

## CHAPTER 17

# Muslim–Hindu Dialogue

Anna Bigelow

Inter-religious dialogue between Muslims and Hindus in India is not a recent product of neoliberal efforts at social integration or post-Partition cultural reconciliation. Muslims and Hindus have been in dialogue since the arrival of Muslim traders in the seventh and eighth centuries. Indeed the earliest accounts of encounters between Arab Muslims and South Asian Hindus depict a wide range of interactions and mutual perceptions. Far from being perpetually antagonistic groups, Muslims and Hindus in many places and times formed communities in which there were intermarriages, places of collective worship, shared political and economic institutions, and other forms of exchange. Certainly there have also been times and places where the interactions have been contentious and violent, but without understanding the full range of encounters, it is difficult to make sense of either the conflict or the cooperation that make up the fullness of history. To understand these interactions through a framework of interreligious dialogue, as this volume suggests we might, it is important to recognize the very different contexts and conversations that have taken place and those that continue to this day. This essay will provide a survey of Hindu–Muslim encounters and of the various scholarly efforts to understand the nature of these mutual engagements and their meaning.

Dialogue, of course, takes many forms – several of which will be described in what follows. Theologians, activists, and religious actors define dialogue in various ways. For some it is a preamble to proselytization – one must converse with and understand the religious other in order to most effectively impress upon them the superiority of one's own faith. For others, dialogue provides new insights into their own religion by rendering apparent that which is similar, and that which is distinctive. Such efforts may facilitate the view that the other religion is a less evolved or less precise version of the analyst's tradition – making a certain kind of space for the other, but without acknowledging the validity, and sometimes desirability, of difference. The dialogue that promotes what Indologist and pluralism scholar Diana Eck calls engaged pluralism is

one that seeks understanding and accepts difference. “The encounter of a pluralistic society is not premised on achieving agreement, but achieving relationship” (Eck 1993). Her view of dialogue as primarily oriented towards the forging of relationships between religiously committed people also echoes the work of Martin Buber, who described “genuine dialogue” as that dialogue “where each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them” (Buber 1947: 19). Of course, relationships take many forms, and in the case of inter-religious dialogue, those relationships may help to solidify differences, facilitate cooperative engagement, improve mutual understanding, or bolster oppositional identities. India’s history of inter-religious exchanges has witnessed all of these possible conformations and more. Given over a thousand years of such complexity, it is important to bracket contemporary assumptions about what dialogue looks like now and what it looked like historically.

## Traders and Raiders

The earliest contact between South Asia and the Middle East came even before the advent of Islam in the early seventh century CE, through trade across the Indian Ocean in the south and along the Silk Road in the north. South Asia was a highly desirable trading partner, possessing valuable natural resources in the form of spices, textiles, and precious metals and jewels. In the south, along the Malabar Coast, cities flourished due to the ocean trade through the region, and in some cases, Arab traders established long term residences in these areas and were allowed by the Hindu rulers to intermarry with the local population (Wink 1990: 80). With the emergence of Islam, these unions developed into the Mappila Muslim community, which exists to this day. In the north of India, trading relationships existed, but raiding parties from Afghan and Turkic tribes and dynasties were also common from the early eighth century forward. Initially, few of these warlords attempted to establish permanent territories, the brief rule of Muhammad bin Qasim in Sindh, established in 711, being an exception. However, even profit-seeking invasions provided some opportunities for dialogue. Many of these engagements were pragmatic, geared towards the adoption and adaptation of new ideas, technologies, and crafts. Indeed as Carl Ernst has pointed out, during the Abbasid period (ca. 750–1258), the main thrust of Arab interest in Hindu knowledge focused on mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and other “practical” sciences (Ernst 2003: 175). These knowledge systems, developed in India, helped to fuel the institutions of intellectual inquiry in the Middle East such as the Dar al Hikma, or House of Wisdom, in Baghdad in which scholars translated materials from all over the world and produced an enormous body of new scholarship that spread throughout the Islamic world.

In this period, one of the most sustained examples of one Muslim scholar’s efforts to understand the nuances of Hindu theology, philosophy, and science came in the person of al-Biruni. Al-Biruni was in the employ of the famous warlord Mahmud of Ghazni, who invaded north India seventeen times in the early eleventh century. Al-

Biruni was a polymath and a reluctant member of Ghazni's retinue, but he took advantage of his post on the frontier to explore the knowledge of the subcontinent. Like many Muslim scholars, he took seriously the Prophet Muhammad's directive to the faithful that they should "Seek knowledge, even unto China." He studied Indian languages and employed pundits and priests to instruct him. His *Book of India* (*Kitab al Hind*) touches on a wide range of topics, though it draws mostly from elite brahmanical Hindu sources, and thus gives little idea of how the majority of the population lived and worshiped (Al-Biruni, trans. Sachau [1888] 1971). Still, it remains an important record of a scholar's effort to understand a distinct religious system. Al-Biruni was particularly impressed by certain elements of philosophical Hinduism that adhere to a monist view of the godhead, which to him is close to monotheism and opposes the idolatry practiced by the masses. Indeed he is quite dismissive of popular religion among both Hindus and Muslims as being superstitious and essentially idolatrous. He describes Hindu idols in detail only to warn his reader "Our object in mentioning all this mad raving was to teach the reader the accurate description of an idol if he happens to see one, and to illustrate what we have said before, that such idols are erected only for uneducated low-class people of little understanding; that the Hindus never made an idol of any supernatural being much less of God; and lastly, to show how the crowd is kept in thralldom by all kinds of priestly tricks and deceits" (Al-Biruni trans. Sachau [1888] 1971: 122). He also spends a great deal of time drawing connections between certain elements of Hindu thought, philosophical Sufism, and Greek philosophy, especially neo-Platonism. Al-Biruni was intrigued by the mathematical and astronomical sciences developed by the South Asians, and wrote extensively on them. However, he also recognized the limits of the conversations in which he was involved, perceiving among the upper-caste Hindus with whom he largely interacted a profound prejudice against foreigners and those of other faiths, marked by, for example, their views against sharing food or beverage with non-Hindus or lower castes. Although these negative mutual perceptions are sometimes deployed as evidence of perpetual antipathy between Muslims and Hindus, such a characterization is both overdrawn and requires the neglect of the far more substantial portions of the text that al-Biruni devotes to his fascination with Hindu metaphysics, mysticism, metempsychosis, mathematics, astronomy, astrology, and theology.

## Islamic Empires, Plural Populations

From the time of Mahmud of Ghazni in the eleventh century until the establishment of British direct rule in 1857, much, but not all, of the Indian subcontinent was under the control of Muslims. Whether in the form of imperial dynasties such as the Lodhis (1456–1526) and Mughals (1526–1857) or of regional powers such as that of the Nizams of Hyderabad or Mysore State under Haider Ali and Tipu Sultan, Muslim authority was widespread. However, even at the territorial height of Mughal power in the early eighteenth century, scholars estimate that only about 25 percent of the population ever accepted Islam, countering the common perception that Muslim rulers forced their subjects to convert. The work of Richard Eaton in particular has helped to

distinguish truth from fiction in evaluating the degree to which South Asia Islamicized, and the means by which Islamicization may (or may not) have occurred.

These great debates center on the question of forced conversions and temple desecrations – issues that continue to fuel communal conflict in South Asia to this day. In two probing essays, Eaton explores both issues. In “Temple Desecration and Indo-Muslim States,” Eaton points out that “much misunderstanding over the place of temple desecration in Indian history results from a failure to distinguish the rhetoric from the practice of Indo-Muslim state-formation” (Eaton 2000: 124). He argues that while mutual destruction of sacred sites was indeed a strategy of conquest employed by Muslims, it was also practiced by Hindus, both in battles between Hindu forces and in conflicts with Muslims. Yet in many cases, the recorded histories seem to exaggerate some or all of the damage that was inflicted upon their enemies. Comparing these records to epigraphic and archeological evidence, Eaton debunks many of the claims made both by present-day partisans as well as by the court chroniclers during the periods in question. Another important result of the expectation of Muslim–Hindu antagonism is the effect of these histories on both sectarian discourses in India and on the British colonial state and its perception of the incommensurability of the two religions under their control. Projects like the eight-volume collection of partial translations from Indian historians done by Elliot and Dowson in 1849, seemed to offer evidence of the necessity of British mediation and mastery to prevent all-out war between their Hindu and Muslim subjects. *The History of India as Told by Their Own Historians* edited, redacted, and selected in order to demonstrate primordial antipathies. The effects of such orientalist projects in service of colonial power has continued to feed communalist sentiment in the minds of many who have access to these English translations, but not their Persian and Arabic originals.

In another essay, “Approaches to the Study of Conversion to Islam in India,” Eaton systematically undermines three common theories of Muslim attitudes towards the Hindu majority during the period of Muslim rule. These theories are the “religion of the sword theory,” the “political advantage theory,” and the “religion of social liberation theory” (Eaton 1987: 107–109). Eaton argues that there is little evidence that any of these three resulted in much conversion. By examining records of names, mosque-building, and other measures, he proves that Islam spread gradually and in greater numbers in areas peripheral to brahmanical Hinduism. He characterizes the spread of Islam as the “religion of the plough,” since the rise of Islam accompanied the conversion of territory into arable land. In the Punjab, for example, this process was facilitated by the introduction of well and canal technologies that enabled cultivation of lands that had hitherto been agriculturally unproductive. Eaton’s work helps to break down the myths of Muslim expansion that persist to this day.

It is important, however, to acknowledge the power of these imaginings that characterize the Muslim expansion as essentially violent and destructive. The eminent historian Romila Thapar, for example, has done fascinating work on the vast chasm between fact and fiction regarding Muslim treatment of Hindu holy sites such as the great Shiva temple at Somnath, Gujarat and the place identified as the birthplace of the Hindu God Rama in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh (Thapar 2005). The former site was legendarily destroyed by Mahmud of Ghazni in one of his many eleventh-century raids.

The latter site is believed by many to have been destroyed at the direction of the Mughal Emperor Babur in the early sixteenth century, to give way for a mosque known as the Babri Masjid. Hindu nationalists tore down that mosque on December 6, 1992, leading to riots, deaths, and a controversy that continues to trouble India to this day. Thapar's work, however, illustrates that the absence of historical evidence in both cases has not prevented Somnath and Ayodhya from being flashpoints of conflict between Indians of all faiths and none. Indeed contemporary inter-religious relations are often organized around managing the continued grievances of both communities. However, Babur's conquest of north India brought and expanded Turko-Afghan and Persianate culture to the region as well, resulting in new cultural and imperial structures that shaped Indian society profoundly and in many positive ways.

During the Mughal period (1526–1857), Muslim–Hindu relations took many forms. At both the imperial and regional levels, certain rulers and courts were quite open not only to employing and strategically allying with one another – which was common – but also to pursuing deeper engagement and understanding. To some extent this can be understood as relevant to the pragmatics of statecraft, but there are many examples of sincere interest and genuine curiosity. The most famous example of such fascination about other religions is the Mughal emperor Akbar, who not only spoke local languages, but was a patron of Hindu poets writing in the Indic language of Brajbhasha, which was, along with Persian, the literary language of north India during his period (Busch 2010). Recent scholarship by Allison Busch reveals much about the fascinating nexus of language, religion, and the arts in the imperial and regional Mughal courts. Although language is often linked to religious identity – Persian for Muslims and Sanskrit and its offshoots for Hindus – Busch and others effectively demonstrate how oversimplified and impoverished such characterizations are. For example, the poets Gang and Keshavdas Mishra wrote in Brajbhasha in praise of Akbar and other Mughal notables, indicating a close association between the poets and the princes and their advisors. Akbar is also well known for having commissioned art, music, and literature from a wide range of sources. He had the Hindu epics and other key texts translated into Persian, as had other rulers and powerful figures before. But as Carl Ernst has pointed out, the zeal for translation and patronage of the arts under Akbar must be seen as part of his imperial policy “designed to reduce intellectual provincialism and linguistic divisiveness within the empire” (Ernst, 2003: 180). However, the continued patronage of Brajbhasha and Sanskrit literary endeavors, as discussed by Busch, adds nuance to this pragmatic assessment of Mughal patronage of non-Muslim literary and creative arts.

One particularly interesting example of a sustained inquiry into Hindu and Muslim concepts and practices was produced by Akbar's great-grandson, Dara Shikoh (1615–1659). A committed Sufi, Dara Shikoh authored a Persian text called the *Meeting of the Two Oceans* (*Majma' al Bahrain*), which is often mistaken as an effort to reconcile Hinduism and Islam. Instead, the text is a comparative project, digging into the esoteric truths unveiled by the elite practitioners of monist Hinduism and Sufism (Ernst 2003). He was also interested in the epics, texts on yoga, and philosophical materials, many of which he had translated. Like many Sufis and yogis, Dara Shikoh believed that certain kinds of knowledge may be shared by adepts from various traditions, but

these ideas are quite distinct from those held by the masses and should remain the provenance of an elite few. Indeed many texts belonging to esoteric and mystical paths within Islam and Hinduism are clearly not meant to initiate a large-scale inter-faith dialogue, have little to do with the kind of popular religion that is common to South Asia, and defy religious categorization. These were traditions for those few who were initiated into their highly complex practices by teachers trained in lineages that went back generations.

Often times devotional (*bhakti*) Hinduism and Sufi Islam, both of which are widespread throughout the subcontinent, are depicted as converging streams within their respective religions, which in some cases certainly is true. While it is important to avoid overgeneralizing, many important figures within the Bhakti and Sufi movements in South Asia were primarily concerned with attaining direct experience and knowledge of the divine and less interested in doctrinal or ritual orthodoxy. In some cases, these figures actively explored the traditions and spiritual technologies of a variety of faiths. For example, the great poet-saint Kabir was born into a Muslim household but came to reject sectarian identification and devoted himself to the praise of an abstract (*nirguna* – without form) divine essence he referred to as Ram. The Baul movement in Eastern India is grounded in highly esoteric practices that involve manipulation of the mind and body, employing concepts, images, and themes that resonate with Hinduism and Islam, among other systems (Roy 1983; Salomon 1995).

Discussions of mutual Bhakti and Sufi influence are often infused with the social and political agendas of the interlocutors. It is easy to find points of intersection and divergence, origin and expansion, adaptation and translation. Recent scholarly work on the popular and devotional traditions that emerge around charismatic holy people associated with Bhakti and Sufi religion has helpfully introduced a regional scope of analysis that avoids the largely obscurantist label of syncretism that is too often employed (Ernst and Stewart 2003). Ernst, Stewart, and others argue convincingly that implicit in the term syncretism is the idea of combined religion traditions that existed in some pure and unadulterated form prior to their combination into a synthetic form. That synthesized faith is by implication a more obviously manipulated entity that does not merit the same degree of legitimacy as the traditions from which it derived. As an analytical category, therefore, syncretism does little to help us understand how all religions develop and are maintained, nor how they are understood and practiced by their communities of faith. In a useful effort to avoid the trap of originalism and stigma of corruption, Tony K. Stewart introduced a theoretical framework of translation (Stewart 2001). In this approach, it becomes apparent that when communicating principles and practices in local idioms, environments, and socio-political contexts, religious actors engaged one another through familiar languages, tropes, themes, and rituals. In such a complex situation, labels such as Hindu or Muslim may be over-determining, limiting the true range of meaning for practitioners. Historian Farina Mir illustrates a similar turn towards the shared pietistic sensibilities of diverse people who inhabit a shared linguistic, cultural, and natural environment in her work on colonial Punjab, to be discussed below.

Shared religious landscapes do not, of course, always result in shared ideas about the nature of the places that animate those regions. Indeed, much dialogue between

Hindus and Muslims in South Asia has involved competition to control the symbolic and spiritual identities of places and people important to both traditions. Simon Digby has written extensively about folklore featuring spiritual competitions between yogis and Sufis in which one's victory over the other in the performance of miracles revealed the ideological orientation of the story's source. (Digby 1970, 2000). In the Deccan, Nile Green reveals the ways in which local interlocutors represented a key fortress – Deogiri or Daulatabad – imbuing it with spiritual histories to reflect the site's identity as military and political power shifted (Green 2012). Examining three different narratives composed from the mid-eighteenth to the early nineteenth centuries, Green illustrates shared rhetorical structures between the two Muslim and one Hindu versions of the site's history and etiology. Given the centrality of this fortress in terms of political control of the region, it provides a compelling example of narrative competition over its symbolic meaning.

## Colonial India

Mughal authority declined steadily from the early eighteenth century onwards, with the rise of regional Hindu kingdoms, such as the Marathas in the west, and the emergence of British trading centers mostly in the south and east. The victory of the British East India Company in 1757 and the advent of direct British rule in 1857 changed the dynamics between Hindus and Muslims profoundly. Politically, Muslims had dominated much of the north from the Ghaznavid period in the beginning of the eleventh century until the demise of the Mughal dynasty in the mid-nineteenth. In the central and southern regions, Muslim principalities emerged in the Deccan in particular, with successive dynasties such as the Asif Jahis in Hyderabad controlling parts of that territory even throughout the period of British colonialism. Hindu princely states such as Jaipur, Udaipur, and Gwalior continued in semi-autonomy as well. At no time was the entirety of South Asia under Muslim rule, and although Muslims did dominate much of the territory until the consolidation of British rule in 1857, at no time was Islam the majority faith for the whole subcontinent. Indeed, as stated previously, at the moment of Indian independence in 1947, only 25 percent of the population was estimated to be Muslim. Most Muslims were concentrated in urban areas and in the northwest and northeast of the subcontinent, a distribution largely attributable to the lesser presence of brahmanical Hinduism in those regions. Certainly the decline and fall of Muslim imperial patronage changed the landscape for Muslim scholars, clerics, and artists. The British tended to employ Hindus in greater numbers as bureaucratic functionaries and to identify certain ethnic and religious groups as bearing particular moral characteristics – such as the martial Sikhs and the scoundrel Thugs.

British colonialism in part derived its legitimacy from a claim that without the British, Muslims and Hindus would be immediately in conflict with one another, a claim even some Indians espoused. Sometimes referred to as a divide and conquer policy, the British attitude towards the religions of their subjects often had the effect (and possibly the intention) of demarcating differences between religious communities. Though it is overstating it to say that the British invented Hinduism and other religious identities

through their enumerative policies of census taking, ethnographic data-gathering, and taxation, these practices certainly had profound effects upon the population and required a good deal of social organization to effectively respond to their demands.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, resistance to British rule began to grow. During the Indian independence movement, dialogue between Muslims and Hindus that more closely resembles contemporary understandings of interfaith dialogue became an important strategy of some of the key actors – most especially Mohandas K. Gandhi. Gandhi, of course, was a devout Hindu as well as a canny political strategist. One of his greatest interests and challenges during his years working to unite Indians against British colonial authority was to bring Hindus and Muslims together for the cause. He pursued this goal both through political action and devotional practice. One of the first political efforts Gandhi and his followers pursued in order to strengthen their support among Muslim Indians was known as the Khilafat movement from 1919 to 1924 (Minault 1982). The movement began after the First World War, in the aftermath of the demise of the Ottoman Empire and the end of the Caliphate, which had ruled much of the Middle East, including the holy places of Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem. Although the Ottoman Caliphs had had little influence in South Asia, the loss of Ottoman authority represented more than just the end of that empire, but also meant the end of an Islamic global power and the end of one of the last competitors with the Europeans for dominance as the Ottoman territories were broken up. As such, within the context of a South Asia controlled by Britain, the nominal, essentially ineffective support for the movement to re-establish the caliphate was a gesture that both fostered Muslim support for the broader Indian independence movement, and spoke to indigenous rights of self-governance. Of course, not all South Asian Muslims felt any particular connection to the Khilafat movement, and it was short-lived, leaving some freedom-minded Muslims inclined towards Gandhi's Congress Party and others preferring Muslim-oriented groups such as the Muslim League.

Another group that emerged during the independence movement was known as the Khudai Khidmatgar, also known as the Red Shirts. Under the leadership of Abdul Ghaffar Khan, a Pathan tribal leader from the northwest of India (present day Pakistan and Afghanistan), the Khudai Khidmatgar advocated nonviolent resistance to British colonialism. Though Khan worked closely with Gandhi (and is sometimes rather derivatively called the Frontier Gandhi), he also developed tactics, mobilization strategies, and a language of resistance that was autochthonous to the Pashtun culture of the northwest. He told his followers that his methods were not new, but were the same methods and values that the Prophet Muhammad had taught – “*amal, yakeen, muhabbat* – work, faith, and love” – which no enemy could stand against (Easwaran 1999: 13). By putting nonviolent resistance into the language of Islam and making it part of the Pashtun code of honor, Khan was able to gather more than 100,000 activists to the cause of nonviolent resistance and spent many years in jail himself. In a similar fashion, Gandhi also deployed religious language and culturally resonant concepts, framing resistance as *satyagraha* – holding fast to the truth, and evoking the ideal of *Ramrajya* – the perfectly righteous time when the god Rama ruled on earth – as a goal for the movement. The two men spent time at Gandhi's ashram together in prayer and consultation and also went out together on tour of the country (Easwaran 1999).

The idealism of Khan and Gandhi did not, however, win the day. Ultimately, the independence movement gathered steam even as it became more fractious, and it became clear after the Second World War that the British were going to leave the sub-continent. As the inevitable approached, the Muslim League under the leadership of Muhammad Ali Jinnah pressed for a more regionally federated nation than was acceptable to the leadership of Congress under Jawaharlal Nehru. Partition of India and Pakistan emerged from the negotiations as the expedient option, and so 1947 saw the devastating violence and mass transfer of population that accompanied the independence of India and Pakistan. The communal violence that occurred during this period was particularly horrifying in the regions of Punjab in the northwest and Bengal in the northeast. Scholars estimate that a million or more people died and approximately fifteen million moved from one side of the new borders to the other.

Yet even in those extremely dark times, there were places where relations between Muslims and Hindus – as well as Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, Christians, and others – were strong enough to preserve certain communities from the worst of the crisis. One particularly interesting case is that of the former princely state of Malerkotla, ruled by a Muslim nawab in the eastern part of Punjab – the side that remained with India. Few Muslims left for Pakistan from that small state and many Punjabi Muslims sought refuge and remained in the area. Today the town is regionally famous as a place where no one died in partition and where communal relations are overall very congenial. Several studies of the town by myself, Pippa Virdee, and others have sought to understand how the legend of peace has become a kind of reality (Bigelow 2010; Virdee 2007). This question takes us into the territory of grassroots peacemaking and coalition building that occurs on a daily basis in Malerkotla. Indeed, much of the inter-religious dialogue that occurs in this town, as in many others, is not of the formal or institutional variety. Rather it is the outgrowth of relationships that have developed organically over time and generations, but continue to be cultivated as a matter of a shared local ethos. Thus in this town Muslims and non-Muslims exchange visits and food around one another's holy days, and attend shared public gatherings (such as the annual burning of the demon king Ravana from the Hindu epic Ramayana, or the public procession for the Shi'i observation of the martyrdom of Imam Hussain). Wedding receptions are large, multi-religious, and have provision for vegetarian and non-vegetarian guests, as well as areas for women only. There are numerous shrines, usually dedicated to Sufi saints, which are attended by Hindus and Sikhs, as well as Muslims. Many local businesses are joint ventures or at least employ people from various religions, clans, and castes. Politics are particularly complicated and integrated, especially since the family of the former nawab's lineage has dwindled and, as their former dominance ebbed, others have stepped into municipal and regional political positions. However, even typically sectarian parties like the Sikh Shiromani Akali Dal have forwarded Muslim candidates for their slates from Malerkotla. In a similar fashion, religious organizations such as the local Jama'at-i Islami and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh have typically enjoyed leadership that seeks to build relationships with one another, rather than foster enmity. In separate conversations with the author, past presidents of both organizations spoke warmly of the "family relations" they had with one another.

Such informal networks of association are foundational to sustainable multireligious communities in India. Many recent scholars have sought to understand why ethnic or communal violence does not occur in some places, yet seems almost endemic in others (Brass 2003; Kakar 1996; Nandy et al., 1995; Talbot 2007; Tambiah 1996; Varshney 2002; Wilkinson 2001). These studies take various views on the causes of religious conflict, ranging from psychic trauma to electoral competition to elite opportunism to political manipulation. Yet the study of ways in which religiously diverse communities connect with one another, formally and informally, is just beginning to take shape. Varshney, for example, while interested primarily in the causes of conflict between communities, also highlights the role of interethnic associational links at the civil societal level in reducing the likelihood of violent conflict in several urban areas of India. Wilkinson explores the ways in which inter-religious riots are instigated and organized by politicians who believe they may gain traction with the electorate by fomenting religious division. Nandy documents the steady increase of alienation between communities that occurs under the confluence of economic and political change accompanied by urbanization and the breakdown of traditional networks.

Other recent studies reveal in close detail how religious communities have connected with one another in various cultural and historical contexts. Already mentioned is the important work of Allison Busch on Mughal patronage of Brajbhasha literature produced by non-Muslims and that of Carl Ernst on the translations of Hindu texts and interpretations of Hindu traditions undertaken in Persian and Arabic in the same period. These studies greatly expand our grasp of the social and cultural milieus of both inter-religious interaction and the production of knowledge. Another study that adds profoundly to our understanding of the circulation of knowledge through a literary culture is that of Farina Mir and her work on the romance ballads of the Punjab (Mir 2010). Her book *The Social Space of Language* is a richly textured history of the thriving vernacular language literary market in colonial Punjab that appealed across religious and ethnic communities and defies conventional wisdom about the role of the British in reifying, or even generating, communal division through language policy and other bureaucratic systems. Mir demonstrates how the romantic ballad *Hir-Ranjha* was told and retold by poets from every walk of life, and found audiences even more diverse. This speaks to a shared cultural ethos in which Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs all resonated with the tragic romance of the star-crossed lovers, and were drawn together through the telling. Similarly, Sufia Uddin's study *Constructing Bangladesh* shows how Bengali language and shared cultural formations helped to shape Bangla identity (Uddin 2006). Chief among these shared traditions is the devotion to Sufi saints who draw people of all religions, classes, and ethnicities into their orbit.

### “Dialogue of Life”

From the perspective of daily coexistence, Hindus and Muslims have long been engaged in what Riffat Hassan calls a “dialogue of life.” She points out that the “dialogue of life which emerges out of the processes of life is not a contrived matter. It arises ‘naturally’

as it were from the interaction, positive and negative, obvious and subtle, verbal and nonverbal, between various peoples or persons" (Hassan 1992: 405). While not overlooking the value of formal dialogue between officials, Hassan argues that scholars and observers should pay attention to the "dialogue from below," just as we look to theology from below and so on. A generation of scholars has begun to take on this task, not under the rubric of inter-religious dialogue, but in finely grained ethnographies of communities wherein religious identities are entwined and often reflect positive, prosocial engagement. For example, Peter Gottschalk's book *Beyond Hindu and Muslim* explores the shared memory systems that draw together a diverse population in a network of Bihari villages (Gottschalk 2000). In these places, local identities are more salient in some cases than religious difference. Not only does this study invite more careful thinking of the ways in which caste and class intersect with religion, but it also serves as a corrective to assumptions that religious identities always supercede any other affiliations.

Similarly, Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger's book *In Amma's Healing Room* provides a window into the life of a Muslim woman healer in Hyderabad and her religiously mixed clientele (Flueckiger 2006). Having known Amma for many years, Flueckiger's study is richly detailed and the healing room comes to life in her narrative. She points out that Hindu and Muslim clients share a "ritual grammar" with Amma and one another. This shared grammar determines the structure of the healing, how it is performed and how it is deemed effective. Though some of this grammar derives from particular religious systems – such as the Arabic writing Amma employs in writing amulets – its efficacy and authority are not exclusive. Furthermore, Flueckiger acknowledges that while "differences between Hindus and Muslims matter very much" in relation to some issues or concerns (marriage, employment, admissions, elections), in other contexts, such as the healing room, "these differences are over-ridden by what is shared" (Flueckiger 2006: 168–9). Participation in that healing tradition does not require conversion or suspension of religious identity. In many other life arenas, the participants' salient identities may indeed be religious (or caste, or gender, etc), but the choice to engage in the multireligious context of the healing room has its own authenticity and centrality in the lives of its denizens. Flueckiger describes it as a "crossroads," a place where a multitude of lifeways converge, but do not remain confined. The dialogues that take place within that healing room did facilitate profound interpersonal relationships and a recognition of shared humanity. While not formal dialogue of the kind that religious institutions and their representatives promote, in many ways these autochthonous exchanges are more indicative of the actual quality of relations between Hindus and Muslims in that particular community.

This kind of "dialogue of life," as Hassan calls it, is also pervasive in my own research at shared shrines throughout the Indian subcontinent. At these places, often the tombs of Sufi saints, Muslims and non-Muslims join together in acts of devotion and pragmatic exchanges between one another and with the object of their devotion. Pilgrims in attendance will at times mimetically adopt one another's modes of prayer, repeat each other's stories and testimonials about the site and its sacrality, and engage one another in conversations attesting to their shared concerns and giving one another

comfort and advice. In some places these shared sites serve as ad hoc community centers at which and through which residents and visitors imagine and enact idealized forms of citizenship in a plural India.

Another scholar who has assiduously researched interfaith relations, particularly as they relate to the status of the large Muslim minority in India, is Yoginder Sikand. An avid blogger and author of many articles and books, Sikand has documented a wide range of sustained, living multifaith traditions across South Asia. In his book *Sacred Spaces*, twelve sites shared between Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, and others come to life, demonstrating the vibrancy and normalcy of these everyday spaces of local devotion throughout the subcontinent (Sikand 2003). In other work he explores the interfaith practices of a group typically thought of as zealously communitarian – the Jama'at-i-Islami (JI) (Sikand 2001). The JI was founded in 1941 by Maulana Maududi, an autodidact who became an extremely influential ideologue in shaping contemporary Islamist thought both in South Asia and beyond. However, Sikand points out that after the Partition of India and Pakistan, the Indian branch of the JI focused out of necessity on improving the overall condition of Muslims in India rather than on Islamizing the state, as the Pakistani branch did. Indeed, even as JI activists in India believe in the perfection of Islam as a way of life, they also reject religious chauvinism and isolationism, promoting dialogue and understanding between Hindus and Muslims as the best way to lift up the entirety of the Indian society they share. Sikand demonstrates that even this extremely conservative Muslim organization is committed to improving communal relations and has organized conferences, published books and pamphlets, and participated in dialogues in order to achieve that goal (Sikand 2001: 57). Anecdotally, the local JI leader in Malerkotla during the time of my research there (1999–2004), Maulana Abdul Rauf, was an excellent example of Sikand's observations. Rauf not only had good relations with the local leader of the Hindu nationalist outfit, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), but he also worked with many non-Muslim village leaders to ensure the protection and development of mosques and religious education for Muslim residents. He participated in the Malerkotla Peace Committee that convened to mitigate communal conflicts in town. Though his commitment to his faith was unquestionable, Maulana Rauf was also committed to building a strong community free of religious prejudice.

## Interfaith Activists

Today in South Asia many organizations approach human rights and social justice through the lens of religion. For some groups this involves caste, class, and tribal rights, while for others activism is framed in terms of a struggle against communalism. Communalism refers to extreme religious chauvinism and antagonism towards the religious other, often accompanied by exclusivist political mobilization. A wide range of activists and organizations are striving to counter communalism, some working from within religious traditions and others as secularist activists. Secularism in South Asia refers not just to the separation of religion and state, but also to the constitutionally mandated public embrace of a plural religious culture. This entails, according to the Indian con-

stitution, the guarantee of rights of groups to organize, educate, observe customs, and propagate their faith.

The organization Sabrang (“all colors”) is a human rights advocacy organization founded in 1993 to:

provide information on, analyse and expose the machinations of communal politics in India, on the subcontinent and abroad and to publicise the attempt of secular individuals, groups and organisations engaged in fighting them. We stand for equal respect to all religions but are opposed to the cynical manipulation of faith in the pursuit of power. Therefore we are opposed to both majority and minority communalism.

Sabrang Communications provides a framework for several interconnected advocacy organizations, including the journal *Communalism Combat*, and is also connected to watchdog groups Citizens for Justice and Peace (CJP) and Muslims for Secular Democracy. Sabrang works to inform the public about activism and news relating to religious intolerance, violence, human rights violations, caste, women’s rights, and a myriad of social issues. *Communalism Combat* is a monthly journal reporting on the activities of communalist and anti-communalist activists. Citizens for Justice and Peace has gone on factfinding missions after incidents of communal violence, such as 2002’s riots in Gujarat.

The Centre for the Study of Society and Secularism was founded in 1993 by Muslim scholar and activist, Asghar Ali Engineer. Engineer has developed a strong reputation as a voice for inter-religious tolerance, producing numerous essays and books on India’s secular tradition and Islamic teachings on inter-religious relations, many of which can be found on the centre’s website (<http://www.csss-islam.com/>). The centre’s objectives are “To spread the spirit of Secularism and communal harmony and social peace; to study problems relating to Communalism and Secularism; to organize inter-faith and ethnic dialogue and justice.” To achieve these ends, the centre engages in research, seminars, publishing, training programs, youth camps, and dialogue events. In addition to Engineer, the centre’s board is made up of prominent intellectuals and activists from a variety of religious backgrounds and perspectives.

A similar group is Aman Panchayat (<http://www.amanpanchayat.org/>), which came together in response to the rise of communal and sectarian activism in the mid-1980s. Also spearheaded by a group of scholars, artists, and activists, the main concern of Aman Panchayat is to counter various forms of oppression and violence, including that which is fueled by intolerance and communalism. Their particular concern is “the social and psychological rehabilitation of people made invisible by conflict, especially orphans, refugees and widows. The group’s networking, sensitisation and legal-aid programmes strengthen democratic institutions and develop society’s resources for non-violent conflict resolution.” Aman Panchayat’s activities center on education, advocacy, and sponsorship of local organizations and activists. These are just two of many NGOs in India whose goals, either principally or in part, seek to improve relations between religious and ethnic communities. Many of those involved are committed to India’s secular ideals, and while they work for inter-religious harmony and tolerance, they do so from an NGO and activist perspective, which is often non-religious.

However, there are also many prominent religious actors within the Hindu and Muslim communities who reach out to one another in order to promote deeper understanding and spiritual dialogue. One such person is Maulana Wahiduddin Khan. Khan is the spiritual leader of the International Centre for Peace and Spirituality (<http://www.cpsglobal.org/>), founded in 2001. The centre has many activities, ranging from Islamic education to combatting terrorism to interfaith dialogue:

At CPS we believe that we are living in a world of multi-religious, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic societies – a world of differences. A reformer has rightly said that nature abhors uniformity. This means that ‘difference’ is a part of nature and it exists in every aspect of life. The art of difference management is only possible through meaningful and positive ‘inter-faith dialogue’ between people on all aspects of life including religions. The aim of dialogue being to seek peaceful solutions to controversial matters, in spite of differences. By giving people respect and honour, these difference will become blessings. The result will be dialogue, sharing of views – that will result in intellectual development, which is a boon for everyone concerned. (<http://cpsglobal.org/content/interfaith-efforts>)

The dialogue Khan describes is one that does not seek to eliminate or overcome difference, but to embrace it as part of a divine plan. Indeed a well-known Qur’anic verse 49: 13 is invoked often – “O humankind, God has created you from male and female and made you into diverse nations and tribes so that you may come to know each other.” To support his interpretation of the Islamic basis for inter-religious dialogue and peace activism, Khan has written many books and pamphlets available in several South Asian languages (Hindi, Urdu, Telugu, Marathi, English), and uses the organization’s website as a resource center with video lectures in English and Urdu. In his lecture “The Concept of Harmony in Islam,” Khan gives an exegesis of the Qur’an chapter 109, verse 6 “For you, your religion, and for me, mine,” calling it the “most beautiful formula of coexistence. . . . Follow one and respect all. This is the formula of coexistence. In a multireligious, multicultural society there is no other feasible formula, no other formula can be practiced in such a society.” Widely known throughout South Asia, Khan is an excellent example of a religious leader who views interfaith dialogue as essential to the practice of his faith as an Indian Muslim.

A prominent Hindu activist for human rights is Swami Agnivesh. This leader of the Arya Samaj is oriented principally towards the most vulnerable among the poor, focusing particularly on the issue of bonded labor, but he has also made combatting communalism one of his chief concerns. He engages in political activism and education, founded the Bandua Mukti Morcha to work against bonded labor, and organizes rallies against Hindu nationalist initiatives to polarize local communities. For Swami Agnivesh, the goal of religious dialogue is to bring together people of good will in the common cause of fighting injustice and lifting up the poor. Although a renunciant, his work is not focused on personal salvation: “[T]he task of the spiritually enlightened is not to promote one particular religion; much less to pit one religion against another. He repeatedly calls for identifying the good and the common factors that exist within all religions. He dreams of a world where religions interact in an integrative model as against the present conflictual and competitive model” (<http://www.swamiagnivesh>).

com/aboutswamiji2.htm). Like Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, Swami Agnivesh is a frequent speaker at interfaith gatherings and often champions the rights of India's minorities. Religious nationalism and communal politics have made inter-religious dialogue a matter of paramount concern to human rights activists as well as religious professionals like Khan and Agnivesh.

## Conclusion

High-profile and well-publicized conflicts between religious groups in South Asia have made it easy to lose sight of the many positive forms of dialogue between Hindus and Muslims that have occurred in South Asian history. It is certainly true that the partition of India and Pakistan that accompanied independence in 1947 deeply challenged the capacity of the two religious communities to live together. The terrible violence and lasting mistrust that ensued cast a long shadow across the subcontinent. But it would be a mistake to allow that trauma to obscure other, equally important, realities. Since the first arrival of Muslims in the region, there have been many arenas of exchange, cooperation, and positive coexistence. Though the term "inter-religious dialogue" is a modern convention, our earliest records of the Hindu-Muslim encounter indicate enormous curiosity and lively interchange between religions in matters of technology, arts, and sciences, as well as spirituality. From the investigations of al-Biruni, to the translation projects in the Mughal period, to the Bhakti and Sufi devotional movements, to the daily pious practice at countless shared sites, to the social and political activism of human rights advocates, inter-religious dialogue between Muslims and Hindus is rich, complex, and ongoing.

## Bibliography

- Al-Biruni (trans. Edward C. Sachau). *Alberuni's India*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1971.
- Assayag, Jackie. *At the Confluence of Two Rivers: Muslims and Hindus in South India*. Delhi: Manohar, 2004.
- Bigelow, Anna. *Sharing the Sacred: Practicing Pluralism in Muslim North India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Brass, Paul. *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003.
- Buber, Martin. "Dialogue," in *Between Man and Man*. London: Kegan Paul, 1947.
- Busch, Allison. "Hidden in Plain View: Brajbhasha Poets at the Mughal Court," *Modern Asian Studies* 44(2) (2010): 267-309.
- Digby, Simon. "Encounters with Jogis in Indian Sufi Hagiography." Unpublished lecture, School for Oriental and African Studies, 1970.
- Digby, Simon. "Medieval Sufi Tales of Jogis and Tales from the Afghan Sultanates in India," in *Wonder Tales of South Asia*. New Delhi: Manohar, 2000, 221-40.
- Easwaran, Eknath. *Nonviolent Soldier of Islam: Badshah Khan, a Man to Match His Mountains*. Tomales, CA: Nilgiri Press, 1999.
- Eaton, Richard M. "Sufi Folk Literature and the Expansion of Indian Islam." *History of Religions* 14(2) (1974): 117-127.
- Eaton, Richard M. *Sufis of Bijapur, 1300-1700: Social Roles of Sufis in Medieval India*. Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1996 (1978).

- Eaton, Richard M. "Approaches to the Study of Conversion to Islam in India," in *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, ed. Richard C. Martin. New York: One World Press, 1987.
- Eaton, Richard M. *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier: 1204–1760*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.
- Eaton, Richard M. "Temple Desecration and Indo-Muslim States," in *Essays on Islam and Indian History*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Eck, Diana. "The Challenge of Pluralism," *Nieman Reports* XLVII(2), 1993 [http://pluralism.org/articles/eck\\_1993\\_challenge\\_of\\_pluralism](http://pluralism.org/articles/eck_1993_challenge_of_pluralism) (accessed May 16, 2012).
- Elliot, H. M. and John Dowson. *The History Of India As Told By Its Own Historians*. Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1990 (1867–1877).
- Ernst, Carl. "Muslim Studies of Hinduism? A Reconsideration of Arabic and Persian Translations from Indian Languages." *Iranian Studies* 36(2) (2003): 173–195.
- Ernst, Carl and Tony K. Stewart. "Syncretism," in *South Asian Folklore*, eds. Peter J. Claus and Margaret Mills. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Flueckiger, Joyce Burkhalter. *In Amma's Healing Room: Gender and Vernacular Islam in South India*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006.
- Gilmartin, David. "A Magnificent Gift: Muslim Nationalism and the Election Process in Colonial Punjab," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 40(3) (1998): 415–436.
- Gilmartin, David. "Religious Leadership and the Pakistan Movement in the Punjab," *Modern Asian Studies*, 13(3) (1979): 485–517. Reprinted in *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia*, eds. David Gilmartin and Bruce Lawrence. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000.
- Gilmartin, David and Bruce Lawrence (eds.). *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000.
- Gottschalk, Peter. *Beyond Hindu and Muslim: Multiple Identity in Village Narratives in India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Green, Nile. *Making Space: Sufis and Settlers in Early Modern India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Hassan, Riffat. "The Basis for a Hindu–Muslim Dialogue and Steps in That Direction," in *Muslims in Dialogue: The Evolution of a Dialogue*, ed. Leonard Swidler. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992.
- Kakar, Sudhir. *The Colors of Violence: Cultural Identities, Religion, and Conflict*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Khan, Dominique-Sila. *Conversions and Shifting Identities: Ramdev Pir and the Ismailis in Rajasthan*. New Delhi: Manohar, 1997.
- Minault, Gail. *The Khilafat Movement: Religious Symbolism and Political Mobilization in India*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.
- Mir, Farina. *The Social Space of Language: Vernacular Culture in British Colonial Punjab*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010.
- Nandy, Ashis, Shikha Trivedy, Shail Mayaram and Achyut Yagnik. *Creating a Nationality: The Ramjanmabhumi Movement and Fear of the Self*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Oberoi, Harjot. *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity, and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Pandey, Gyanendra. *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Pandey, Gyanendra. *Remembering Partition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Roy, Asim. *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983.
- Salomon, Carol. "Baul Songs," in *Religions of India in Practice*, ed. Donald Lopez. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995.
- Sikand, Yoginder. "Islamic Mission and Inter-Religious Dialogue in a Minority Context: the Jama'at-i-Islami of India." *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 13(1) (2001): 50–64.
- Sikand, Yoginder. *Sacred Spaces: Exploring Traditions of Shared Faith in India*. New Delhi: Penguin India, 2003.

- Stewart, Tony. "In Search of Equivalence: Conceiving the Hindu-Muslim Encounter through Translation Theory." *History of Religions* 40(3) (2001): 260–287.
- Tambiah, Stanley J. *Leveling Crowds: Ethnonationalist Conflicts and Collective Violence in South Asia*. New Delhi: Vistaar Publications, 1996.
- Thapar, Romila. "Communalism and the Historical Legacy: Some Facets." *Social Scientist* 18(6/7) 1990: 4–20.
- Thapar, Romila. *Narratives and the Making of History*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Thapar, Romila. *Somnatha: The Many Voices of a History*. London: Verso, 2005.
- Troll, Christian W. (ed.). *Muslim Shrines in India: Their Character, History and Significance*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Uddin, Sufia. *Constructing Bangladesh: Religion, Ethnicity, and Language in an Islamic Nation*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006.
- Van der Veer, Peter. *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.
- Varshney, Ashutosh. *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002.
- Virdee, Pippa. "Partition and the Absence of Communal Violence in Malerkotla," in *The Deadly Embrace: Religion, Politics, and Violence in India and Pakistan, 1947–2002*, ed. Ian Talbot. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Werbner, Pnina and Helene Basu (eds.). *Embodying Charisma: Modernity, Locality, and Performance of Emotion in Sufi Cults*. London: Routledge, 1998.
- Wilkinson, Steven. *Votes and Violence: Electoral Competition and Ethnic Riots in India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Wink, Andre. *Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World, Vol. I Early Medieval India and the Expansion of Islam, 7th to 11th Centuries*. Leiden: Brill, 1990.
- Wink, Andre. *Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World, Vol. II The Slave Kings and the Islamic Conquest, 11th to 13th Centuries*. Leiden: Brill, 1990.