The Goddess and the Saint: Acculturation and Hindu-Muslim Communalism in a Place of Worship in South India (Karnataka)*

Jackie Assayag


On a stormy night a fakir (Muslim) took shelter in a temple; though in ruins, its Shiva-linga remained undamaged. The fakir sat astride the linga and proceeded to eat some kebabs. At that moment a Hindu peasant ran in, seeking refuge from the inclement weather. The sight of the fakir stunned him. Though the fakir did not utter a word, the god was not so kind. In a terrible voice the linga said, ‘Dear fakir, would you be so good enough as to move your feet so that I may smash this Hindu’s nose! How could such a lowly creature dare to bring his muddy feet and filthy clothes into my temple?’


The temples of India, those of South India in particular, have been the subject of many a monograph in social anthropology. Some provide a detailed account of the way temples are being run today, while others favour an ethno-historical approach. However, in keeping with the nature of the subject, the logical focus of all these studies has been the specifically Hindu character of temples, which have always formed and still remain an essential part of Indian social life. Yet in doing so, the monographs reflect


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the point of view of the dominant members of society, the ‘owners’ of the temple or the clients. This is but natural in a social universe where Hindus are in an overwhelming majority, especially when the field of enquiry is restricted to a narrow socio-religious framework which is being used increasingly by the Hindus as a reference point to define their identity. Very few studies refer to the participation of communities outside the Hindu fold in temple activities—be it an established historical fact or a current limited phenomenon. Nonetheless, the control of these religious institutions, functioning in a social environment less homogeneous than we tend to think, was used to determine power equations and is still a source of conflict. It is true that the participation of non-Hindu communities in

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For size of population, the following table provides the main data regarding the demographic composition (in thousands of persons and as percentage of the total population) of Hindus and Muslims in India and in Karnataka (state referred to as Mysore in the 1961 Census).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1961 Hindus</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
<th>1961 Muslims</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
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<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>366,257</td>
<td>83.4</td>
<td>46,941</td>
<td>10.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Karnataka</td>
<td>20,583</td>
<td>87.3</td>
<td>3,328</td>
<td>9.9</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1971 Hindus</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
<th>1971 Muslims</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>453,347</td>
<td>82.7</td>
<td>61,418</td>
<td>11.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karnataka</td>
<td>25,382</td>
<td>86.5</td>
<td>3,113</td>
<td>10.6</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1981 Hindus</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
<th>1981 Muslims</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>541,779</td>
<td>82.6</td>
<td>75,512</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karnataka</td>
<td>31,907</td>
<td>85.9</td>
<td>4,105</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


3 Temples have become a vital stake in 'communalist' conflicts in India. Though the results of work done on locating them are ambiguous—under the pretext of drawing up an inventory, the quarrel between Hindus and Muslims gets fuelled as only the perspective of the former is adopted—it would be interesting to consult the two volumes of A. Shourie et al., Hindu Temples. What Happened to Them (A Preliminary Survey), New Delhi, 1990 and 1991.

4 An important exception: the Jagannatha temple in Puri in Orissa. It is true that the Daitas, descendants of tribal origin of the priests who worshipped the original form of Lord Jagannatha under the name of Sabari-Narayana, occupy till today a dominant position during ceremonial festivals in and around the temple: see A. Eschmann, H. Kulke and G.C. Tripathi, eds., The Cult of Jagannatha and Regional Tradition of Orissa, Delhi, 1978; S. Mohanty, Lord Jagannatha, Bhubaneshwar, 1982.

5 To better understand the relationship between religion, politics and society, the emphasis in recent works has been on the study of conflicts in Hindu places of worship: for instance P. Van Der Veer, Gods on Earth. The Management of Religious Experience and Identity in a North Indian Pilgrimage Centre, London, 1988; or N.B. Dirk's masterly monograph, The Hollow Crown, Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom, devoted to the South Indian kingdom of
temple life has always been limited in nature. Be that as it may, a shift in perspective to take stock of groups or individuals occupying a subordinate position, provides an opportunity—not very often seized by anthropologists—to observe temple life from 'below', through the 'subalterns',6 thanks to the position of the 'outsiders' involved who see both from a distance and at close quarters. Such is the case of the Muslims, and one can provide several examples of temples where their collaboration has been confirmed.7 This alone is enough to justify the stand, which we consider heuristic, taken in this article, namely to describe a Hindu temple while restoring the Muslim point of view.

It was during research work on a temple in South India that I discovered to what extent a counter-enquiry among a tiny Muslim community in contact with the 'priests', clients and the temple goddess enriched and gave a more composite character to the general conception one has of Hinduism or at least the conception that emerges after observing and questioning Hindus alone. The de-centred perspective of this minority group not only showed up the functioning of the temple,ª concealed by the dominant members, but also threw light on the relationship of mutual attraction and repulsion between the Muslims and the Hindus.9 Though the former pro-claim, sometimes in a conspicuous way, their belonging to the universal community of believers (umma), their Hinduization will surprise only those who stick to a purified textual model or one that is explicitly reformist,10

Pudukottai; fortunately, this new approach has also been applied to Islamic institutions: see E.A. Mann, 'Religion, money and status: Competition for resources at the shrine of Shah Jama, Aligarh' in C.W. Troll, ed., Muslim Shrines in India. Their Character, History and Significance, Delhi, 1989.

6 The notion of 'subaltern', of Gramscian origin, has been borrowed from studies undertaken by historians, anthropologists and sociologists—informally put together by R. Guha—who have published till date five volumes of Subaltern Studies, Delhi, 1982-85. By choosing to study Indian society not from the viewpoint of the 'elite' or the 'dominant' members but 'from below', they have given a new life to the historiography of the subcontinent. However, this exclusive focus on the 'subalterns' has given them a kind of voluntarist autonomy that verges on the essentialism these authors have accused their predecessors of.

7 It was within the framework of a joint research project on the forms of acculturation in India, financed by the Ministry of Research and Technology, that I studied, in the course of two enquiries in Karnataka (in 1990 and 1991) Hindu and Muslim places of worship.


9 Idea developed pertinently by A. Ahmad, Studies in Islam in the Indian Environment, Oxford, 1964, see p. VII.

10 For the Muslim reform movements in India, we have referred to the lengthy work of M. Gaborieau. His article, 'A XIXth century Indian "Wahhabi" tract against the cult of Muslim saints' in Troll, ed., Muslim Shrines in India. (which contains a translation of a tract in Persian attributed to Shāh Wafullāh, published in 1890, but circulated widely in Urdu since 1964) throws light on the theological arguments put forth against the worship of saints; another
of an Islam that has in any case become more aggressive. Such Hinduization is in fact common in India, a land of a Sufic Islam with a long tradition of assimilation.\textsuperscript{11} Admittedly, in a context as Hinduized as that of the temple, the results of such an enquiry are necessarily incomplete; subjugated, the Muslims can hardly claim to play an important role or to have contributed significantly to temple history, at least in the eyes of those who hold a legitimate monopoly over power. This is borne out by recent trends in Indian society: inter-religious conflicts, referred to as ‘communal’,\textsuperscript{12} are on the rise with a continual hardening of stands.\textsuperscript{13} The various communities are increasingly inclined to press their autistic demands for a separate identity, and have a propensity to deny old alliances, acts of daily cooperation,

article by the same author, ‘Hierarchie sociale et mouvements de réforme chez les Musulmans du sous-continent indien’, Social Compass, XXXIII/2–3, 1986, shows that, far from criticizing the hierarchical vision of society, reformers, modernists, traditionalists or fundamentalists, all from the good society of the 

11 The importance of Sufism in the spread of Islam has often been noted. For South India, it will be useful to read K.A. Nizami, ‘Sufi movement in the Deccan’ in H.K. Shervani, ed., History of Medieval Deccan (1295–1724), Vol. II, Hyderabad, 1974, pp. 175–99; and a reconsideration of the problem by I.H. Siddiqui, ‘A new look at Deccani Sufism’ in C.W. Troll, ed., Islam in India, New Delhi, 1985, in reaction to a study by R.M. Eaton, Sufis of Bijapur (1300–1700): Social Role of Sufis in Medieval India, Princeton, 1978. It may be added that as the spread of Islam was more peaceful in the South than in the North, the discussion on the problem of conversions is repeatedly revived in spite of a lack of historical data: for a series of case studies on different denominations, see G.A. Oddie, Religion in South Asia. Religious Conversion and Revival Movements in South Asia in Medieval and Modern Times, New Delhi, 1991.

12 The term ‘communalism’ can be interpreted in several ways. It may be used to describe the animosity that members of one community feel against another, defined in terms of the criteria which determine their differences. But, in the Indian context, it refers mainly to religious distinctions. Among the various kinds of ‘communalism’ found in India, there is no doubt that Hindu–Muslim communalism has, since Independence (1947), given rise to numerous conflicts resulting in a great deal of violence: for a synoptic view of the problem see B. Chandra, Communalism in Modern India, New Delhi, 1987; and the collection of articles by I.A. Ansari, The Muslim Situation in India, New Delhi, 1989.

13 It is enough to mention here the Babri Masjid–Ram Janmabhumi affair, today a major national issue. A large section of Hindu opinion, encouraged by the Hindu militants of the Bharatiya Janata party (BJP), the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), have been demanding that the mosque at Ayodhya be demolished so that a temple in the honour of Rama can be built there: For a historical, religious, archeological, political, sociological, economic and mythological presentation of the problem, it will be useful to consult the works brought out by A.A. Engineer, Babri-Masjid–Ramjanmabhoomi Controversy, Delhi, 1990; and S. Gopal ed., Anatomy of a Confrontation: The Babri Masjid–Ramjanmabhumi Issue, New Delhi, Viking, 1991; P. Van Der Veer took an even more controversial stand in his article, ‘God must be liberated! A Hindu liberation movement in Ayodhya’, Modern Asian Studies (henceforth MAS), 21, 2, 1987.
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borrowings or fusions, in short the process of acculturation\footnote{14 Though dealing primarily with Amerindian societies, N. Wachtel's article, 'L' acculturation', in P. Nora, ed., Faire de l'histoire, Vol. I, Paris, enumerates the problems posed by the use of this notion, but also its heuristic value, to the extent that it takes into account the acculturation capacity of the acculturated.} thanks to which they co-existed more or less peacefully till the tough line adopted by the British colonizers in the second half of the nineteenth century.\footnote{15 A classic argument in Indian and Anglo-Saxon historiography; many studies have been devoted to this question, the best perhaps being the work by S. Gopal, British Policy in India, 1858–1905, Cambridge, 1965; though not free of the tendency to paint the British colonizers in a diabolic light, A. Mukherjee—in 'Colonialism and communalism' in Gopal, ed., Anatomy of a Confrontation—summarizes and discusses it; an incisive article by C.A. Bayly, 'The prehistory of "communalism"? Religious conflict in India, 1700–1860', MAS 19, 2, 1985, brings out however, taking care to make a distinction between 'religious conflict' and ""communalist" conflict', the fact that Hindu–Muslim disputes existed even before the fracture caused by the 'Great Mutiny' of 1857.} But today, under the leadership of militant organizations whose aims are first and foremost political, communities are working systematically at erasing all traces of acculturation in the name of a pristine religious purity that is really a retrospective ideological projection: the Hindus\footnote{16 R. Thapar, H. Mukhia and B. Chandra, Communalism and the Writing of Indian History, New Delhi, 1977, have shown—with the help of archeological data and old historical facts, that is to say using what Vidal-Naquet calls the 'good use of betrayal'—the dangerous fantasies that the fraudulent use of the idea of 'Aryaness' gives rise to amongst historians and the main 'leaders' of the Hindu extremist groups.} in search of a mythical Aryaness, the Muslims\footnote{17 The book by F. Robinson, Separatism Among Indian Muslims: The Politics of the United Provinces' Muslims, 1860–1923, Cambridge, 1974, stresses the importance of the 'revivalist' ideology in the birth of nationalism and Muslim separatism, highlighting in particular the example of the Hindi/Urdu conflict, pp. 66–78; for an excellent overview of Muslim reactions to colonization, see P. Hardy, The Muslims of British India, Cambridge, 1972.} dreaming of the old Mughal supremacy.

The interest of the case studied in this article is to make an example of this acculturation both integrated and dissociative, to borrow from the categories provided by Devereux.\footnote{18 G. Devereux, 'Acculturation antagoniste (1943)' in Ethnopsychanalyse complémentariste, Paris, 1985.} Just recently, the Saundatti Muslims were deprived of the prerogatives they enjoyed till not so long ago within the temple. But the enquiry also corroborated the vitality of a specific (South-) Indian Islam though it would be incorrect to call it 'syncretic'\footnote{19 Working from African material, M. Auge provides a synthesis of 'Les syncrétismes' in Atlas des Religions, Encyclopedia Universalis, Paris, 1988; though ordinarily there is neither accumulation nor overlapping in Indian Islam, the notion has been used in studies on India, and I. Ahmad justifies its usage in his 'Introduction' to the collection Ritual and Religion among Muslims in India, New Delhi, 1981; for their part, A. Roy, The Islamic Syncretic Tradition in Bengal, New Jersey, 1983, and R. Ahmad, Bengal Muslims, 1871–1906, New Delhi, have focused on the erosion of Muslim syncretism, particularly the dilution of what the dargāhs symbolized for the masses, under the impetus of orthodox reform (see for the former p. 251, and for the latter p. 184).} By emphasizing both the labile character of Hinduism, before it became what...
R. Thapar calls 'syndicated moksha' and the process of mutual stimulation between the Hindu and Islamic religions, such an example can help to illustrate that there has never been any preordained teleology in the creation of indigenous local traditions in South India.

The (Hindu) Temple of the Goddess Yellamma

The temple of Yellamma-Renuka, a popular regional divinity, is situated at a distance of eight kilometres from the market town of Saundatti, and forty kilometres from Belgaum, a major city in the state of Karnataka-Mysore. Though temples of female Indian divinities are generally built in the mountains, the outstanding feature of this temple—called the 'Yellamma of seven valleys' (Elu kollada Yellama)—is that it is located in a natural oblong rock excavation of about 800 metres. It is here, in this cavernous mountain hollow, that all the rites and festivals of the Universal (ella) Mother (amma) take place. Legend has it that she was repudiated by her husband Jamadagni who, after watching a king play with his courtesans, was filled with erotic thoughts. Jamadagni turned his wife into a leper, forced her to take exile in the forest, and then ordered his son Parashurama to behead her.

On the night of the full moon, and on Tuesdays and Fridays—considered auspicious—thousands of devotees (bhakta) make a pilgrimage to Saundatti: individuals, couples, families, caste groups, all come in the hope of their wishes being fulfilled, of seeing an end to their troubles and diseases. As Yellama's wrath and terrible might (shakti) are thought to be responsible for most misfortunes, one's final destiny depends on the extent to which

20 Article by R. Thapar, 'Syndicated Moksha?', Seminar, 313, 1985, on contemporary Hindu crusades.
21 A lesson one would do well to dwell on in this period of rampant 'casteism', militant regionalism and combative 'communalism': see S. Bayly, Saints, Goddesses and Kings. Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society, 1700–1900, Cambridge, 1989. The purpose of explaining in detail the high degree of syncretism achieved by Islam and Christianity in South India is to show that the sharing of practices and beliefs between different religions, today dominant religions (Hinduism/Islam/Christianity), is the result of a long process of interaction among them. Thus, Hinduism was never a prior orthodoxy, 'eternally' there to embrace foreign religions. This change in perspective is of interest not just in the Indian context. This is exactly what C. Geertz fails to take into account in his otherwise excellent comparative study on the different forms of Islam in Morocco and Indonesia, Islam Observed, Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia, London, 1968. He too begins with the assumption that there is an established and theoretically homogeneous tradition of Islam.
22 On the basis of their field observation, anthropologists have, since the eighties, reinstated the notions of auspicious and inauspicious to counterbalance the excessive importance attached for a long time to the ideas of purity and impurity: see in particular J.B. Carman and F.A. Marglin, eds., Purity and Auspiciousness in Indian Society, Leiden, 1985; and G.G. Raheja, The Poison in the Gift. Ritual Prestations and the Dominant Caste in a North Indian Village, Chicago, 1988, a monograph of which these doublets constitute the central theme (Ch. 2).
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her anger has been appeased. In Saundatti, the benevolent Yellamma dispenses her favours and represents the cure more than the affliction.23

**Muslim Excentration**

Often compared to the umbilicus of the world, this geographical ellipse delimits a sacred space over which are spread about sixty shrines; most are large, though there are some which are tiny. The Yellamma temple obviously occupies the central space. Two structures are located outside this space: one is the small temple of her consort Jamadagni and the other, the tomb of a Muslim saint Bār-Shāh-wali.

The small Jamadagni temple, which contains an effigy in black stone of the god in the ‘lotus’ position, stands apart at a few hundred metres northeast of the site. A small river, usually dry except during the monsoon, separates Jamadagni from his consort. The excentration and elevated position of the shrine on the ‘Kailasha Pārvata’ (Mount Kailash), from where it overhangs all other structures in splendid isolation, have an undeniable symbolic value. That the hill is called by the same name as the sacred snowy Himalayan peak seems to signify that Jamadagni is the *avatāra* of the, Lord (Yogin) Shiva. The lofty and isolated location of Yellamma’s chaste consort thus symbolizes the virtues of renunciation and asceticism that Shiva habitually incarnates;24 though these values may be peripheral to the world, within the framework of what is called in India the religion of devotion (*bhakti*)25 they are its very underpinning. A detail which is revealing: according to the devotees, even if Jamadagni’s right ear is turned towards his consort, the noise and the clamour of the pilgrims praying below can never be heard on the metonymically Himalayan hill on which he is perched. Completely absorbed by terrestrial pleasures, the pilgrims’ primary concern is to obtain worldly goods.

The southern extremity of the rocky ellipse lies 800 metres across this shrine. In this part, diametrically opposite to the sanctuary, stands a small Muslim complex dedicated to the Sunni saint Bār-Shāh. Located at a good distance from Yellamma, it overlooks the outside edge of the pit. But the reason for its isolation is not the same as in the case of Jamadagni; being an Islamic structure, it is considered relatively impure by upper and middle caste Hindus. Obviously, such an explanation is not acceptable to Muslims.

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23 For mythological, ritual and festive details, which we have not been able to elaborate upon in this article, see J. Assayag, *La colère de la Déesse décapitée. Traditions, cultes et pouvoir dans le Sud de l’Inde*, Centre d’Etudes de l’Inde et de l’Asie du Sud Editions, Paris, 1992.


who argue that the structure was isolated because of the saint’s habit of meditating in that spot for periods of forty days (chilla). Such self-imposed solitude, conducive to prayer (namaz), is frequently interpreted as asceticism, synonymous with ‘inner fire’, that the Muslims commonly refer to as tapas, a term usually reserved for Hindu sages. Thanks to the ardour of this internal simmering, the sage acquires miraculous powers (karamat), comparable to those of siddhi that come with the practice of yoga.

Figure 1 will give a clearer idea about the location of the various structures and important places inside and outside the rocky ellipse of Saundatti.

Though often referred to as a dargah (royal court), the complex is more like a khanaqah—a hospice with living quarters, places to meet and pray, tombs of the founders and a kitchen (langar khanà). In fact, the complex contains only the saint’s cenotaph (asthana), not his tomb. The cenotaph, a limestone parallelepiped, is covered with a green cloth (galif or chadar). The seven tombs (mazar) within the complex—which sometimes even the Muslims refer to as samadhi, a Hindu term used in the context of the yogi—are those of the lineage saint (vomshawalj, that is his historical intercessors. For, though the saint remained unmarried and did not have descendants, he passed on his spiritual authority (wilayat) to a chosen disciple (khilafat), Shâh-Shâh-Madár. It was thanks to this successor, ‘the one who sits on the prayer mat’ (sajjada-nishin), that the chain (silsila) of initiation was maintained, linking the priests in charge to the founder through the masters. Shâh-Shâh-Madár, also considered to be a spiritual guide (murshid), had three children—Bavar-Shâh, Madâr-Shâh and Jangli-Shâh—ancestors of the priests currently in charge. Nowadays, the dargah is looked after by three families, each family taking charge for a period of one year by a rotation system called palu, similar to the one of Hindu temples. The priests in charge are referred to as pirzade, the plural form of the word pîrzade which designates the spiritual ‘sons’ of the saint (pir) attached to the dargah. This, however, does not stop Muslims, particularly

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26 Theoretically, a distinction should be made between karamat which designates the ‘spiritual powers’ of the saint and the ‘miracles’ (mu’jizat) he accomplishes. But in accounts gathered so far, the distinction has tended to disappear. Examples of such exploits abound in literature on Sufism, but of special interest is a paper by S. Digby, Encounter with Jogis in Indian Sufi Hagiography, unpublished text of a lecture at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London in 1970, which discusses these two phenomena in relation to the powers of the yogi; see also J. Filliozat, ‘Sur les contreparties indiennes du soufisme’, Journal Asiatique, 1980, CCLXVIII, 3/4, pp. 259–73; and M. Gaborieau, ‘Pouvoirs et Autorité des Soufis dans l’Himalaya’, Purusàrtha, 12, 1989, pp. 215–38.

27 The name perhaps reveals a link with the fifteenth century non-orthodox saint (be-shar’), Badi’al-Zaman Shâh Madâr, a Syrian of Jewish origin who popularized, borrowing heavily from the yogis, Sufi practices among Muslim converts; for more about this colourful figure, see A. Ahmad, Studies in Islamic Culture, pp. 161–62; and S.A.A. Rizvi, A History of Sufism in India, Delhi, 1975, p. 318ff.
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Figure 1: The rocky ellipse of Saundatti, a location sketch

Hindu sanctuaries of: 1 — Jamadagni; 2 — Yellamma; 3 — Kailabhāirava; 4 — Mātangi; 5 — Parashurāma; 6 — Karevva and ‘garden of Yellamma’; 7 — Rēvanasiddha; 8 — Ganapati; 9 — Mallikārjuna; 10 — statue of Parashurāma; 11 — ponds (Yennigonda).

Muslim sanctuary: 12 — Dargāh of Bār-Shāh-wali.

The arrows indicate the entrances, tollbars (a and d), and the steps (b and c) going down to the hollow of the ellipse, the Yellamma sanctuary being its lowest point.

those who also visit the goddess temples, from using the term pūjāri, normally reserved for Hindu priests. Though the pirzāde do not pay any daily homage (pūjā) to the saint, every day they burn a little sandalwood paste before him, and several disciples (murīd) gather together to watch the ritual being performed. Claiming to come from the Sayyad caste (zāt),
these families thus belong to the upper class *ashrāfs* (nobility), descendants (real or imaginary) of Arab, Turkish or Afghan immigrants. They live in Ugargol—which means the Terrible Valley—in the same village as the priests (*pūjāri*) and servants (*sēvakari*) of the Yellamma temple. Only five kilometres separate this tiny agglomeration from the temple of the goddess, near whom, it is said, no one can lead a peaceful married life. Besides the income they get from the *dargāh* in the form of offerings from devotees (*nazər*) and sales of talismans (*maḍuli*) and magic strings (*ıḏi*) received as gifts (*tā'wiz*), the main source of livelihood of these Muslims is the sale of sweetmeats at the Saundatti site. In addition, they also receive payments for religious services performed at domestic ceremonies. Devotees (*tā'ifa*) invite them unfailingly to all tonsures, circumcisions, marriages, etc.; on such occasions, they are called *mujāwar*. They also help, along with five other Muslim 'leaders' from Saundatti, in organizing and managing the funds of a committee (*jamāʿat*) headed by the main *pǐrzḏa* who assumes, for this purpose, the title of 'secular administrator of a religious institution' (*mutawaliz*). The funds of the committee are used to cover festival expenses; for instance, payments made in cash and kind for the spectacular services of a *jalālī* (anger/splendour) *faqir*; members of this group claim to be wandering dervishes (*qaqandars*) even though they live in a brotherhood (*qaqm*) in the city of Belgaum.

Apart from the four pilgrim quarters, known as *khānqah* or dharmanšālā, a small temple (*gudi*) dedicated to the saint stands next to the cenotaph. Over the flat roof of the building, open on the east, flies the green flag of Islam. While the architectural style is similar to that of local Hindu village temples, the shrine does not contain any effigy (*mūrti*), in keeping with the

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28 Though the *mujāwar* can have administrative and therapeutic functions, as has been observed in Maharashtra—B. Pfeiderer, 'Mira datar dargah: The psychiatry of a Muslim shrine' in I. Ahmad, ed., *Ritual and Religion among Muslims in India*, Delhi, 1981—he is, in the strict sense of the term, the guardian of the *ta'ziya*, that is to say, of the small reproductions of the saints' tombs, in particular those of Hasan and Husain, built during Muḥarram. Carried in procession during this festival, their use is similar to the 'divine mobile effigies' (*utsava mūrti*) of Hinduism; but unlike the latter they are destroyed and made every year.

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precept of Islam (orthodox). A seat of meditation for the saint, topped by an umbrella, on which are kept his wooden sandals, is nonetheless present; these being symbols associated with the Hindu royal-renouncer (rājāh-samnyāsin)—which moreover are designated by the Sanskrit terms: chatri (canopy), simhāsana (throne), chāpal (clogs). Also present are ‘the hands’ (panjah) garlanded with jasmine flowers—five panjahs in all, an allusion to the members of the Prophet’s family—tiny metal votive horses (duldul)—which could just as well be the steed of Husain or his nephew Kasim, or even the celestial mare (burāq) of Muhammad—the green banner of the saint (jhandā), the ritual peacock feather fly-whisk (murchal) and a minuscule white bench used by the priest in charge. To complete the list of ritual utensils, there is the (magic) stick of the saint (daṇḍā), his 100(0)-bead rosary (tesbeh), a receptacle (chakar) containing sweets and another filled with charcoal whose emanations mix with the smoke of a bundle of incense sticks, a donation box (golakh), and finally a copy of the Qu’rān.

At right angles to the shrine, a modest covered platform may be found where prayers (namāz) are offered; for some, it serves as a small mosque (masjid) even though the recess (mihrab) marking the direction of the Mecca (qiblā) is absent.

The Saint: His Name and History

The complete name of the saint is Khwājah-Bār-Shāh-walī, shortened more often than not to Bār-Shāh. The title Khwājah (master), a term of respect, has been added to the designation Shāh (sultan/king), which too is an honorific title. The use of the term wali, ‘one close to (Allāh)’, to designate Muslim saints, is not confined to India alone; it is commonly used. However, the word pir(a), old man is used just as frequently, and sometimes the title Shaikh, meaning very old, is given to those of Arab ancestry.

Two explanations were provided for the name of the saint. In Urdu and Persian the word bār means greatness, dignity and, by extension, god. But it can also be translated as ‘to give an audience’ in relation to the ‘sovereign presiding over his court,’ a metaphor with a mystical resonance (Sufi)

30 To use the explanation provided by I. Goldziher, Muslim Studies, London, 1967–71, p. 332:

Wali: This word, derived from a root which in Semitic languages expresses the idea of adherence, attachment and nearness, means firstly: he who is close, follower, friend, relative . . . . In religious language the idea of nearness was extended to the relations of men to God . . . . From the general meaning of ‘someone who is close’ in Old Arabic usage the word was extended also to the protector, helper and patron, curiously enough also applied to divinely venerate beings of whom man believes that they help those who venerate them. Wali, the devout, pious man became wali equipped with the attribute of miracles, the intermediary (shaft) between God and man.
comparing the throne to the prayer carpet. Other informers maintain his name is a derivate of the Urdu term bājr, which means heavy and adamantine, but stands for, above all, thunder and lightning; now, in Kannada, the language spoken by the majority of Muslims living in the area, the saint is often designated by the metonymic expression bhidu gali, tempest, thunder or storm-stick. And, as we know, the danda in the shrine is the attribute of the Sufi mendicant. Some emphasize the terrible character of this saint whose name confers on him such warlike qualities; others stress its proximity with the Urdu word bhāran, torrential rain. Though they acknowledge his formidable aspect, it is tempered by emphasizing the beneficial properties generally associated with water in India.

The second explanation refers to the fact that bār(a) in Kannada signifies twelve, the twelfth, an allusion to the Shi'ite figure of the (hidden) Twelfth Imām, Mahdi Al Muntāzār, the Awaited One. It is worthwhile mentioning that the Ādil Shahi dynasty, which, from Bijapur its capital, dominated the North-West Deccan from 1489 to 1686, was Shi'ite. In his fascinating historical study of the kingdom, Eaton has brought to the fore the vigorous efforts made by the nine sultans of this powerful lineage—patrons of both the Muslim saint Hażrat Gēsū Darāz of Gulbarga31 and the Hindu goddess Saraswati—to gather to the court, poets, men of letters and Sufis in particular. Now, the latter deliberately chose to use the vernacular language to spread, with all the fervour of Shi'ite piety, their mystical message throughout the Deccan.32 Interestingly, there exists at Hirekumbi, some fifteen kilometres from the Saundatti temple, another tomb of the Bārā Imām, the Twelfth Imām. The village, whose name means a heap of diamonds (hira-gumpe)), is dominated by the Sayyad and Shaikh33 ‘castes’—a phenomenon rare in South India.34 Considered by the inhabitants to be the oldest tomb, it forms part of a Muslim complex dedicated to the saint Makhdūm Ḥusainī, who enjoys a higher status among the local population.35 Three hundred metres

31 Unfortunately, to the best of our knowledge, there is no good monograph in English on the mausoleum of this saint. We may mention in passing that within this mausoleum, the most important one in South India, a saint (Hindu) Lingāyat-Virashaiva has been buried. Nevertheless, the following books can be consulted: S.S.K. Hussaini, Sayyid Muhammad Al-Husayni-I Gisūdiraz (721/1321-825/1422): On Sufism, Delhi, 1983; and The Life, Works and Teachings of Kwajāh Bandāhnawāz Gisūdiraz, Hyderabad, 1986.

32 Eaton, Sufis of Bijapur, in particular Chs. 8 and 9.

33 The best discussion on this recurrent problem of the existence of castes among the Muslims has been initiated by I. Ahmad in Caste and Social Stratification among the Muslims, Delhi, 1973; this collection contains an interesting contribution on the South by M. Mines: ‘Social stratification among Muslim Tamils in Tamil Nadu, South India’.

34 What are called the ‘dominant castes’ in the villages of Northern Karnataka are mostly Hindus, often Lingāyats. But sometimes it happens that the Muslims are in a majority and economically the most well off, as in Hirekumbi, where the Sayyad, Moghul and Pathan castes or as they say there, zāts (listed in order of status) represent about 60 per cent of the population comprising mainly Kurubas.

35 I am currently writing, on the basis of the only existent local tradition, an article on the dargāh of this saint whose tomb can be found in many villages of the region.
to the east of the latter’s dargāh is the dargāh of the Bāra Imām. A curious place indeed, perched as it is on a hill overhanging the agglomeration. Of far greater interest though, is the huge adjoining lithic mass, which is in fact the tomb of the tiger-attendant who served the saint during his life-time. This enormous pile of stone, fifteen metres long and five metres high, is situated around a fruit tree (gīḍḍa bari) whose leaves are supposed to have therapeutic properties. The stone seems to keep growing in size as pilgrims place one or five new stones ex voto. Facing the tomb—reminiscent of the animal marabouts of Maghrebin Islam—a manger has been built on the stony ground where pilgrims leave their offerings (sweets and meat) for the animal. While the saint meditated in a hillside cave, the animal would stand guard to protect him from any external danger, like the lion that protected the body of Ḥusain after he was buried at Karbalā.

As such, these Shi’ite references have no particular significance for the faithful, who, it might be recalled, are all Sunnis; nonetheless, the assertion that the Bāra Imām was assassinated and above all the account of a nocturnal message (huqm) attributed to his glorious neighbour are certainly suggestive.

One night, in a dream, Makhdūm Husaini asked the Bāra Imām, ‘Where were you buried?’

The Bāra Imām answered, ‘Wake up early tomorrow, face the sun and throw a lemon in its direction. At the place the lemon falls you will find my corpse. There, you shall dig my grave.’

—‘But what name shall I give you?’

—‘My real name is different, but here you shall call me Bāra Imām.’

From this brief account we learn of the saint’s need to remain hidden even while making himself visible through his sepulchre. It also brings out the true quality of his saintliness: the pir is both dead and alive. Now numerous biographies tell us of how Muslim saints went up to paradise, their eyes open. And so the Bāra Imām continues to live at the place he was buried and help his worshippers in the same way as he did during his life on earth.

His father, who ran a Koranic school (madrasa) at Mekke, took upon himself his religious education. Such was the intelligence of this child that in little time he mastered the Chishtiyya and Qadiriyya teachings, and at that early age acquired four disciples (murīd). In order to perfect his knowledge, he set off for Baghdad, where he met the saint Mahbub Subhani, and then reached Ajmer in Rajasthan to receive, this time, the

* See the sparkling picture depicted by E. Dermenghem in Le Culte des saints dans l’islam maghrébin, Paris, 1954, p. 96ff.
teaching of the greatest Indian saint Mu'inal-din-Chishti. While in a dream, the latter ordered him to go to South India, first to Gulbarga, to meet Bandâ Nawaz Gësû Darâz, and then to Parasgad, the old name of Saundatti. His four disciples, who had followed him faithfully and had become saints in their own right, settled down in a radius of thirty-five kilometres on the banks of the Malaprabha. The first, Jangh-Bhâr-Shâh, in the village of Nagudi in the Ramdruga district; the second, Lakdak-Diwan-Shâh, in Toragal in the same district; the third, Dilawâr-Göri, chose the village of Yakkundi. As for the fourth, his name is not known and no one knows where he stayed! Such was the power of the saints that they all ‘acquired disciples’ (pirî muridi).

If one is to believe this short biography as retraced by the main pirzâda—undoubtedly the only living depositary of the saint’s history—Bâr-Shâh-wali, born in the seventh century of the Hegira, must have thus reached Saundatti in the fourteenth century, that is to say (for Muslims) even before the installation of the Yellamma goddess. The following myth bears this out:

While practising his meditation (chilla) on the site, Bâr-Shâh noted with surprise that every morning his dwelling was cleaned thoroughly and, as if by miracle, all the household work was done, without him ever catching sight of anyone. In this way twelve years passed. Finally, to thank his zealous servant whom he had never seen, he threw his ‘thunder’ stick (danda) 200 metres down. The temple servant appeared at the spot where the stick fell and was deified as Yellamma. After this episode, Saundatti became a major place of pilgrimage.

There are several versions to the story, but whether the goddess herself asked the saint to find her a place to live in or the saint threw down a lemon instead of a stick hardly matters. What is important is that the account is a Muslim attempt to downgrade the status of the goddess to that of a servant. Interestingly, this has been done using a motive from Hindu mythology in which two divinities are amalgamated in a single figure, in this case

37 With P.M. Curries’ book, The Shrine and Cult of Mu‘în Al-Din Chisti of Ajmer, Delhi, 1989, we finally have a monograph both historical and anthropological—describing the organization and the functioning of the mausoleum—on this much venerated mystical saint (fourteenth century); see also, S.L.H. Moini, ‘Rituals and customary practices at the dargah of Ajmer’ in Troll, ed., Muslim Shrines in India.

38 The citrus fruit, to which numerous therapeutic properties have been attributed, is frequently used in rituals by Hindus and Muslims alike. To give just one example, while the former rub some lemon (wrapped in cloth) on their eyes during their repeated prostrations before Yellamma, the latter plant them with the help of a nail in a tree near a pir: their way of fixing the exorcised demons (bhûta) once and for all; a text on this type of therapeutic dargâh is being prepared.
Yellamma and her younger sister (tangi) or servant called Māṭangi. The servant is both a minor and major character, and her temple is situated just behind the one of her mistress in Saundatti. This duplication of mistress and servant, both distinct and inseparable but always in a hierarchical relationship, features in many popular stories; it forms the basis of iconographic distinctions with which specific attributes are associated. In this way, a single divinity, split in an ancillary relationship with the servant, can be venerated by groups of different status. In Saundatti, the Māḍiga Untouchables (tanners, peasants) revere Māṭangi as their great divinity, whereas the Bānajiga-Lingāyats do not know of her, even though both castes recognize the indisputable supremacy of Yellamma.

The Muslims, for whom the separation of sexes is far more important than for the Hindus, even during the dargāh rituals have no such system. The veneration of a local patron saint has nothing to do with discrimination resulting from caste difference. Regularly visiting such a place of worship, called ziyārat, simply to express one's wishes to the saint, does not in any way stop one from going to a Hindu shrine for the same purpose. In fact, there are some temples—one is never quite sure what to call them, gudi or dargāh—where the faithful from both communities rub shoulders. Symbols of both religions can be found here in an intentional eclecticism: panjāh (hands) and idol of Narasimha (= Vishnu), horses (duldul/buraq) and bull (Nandin), green banner and Shaivite trident and so on.

As far as the Hindus are concerned, it is generally the lower castes which come readily to Islamic shrines to break their coconuts, burn incense, offer flowers and clothes and give money. The sārīs by which they are used to drape the panjāh uprights when they are taken out in procession during the festival of Muḥarram. As the Muslims circle (hajj) the dargāh, so the Hindus go around the saint several times, like the circumambulations (pradakṣinā) in temples. However, while the former go right into the dargāh and touch the saint's tomb, the latter come mainly to have a vision (darshan) of a figure with godlike qualities. But, be it through the mediation of sight or through tactile contact, the end result is the same: the

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devotees appropriate a part of that extraordinary charisma (bakara) that is wali.  

The purpose of all rituals performed in the dargāh, irrespective of the identity of devotees, is thus to mobilize to the highest degree the power (baraka) of the one who 'carried the burden of rendering the transcendent Allah relevant and accessible to the needs of everyday life and the common man,' to quote what E. Gellner wrote about the Atlas. This brings Islamic monotheism closer to Hindu polytheism, even if the local divinities of the latter are conceived in the descent (avatāra) mode of the major gods (of the pantheon) and the sacredness of the wali is proportional to his proximity with Allah who chose him to rise towards him.

As for the device of the servant, it has been made use of in Muslim accounts, particularly in the hagiographies of saints (raz kirāt). However, the servant is a tiger who often accompanies the holy man. The animal, completely at the service of his master, does all the household chores (cooking, cleaning etc.) and protects him when he is absorbed in his meditation. The untamed beast, transformed into a pet just by the aura of the saint, incarnates the perfect servant-guardian (khuddām), similar to the recurrent theme of South Indian devotion (bhakti) where the divinity's fiendish enemy gets metamorphosed, after a terrible battle, into his zealous devotee. In this theme, the heroine, the Terrible Goddess, brings down demons and is shown mounting a tiger (or a lion) in iconography. The vehicle (vāhana) is thus common to the goddess—for instance, the Mother-tiger Huligamma, who in the Hospet region incarnates the terrible aspect of Yellamma-RENUKA—and the Muslim saint—not just Bār-Shāh but also the famous yogi Rājābag Sawār of Yamanur whose temple-dargāh is situated at forty-five kilometres from Saundatti. The Bār-Shāh episode is like this:

41 See G.S. Colin, 'Barakat', Encyclopedia of Islam (new edition), p. 1032. 'Baraka can be translated as "beneficent force of divine origin, which causes superabundance in the physical sphere, and prosperity and happiness in the psychic order".'


43 In his analysis of 'cultural translations' between Hindu and Muslim traditions in Bengal, A.R. Sayied explains how the cult of the pir authorized the Islamic concept of nabi to be equated with the Hindu concept of avatāra and how the Prophet himself was conceived in the manner of an avatāra of Kal-Yug, the 'iron age' of the Hindus: Sayied, 'Ideal and reality'; see also M. Mujeeb, The Indian Muslims, London, 1967, pp. 321–22; and in particular A. Roy, 'The pir tradition: A case study in Islamic syncretism in traditional Bengal' in F.W. Clothey, ed., Image of Man: Religious and Historical Process in South Asia, Madras, 1982; the same idea has been applied to the master/disciple relationship with functional parallels established between Shaikh and Guru by B.B. Laurence, 'Early Indo-Muslim saints and conversion' in Friedmann, ed., Islam in Asia, p. 134ff.

44 Theme illustrated and commented on by D.D. Shulman, 'The enemy within: Idealism and dissent in South Indian Hinduism' in S.N. Einsenstein, ed., Orthodoxy, Heterodoxy and Dissent in India, Amsterdam, 1984.

45 This temple-dargāh, on which an article is going to be published shortly, is fascinating for the officially proclaimed 'syncretism' of its priests-in-charge who are both Hindus and Muslims. It may be noted that this saint mounting his tiger is always represented with a large scorpion in his right hand.
The saint had left the city of Gulbarga far behind and was walking southwards. As he approached the banks of the Malaprabha—the river which feeds the basin of sacred oil (yenigonda) of the Yellamma goddess—the waters began to swell into a great flood; taking advantage of this, a crocodile attacked a tiger. The saint, who witnessed the fight, saw that the tiger was cornered, and threw his [magical] stick down on the crocodile, forcing it to flee. Bār-Šah then mounted the tiger and continued along his way; and it was astride the beast, dressed in white, with his long beard looking all the more impressive on account of his green turban, that he reached the site of Saundatti.

This predilection for the tiger, shared by Hindus and Muslims (in fact, by all Indians) alike, extends to folklore as well. The carnival-like festival of Muharram, which opens the liturgical year of the Islamic calendar (hijri), never takes place without ‘tiger dances’. The dancers, either one or several, are always accompanied by a band: the slow choreography of the dance comprises of an alternation of aggressive and feline postures. All the actors dress up as tigers with the help of body make-up and a few accessories (helmet with ears, moustaches, claws and tail); they move in a procession across the village or the town, going from house to house asking for alms (zakāt). This is their way of thanking the saint, and Allah, for fulfilling a wish made the previous year (mannāt). Any tiger figure, even that of Tipu Sultan, the ‘Tiger of Mysore’, celebrated by all Muslims today, is reason enough to hold these religious mimodramas. Currently, they have acquired militant overtones; a recent television serial on Tipu Sultan—counterpart of the Ramayana serial—has given them an added justification, particularly in this state (Karnataka) where Tipu marched from strength to strength in the eighteenth century.

Dargāh Rites and Festivals

Bār-Šah’s memorial is not frequented very often. Little is done to worship him, other than celebrating his death anniversary (‘urs), that is to say the anniversary of his wedding or mystical union with Allāh. It takes place on the second Thursday of the Jamadi’l-Awwal month of the Islamic calendar and goes on for about forty-eight hours. On the first day, which for the Muslims

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47 Explanation in Subhan, Sufism, Its Saint, p. 114:

Urs was originally the term used for marriage festivities, as opposed to nikah, the marriage ceremony. However, it has come to be used to designate ‘the ceremony observed at the anniversary of the death of any celebrated saint’. Used in this way the word ‘urs’ has a ‘subtle reference to the unitive stage attained by him (the saint) in his lifetime and consummated at the time of his death’.
begins after sunset, the faithful recite the fātiha, prayers in the name of the saint and Allāh. On the second day, the main ceremony is held, locally referred to as sandal ratri, because of the sandalwood paste with which the faithful smear the saint’s tomb before covering it with a thick carpet of flowers and several lengths of cloth and brocades (gālif or chādar). The water used to wash the tomb (ghusl) as well as sandalwood powder and some flowers, the roses in particular, are sold as gifts from the saint (tabarruk), the proceeds of which go to the pîrzâde. The faithful drink this water so that they may absorb its baraka.

During the Bāratha huṇṇime, a major (Hindu) festival of Saundatti which takes place on the full moon night of Magha (January/February), or at ‘idd-ul-Zuha, the highest Islamic commemoration, as well on the ‘black moon’ (amarsi) nights of Jyeṣṭa (May/June) and Āśhwija (September/October), goats and cocks are slaughtered wholesale; both the Muslims and the low caste Hindus who join in the celebrations refer to this sacrifice as bāḷi. The Marathas, a ksatriya caste of Maharashtra, take part in large numbers, their sacrificial habits being akin to those of the Muslims. The difference is that while the Muslims first tie the goat’s legs, lay it down and then slowly slit its throat muttering Qu’ranic verses all the while, the Marathas behead the animal standing, without reciting any prayers. For this reason, unlike the Muslims, the Hindus (Marathas) sacrifice the animals at a distance from the dargāh before offering them to the saint; the decapitated heads as well as the skin of the goats sacrificed are given to the pîrzâda who, in turn, distributes the ashes (woodî) and sweetmeats (bunda) made specially for the occasion.

The saint’s dargāh is famous for its ‘(male) demon stone’ (bhūta kallu). About a 100 metres behind the sanctuary, near a small cliff which the waters of the Malaprabha hit against, is a natural orifice at ground level, thought to be the dwelling place of a spirit that the Muslims call jinn (spirit, genie) or bhūta (demon). A myth tells us how it came to be here:

While the reclusive priest, though surrounded by a few disciples, fasted, prayed and meditated for forty days (chilla), he was continually troubled by an enormous ghost or demon (bhūta). Filled with anger, the saint picked up a heavy stone and flung it at the demon. This stone is today known as the bhūta kallu [demon stone].

The Muslims as also the Hindus, particularly the Untouchables of the Madar caste, have developed the habit of worming their way into this hole, three or five times. To do this one has to really contort oneself unless one is very slender; for the diameter of this minuscule tunnel is no more than thirty centimetres, and care has to be taken not to hit the rounded stone (bhūta kallu) located at one of the exits. If successfully accomplished, this feat, which seems like giving birth to oneself through a cave, means your
wish will be fulfilled. While the Hindus generally consider the bhūta to be evil—though often ambivalent in nature—the fact that the stone, which has today come to symbolize the vanquished demon, is located near the dargāh, makes it good; and so the jinn becomes benevolent.

We have already seen a similar change in perception in the case of Yellamma. If she is venerated, it is primarily because her anger, synonymous with affliction and pain, is feared more than anything else. However, her beneficial effect and protection can be had simply by going to her shrine on ad hoc days. Indeed, Muslim saints are generally worshipped so that man’s desires may be fulfilled and marriages bear children. In addition, in Saundatti, both the Muslims and the low caste Hindus believe that Bār-Shāh helps not only in engendering male offspring but also in curing skin diseases. Now, normally such powers are attributed to Yellamma, whose efficacy in these matters is certain. In short, it was as if all the goddess’s might (shakti) had channelized the saint’s power (baraka) in this direction. This is hinted at by the following myth, which transforms the goddess into the saint’s servant:

At the time Yellamma was fleeing to escape her husband, who in his wrath had turned her into a leper, she encountered the saint and his tiger who, as was their daily habit, were going to take their bath. The sight of the beast terrorized her. Bār-Shāh reassured her, and asked her to tell him her story. After listening to her tale, he was filled with compassion and gave her his blessings, promising to cure her if she bathed in the sacred basin (yennigonda). The next day, Yellamma became as beautiful as before.

To show her gratitude, she placed herself at his service and remained with him for the next twelve years. But one day, she asked the saint’s permission to leave and requested him to find her a place to stay. The saint agreed to do so; this is how Yellamma began to be worshipped at the Saundatti temple.

When we told this story to Bānajiga-Lingāyat devotees, who claimed never to have heard it, they provided us with a ‘counter-myth’ to this Muslim version of how Yellamma came to be worshipped. The story is designed, if one may dare to say so, to fuel the ‘communalist’ battle of precedence—for by transforming the saint Bār-Shāh into a devotee first punished and later absolved by the goddess, it gives Yellamma the first right over the site.

The saint Bār-Shāh had got into the habit of constantly blaming and cursing the goddess Yellamma. The latter, angered by these perennial

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*See Dermerghem, Le culte des saints, p. 109.

*For the importance of the cult of ‘demons’ in this region of India, see P. Padmanabha and K.S. Prabhu, Special Study Report on Bhuta Cult, Mysore, 1976.
maledictions, which in any case had no effect, decided to punish the saint. Thus she put a spell on him, turning him blind. Unable to see, the saint realized his mistake; he began to worship her, singing her praise day and night. Yellamma, impressed by his devotion and austerity, restored his sight to him, and to thank her, Bār-Shāh became one of her most faithful servants.

Exeunt the Muslims

Reconstituting the tumultuous history of a temple, control of which ensures both social prestige and a sizable income, is a difficult task indeed. The main difficulty lies in the fact that the dominant Bānajiga-Lingāyat caste, from which the Yellamma temple ‘priests’ are recruited, is opposed to any in-depth enquiry. They are particularly loath to show the cash registers of the temple pañchāyat, maintained for nearly a 100 years by the local administration (dēvasthānam). These documents are precious for the ethnologist, as they provide the names of all the permanent and temporary servants in charge, mentioning how much each one was paid for his services. By some miracle, however, I was able to lay my hands on three of these registers for the years 1884, 1924 and 1928; they show that for the period covered access to ritual functions was easier and open to members of castes who are excluded today.

As shortage of space does not permit any further elaboration, let us just say that by adopting a mixture of subtle and strongarm tactics, sometimes even resorting to legal proceedings, the Bānajiga-Lingāyats managed to exclude from the temple services the Brahmins in the thirties, and recently the Mādiga Untouchables. We shall, however, discuss at some length the more recent case of the Muslims. Though only one out of the seven Muslim families living in Ugargol is directly concerned, it confirms the current tightening of recruitment of servants (sēvakari). Finally, I must admit that over the years a member of the family involved became my main informer, better still a dear friend. It was he who brought about what we have euphemistically called the ‘miracle’ that enabled me to consult in somewhat incredible conditions the account books in his possession. According to him, the local relationship between Hindus and Muslims warranted such secrecy.

Traditional Rights and Conflicts

The various ways and means of harassment adopted by some Bānajigas lead to a violent conflict with the Muslims in 1970. In 1974 they managed to

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50 For more details, see Assayag, La colère de la Déesee décapitée.
51 For the Brahmins, see ibid., p. 469ff.; for the Untouchables, ibid., p. 421ff.; a similar case has been presented by Goswamy and Morab, Chamundari Temple p. 18ff., p. 52ff.
remove the latter from the cultural offices they had been holding hereditarily, and finally in 1978 the Muslims were completely sidelined from the temple administration (dēvasthānam).

Muslim participation in temple services is not an ecumenical idealization of the past, nor some pettifogging on the part of disgruntled social actors who find themselves besieged. It is an established historical fact proved by an edict issued in Urdu in 1774, later translated in Kannada for the purposes of the case filed by my informant’s father against the Bānajigas. Bearing the seal of a feudatory of the Maratha Peshwa dynasty, it stipulates the hereditary service rights to the Yellamma temple. This historical document, officially authenticated, confirms the rights of this Muslim lineage to clean the temple of the goddess’s son Parashurāma, to light the lamp daily in the shrine at its own expense, to bring, at the time of the full and black moon festivals, the utensils needed by the pujāris for the abhiṣeṣka (aspersion of consecrated water) and finally to supply the oil required for the lamp (nandadīpa) during the Navaratri festival when Parashurāma’s anniversary is celebrated. As this solemn proclamation was explicitly based on prior customary law, it is clear that these social privileges were accepted and socially recognized before 1774. It was customary for the serving family to receive as payment (kanika) the offerings (pādagata) placed by the devotees outside the temple. Another hereditary right enjoyed by the family was that its members officiated as the priests in charge, sēvakari, when the mobile effigy of the divinity (utsava-mūrti) was taken out in procession, the men being part of the palanquin bearers and the women waving the ritual fly-whisk (cauri).

In their bid to deprive the Muslims of their rights, the Bānajigas first launched a verbal onslaught. Finally, in 1974, these rights were legally relinquished through a law of the Karnataka state government. Promulgated while Devraj Urs Wodeyar—a descendant of the former mahārājās of Mysore, reinstated by the British during the nineteenth century—was the Chief Minister, the new law stipulated that only the Hindus could act as priests-in-charge in (Hindu) temples.

In the meantime, in the seventies the Muslims and Bānajigas had clashed in a violent conflict. The instigator, rather the agent provocateur, was a traditionalist Lingayat (no longer alive) from the upper Jangama caste of this community whose members act as domestic priests (purohīt). A teacher by profession (Sanskrit, reading of the scriptures [Vīrashaiva]-Āgama, and doctrine [Shakti Vishistādvaita]) of the sect, he also acted as a spiritual

mentor (guru) to the pūjāris. Under his guidance the Bānajigas accused the Muslims of trying to appropriate the Parashurāma temple so as to transform it into a mosque (masjid). The charge seemed rather thin, given the uneven strength of what may hardly be called the two communities. Nonetheless, as it was made in public before the shrine, it lead to a violent altercation between Bānajiga activists and members of the Muslim family. Things got out of hand to the extent that the police had to be called in, or rather removed, to restore order.

Once the Muslims had been removed from the offices they had held for generations—and from which they received allowances—the Bānajigas destroyed the dome (ghumut) that topped the Parashurāma temple. They said it made the edifice (now exclusively Hindu) look like an Islamic construction. Old photographs show the presence of the dome that has mysteriously vanished. Today, a rickety white plank is all there is for a roof. Even if one were to accept that this version is a 'communalist' if not paranoid rationalization of what happened, a mere quibble over an architectural detail that had worn out with time and the yearly monsoons; yet it is difficult to explain why the Bānajigas, when questioned on the subject, denied (despite photographic evidence) that such a dome ever existed. Particularly as other Hindu informers, less involved in the conflict, corroborated its existence as stated by the Muslims.

Power and Acculturation

From the Hindu side, the story of the Saundatti temple brings out how, in contemporary India, a dominant community 'castified' its self over time. While never failing to cite tradition—selective memories of archaic merits—the Bānajigas did not hesitate, when the situation demanded, to resort to brutal methods to establish their legitimacy. The statutory supremacy so acquired strengthened their local power, and today they enjoy a complete hegemony. In India too rights are really determined on the basis of brute force, though often we tend to overlook this fact.

Certainly, tradition can be compared to the flaky structure of the myth, which cannot be dated precisely in the chronological sense of the term. But that is forgetting that such flakiness is intended to meet certain needs. If the values legitimizing tradition are incorporated within an imposed narrative framework, such 'tinkering' is not purely a mental game. It is a bid for

53 Placed in a wider political context, this process has been described by J. Assayag, 'Modernisation de la caste et indianisation de la démocratie', Archives Européennes de Sociologie, XXVII, 1986.
54 See M. Douglas, Ainsi pensent les Institutions, Paris, 1989, p. 63 (first published in English, 1986) on the importance of speculating why things are forgotten and not only why they are remembered.
55 As Kant has said so pithily, 'Law does not occur with the Law.'
power, an expression of the interests of the social groups engaged in this struggle. The stakes are high: the assertion of power (potestas) by exercising authority and through symbols (auctoritas). For the observer, the mythological and the symbolic can become a well-defined game of variations, inversions and transformations—to the extent of resembling a luxurious Gothic architecture, to use the left-handed compliment Leach paid Lévi-Strauss. 56 But the moment you contextualize it, the game reflects a pragmatic of social investments, even if it is first and foremost a ‘time’, or better still, history-‘erasing machine’ 57.

In fact, what the Saundatti Bânajigas choose to call tradition is really a continual rearranging of history to suit the victors. The dominant community, which alone can articulate its aspirations, uses the past to legitimize the present; certain facts are suppressed, history is tailored to fit in with the myth, the past is reinterpreted in the light of the present. And so an unchanging, eternal time is created which becomes their tradition: a present that is the denial of the present. Organized around this imaginary time which rejects its historicity, the dominant members build myths and titles, adjust attitudes and functions, in short, ensure there is no turbulence by imposing orthodoxy/praxis *hic et nunc*.

Thus, we would do well to recall a truism: the Bânajigas use the symbolic for pragmatic ends; if need be, accounts are modified, behavioural patterns adjusted, the norm corrected when accidents occur, interests shift or the stakes are high. Only the means matter when confronted with an emergency. The rules to deal with the fluctuating power struggle are invented as and when required.

What needs to be emphasized here is the complexity of the acculturation process since, despite borrowing certain practices from neighbours or religiously distinct contexts, assertions of identity persist. For the Hindus and Muslims, generally from the lower castes, who frequent the places of worship of the other group, acculturation is dissociative through differentiation. 58 The Hindus worship a Muslim saint as if worshipping a Hindu divinity by adapting the offering (sugar in particular) and respecting the religious modalities of the officiant. And when the Muslims visit a temple, they take to Hindu practices, of which some are in any case performed at the *dargâh*, without in any way denying their underlying religious culture. In both cases, allegiance does not imply conversion. Besides, the benefits derived from these two ways of worship add up most of the time. Thus, cultural duality is respected through barely differentiated behaviour. While worshipping the saint, it matters little to the Muslims that they are praying

58 We have been inspired by the typology provided by Devereux (See above, fn. 18) which refers to ‘dissociative acculturation through differentiation’ as ‘the adaptation of the mean-segment of the manifest culture, but not of the underlying culture’ (p. 283).
in the Hindu way. For, in this culturally autonomous space the absorption of techniques of the dominant group in no way weakens their feeling of being, in the strongest sense of the term, Muslim. Such perfectly integrated acculturation shocks only the followers of a scriptural Islam and ethnologists working on India. Finally, the Islamic identity gets strengthened when Muslims are excluded at the time of some solemn worship of a Hindu divinity. This designation as non-Hindu is then translated in religious terms, the fact of segregation being interpreted as the effect of belonging to the Mohammedan community. Such defensive isolation characterizes a reactionist identity, which, in the long run, could cause an ostentatious differentiation. But the culture of the dominated may in no way be termed as deficient. In spite of their subjugation, the Muslims are not passive; in response to the Bānajīga manipulations and show of strength, they too borrow, alter, and reverse accounts, juxtapose apparently contradictory cultural schemas but ones which satisfy them. Of course, they act in such a way because they are constrained to do so and use the methods of their adversaries, adapting to them as best as they can. But in doing so, they participate fully in the fabrication of a social space where cultural organization is structured; for models (indigenous) both complementary and contradictory circulate in the same field. This enables both the communities to assert, deny or perpetuate their respective identities, but in relation to an interaction that makes both sides adjust to each other. What is the outcome? Though Indian society is still governed by a devolution of status or ranks, and definitions of identity or community belonging continue to be prescribed, it is not unfamiliar with social history; that is to say that individuals and groups do enjoy a certain amount of free play, albeit within a framework of restrictive norms.

Tradition and Modernity

Given the fact that the subcontinent is going through a series of major convulsions, it may seem trivial to dwell on an example as limited as that of Saundatti. Discussing at length minor details regarding worship and mythology appears to be more anecdotal than anything else. As for the transformations observed, they affect only a handful of actors placed in an extremely localized context. But, when all is said and done, does not all anthropology always boil down to the 'anecdotal'? Particularly in societies where traditional and modern structures make up, in a novel canvas somewhat like the paintings and sculptures of F. Stella, a complex whole, sharply contrasted and ambiguous but in which, as E. Gellner said, the most striking aspect is the importance attached to singularity. That being

the case, considering particular traits as negligible is missing symptomatic events, forgetting that often what appears to be minor contains traces of deep changes; in short, one could well run the risk of failing to see the whole. We would do better therefore to pay heed to the advice of the historian C. Ginzburg, and consider these events to be 'clues' which make anthropology somewhat like a police enquiry.⁶⁰ Through the adoption of such a method, micro-events assume a paradigmatic value.

From the micro-level, we thus need to go on to the macro-level. The comparative ethnography of the worship of a goddess and a saint leads us to three general conclusions.

First, it shows how, the demographic imbalance notwithstanding, both Hindus and Muslims construct a tradition of which they still share⁶¹—for how much longer, it is difficult to tell—a few elements, rearranging accounts to suit their interests, changing their behaviour according to the circumstances, adapting discourse and practice to the needs of the situation. Neither religious symbols nor social behaviour can be reduced to statistical data or systems simply inherited and mechanically reproduced. Contrary to L. Dumont's idea, there is less and less of that normative system of ideas which a sociology of values could apprehend;⁶² a contrario to C. Geertz' postulate, there are no 'cultural givens'⁶³ but ideological and practical configurations continuously renegotiated by the agents.⁶⁴ This observation radically alters both the conception of religion, increasingly instrumental, and the practices of the agents, who are today far more inclined to resort to manipulations, even if it means invoking the most archaic traits of culture.

Such a study also suggests that the growing consciousness of one's identity, previously less marked and more segmented, is transforming the actors to such an extent that a day may come when they refuse to share the symbols and rituals that allowed them to co-exist before. This is not to idealize the past. It is certainly not our contention that earlier relations between the two groups were based on peaceful co-existence or that there was complete cultural integration free from any conflict. Acculturation or syncretism does not mean symbiosis! Hinduism was never a monolithic religion but rather an amorphous organization, a juxtaposition of extremely


⁶¹ M. Gaborieau recalls, very rightly so, in 'Les Ordres Mystiques dans le sous-continent indien: un point de vue ethnologique' in A. Popovic and G. Veinstein, eds., *Les Ordres Mystiques dans l'Islam. Cheminements et situation actuelle*, Paris, 1986, p. 126, that this is not a new idea as it has been put forward, as early as 1831, by Garcin de Tassy.


⁶⁴ From ethnomethodology we have borrowed the constitutive concept of social interaction, defined as a negotiated and temporary order, thanks to which the actors are able to construct daily life.
flexible castes and sects, very often in conflict with each other. The case of the Lingāyat-Virashaivas alone illustrates how success in business followed by an elevation in social rank gave them the right to persecute the Jain monks and destroy their images in Karnataka. However, it was not a question of the Lingāyat ‘community’ versus the Jain ‘community’; only a few segments of the sect were involved. The same is true for Andhra Pradesh where a Virashaiva group grabbed the Shri-Shailam temple in the fourteenth century, deliberately destroying the old inscriptions so as to erase even the slightest trace of the Hindu priests in charge before them. As for the Muslims, examples of ‘internal’ conflicts between Sunnis and Shias are legion. Be that as it may, one can cite countless instances of kings extending their patronage to religious institutions of communities other than their own. While the notions of ‘Islamic community’ and ‘Hindu community’ have undoubtedly existed in India for a very long time, their meaning has always been very fluid. It was only after the Independence movement, the birth of Pakistan and the rise of fundamentalism and nationalism that they became ‘guiding’ principles. The paradox—though in India this formulation is far too theoretical—is that the creation of an avowedly ‘secular’ democratic state which wishes to do away with the idea that society is made solely of religious groups by emphasizing the legal rights of individuals, electoral choice, employment on the basis of merit, should end up favouring the crystallization of identities, inter-community rivalry and tension, or the mobilization of increasingly large sections of society for political or economic ends.

Finally, this study reveals, on a reduced scale, the fundamental transformation India is undergoing. The subcontinent is today beginning to

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65 Thapar, in ‘Syndicated Moksha?’, broadly retraces all the major, sometimes violent, tensions between Hindu sects or communities that the Indian civilization experienced. Orientalists had no mean hand in contributing to the fabrication of such an Indian religion drawing from the monotheistic religious models and their ecclesiastical organization. ‘The work of integrating a vast collection of myths, beliefs, rituals and laws into a coherent religion and of shaping an amorphous heritage into a rational faith known as ‘Hinduism’ were endeavours initiated by Orientalists.’: D. Knopf, ‘Hermeneutics versus History’, Journal of Asian Studies, 39, 3, 1980.


68 To the extent that M. Hassan, ‘Sectarianism in Indian Islam: The Shia/Sunni divide in the United Provinces’, The Indian Economic and Social History Review, 27, 2, 1990, supports that the cleavage was, in Northern India, more marked and violent than that between Hindus and Muslims.

69 Such examples are given by M. Hassan, ‘Competing symbols and shared codes: Inter-Community relations in modern India’, in Gopal, ed., Anatomy of a Confrontation, p. 112ff.

70 For the paradoxal effect the imposition of a democratic framework on the Indian sociological framework had, an essential reading: R. Kothari, Politics in India, Delhi, 1970; the example of the Lingayats compared to other representative groups is presented by J. Assayag in ‘Tocqueville chez Kipling. De la Démocratie en Inde—tradition et modernité’, Archives des Sciences Sociales des Religions, 67, 1, 1989.
resemble increasingly the image that the nineteenth century administrators, officials and British observers had projected of it,"71 that of society divided into two strictly compartmentalized communities. As J.M. Brown has said so succinctly, 'The British tended to break up the Indian population in terms of community and analyzed Indian society as a plural one of different peoples who needed special outlets in political life."72 Now these 'imagined religious communities', to use the expression given by the historian R. Thapar,"73 have begun to perceive each other in fundamentally hostile terms. That is why today it is difficult for competing religious symbols to co-exist, let alone be shared, in a society that officially claims to be wedded to secularism. Unfortunately, it seems likely that soon a day will come, if it has not already happened, when Muslims will consider Hindus as kāfirs (non-believers) and Hindus will view Muslims as yavanas (foreigners) with whom one should not mix and who should be kept at a distance.

71 Under the impetus of James Mill, The History of British in India, London, 1826 (reprinted in 1982). This book was to shape the conception of India for several generations of historians and administrators in the nineteenth century; see Thapar, Mukhia and Chandra, Communalism and the Writing of Indian History, p. 4.