After Shoghi’s death, who died issueless and intestate, the Universal House of Justice, first elected by the first International Bahá’ís Congress held in London in April 1963, acts as the supreme administrative body and has assumed permanent headship of the Bahá’í community. In contrast to all other present Bahá’í bodies, its membership is confined to nine men. Elected once in every five years at an international convention of the Bahá’í national assembly members, it conducts its work as a spiritual assembly. To date a total of 16 men served as its members, including three originally elected in 1963, its membership changing only as a result of death or retirement. Like the Shi‘í mujtahids, the House is empowered to legislate on matters not incorporated in the Bahá’í Holy books. Besides providing directive guidance, the House has collected and published a large number of writings of Bahá’ulláh, Báb, ‘Abd al-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi.

The total number of Bahá’ís in the world is now claimed to be five million mostly living in USA and Canada, Australia and New Zealand, South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. The Pacific is one of the most important areas having the only Bahá’í head of the state in the world, Malietoa Tanumafili II of Western Samoa and the first House of Worship in the region outside Australia, opened in 1984. They have radio stations in Latin America and have opened schools and dispensaries, like Christian missionaries, for the lower segments of the society, particularly in the Third World, which have proved very effective weapons for the propagation of their Faith.

Ali Raza Naqavi*


Until recently the study of Sufism has mainly been the domain of orientalists and historians. From the perspective of orientalists, contemporary shrine cults predominantly appear as degradations of classical Sufism into ‘decadence’ characterised by superstition and magical practices. Historians, on the other hand, have for long emphasised the syncretism of saint worship, depicting it as part of a process of ‘indigenisation’ of Islam

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and rendering saint worship as basically a Hindu institution. But in this study we have to do with anthropological studies of Muslim practices associated with shrines and saints.

The encounter of Hindus and Muslims at shrines of saints is a reunion of men divided into two groups, who devalorize each other's values and who are nevertheless associated. Hindus construct the saint as a deity, while for Muslims he was/is an extraordinary man.

Muslims do not perceive the presence of Hindus at shrines as indicative of non-Islamic practices. On the contrary, the symbolic repertoires of regional saints' cults in South Asia reinforce beliefs in the universalism of Islam.

For the citizens of post-colonial societies the experiential reality of modernity reveals a striking contrast existing between the rationalized authority of the state and charisma established as an embodied quality exemplary persons. While the state and its politicians make public institutions subservient to their selfish interest, the lodges of South Asian Sufis are made available to the common welfare and are set apart as spaces of emotional good will. Processions to and from shrines push individuals toward immersion in a charismatic group. In highlighting the continued vitality of South Asia up to the present, the reader is challenged to probe more deeply into the embodiments of Sufi charismatic organization in the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent, characterized by their historical co-existence with 'Hindu' beliefs and practices.

In line with the purpose of the book it is illustrated with evocative plates of the rituals and their performers.

To sum up, this study demonstrates the mass of concrete opportunities Western students have at their disposal to participate in South Asian Sufi life if they are eager to understand Muslim mysticism in its immediate surroundings.

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