knowledge of Islamic, Qur'anic terminology, of which they claim to be others- wise utterly ignorant.

These phenomena should not be miscon- strued as a mere superstition of a hard- ly explainable practice. On the contrary, one of the upper- caste traster who has joined the ranks of Hindu right-wing organizations: far from his residence he behaves like an uncompromis- ingly developmentist of Hindu tradition, but when he returns home he never forgets to make offers to the 'invisible pir' symbolized by an oil lamp (chigri) installed inside a recess of his room. This pir is not a simple house- hold spirit but a real Sufi saint whose spiritual- ity, devoted to the same time they were reluctant to discard all- together what had been for centuries their sacred heritage. This is why they resorted to one of the 'clever strategies' to which I have been alluding: the ornate drapery (chadar) covering the holy graves of their founders and spiritual masters, which were usually removed, were not but hidden behind other saffron showing their place.

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