

Of Pirs and Pandits

Tradition of Hindu-Muslim Cultural Commonalities in Orissa

Frederique Apffel-Marglin

IN a small village south of Puri, not far from the coast, all the girls and young women sang while swinging on brightly decorated *dolis*. It is *raja samkranti* in June of 1990, the festival of the menses of women, the Goddess and the earth. The village lanes are busy with groups of women on their way to visit neighbours. Hardly a man is to be spotted. They have left the night before to camp in the sacred grove of Harachandi for the four days of the festival to sacrifice, feast and enjoy the *mela*.

The Harachandi Mela

I had come to study this festival, continuing my inexhaustible fascination for the way the Hindu tradition in Orissa represents women and their bodies. Underlying my fascination lay, no doubt, my unconscious assumption of the vastly different and rather negative manner in which the Semitic religions and their contemporary heir, modern medicine, approached this reality. This is to say that I was not prepared for what I heard that hot June morning in the village of Dekudi when the girls were singing on their swings. (See also my article on this festival in **Manushi** No. 82)

Sisulata's 13-year-old daughter, Mahari, sat in her new sari on a swing, all decorated. She and I had gone early that morning of the first day of *raja* to the village tank where she and all the other girls bathed. The little ones were

carefully decorated by their mothers with bright bows in their hair, white talcum powder on their faces, red *alata* on their feet and *kajal* in their eyes.



Young girls singing Raja song on a swing

Mahari sang a song about Sita's *swayamvara*. The last line identifies the writer of the song as Hamid. I confess I was astonished to hear the signature line. I even asked the girls if they knew who Hamid was. Was this a Muslim name? I tried to find out whether they saw any incongruity in this. They simply laughed. It obviously never occurred to them or their mothers to see any incongruity in this. I was the incongruous one! The song was printed in a small bazaar publication entitled *Raja Doli Gita* (Swing Songs of *Raja*) which someone had bought at the *mela*.

This incident sensitised me to the Muslim presence in the festival of the menses. On my next visit to the *mela*, which takes place at the hill of Goddess Harachandi, some 20 km south of Puri, I checked the vendor of books and saw that the only song pamphlet on sale was the one with

S.A. Hamid's songs in it. A young woman next to me bought one for two rupees and so did I.

The *mela* draws a fair crowd, with men from about 60 villages surrounding the hill of Harachandi pitching long tents in the grove.¹ Many vendors sell anything from food to village furniture. People come as day visitors. I noticed that several vendors as well as several visitors were Muslim. When my collaborator P.C. Mishra did a systematic survey of all the tents, interviewing men from each tent, it appeared that in the last four to five years, youth clubs from surrounding villages had organized tents for the purpose of keeping law and order at the fair, not leaving this crucial task to the police. They had done this in response to cases of rape at another goddess temple. Apparently, outsiders had come and raped some women.

Muslim Participation

In 1990 there were three such clubs and one of them was a Muslim one. People in all three clubs explained that in the last six to seven years the number of pilgrims, visitors, and vendors to the *mela* had increased substantially. These were outsiders in the sense that they did not belong to the villages whose men pitch tents in the grove. This increased the law and order problems. Two of the clubs are from one village only two kilometers from Harachandi's temple. That village has a sizable Muslim population. One of the clubs is Hindu, the other one Muslim. The Muslim club house was actually a *paan* shop with a covered area. About the work of this club, Fariduddin said:

"In the last five to six years the crowd coming here has become much larger. We try to see that everything goes well at the *mela*. We join with

our Hindu brothers. They also join us at our festivals. We keep good relations with the Hindus, we exchange gifts with them (*dia-nia karu*). Also this place is used by our women who come and visit the *mela*. Some of our women buy new clothes for *raja* and eat treats like the Hindu women do. They can come here and rest."

It seemed to me that Fariduddin was expressing concern about the safety of Muslim women at the *mela* so we inquired whether Muslims also observed a separation between men and women during this festival. He responded:

"Not at all. Why should we do this? The Hindus say that their Goddess is at her periods but we do not understand this. We don't ask about this, it may offend them. We observe *raja* by stopping our ploughs. Some of our girls and women play on swings and wear new clothes."

The involvement of Muslims in the festival of the menses was even incorporated in a song one of the priests of Harachandi sang for me one day. The song recounts Her story and several persons who gave land for the temple are mentioned. One of them is Mohammed Askar who gave seven acres of land for the maintenance of the Goddess' worship. Hearing this, I asked the *pandas* about this Askar. They explained to me that at the time of the arrival of the British - who conquered Orissa in 1803 - the British gave land to a Muslim to buy his loyalty and gain information. However, according to another *panda* this Muslim respected the Hindu gods and goddesses. This Mohammed Askar gave seven acres of land to the temple of Harachandi. Then this second *panda* went on about Askar and told me the following:

"Although he was a Muslim, fearing the Goddess, and with great

devotion, he granted this land. Whether something entered his heart or the Goddess appeared to him in a dream, whatever the reason, he was very happy to grant this land... That Muslim administrator was so strong, no one could move without his permission. Once the *mahant* of Emar Math in Puri wanted to have a *darshan* of the Goddess. He came along the coast in a palanquin. Mohammed Askar heard the rhythmic panting of the carriers and came to stop the palanquin saying: "Who has come without my permission in a palanquin in my land? Stop him!" The *mahant* sent a message to the *mahant* of Pandita Matha who in turn sent a message to Mohammed Askar saying: "Don't insult the *mahant* of Emar Matha. Let him go." Askar responded by saying: "If he is coming why did he not inform me? Such a holy man, I would have received him with all dignity." He then sent a message to the *mahant* of Emar Math requesting him to wait a while. Askar then had flowered arches built all along the road to the Goddess. So the *mahant* went and had a *darshan* of the Goddess."

A Shared Culture

Then the other *panda* who had told me about the British bribing Askar with land, chimed in with the following:

"...this Muslim was such a good administrator that no law suits were filed in Puri. Everyone was coming to this Muslim to settle their disputes. He was like a king, dispensing judgements. People came to him all the way from Chilka, even as far as Ganjam, to Puri. People lived in peace under him."

Since Mr. Fariduddin of the Muslim youth club tent at the festival had invited me to visit his family in the village I decided to visit him there

after the *mela*. His village is scarcely two kilometers from the grove of Harachandi. He introduced me to a farmer, Sheikh Imabul. The following conversation took place:

FAM: *Do you stop cultivation work during the four days of raja?*

S.I.: We give rest to the land, the bullocks and to men. It is the way people go, it is a custom; we also make *pithas* (special cakes for *raja*). The people stop work. If we cultivate at that time, people will surely feel bad, so why should we do it?

FAM.: *But this is not a Muslim festival?*

S.I.: It is not a Muslim festival but we live together. They have a festival so let us be happy and join with them. They also join in our festivals. If we do otherwise there will be quarrels. Why should we quarrel? We work and keep good relations with each other. In this area some people create problems between the two communities, so we have to be extremely careful and give no reason for quarrel.

At this point I tried to find out more about these persons who create problems but no one wanted to talk further about it.

FAM: *The Hindus say that the earth menstruates at that time. Do you think that too?*

S.I.: No; there is no such thing in our book; nothing like that is written. But this earth is Mother; only because of that we give rest to her. We do not observe this very strictly. We do not gain if we plough, nor do we lose if we do not plough. It is just for keeping good relations and walking together. A Hindu's plot is right next to mine. If I do not stop he will be greatly pained.

I then requested to meet Mr.



Men camping at the festival site

Fariduddin's mother and was taken inside the house and introduced to her. After the required pleasantries, she explained to me their marriage system and how come everyone in the house was related to everyone else. They practice cross-cousin marriage which the Hindus in this district do not. However, further south, in Ganjam district, (as in most of the South) the Hindus also practice the same form of marriage. The conversation came around to Raja Parba and she confirmed that some of the girls and women play on swings and dress in new clothes. Most families also prepared the traditional *pithas*. I then queried her concerning the menarche observation in her family. At first she was reluctant to engage in this particular conversation. I waited until only girls and women were in the room and then she became more forthcoming. The following is what she told me:

“When a daughter bleeds for the first time, she will not be allowed to go out. She won't eat fish or meat, nor salt. She is kept indoors for seven days. On the seventh day she is taken to the

tank by seven married women to bathe; she wears new clothes and cuts her nails. Then some verses from our scriptures are read. But during the seven days she does not do her prayers. On the seventh day her maternal grandmother must be there. She will see to it that the girl is properly decorated and beautified. On that day she will do her prayers again.”

Hearing this description, I was struck by the exact parallel with the menarche observances of Hindus of the same area. I was then curious to know whether their other practices were also followed by the Muslims.

FAM: *When the mother sees her daughter's first blood, does she place her on the manure pile?*

Mo: This used to be done earlier, but it is not done anymore.

FAM: *Was it done for you?*

Mo: Yes, my mother placed me on the manure pile for a while before taking me indoors for the seven days seclusion. But I did not do that for my daughter.

Except for the reading of scriptures

and the saying of prayers, the observances were basically similar to those among the Hindus. I was particularly struck by the fact that the custom of placing the girl on the manure pile had also existed, revealing that cultivators shared, regardless of religious affiliation, the understanding of the menses as part of the same degeneration/regeneration processes as those found in nature.

After returning to Puri I made some enquiries trying to get more information on Sheikh Imabul's remarks about persons creating trouble between the communities. It turns out that a certain well off local member of Congress hires *goondas* to foment riots. This gives him the opportunity to use Congress funds to give relief to the affected communities whose houses have been burned as well as the opportunity to keep a good portion of those funds for himself. Unfortunately this was not the first time that I had heard of similar practices by politicians fomenting troubles between communities in the area.

The Puri Panjika

To further my understanding of Muslims in this region, P. C. Mishra and I decided to go to Cuttack where Kohenoor Press, which publishes both the pamphlet of swing songs and the *Puri Panjika* (almanac) was located. The *Puri Panjika* is a major cultural institution and the most respected almanac in Orissa. It contains crucial astrological information as well as the dates of all the major and minor festivals. It contains a solar as well as a lunar Hindu calendar, the civil calendar and the Muslim calendar. It is endorsed by the Mukti Mandapa Pandit Sabha, the assembly of learned Brahmins who convene inside Jagannath temple to consider matters

pertaining to *Dharmshastra*. Kohenoor Press is owned by a prominent Muslim family of Cuttack. At the house of the owner of the press in Cuttack, we met Nasrul Islam and his wife. Nasrul is the son of the founder of the press, the late Aminul Islam, who passed away in 1985. Nasrul's wife, being from Puri, had acquaintances in common with P.C. Mishra, which immediately created a bond. She gave me a slim volume about her father-in-law that her husband had just published to honor his father's memory. The book recounts how Aminul Islam started publishing the *Panjika* in 1935. It tells us that Aminul Islam was awarded the honorary degree of Jyotish Chandrasekhar in recognition of his outstanding contribution to astrology by the President of the All India Council of Astrological Science.

The book contains accounts of Aminul's life as well as his friendship and collaboration with the poet S.A. Hamid. Aminul published a verse account by S.A. Hamid of a famous incident in the history of Orissa's resistance to British rule, the firing on the boat man Baji Raut at Dhenkanal during an uprising against the colonial government. He published it in 1938, right after the events described. The book was banned and the booksellers arrested. In fact it was the friendship between Aminul Islam and S.A. Hamid which started the press going. Hamid would put into verse memorable events of the day, as well as write about many local festivals such as the great Ratha Jatra of Jagannath in Puri. Aminul decided to immediately print these compositions in cheap pamphlets so that they would be accessible to everyone. This being before the time when radios, let alone TV, were widely available, they sold briskly, and thereby launched the press.

The rest of the volume is filled with a long list of testimonials. The first three, in Oriya, are noteworthy. The first is from Puri Gajapati Thakura Raja Sri Jukta Dibyasingh Deb (the king of Puri) commending Aminul on having published the *Panjika* for the last 50 years and thereby fulfilling a great social service. He also commends him for having published many Hindu religious works.

The second testimonial is from the secretary of the Mukti Mandapa Pandit Sabha, Sri Purna Chandra Tripathi, where it is said that since 1935 the manuscript of the *Panjika* was sent to the *Sabha* every year for corrections. Tripathi also commends Aminul for having endowed the temple with funds for the *upanayan* of young indigent Brahmins as well as for the *ekadashi vrat*. He concludes with the words "we pray for his soul".

A Muslim Pandit

The third testimonial is from Sri Krushna Rajaguru, president of the Mukti Mandapa Pandit Sabha and Professor of Sanskrit at Jagannath Sanskrit University in Puri and one of the most learned men I have had the honor to know. K. Rajaguru, besides being elected president of the Sabha and nominated to the Sanskrit chair at the university in Puri, was also traditionally the supervisor of rituals of the whole Jagannath temple as well as the *purohit* of the king.² I will translate his comments for they embody the spirit of Hindu-Muslim understanding that has prevailed in this region:

"Mia Saheb [Aminul's nickname] showed genuine respect and honour to all religions. He was of a religious and helping temperament. He always fought against blind religious sentiments. He published *Puranas* and

Dharmshastras. His gift to Oriya religious literature is important, uncommon and befitting the time. He was independent minded, nationalistic, and courageous; he was never afraid. He was one of the few non-Hindus who tried to uphold the basic principles of Hinduism and in that spirit he gave generously to a fund for the thread ceremony of poor Brahmin children. That fund, along with a fund for *ekadashi brat* is a permanent legacy with a fixed deposit. He does not need a testimonial; without one he is a learned man and a *pandit*.”

Many more testimonials follow, several in English, from chief justices, journalists and academics from all over Orissa and all with Hindu names.

The wife of Nasrul Islam responded first when I asked about the situation concerning Hindu-Muslim relations in the city:

“In childhood we are so immersed in Hindu culture that we simply do what they do; wear new clothes at Ganesh *puja* etc... At our functions, marriage or death, all our neighbours join us. They are friends in pleasure and in pain. So also we share their pains and pleasures. We are so close. If we invite one thousand people, 200 Hindus who are not neighbours will be invited besides 200 neighbours. For the death ceremony of my father-in-law, my husband made separate arrangements to have *mahaprasad* (from Jagannath temple) for the Hindus. We had *biryani* but some Hindus ate that too. My mother in Puri adopted some Hindu boys; they frequently visit her house and they have kept relations with me after my marriage.”

Nasrul Islam told us about the friendship between S.A. Hamid and his father and how this got the press started. He then told us about the

beginnings of the Kohenoor press *panjika*:

“My father then thought of doing the *panjika* and consulted with different astrologers and began publishing it. First we send the manuscript to the Mukti Mandapa Pandit Sabha which looks it through

and then authorizes it. Then it gets the authorization from the king of Puri. In it we also indicate the Muslim festivals according to our calendar. If you are interested in Hindu-Muslim relations in Orissa you must go to Kaipadar to the shrine of a *pir*. It is the most famous *pir* shrine in Orissa.



Cover page of the *Puri Panjika*

There the *prasad* maker is a Hindu and must be a Hindu; he can't be a Muslim. Both Hindus and Muslims go to this *pir*."

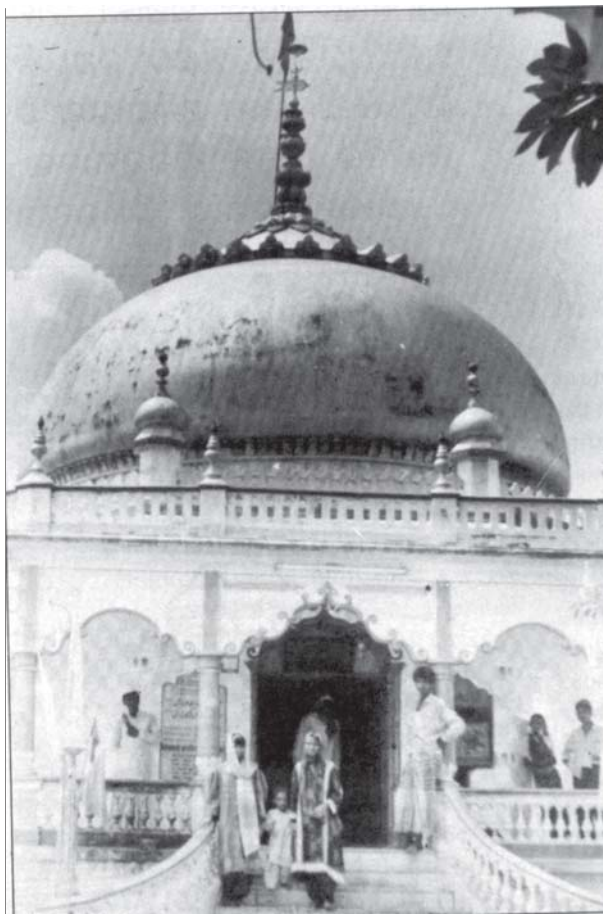
Hindus Worship Muslim Pir

After getting directions to Kaipadar, we took our leave and headed for the *pir*'s shrine.

Kaipadar, not far from the city of Khurda, is a village of about 5000 inhabitants, about a fifth of whom are Muslims. The *pir*'s shrine is in a rather elaborate structure surrounded by a large courtyard with adjoining rooms. Next to that compound is a mosque. As we entered the gate to the courtyard, a garland seller (*mali*) was selling flowers on the right and a sweetmeat seller (*gudia*) was on the left. The *mali*'s name is Mahapatra and the *gudia*'s name is Sahu, both Hindu names. I bought a garland, some sweets, incense and rosewater and we went to the shrine. The *khadim* sat by a huge termite mound covered with cloth and garlands. I handed my offerings over and gave my name. The *khadim* prayed in Urdu, sprinkled the rosewater on the mound, lit the incense and put the garland at the base of the mound. He then blessed us both by brushing us with a bunch of peacock feathers.

I asked him to tell me about the *pir*, Bokhari Baba, and he gave me a thin pamphlet entitled *Bhokari Baba of Kaipadar* written by Trinatha Srichandana. The following is a translation of the pamphlet's content:

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Satya Narayan became Satya Pir for the Muslims. Different Babas from this religion wanted to preach their *dharm* and came to Orissa and influenced its *dharm*. [then follows a long list of Babas from Cuttack, Pipli, Astarang, Balasore and other places] Among them is Bokhari Baba. He was



Kaipadar Shrine, Photo: BIBHUTI MISHRA

a *sanyasi* and came from Samarkand in the 17th century. He was born in a Muslim family in Bokhara. His name has spread throughout Orissa and throughout India. He was beloved of the Lord (*ishwar premi*) and a devotee of God (*Bhagavad bhakti*). He was not tied to the world (*samsar*) and he took *sanyas* and wandered to different *tirthas*. He had been to Mecca and Medina and then he came to India:

Delhi, Ajmer, Gujarat, then Orissa. From Sterling's history we know that in 1593 the fort of Kaipadar was established surrounded by jungle. Baba entered there in the afternoon. At noon he did *namaz*. For *uju* (purification) he needed water; so Baba met a long bearded, knotted haired *sadhu* and asked him for water. The *sadhu* knew that Baba was a *siddh purush*. To test him he told him he had no water and to get it himself. Baba had an iron rod in his hand and struck the earth with it. Water gushed out. That water is now seen in the well in the courtyard of the shrine. The two stayed in the same place in discussion of *Dharmshastra* and *darshan*. The *sadhu* then left for a *tirth*. Baba stayed here in this beautiful forest with fruits and flowers. He was old and doing *tapasya*.

Gajapati Ramachandra Deb (the then king) was then staying in the historic Barunei hill. Once the king was hunting near Kaipadar fort and met the Baba. The king felt blessed seeing the Baba. Taking permission from Baba, the king built an ashram there and arranged for his food and drink in the flowered forest. The fame of Bokhari Baba spread everywhere. Many people came; Baba was equally affectionate to Hindus and Muslims. People got satisfaction from seeing Baba, discussing philosophy and religion. Baba gave *hukum* (order) and people's desires were fulfilled. Baba shared with others the food and drink the king had given him. A *gopala* boy, learning of the great deeds of Baba, offered milk regularly. Many people began staying there so a settlement

grew. On the day of Hijra 1146 *Ramazan* 24th the *gopala* saw that around the meditating Baba an ant hill was forming. The *gopala* was very worried. He ran to the village and told the news. The villagers came and saw the Baba in deep meditation, a brilliant glow on his face. They had their last *darshan* and people offered flowers. Then the ants covered him completely and the hill grew. So he is a *jinda-pir* (a living *pir*); he is the greatest devotee of Khuda (Allah).

The news went to Khurda and the Gajapati came with his court and realized that Baba is Satya Pir. The Gajapati Ramacandra Deb introduced the *puja* for the union of Hindu and Muslim religion and culture (*dharmo samskriti*). Since that time the Hindus' Satya Narayan's peacock tail is kept at the shrine. He appointed a Muslim *pujak*. A Sahu Mahajan was appointed for the food offerings of dried sweets. A *mali* was appointed for flowers and sandal paste. Every day this is offered to the *pir*. The *fakirs* who come are to be fed on Thursdays with *khiri* and *kecheri*. The king gave two *batis* (about eight acres) and 10 *manas* (about 2 acres) of land in the month of Jyestha 1141, 13th day (1734). This is known from one of the *sanand* (decrees from the king's court). An additional four acres were given for the fruit garden in charge of the *khadim*.

In Bengitangi, a nearby village, there is a well out of which Baba's *vibhuti* (sacred ash) comes. The soil has a good smell and looks like sandal paste. When the *puja* started Baba appeared in a dream to the *khadim* and told him about this *vibhuti* from the well of a *gudia*. At the time of the food offering (*fatia*) if the clay from that particular well is put in the *sirini* (dried sweets), it will become *prasad*. The *khadim* and the villagers went



Devotees at the Bokhari Baba's Shrine, Photo: BIBHUTI MISHRA

there and found the clay. Every year it is collected for preparing *vibhuti*.

Puja at the Shrine

At dawn the main door is opened. After ablutions, the *khadim* plays the *nagara* (drum). The door to the shrine is opened and the shrine is cleaned. The *mali* and the *gudia* arrange their flowers and sweets. The *khadim* offers sandal paste and flowers and lights a *ghee* lamp. Then *sirini* is offered. In the evening the drum is also played and incense is offered. The shrine is open till nine p.m. Thursday is a holy day. *Khiri* is given to the poor and *fakirs* are fed. Several annual festivals are observed such as *Urs*, *Ramazan* etc...

There is no feeling of touchable or untouchable caste (*jati chhua*, *achhua*). Everyone can come and eat together. The Koran is recited on holy days with mikes. Hindus of many *sampraday* come here. Muslims and Hindus forget their differences and live like brothers.

Satya Narayan Pala is performed here. The flag on the shrine is a symbol of the equality (*samata*) of Hindu and Muslim culture.

The present marble shrine was constructed in 1893 in Muslim style. The money was donated by a seafaring trader who received a boon from Baba. The architect, Duhsasana Mangaraj was a Hindu. The villagers offered their labor and a new addition was built in 1925.

Ramachandra Deb brought a *khadim* from Kusupalla (near Khurda) (the genealogy of the *khadim* is given).

(The pamphlet concludes with practical information on the various ways of reaching this shrine by bus and train).



The information in the pamphlet confirmed what the *mali*, the *gudia* and the *khadim* had told me. Today there are five *gudia* families and two families of *malis* who take turns in the *seva*. They confirmed that land was given to them by Ramachandra Deb to carry out the *seva* of the Baba.

Satya Pir as Satya Narayan

The author of the pamphlet, Trinatha Srichandana, being a Hindu, uses throughout his text Hindu terms such as *sanyasi*, *pujak*, *tirth*, *samsar*,

Ishwar premi, Bhagavad bhakti, and siddh purush to talk of Bhokari Baba. In fact Urdu terms are few and far between. The very first phrase informs the reader that the Muslims' Satya Pir is a form of Satya Narayan. Devotion and respect for this Baba was from the start shown by both Hindus and Muslims and Ramachandra Deb in endowing land to both Hindu and Muslim servants for the worship at the shrine. This simply institutionalised the popular practice. He simultaneously gave state legitimacy to harmonious relations between the two communities, institutionalising in the worship at this shrine the cooperation of the two communities. The popular practice has not changed since its beginnings in the 18th century. According to the *khadim* as well as the *mali* and *gudia* on duty that day,

at the festivals celebrated at the shrine on Muslim holy days, about 75 percent of the crowd are Hindus.

I asked the *khadim* about *Pala* and the peacock's tail, mentioned in the booklet. *Pala* is a song sung by particular Hindu singers for the fulfillment of people's desires. The singers who live in a 15 kilometer radius from the shrine come and get the Baba's blessings and permission before they start out to perform. They carry a bunch of peacock feathers and these are said to represent simultaneously Satya Narayan and Satya Pir, who in fact are one and the same as the very first sentence in the booklet informs us. It is the same peacock feathers that the *khadim* uses to bless visitors to the shrine. The Muslims do not sing nor do they



A woman preparing a special sweet for Raja

sponsor *Pala*. It is sung and sponsored only by Hindus. Muslims sing *milad*.

I made a point of attending a *Pala* performance later in Puri. It is performed for a fulfillment of a wish. P.C. Mishra's wife, Sureswari, had arranged for a priest to perform one at her house. The priest with Sureswari's help set up the icon, a bunch of peacock feathers, decorated it with red cloth, and placed all the items of *puja* around it. A food offering was prepared (grated coconut and *gur*). The priest explained that the peacock feathers were Narayan, and that this was Satya Narayan, and that was also Satya Pir. According to him Satya Narayan/Satya Pir was born from a Muslim princess, Saheeba Jani, who had swallowed a lotus while bathing in the Ganges. After the *Puja*,

the priest launched into a lengthy song about a king's dream. The song had no reference to any Muslim characters or themes.

I learned from the priest that some castes regularly have *Pala* performed on the occasion of certain festivals. For example, the weavers, on the occasion of the worship of their loom, always have a *Pala* performed. In fact, while doing fieldwork among the weavers of Nuapatna, my husband participated in their festival and witnessed a *Pala*. He was then told that they had first gone to Kaipadar to receive the blessings of Bhokari Baba.

Mohammed Chaturvedi

Let me add one more example illustrating the tenor of relationships between Hindus and Muslims in this

area. P.C. Mishra and I made the acquaintance of the teacher of a *madrassa* in Pipli. Pipli is a town between Bhubaneswar and Puri, where the famous cloth applique work is done. This town of about 12,000 inhabitants has a majority of Muslims, many of whom do applique work. The teacher's name in itself captures the spirit of the place: Mohammed Israil Chaturvedi. The title of Chaturvedi was given to him by Hindu and Muslim neighbours due to his knowledge of Hindu scriptures. In 1990 he was a youngish man in his early 30s. To capture the flavor of Israil Chaturvedi's manner of speech, I will reproduce a conversation we had with him and two other persons one June evening, sitting under palm trees by the mosque. We were joined by Sabir, a youth of 19 and by Mustan

Saha, the *imam* of that mosque. Clearly Israil enjoys speaking on the topic of the similarities between his religion and that of the Hindus:

MIC: All religions have a similar core. For example take the notion of *shunya*, void, emptiness in Hindu texts. We say *nur* which means the same thing. In your [here P.C. Mishra] texts they say *anakar*, with no form. Also you say *nirakar* and from that two kinds of *puja* come: *sakar puja* and *nirakar puja*. Similarly, *aikyabad* or *ekeshwarabad* means one ultimate principle. Mohammed says the same thing.

PCM: *What is the relationship between the two communities here in Pipli?*

Sabir: We are very good friends.

Mustan. We go to each others funeral feasts. We do not touch the corpse of a Hindu. But we take the responsibility for all the food arrangements.

PCM: *Do Hindus come to your funerals?*

Mustan: Yes, we call them; they help carry the body and go to the emetery and throw earth on the grave. They go to our cemetery.

Sabir: In Pipli we have Lakshmi and Ganesh *puja*. We collect contributions (*chanda*) from each and every person. Muslims give with pleasure and participate in the feast. They come and sit and eat with the Hindus. At Ganesh *puja*, we also participate and wear new clothes.

FAM: *What other festivals do you celebrate?*

Sabir: In our *Id* some Hindu friends of ours wear new clothes and make merry. On the day of *rakhi bandhan* Hindus worship cows and bullocks and give them *pitha* (cakes). We also do that. On *Dasahara* we also wear new clothes and on *Divali* we light lamps and go to Marwaris who feed us.

FAM: *What do the cultivators observe?*

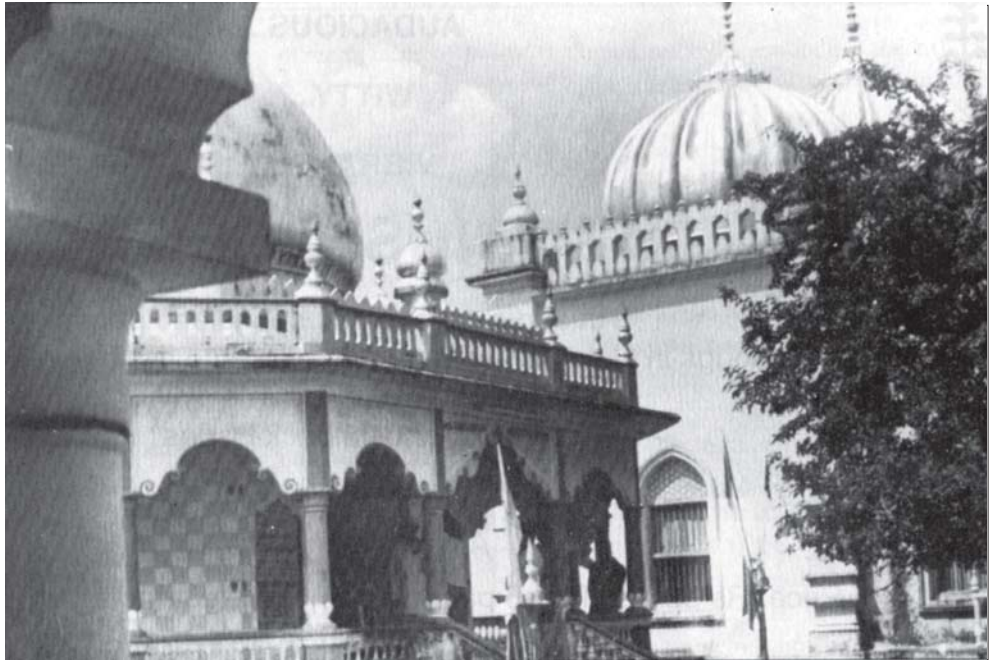
Mustan: At *raja* they stop ploughing. They also observe *akhyaanukul* on *akhya trutiya* (ritual first planting of seeds). Even if we are Muslims, in agriculture we follow the Hindu tradition.

Mohammed Israil continued citing verses from various Hindu texts and pointing out the parallels with Islam. He took us to his room and showed the many Hindu texts he had there. He reads Arabic, Urdu, Gujarati, Telugu, Bengali and Hindi. This vast

knowledge is what earned him the title of Chaturvedi.

A Living Tradition

The song sung by a young girl on a swing during *raja* had led me to discover a world to which I was originally introduced by two famous professors. Professor Charlotte Vaudeville of the Sorbonne and Professor Anne-Marie Schimmel of Harvard University³ were giving a joint course at Harvard in 1980 entitled "The *Sant* and *Sufi* Traditions of India." We learned about the historical movements that had produced a Lalla and a Kabir, of the deep interpenetration between Sufism and Bhakti. However, this was a history course which stopped before the coming of the British. I therefore never quite expected to come face to face with the kinds of practices this course introduced me to. I felt, speaking with Mohammed Israil Chaturvedi, or the *khadim* of Bhokari Baba (in fact all the persons I



The mosque next to the Kaipadar Shrine, Photo: BIBHUTI MISHRA

encountered in my quest) that what these two remarkable professors had talked about had come to life, here in Orissa. The little that I have presented in these brief notes speaks for itself and hardly needs any commentary.

What made a deep impression on me was the fact that several persons were clearly aware of the forces trying to create enmity between the communities. I heard many stories of deliberate creation of conflict for political and/or financial gain. But what gave me hope was that people from both communities continued to participate in each others' festivals and ceremonies. The rhetoric of extremists from either community has not yet made anyone self conscious about these practices. Orissa is sufficiently steeped in its practices and ways of thought that the recent ascendancy of a peculiarly modern form of consciousness, namely one that revels in exclusive dichotomies, in either/or thinking and its concomitant neat classifications and

rigid boundaries, has not taken root.

Orissa enabled me to experience directly the interpenetration and mutual influence characteristic of the meeting between Islam and Hinduism in the subcontinent that Professors Vaudeville and Schimmel had taught about. Here this phenomenon could be appreciated, tasted and felt, with practices having roots far into the past — as far back as the 11th or 12th century. Here I witnessed a truly indigenous creativity at play, one which unfortunately is under assault by those who would instrumentally use religion for short term gains in a characteristically modern manner. In this attempt to draw sharp boundaries between the two communities, making them mutually exclusive, those extremists betray the particular genius of this land. Inheritors of the colonial classificatory mania used to such good political ends in censuses, maps, laws and sundry other contexts for purposes of divide and rule, they have learned well from their erstwhile masters and

in the process forgotten their ancestors *pace* their strident rhetoric about *hindutva*.

References:

1. For a more in-depth treatment of this festival see F. Apffel-Marglin with P.C. Mishra "Gender and the Unitary Self: Locating the Dominant when Listening to the Subaltern Voice" in *Oral Traditions*, forthcoming, and F. Apffel-Marglin "Rationality, the Body, and the World: From Production to Regeneration" in F. Apffel-Marglin & S.A. Marglin eds. *Decolonizing Knowledge: From Development to Dialogue*. Oxford U. Press, Clarendon, in press.
2. K. Rajaguru was my teacher during my research on the devadasis of Puri. In my book on this subject I have given him the name Trinayana. See F. Apffel Marglin *Wives of the God-King: The Rituals of the Devadasis of Puri*. OUP Delhi, New York, Oxford, 1985. I mourn his passing in 1992.
3. Professor Schimmel has published widely on Sufism and is a specialist on Rumi. Professor Vaudeville is a scholar of North Indian medieval vernacular literatures and the author of major works on Tulsi Das and on Kabir. □

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