The Sufi, Sunni, Shia Dynamics in India: Salafism, Sectarianism and the Resilience of Dargah Culture

Sectarianism has in the last decade become an important lens for explaining the politics of the Middle East, in particular when it comes to relations between Sunni and Shia Muslims in countries like Iraq and Syria. Often neglected, however, is that intra-Muslim competition and tensions are neither confined to the Middle East nor are they a recent phenomenon. Sectarianism is also not exclusively a phenomenon of Sunni versus Shia. Our proposal offers to study Muslim politics in India, a country in which Muslims are a minority but nonetheless represent—at 180 million people—the second largest Muslim community in the world. Here competition over power and influence between Muslims of various orientations and sects (Sufis, various Sunni reformists, Shiias) provides an opportunity to show the ways new forms of religious politics and authority are taking shape and which reflect broader transformations that affect Muslim belief and practice both at the periphery as well as at the center of the world of Islam. Our project aims to analyze the interactions between more “traditional” and historically rooted sects of Islam (Sufis and Shiias) and reformist Sunni streams of the faith (e.g. Salafis, Tablighis, Deobandis). One of the most intriguing, and as yet unstudied, consequence of these dynamics is the banding together of Shiias and Sufis against the Sunni reformists. This is leading to new forms of religious authority and ways of regulating sacred space. Such developments are harbingers of larger religious and political transformations which transcend South Asia and have global consequences.

Sufi traditions under pressure

A major specificity of Islam in South Asia lies in the Sufi tradition, which has dominated religious belief and practice for centuries. This tradition dates back to the medieval era, during which time Sufi missionaries helped propagate the tenets of Islam among the Hindu population, even as they negotiated their charismatic authority with Muslim rulers who sought legitimacy. The strength of this tradition is also reflected in the geographical spread of South Asian Sufism since pilgrims travel until today from Pakistan, Bangladesh and the Indian Ocean littoral regions to visit the tombs of Sufi saints in India. These tomb complexes, known as dargahs, are sacred sites where mosques and madrasas are also built, sometimes, next to the mausoleum. Although they are clearly identified as Islamic institutions, dargahs are also visited by non-Muslims (Hindus, Sikhs, Christians and others) who believe in the blessing power (baraka) of the saints buried there. As devotees, they come to obtain fulfillment of their wishes (mannat), to present ex-votos and/or to benefit from the spiritual atmosphere of the place.

The “dargah culture” – as defined by Carla Bellamy1 - is today under attack, not only from outside because of the hostility of Hindu nationalists towards a tradition that mixes their religion with Islam, but also from within because of the opposition of other Muslims who resent exactly the same thing: the hybrid character of “shared sacred sites”2. Historically, critics have come from two different directions. On the one hand, were modernist reformers, like Sayyid Ahmed Khan (1817-1898) of Aligarh, who despised what they considered to be dens of superstitious belief and backwardness. On the other hand, were the fundamentalist

reformers, a nebulae that includes Salafis, on whom we will focus in our study because they are the most active today in the clash with Sufism and its institutions.

Salafism is the legacy of a socio-religious reform movement dating back to the 19th century in India. In fact, one of the most important Salafi schools of thought in the world, the Ahl-i-Hadis, was born in India with its strongholds in Bhopal and Delhi. Some of the Arab proponents of Wahhabism studied in India and have been greatly influenced by the Ahl-i-Hadis. In our project, we will also consider the growing influence of another major Sunni reformist tradition that was born in the late 19th century in northern India, in the seminary of Deoband, from where it spread to Kabul and across the Subcontinent to Dhaka, and beyond. Last but not least, in the first decades of the 20th century, the Tablighi Jama'at took shape in Rajasthan, in reaction to Hindu revivalism, and initiated its own methods for the re-Islamization of society from below.

All these Sunni groups, indeed movements, have denounced the Sufi cult of saints as an imitation of Hinduism and therefore, as an un-Islamic practice (bid'a or reprehensible innovation) that has to be eradicated – in spite of a great deal of ambivalence vis-à-vis Sufism (due to the prestige of saintly figures and sacred sites) among the Tablighis and the Deobandis at large. In India, these attacks have not resulted in the same kind of violence as in Pakistan, where shrines have been repeatedly targeted over the last decade or so. The few bombings and demolitions of daragahs which took place in Rajasthan (in Ajmer) and Gujarat (during the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom) were due to Hindu nationalist groups. But daragah culture has come under pressure from within the Muslim fold and its opponents, who enjoy the support of some individuals and institutions in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, try to dissuade the Muslims of India from participating in and perpetuating the cult of saints.

The Sunni/Shia tension

Besides Sufi culture, Sunni reformists and revivalists have also targeted Shia Muslims. The last decade has seen the emergence of intra-Muslim sectarianism as an explanatory category for understanding the politics of the Middle East. In particular, the competition and violence that has pitted Sunnis versus Shias, as well as the nations of Saudi Arabia and Iran, have often been understood as rooted in an age-old confessional rivalry. The rivalry between groups and nations, of course, might be over resources and capital of various kinds (symbolic, economic, political) but the language used by the actors is invariably religious and more specifically sectarian. In the Arab world, the state has played a dominant role in defining how actors behave, what language is used and who gets patronage and protection. So, for example, the Shia-dominated government in Baghdad has resorted to sectarianism in its discourse as well as in its allocation of resources, forcing Sunnis to react and respond in similar fashion. In Syria and in Saudi Arabia, the respective governments of Bashar al-Assad and the Al Saud, have also resorted to tactics and strategies which are guided by a sectarian logic. While the Arab context of sectarian competition is now better studied and understood, the same cannot be said of South Asia. Our proposed project aims to study and explain sectarianism in South Asia and our respective universities have complementary comparative advantages that, when brought together, can generate important new insights and scholarship on this little studied yet important topic.

Intra-Muslim debates and tensions in India offer an interesting and somewhat different counterpoint to the situation in the Middle East. Here, the state has been less of a central actor
in fueling sectarian rivalry between Muslims. The state in India is not identified with a specific sectarian or confessional group – Delhi is not representative of Sufism in the way Tehran stands for Shia power and influence or Riyadh for Salafi Islam. Furthermore, the sectarian divide of the Arab world – which is primarily between Sunnis and Shias – does not map on well to the situation in India, where a more complex and variegated religious scene prevails. In the Arab world, for instance, Sufis do not seem to play a leading role in the sectarian drama that we see unfolding. Furthermore, Sunni political leadership is either Salafi or dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood, whereas the Shia are either followers of Iran’s leadership and its doctrine of wilayat al-faqih (guardianship of the jurist) or the traditional quietist scholar hawza in Najaf. By way of contrast, Indian Muslims consist of Sufis, Twelver and Ismaili Shias, as well as Sunnis of various kinds (Deobandis, Ahl-i-Hadis, Barelwis, Tablighis). Furthermore, it appears the Sufis, who are nominally Sunni and whose activities are often centered on shrine complexes called dargahs, have increasingly aligned themselves, religiously and politically, with Shia scholars and groups as they have come under pressure from Sunnis who disapprove of their beliefs and practices (more on this below). This represents a phenomenon that is worthy of study in itself and one that has no analog in the Arab world. There, Sufis have often rallied to the state (e.g., in Abu Dhabi and Egypt) in an attempt to gain a strong patron against sectarian rivals such as the Salafis.

The Sufi-Shia rapprochement

Suni reformist efforts, including at times the use of violence, has fostered an alliance between two of its enemies, the proponents of Sufism and the Shias. In India, the Shias represent a small minority. If one includes all the Ismaili groups that have settled in the country, the Shias might represent about one fifth of the total Muslim community. But some of these groups, which have received some support from Iran, have been historically influential because of their political clout. Indeed, a number of ruling families adopted Shiism (like in Lucknow, the erstwhile capital of a Shia dynasty) while some Shias have remarkable economic achievements to their credit (in Gujarat and Mumbai especially).

The rapprochement between Sufis and Shias is not only due to the fact that they are facing a common enemy. It is also the result of older affinities. Some of the most popular Sufi saints hail from geographical crucibles of Shiism (Moinuddin Chishti came from Sistan, for instance) and their respective practice of Islam is somewhat similar. After all, the manner in which the Shia commemorate Imams Ali and Husayn at the time of Muharram is similar to the processions that honor Sufi saints (urs). Furthermore, the singing/musical performances associated with dargah settings (qawwali) is often dedicated to praising Imam Ali. Some Sunnis, of course, commemorate the Prophet Muhammad, such as during his birthday celebration (‘id milad al-nabi), but such rituals are not as central to their identity and, moreover, have become highly contested due to Salafi polemics that condemn such veneration as inappropriate and bordering on associationism (shirk).

Case studies

The “Sufi, Sunni, Shia Dynamics in India” project intends to use three entry points for studying the issues mentioned above.
1. The Indian variety of Salafism will be dealt with through a specific case study. Salafis, who are better known as the Ahl-i-Hadis in India, have an active presence throughout the country. They represent the third most important organized group of Muslims in the subcontinent. The Ahl-i-Hadis have built a series of educational institutions, the most important of which is the Jamia Salafiyya in Varanasi, and have organized themselves under an association called the Jam'iyyat Ahl-i-Hadis Hind (the All India Ahl-i-Hadis Association) which is based in New Delhi and traces its establishment to 1906. This association manages several thousand educational institutions spread throughout the country and receives funding from the Persian Gulf countries, most importantly from Saudi Arabia. Going back to more than a century, Salafi networks of scholarship, business and finance connect the Arab world to India. The aim of the association is the spread a Salafi interpretation of Islam throughout the Subcontinent, and it does this – other than through its teaching institutions – by an active series of print publications (journals, pamphlets and books) and an online Internet presence (websites, social media and YouTube). A plethora of videos and social media sites promote Salafi events and teachings in Urdu, Hindi, Arabic and other languages. The movement is centered also on a number of leading personalities, typically scholars who were educated in Saudi Arabia and often enjoy appointments in Saudi-sponsored pan-Islamic organizations such as the Muslim World League. And while these Salafis, their institutions and activities are rooted in an Indian political and social landscape, they are deeply engaged in a competition with other Muslims groups, contesting the teachings of Sufis and Shias in particular. The basic accusation that Salafis level at their Muslim opponents is that their beliefs and practices are not rooted in an originalist interpretation of the faith, and that these have been corrupted by reprehensible innovations (bida’) originating from Hinduism and other non-Muslim influences. The need for reform therefore requires acknowledging and abandoning these “foreign” influences and “reverting” to the true faith. In effect, the Salafis are engaged in a project that would strip Indian Islam of one of its core constituent elements, that of Sufism and its shrine-centers. In other words, they are involved in a radical project of producing their own distinctive forms of religious authority – centered on their scholars and a conception of Islam that emphasizes a particular orthopraxy–while simultaneously undermining other forms of Indian religiosity that are rooted in historical (charismatic masters [pirs]) and institutional formations (dargahs) and that are many centuries old. They are helped in this by the rise of new forms of authority, knowledge production and mobility in the modern world, such as mass literacy and labor migration to the Persian Gulf as well as to urban centers in India itself.

This portion of the project aims to study how Salafis have constituted their authority and the nature and content of their polemics against the Sufis, Shias and non-Salafi Sunnis who do not share their particular interpretation of Islam. It will consist of fieldwork in the Salafi centers of scholarship and education (seminaries such as the Jamia Salafia in Varanasi and the Jamia Sanabil in New Delhi), their association’s headquarter, as well as conducting interviews with the leading scholars, teachers and students of the movement. In addition, the study will detail their writings and their online presence. There might be a socio-political dimension to Salafism in India, namely that it manifestation might be related in some way to caste hierarchies and politics, but this needs to be studied, and this project very much aims to uncover such dynamics if they do indeed exist. There is a significant Salafi presence in the state of Bihar and this has yet to be studied. Visits to these centers will therefore be
undertaken. The connections that Salafis maintain with Arabia and other overseas centers of Salafi activism and learning will also be studied. One particular issue that will be highlighted is how these transnational connections are instrumentalized or leveraged within India by the different actors and to what effects. Finally, no study of the Salafis can be complete without taking into account the reactions they engender in their opponents in terms of polemical writings and other responses (political, social, economic, violence, activist). It is to the opponents of the Salafis that the proposal will now turn.

2. The tensions between Sunni militants and Sufism will be illustrated by the opposition between Tablighis and dargahs of the Chishti order. Two sacred sites will be studied in detail, the Dargah Sharif of Ajmer (Rajasthan) and Nizamuddin in Delhi. The former is probably the most popular Sufi shrine in South Asia, not only do Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs visit it, but even Hindu nationalist leaders do the same. The Dewan, a descendant of the saint buried in the Dargah, Moinuddin Chishti himself, is recognized as the most prestigious Sufi figure of India and is an unofficial spokesperson for the Muslims of the country. But the Dargah of Nizamuddin, who was a disciple of Moinuddin, is almost equally popular and influential because of its location in the Indian capital, New Delhi. In Nizamuddin, the tension between the Sufi culture and its critics is more palpable because the headquarters of the Tablighi Jamaat is situated in the same locale (mohalla) (in fact, the pilgrims have to pass by the Tablighis in order to enter the Sufi shrine). The team in charge of fieldwork in Ajmer and Nizamuddin will study the facets of these tensions which may find expression in proselytizing activities, intimidation, social boycott and even violence. Secondly, the convergence between the Chishtis and the Shias will be scrutinized. Near Ajmer, in Taragarh, the alliance between Sufis and Shias has found expression in the refashioning of a nearby Dargah, along a mix of Iranian and Iraqi architectural styles. In fact, this shrine is decorated with photographs of the shrines of Qom and Najaf that it is supposed to replicate. The degree of convergence between Sufi culture and Shiism will be assessed and measured and the role of Sunni opponents in this process will be analyzed as well.

3. The affinities between the dargah culture and Shiism will be studied in a different context, in Amroha. This small qasbah town, located in the state of Uttar Pradesh, has been one of the historical centers of Shiism in North India since the eighteenth century. Although the Shia never constituted more than 15% of the total population of the city, they have exerted a strong influence over its social, ritual and cultural life through their patronage networks. Historically, this dominant minority – which built its wealth on land revenue – has maintained close ties with the local “Sufi” population, if only by virtue of lineage. Most local Shias claim to be descendants of Amroha’s patron saint, Hazrat Sayyid Sharifuddin Shah Vilayat, who settled in the vicinity in the early thirteenth century. And while the sectarian affiliation of the saint has been a matter of controversy – and legal dispute – since the colonial period, genealogy has been a source of intimacy between Shia Sayyids and the local “Sufi” population. So much so that, even as the orthodox Shia frowned upon some aspects of the cult of the saints (such as the celebration of the death anniversary of local saints), the major dargah of Amroha is currently co-managed by Sunni and Shia caretakers. Like the sectarian affiliation of Shah Vilayat himself, the co-management of his shrine – and the sharing of its resources – has been a source of conflict since the early twentieth century. To date, however, these conflicts have rarely escalated into violent outbursts
and they remain less acute than those opposing the Shia to Sunni reformists (Deobandis and Salafis). While investigating local disputes, many of which trace their roots to the colonial period, this contribution aims to historicize and problematize local politics of religious coexistence, most notably by retracing the formation of a “peacekeeping habitus” among Amroha’s population, that is, a set of attitudes, practices and habits oriented towards the expression of goodwill and the peaceful resolution of conflicts.

Methodology: While the Sunni reformist discourse against Shia and the Sufi culture will not be looked at in great detail because it is rather well known, the investigators of this project will pay closer attention to the scriptural and historical roots of the Indian brand of Salafism and the concrete relations between the Salafis, on the one hand, and the Shia and Sufi orders on the other hand, as well as to the responses of these two sects of Islam to this threat. Their convergence in reaction to this common threat will be approached ethnographically in the locations of North India mentioned above. Interviews will be held with key figures, including the caretakers of the dargahs (diwans, khadims, mutawalis, mujawirs, etc.), leaders of Sufi orders, Imams and Qazis, and of course Salafi preachers and leaders. Participatory observation will take place at the time of urs (functions organized on the death anniversary of a Sufi saint) and festivals such as Muharram. The ethnographic material gathered through fieldwork will be supplemented by the examination of historical sources, including legal documents, religious pamphlets, vernacular historical accounts (tarikh), biographical compendiums (tazkirah), and family genealogies (shajarah).

This collective research will include two workshops – one at Princeton University and one at Sciences Po – in order to maximize cross-fertilization. The papers presented in these workshop, by scholars and doctoral students, will be published as a special issue in a journal dealing with religious studies or South Asia.