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Devotional Islam in Contemporary South Asia

Shrines, journeys and wanderers

Edited by
Michel Boivin and Rémy Delage



Devotional Islam in Contemporary South Asia

The Muslim shrine is at the crossroad of many processes involving society and culture. It is the place where a saint – often a Sufi – is buried, and it works as a main social factor, with the power of integrating or rejecting people and groups, and as a mirror reflecting the intricacies of a society.

This book discusses the role of popular Islam in structuring individual and collective identities in contemporary South Asia. It identifies similarities and differences between the worship of saints and the pattern of religious attendance to tombs and mausoleums in South Asian Sufism and Shi'ism. Inspired by new advances in the field of ritual and pilgrimage studies, this book demonstrates that religious gatherings are spaces of negotiation and redefinitions of religious identity and of the notion of sainthood. Drawing from a large corpus of vernacular and colonial sources, as well as popular literature and ethnographic observation, the authors describe how religious identities are co-constructed through the management of rituals and are constantly renegotiated through discourses and religious practices.

By enabling students, researchers and academics to critically understand the complexity of religious places within the world of popular and devotional Islam, this geographical re-mapping of Muslim religious gatherings in contemporary South Asia contributes to a new understanding of South Asian and Islamic Studies.

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1 Authority, shrines and spaces

Scrutinizing devotional Islam from South Asia

Michel Boivin

This book discusses the role of popular Islam in structuring individual and collective identities in contemporary South Asia. We are aware of the difficulties arisen by the use of words such as ‘popular’¹, and even ‘devotional’, the one we have chosen for the main title. Although the approach is multidisciplinary, anthropology frames most of the papers. In this field, the building of the object under study results from observation. The main behavior observed by the contributors was related to devotion. From Latin, devotion interestingly refers to the vow, the promise made by a believer to God. Such practices of making vows are still a basic ritual in the shrines in South Asia. It implies that devotion plays a leading role in framing the religiosity and piety of such places.

Regarding devotion, a main issue is related to the translation. When we use the Western word devotion, to what vernacular are we referring? In South Asian languages, devotion is expressed as *ibadat*, *bandagi*, *bhagti/bhakti*, etc. For many believers from South Asia, devotion will not be distinguished from spiritual love (*pyar*, *ishq*). The notion of love is the most widespread in locality to express the link between the devotees and a spiritual master. Furthermore, the semantic field of devotion is usually close to two other notions: that of service (*khidmat*) and that of sacrifice (*qurban*).² The relation between a devotee and the saint is conceived as an exchange of services. The devotee asks something and in return, he is supposed to perform some services or duties. The service can be a donation in cash, but also the sweeping of the shrines, or other material services for the maintenance or improvement of the shrine. It shows the complexity of the notion of devotion in Muslim South Asian context, beyond the difficulty coming from the translation, since there is not a single word for expressing the single idea of devotion.

Another point to be raised is that it is well known that devotion, which can also encompass veneration, is for many Muslims restricted to the Prophet Muhammad. All over the Muslim world, the Prophet Muhammad is undoubtedly the main figure to which devotion is directed.³ In the second part of the *shahada*, it is clearly stated that he is the second after Allah to be the recipient of the prayers. Since our work was not on the mosques, which are the most common places where God and the Prophet Muhammad are praised, but on the shrines, we observed that logically, only a few shrines are devoted to the Prophet Muhammad.⁴ It is also well known that the devotional literature dedicated to him is huge.⁵ Furthermore, a

number of reformist movements centers piety on the devotion towards the Prophet Muhammad, from the well-named Tariqa-e Muhamadiyya which was created in the beginning of the twentieth century.⁶ Since the veneration of the Prophet Muhammad is a distinct and separate topic, we have decided not to include the devotion. A main reason would be that the topic will require a whole book devoted to it.

However, a discussion on devotional Islam will imply two main issues: the issue of visitation of the holy tombs and the issue of sainthood, which are in both cases focusing on the shrines. In the Muslim context, visitation and sainthood are reminiscent of the *ziyarat*,⁷ from the Arabic verb *zâra*, ‘to see somebody or something, to pay a visit’, sometimes translated as ‘pilgrimage’,⁸ although it is also used to translate the *hajj*, which I will discuss more later in this book. This said, the *ziyarat* is very often understood as a substitute for the *hajj*, when people are prevented from performing the pillar of Islam (Boissevain and Boivin forthcoming). It is true it is a commonly studied topic, mostly in relation with Sufism. In the eleventh volume of the *Encyclopedia of Islam* (2002), Bearman, Bianquis, Bosworth, van Donzel, and Einrich provide a seminal overview on the topic. Unfortunately, South Asia is not given the importance it deserves, despite the number of leading studies that have already been published. Furthermore, since 2002, several new works have been devoted to the issue of *ziyarat*.⁹ Most of the time, they are anthropological works centered on a given *dargah*, or even multi-sited places, but they were in any case conceived as monographs. In the wake of our multidisciplinary approach, we thought of implementing less-explored approaches, especially those referring to the different categories of space-related issues.

The issue of space was the core approach of a book published in French by Amir-Moezzi (1996), *Lieux d’islam*. The collective volume addresses the issue of place (*lieu*) instead of space, under three different parts: religious and historical places, mystical places and cultural places, which include places from Africa to Java. The relation between place and space is nonetheless addressed in the first contribution authored by Jambet. He reminds the polarity of Islam which starts with the direction of the canonic prayer and is reinforced with the obligation of *hajj*, the canonic pilgrimage, to which should be added ‘a flowering of secondary poles’. Framing on Aristotelian philosophy, Jambet states that the place is not the absolute end of the interpretation of the space (Amir-Moezzi 1996: 19–20). From the beginning of Islam, Muslim mystics have identified a number of places and spaces which are beyond the physical word.

Recently, Green provided a new approach regarding the issue of space. First, he spoke of space as territory, before introducing the dialectic between the territorial construction and the textual construction of sainthood (Green 2012: 33–4). For him, the shrine itself is like an embodiment of the saint, and as such, it plays a distinct and significant role in the process of sanctification. Then in his last book *Terrains of exchange*, Green refers to the concept of terrain. A terrain is ‘conceived as a distinctive environment that lent shape – defining colour and flavor – to their religious product’. Drawing a parallel with the winegrower’s concept of terroir (in French), he claims that the ‘terrains of exchange. . . aim to capture the intersecting

dimensions of “locality” and “globality” (Green 2014: 7). Furthermore, a terrain ‘is a market of religious transactions’ (Green 2014: 11).¹⁰

In our volume on devotional Islam, the way we wished to raise the issue of space and place is expressed in the three elements of the subtitle: shrines, journeys and wanderers. Drawing on de Certeau, the place is the order in which elements are arranged in their relations of coexistence. There is a space as soon as we take into account factors of direction, issues related to speed, and the time variable. Thus, the space is a ‘practiced place’, a place where different operations delimit spaces through the actions performed by historical subjects (Certeau 1990: 173–174). In this respect, the shrine is a main illustration of the dialectic between place and space.

Mainly known in South Asia as a *dargah*, a Persian-originated term meaning *threshold*, the Muslim shrine is also known through other words whose meaning and use vary according to time and regions, such as *mazar*. During the last phase of the Delhi sultanate, the place was better known as a *khanaqah*, which was the exact Persian equivalent of the Arabic word *zawiya*.¹¹ When Ibn Battutta (1304–1377) visited Sehwan Sharif in the mid-thirteenth century, he spoke of the *zawiya* where he stayed a few days. And after a few years, the epigraphic texts left by the Delhi sultan Firuz Shah Tughluq (1309–1388) in the same Sehwan Sharif spoke of it as a *khanaqah*. But later, the *saint des saints* of the sacred places was shifted from the place where the Sufis lived to the place where a Sufi master was buried. Although most of the scholars interpreted this change as a decline of Sufism, it is more relevant to observe the spread of a new religiosity which was closely related to new social, political and economic conditions. Furthermore in the cultural sphere, singing mystical poetry was still a main part of the devotional practice.

The shrines under study will be analyzed through the multilevel spatial context in which they were built and where they grew up. In the field of place understood as a physical space, the urban environment was a key factor. The study of the interaction between the space of the shrine and the space of the city often plays a tremendous role in the fabric of the society. If the shrine was framed by the urban, in return the urban was also framed by the shrine. In this regard, a main contribution is Wolper’s work on how Sufism transformed the urban space in Medieval Anatolia (Wolper 2003). Wolper’s goal is to examine the role of dervish lodges, conceived as both buildings and institutions, in religious and cultural transformation. Throughout her study, she addressed the issue of both places and spaces. First, she examined how these buildings changed the hierarchy of spaces in Anatolian cities, and second, she addressed how the dervish lodges worked as places where different types of authority were mediated (Wolper 2003: 3). However, regarding South Asia, the lack of sources does not allow in many cases implementation of thorough studies in this matter, despite pioneer works here again.¹² Another lens through which the shrine is studied is as a place of social fabric.

As a matter of fact, it is also very common to claim that the shrine is a place where all the different categories of population, referring to creeds, social groups, castes and so on, are mixed and intermingled. Here, we turn back to the issue

of popular religion. In using this expression, which is reminiscent of a number of cleavages expressed in Muslim societies, such as *khass-am* (elite-people) or *ashraf-ajlaf*,¹³ we don't pretend there is no social distinction in the space of the shrine. Nor do we wish to challenge the Turnerian theory of the *communitas*, although it did not prevent social discriminations inside the shrine. We just want to state that the religiosity performed in the space of the shrine is shared by the many segments of the society, belonging to local elites, outsiders, discriminated categories like women, transgender, religious minorities, but also powerful statesmen, low middle classes, high middle classes, landowners, beggars, etc. It is in that sense that the religion of the shrine is popular. We also take the shrine as a place where many things are possible, despite the control taken by the state or by powerful lobbies. It means that the shrine as a sacred place and space is open to new social negotiations, and it is to some extent like a distorted mirror of the interwoven strata of local, regional and national society.

After the shrine, the second topic related to space is that of journey. First it implies the idea of displacement and movement. Rather than focusing on displacement as travel, we thought of it as a linkage between different spaces and places. The journey performer will of course start his journey from home, but sometimes, the journey to the *ziyarat* will include a number of steps before reaching it. Furthermore, the *ziyarat* itself can be made of different internal journeys. Finally, the journey can be a physical journey, but most of the time it is replicated in the symbolic level, in the spiritual realm. *Journey* is consequently not understood in the common meaning. It is a multidimensional term which can refer to different levels of reality, not only physical reality. It echoes the spiritual journey a Sufi is supposed to achieve for reaching the ultimate goal: the merging with God, the *fana fi'llah*.

On the other side, visiting the main shrines is on the agenda of many politicians. Contrary to what is sometimes claimed, the relation between the shrine and the politics is as old as Sufism. In South Asian context, it started as soon as in the thirteenth century, during the Delhi sultanate. We have already spoken of the attempt by Firuz Shah Tughluq to leave his mark on Lal Shahbaz Qalandar's shrine in Sehwan Sharif. It was a true political action, when one knows that he wanted to reduce the Sohrawardiyya influence on the State. As spiritual masters of many people, the State thus wanted to control the shrine's attendants but vice versa, the Sufis looked for the protection of the State. By protection, it means mainly the financial support of the prince and during the first Tughluq princes, the heads of the Sohrawardis obviously increased the wealth of the *tariqa*, as well as their personal wealth. And to some extent, the violence of the *qalandars* towards them was but a protest against the collusion of the Sufi establishment with political power.

The third topic related to space is that of the wanderer. Despite what was suggested by the orientalist, and the homologies with Hindu tradition, the tradition of wandering *faqirs* has been attested in Sufism since the beginning. The wanderer is a figure of sainthood which has survived mainly in South Asia. It has almost disappeared from Turkey, but looks to be still alive also in Central Asia, especially in Chinese Central Asia. It is of course highly necessary to distinguish the

wanderer from the traveler or from the pilgrim in other words. The wanderer, who is himself known under different denominations, is a renouncer: he has given up all what is related to the mundane and material world to wander from one tomb to another. Since they want to die in the mundane world, they live in the company of the dead. While the word *qalandar* was very common in the time of the Delhi sultanate, as an equivalent of the word *rend* from Persian poetry, the most spread could be today that of *malang*, whose origin is unknown.¹⁴ Finally, there is a paradox when shrines were built to host the wanderers' tombs. As a matter of fact, these ascetics illustrated the vanity of life in adopting reverse values: they lived outside instead of having a house, a fixed place. Death was their environment since many were living in the graveyards, and they dressed like women with long hairs and jewels. The building of a tomb thus sounds like a scenario for capturing the wandering of the ascetic.

Beyond the focus on shrines and space, this volume addresses many other issues we do not explicitly express. The issue of sainthood can be framed in a single question: is there a specific kind of sainthood in the shrines? Once again, we don't pretend to propose an exhaustive answer. We rather focus on specific categories of saints for which it is most useful to have a look at the vocabulary. We find the Arabic-originated terms such as *walaya* or *wilaya*, two words which are also employed by the Shiites for the *imams*. This word is built on an Arabic root meaning closeness. The one who is close to God is the *wali* (pl. *awliya*). It thus doesn't refer to sanctity or to the sacred, as in the case of the Latin word *sanctus*, however, the same rooted word *sant* is used in Hinduism. Nonetheless, it is an interesting word since it can be understood as referring to the closeness of the buried Sufi to the pilgrim, and to the closeness between the buried Sufi and God. Consequently, the dead saint is an intercessor and a mediator, and the place where he lies is a bridge between the mundane world and the spiritual world.

While the cult usually develops from the grave of a dead saint, the dead saint's spiritual power or his charisma was transmitted to his descendants or, if he was not married, to the descendant of his successor. Following Weber, we can coin this type as hereditary charisma. For centuries, the heads (*murshids*, *pirs*, *sajjada nashins*) of the most important Sufi shrines have accumulated wealth. Thanks to the pilgrims' donations, they have acquired lands and became landowners, or *zamindars*. They are often the backbone of a social class which can be compared with the gentry of England. The comparison is nevertheless only relevant in terms of wealth and of social dominant class. The main difference is indeed the religious role the *murshids* play. Another distinct feature is the entanglement of the network of their followers with that of their clients. By clients, we mean the people who work for them, in cultivating their fields or in running their shops.

Another implicit issue is that of pilgrimage, a word used in a number of contributors' chapter titles in this book. Obviously, one would wonder why the word pilgrimage was not incorporated into this title. It is true that the old Latin word *pelegrinus*, or pilgrim, encompasses many aspects of the topics the contributions are dealing with, since it refers to mobility and circulation. Interestingly in French and in English, the word *pelegrinus* gave birth to two words, *pèlerinage*/