CHAPTER FOUR

Sacred Spaces: Navigating Oases of Harmony and Tolerance

Travel Writing essentially diffuses information about the unknown and the unfamiliar. What is perceived by the writer and what he translates into words comprise the multiple layers that the writer navigates in the transition from ‘travel experience ’to ‘travel text.’ While doing so, he chooses the experiences according to his preference or to match the expectations of the people for whom he intends to write. A puritanical attitude displayed by a section of people in a democratic set up drove Yoginder Sikand to undertake an unusual journey. The journey takes him to known places like Shabarimala and Shirdi. It also takes him to lesser known places and shrines of many Sufi saints, mainly in the northern part of India. The travel to syncretic places is undertaken mainly to see for himself the changes that have come about in those places.

Sikand’s book Sacred Spaces examines how society through the ages has relegated and oppressed certain sections, destroying some of the cults and traditions that had taken root in India. The book also gives a peek into the sects that are not part of the mainstream society.

Syncretism or fusion of different types of beliefs and religions is a common phenomenon in multiculturalism, which is an important identity of our country. Historically, India has played host to a number of people and has been a breeding ground for many cultures and cults. Sociologists have recorded the plurality that exists in India while anthropologists have shown the varied influences that have shaped our society and communities. However, a traveler’s notes and observations reveal newer and different perspectives. For instance, writers like Amitav Ghosh, Pankaj Mishra and Dom Moraes aim to assess the influence of socio-political developments on human attitudes and relationships. One such writer who explores religious syncretism by visiting pilgrim centers across India is Yoginder Sikand.

India has a rich legacy of being tolerant to many cultures and religions. Existing in mutual harmony over long periods enabled the different religions and sects to borrow customs and practices from one another that gave rise to syncretic places of worship. Monotheism of Christianity and Islam did not stop the borrowing and exchange of customs and practices. Kings who have ruled over the multi-cultural society of India envisaged a society and culture that could
draw people from diverse religions. Akbar’s Din-illahi was one such dream. Yoginder Sikand travels to twenty five syncretic places of worship in India. Except for Valliankani, all other places that he visits are shared places of worship for Muslims and Hindus.

‗Hinduism‘ that gained popularity in the 19th and 20th centuries served different purposes. According to the author, it was used by some to maintain the social order. Most of the Indians who came under the banner of Hindus during the last two centuries were able to use the banner to bring into its fold a large number of people and thereby become a dominant force in the society. The broad umbrella that was created was not successful in entirely eliminating the caste system that has successfully divided our society for ages. Attempts made to bridge the gap by creating places ‘shared’ by different faiths existed for some time. But, political and social turmoil in the country has resulted in the decimation of many such syncretic places. The threat to the co-existence of different faiths led the writer to go in search of such places.

Yoginder Sikand’s book, Sacred Spaces reads like an enthralling travelogue, but a closer look reveals how the postcolonial society marginalizes, persecutes and decimates certain sections of society. Underlying the extensive geographical exploration is the author’s rather serious purpose - to explore the shared religious traditions of our land, with the objective of pointing to ways in which people and groups can come to terms with multiple identities.

The main concern of the book is that in many parts of India, identities of religious groups were not as strait-jacketed as the author feels it is in the present times and in such a situation, syncretic places flourished.

Historically, India has been witness to a vibrant society that absorbed the differences among varied religious groups. This gave rise to syncretic places of worship which remained that way for a long time. According to Sikand’s observations, it is mainly in the post independence period that there has been a rise in the fundamentalist groups among both the Hindus and Muslims, bringing about changes in the attitudes of people and also in the syncretic places that once flourished.

An important point that Sikand emphasizes is that in places like Sabari Malai and Veliankanni, changes came about in the colonial and pre-colonial period, with the dominant group in society taking control of the popular deities. The author feels that it is in these ‘syncretic’ or ‘liminal’
spaces that a person can find answers to the problems of disharmony and discordance that our
country is confronted with. It is here that the universality of mankind, transcending the barriers
of religion, caste and class can be found. An ethnographic account of these places reveals the
rich heritage of the country and the lives of the saints who were successful in uniting people
under one umbrella.

The substantial body of literature that Yoginder Sikand has produced speaks about his interest in
the minority communities and their role in society. With the spread of terrorism globally, there
seems evident a propensity to view a particular community the world over with suspicion. In
such a scenario, one of Sikand’s works, Bastions of the Believers: Madrasas and Islamic
Education in India, presents a different perspective.

Sikand travels across India, visiting important Madrasas to understand how education and
information is imparted, and also to analyze the situation in an objective way. The concern that
he has towards society and all the sections of the society, mainly the Muslim minorities, is
expressed in his works. He takes pride in being a social activist and believes in a secular society.
The main objective of his work involves:

“...explore and promote more liberal and open understandings of Islam, and indeed of all
other faiths, if were to learn to live together despite our differences. Inter faith dialogue,
struggling together for a more peaceful, and at the same time just, social order is, I have
come to believe one of the principle duties confronting committed believers today”.
(Sikand: 2006)

If Bastions... is concerned with Madrasas, Sikand’s Sacred Spaces takes him to the various Sufi
shrines and other syncretic places across the sub-continent. Sikand explores how spiritual
knowledge and formal knowledge are disseminated in Sufi shrines and Madrasas.

Sikand’s journey Sikand that begins with his Bastions traverses Sacred Spaces and moves on to
Beyond the border. Beyond the Border is an attempt to understand the life of ordinary people in
Pakistan. Although Yoginder was not a witness to the Partition, he grew up amidst people who
had been affected by partition. His maternal grandmother had her roots in Pakistan and the
horror stories she recounts had a deep rooted impact on him. Moreover, his knowledge of Islam
was another reason for him to go to Pakistan and get to know the situation first hand. A sense of
mystery is introduced with the title, wherein the reader would want to know something that he has not seen and is not aware of. It can also be interpreted as a work wherein the author tries to perceive something that is known to everyone yet, remains shrouded in mystery. Pakistan is commonly perceived as a hostile country up in arms against India and it is this idea that the author attempts to investigate. It is this myth that the author tries to dispel through his travels across the border and his interactions and discussions with people in Pakistan.

His attempt at reconstructing the idea of Pakistan to himself as well as to the readers is by recording his interactions with the common people. The tales, the woes, the aspirations of the common people in Pakistan are no different from those in any other country.

The immediate threat from society/community to the shared spaces and the intolerance that he observes in the society around him leads Sikand to the different places of worship in India. A good understanding of the emergence of syncretic places, their growth and degeneration, Sikand believes, will help him to understand better the society he lives in. In turn, it can be said without dispute that it is a journey undertaken to realize his position in the society in which he lives and unconsciously tries to construct his identity. What emerges in the travels is the author’s keenness in recording the history of the place and also trying to identify factors or events that led to the development of a particular religion or sect.

The author begins his journey in Kerala and travels up to Kashmir, visiting popular pilgrim places, with the intention of examining the multiple religious cults and communities. Are these religions/cults distinctly different or are they sharply opposed and hostile to one another? Among the common populace, is there mutual antagonism and intolerance or is there a proclivity towards shared practices and beliefs? Do the devout pilgrims remain rigidly loyal to their own religious identity or is there an expression of shared, liberal multiple identities?

Travelling to various syncretic places, trying to get a firsthand experience of the place, the writer broadly analyses the brahminical tradition and the development of the Indian society that was under the influence of different religions. The analysis helps him in understanding how religion has played a pivotal role in society and the various ways in which people over the ages have appropriated it. A strong nexus between religion and social hierarchy is also analyzed by the
writer. Some of the reasons for the brahmanical tradition to be dominant in the society draw flak from the author.

“The Brahmins carefully guarded their privileged access to their religious texts, laying down stern punishments for ‘lower’ transgressors.” (Sikand 2003:4)

Sikand traces the socio-cultural developments beginning from the time the colonizers set foot in India till the recent times with a critical eye and closely follows the changes that came about in society due to the influence of the Europeans. According to him, factors within the society, mainly the caste hierarchy as well as external factors like the effects of colonization and the rise of the Hindu Nationalism in the recent times were responsible for the creation of ‘liminal society’.

A pattern emerges in the journey undertaken by Sikand. He starts from the South and moves upwards. He does not reveal any information about his itinerary. He uses public transport while accessing remote areas and at times relies on hitch hiking also. Except for details like ‘the nine hour bus ride to the town of Chickmagalur’, ‘the train pulled into Kopergaan station’, the author does not divulge anything about the actual travel. He does not engage in any kind of conversation with the co-passengers but at times tries to strike conversations with common people in the places he visits. He exhibits a thorough knowledge of the place, both historically and culturally. The historical significance of a place and the changes that he observes over a period of time is given objectively and research about the places he visits has been an integral part of the journey. The places he travels to cover a vast geographical stretch of the country, thereby giving him an opportunity to observe the plurality and multiculturalism that exists in India.

The travel that Seth undertakes is also his quest for identity. Although he vehemently argues that he is least influenced by the caste system of our country, Sikand fails to think of a solution to the problem that has been troubling many minds in our society. Visiting syncretic places, Sikand tries to unravel the complexity of hierarchy and caste system that is so pervasive in our society. Sikand tends to empathize with the marginalized in the society and is sometimes critical of the dominant Hindus who have tried to ‘acculturise’ the deity in Veliank anni or the fakir of Shirdi. Bitterness and cynicism of the author is quite evident in the narrative. Once again, a major
question that erupts in the reader’s mind is whether the cynicism is the outcome of his experiences in life which to a certain measure he has revealed in the essay that he wrote in *Counter Currents. Org*, in 2012.

In the olden days, accounts by travelers served as a guide to people who intended to take the same route. The information was also useful for the Empire to plan its strategies and policies. Travel writing had to correspond to some amount of authenticity and so travel writers of yore were cautious about this aspect and what they reported was ‘adequate’ rather than ‘accurate’. The same has been followed by Sikand in the places he visits. The description found in travel narratives can be verified through different sources and they prove to be ‘adequate’.

Sikand gives minute details of places like ‘across the bus-stand stood a large arch built across the main road’, ‘the short journey from Kopergaon to Shirdi threw up a picture of abjection and poverty. Mud hovels crumbled under half-eaten thatched roofs.’ Most of the places he visits are decrepit and have gained importance mainly because of the presence of the saints who lived there. It is also ironical that nowhere does he describe order, prosperity, or peace. Does it mean that in the world we are living, the very purpose that these Saints spent their entire lives is lost? In his conclusion, the writer observes,

“I had expected to find myself travelling to oases of harmony and tolerance, inhabited by people of different faiths. I was, however, to be disappointed. Many shrines I visited were now centers of furious contestation.” (Sikand 2003: 269)

During the course of their travel, writers get to meet an array of people and some of them play a vital role in the journey. The dreams and aspirations of such people are discussed at length in the book. It is a technique adopted by many travel writers to break the monologue that may at times become overbearing. Burce Chatwin adopts this technique in his travelogue *The Songlines*.

“And by incorporating into the text other voices and other points of view, this dialogic or *polyphonic* narrative technique arguably works to ‘decentre’ the narratorial self.” (Thompson 2011: 127)
This technique is adopted by Sikand when he introduces Salman in the last chapter. Salman talks about himself and his aspirations. He tells stories of atrocities by the militants and the army personnel that Sikand has heard or read about. This device melts the ‘narratorial self’

“... as the narrator’s consciousness comes to seem a medium in which multiple other consciousness are mingled and distilled.” (Thompson 2011:127)

The first place Sikand visits is the Sabari Malai temple that has been witnessing a swelling crowd year after year. Kerala is described by the author more or less in the same tone that he uses when he speaks of the Indian society in the introduction:

“As elsewhere in India, religion was employed as a convenient means to buttress ‘upper’ caste hegemony and keep the ‘lower’ castes firmly in their place.” (Sikand 2003: 21)

“...Yet despite the unrelenting Brahminical assault on popular religion, traces of the original Dravidian faith can still be found in Kerala today…” (Sikand 2003: 22)

Sikand tries to trace the origin of the worship of Ayyappa that is not limited only to Kerala, but is found in most of the South-Indian States. He calls the worshippers a ‘cult’ that has spread to many states. The author’s skepticism comes to the fore when he recounts what mythology has to offer to the existence of the Ayyappa temple in Kerala. He tries to link the word ‘sharanam’ uttered by Ayyappa devotees to the word used by Buddhists. He also makes an attempt to understand the presence of Ayyappa in the pre-Aryan period and how the native Gods came to be one among the pantheon of Hindu Gods. The writer gets to know the significance of the place through mythology, history and legends that abound the place. The legend is packed with a mixture of stories that depict the faith of people over the ages. He does not enter into any conversation with other pilgrims but does not conceal the fact that he is not a pilgrim. He says he is on a ‘holiday’ to the utter surprise of an usher in the temple.

When Sikand sets off to Sabari Malai, he makes it evident that he is not ‘on a pilgrimage’ and so does not follow many of the rituals associated with the pilgrimage, such as going on foot. He makes it quite evident that his objective is different from that of the other pilgrims:

“I joined the vast sea of humanity, conspicuous by my distinctly North Indian looks and the T-shirt and jeans that I was wearing”. (Sikand 2003: 29)
The author’s power of observation and description comes to the fore when he describes the scene that he sees from the bus as it moves out of Chengannur:

“.....it made its way through an endless carpet of paddy fields, and over vast sheets of water and numerous little palm-fringed rivers.......Large dug-out canoes with thatched straw roofs, painted in florid colours, gently made their way down swollen streams.”
(Sikand 2003: 28)

Following the path of the pilgrims, the author has to complete the last lap of the journey to the shrine on foot, an arduous task. The intention of the author is made very clear when he wonders at the ‘irrepressible faith’ of the innumerable people he sees around him. After having a glimpse of the God and the ‘frenzy’ of the pilgrims, the author proceeds to his next destination - another syncretic place, Vailankanni.

The writer reveals his thoughts when he first sets his eyes on the deity, the Blessed Virgin Mary, who stood ‘in all her imperious splendor’. The writer is drawn to the gaudy posters that belonged to different political parties fighting an election and he is witness to a scuffle between two opposing political parties. As soon as he looks at the ‘saree clad’ deity, he thinks,

“...she was clearly not amused, and had raised an eyebrow at the vulgar display of political intrigue and primitive passion that engulfed her feet like Noah’s great flood... relentlessly reviled by Hindu extremists for allegedly being a carefully concealed guise for Western imperialism, Christianity was now being given an Indian garb.” (Sikand 2003: 36)

He traces the legend associated with the land, its history and the colonization that were together responsible for the establishment of the foreign deity in an alien land. Legend traces the presence of the deity to 72AD when one of apostles arrived in the Coromandal Coast after Jesus’s death. Historical evidence goes back to 1605, which records the arrival of an Italian priest, who made Tamil Nadu his home, learnt Sanskrit to please the people and at the same time introduced his religion and culture too.

“Emulating his Brahmin rivals, he rigidly adhered to their practices of purity and pollution in his treatment of the ‘low’ castes, thus seeking to out-Brahmin even the Brahmins themselves.” (Sikand 2003: 38)
The author’s view about Brahmins and their treatment of the others in society is mentioned sarcastically in the above lines. Although the Italian priest, DeNobili, intended to influence the Brahmins of that period, ironically, he became successful in influencing the dalits in the society. The devotees, mainly dalits and the shudras grew in number and the Church itself underwent changes to cater to the needs of its devotees. Instances of ‘Miraculous cures’ became common. One of the legends circulated even to this day speaks of the miracles performed by Mother Mary, such as curing a crippled butter milk seller. Sikand pays attention to the legends and how they have helped in the development of a place where it is only faith that has been drawing people towards it.

The various people with whom he interacts belong to the lower strata of society and their unquestioning devotion to Mother Mary is reflected in their conversations. Acculturation seems to be complete with the ritual of tonsuring the head, a ritual in many South Indian temples being followed in Veliankanni too.

The museum with all its valuables and riches reflects the devotion at another level where devotees like to express their gratitude in kind.

The chapter ends with the author meeting a missionary, working for an American organization. The intention of the missionary seems to be only to earn a livelihood in the name of God. The author sarcastically observes that even in a religious place, where pure faith is expected to be the predominant factor, there are people who exploit naïve devotees by encashing on their sentiments.

Baba Budhan Dargah near Chickmagalur in the Western Ghats is his next destination. He had first heard of Baba Budhan dargah because of the publicity given to a controversial move by a Hindu outfit to free the dargah from the clutches of Muslim control. The inveterate traveler that he is, he confides,

“... and itching to get back to the road. So I decided to head off to the shrine to find things out for myself.” (Sikand 2003: 53)
Adhering to the technique of ‘naive empiricism’ or ‘epistemological decorum’ we find Sikand giving travel details like, ‘winter of 1998’, ‘The nine-hour bus ride to the town of Chikmagalur...’, ‘... the hill of Dada the Sufi, at a height of 6214 feet above sea level...’ etc.

The myth that surrounds the place helps the reader as well as the writer understand the situation better. As always, places that lend themselves to controversies are shrouded in mystery and the myths and legends help people to claim different things about the place. The myth about Baba Budhan revolves around a Pir who is believed to be sent by the Prophet himself to help the people being oppressed by the local ‘palegars’. The Pir rescues in a miraculous way a person who was being punished by the ‘palegars’. The shackles of the prisoner fall apart and the local ‘palegars’ accept the Pir as their guru. A few people converted into Islam and became dada’s followers while some believed him to be Lord Dattatreya. Whatever the case may be, it is significant to note that miracles play a major role in the folklore or the legends that are popular even to this day. The miracles performed by the saints and pirs play a very important role in attracting the masses and this has not diminished with time.

The Deccan region which had a population of both Muslim and Hindu rulers helped the traditions and rituals to be conducted in the dargah. Muslims continued to be in charge of the worship till as late as the 1990s, when the BJP aided by Bajrang Dal claimed to take control of the dargah and wanted to install Hindu Gods inside the dargah. The author fears a communal clash with the increasing Hindu dominance in the region and in the dargah.

There are no interactions with the common people in the chapter devoted to Baba Budhan, except for a brief encounter with a dervish. The dervish speaks of the love that is important to people to stay connected with God:

“Come what may, God is always with those who are faithful to him

Search for God among God’s loved ones

For God is to be found among those smitten by love’ (Sikand 2003 : 68)

Northern Karnataka, a region that has a long history of influential Muslim, Hindu and Lingayat rulers has seen a large presence of Sufi saints. One such popular saint is Shishunala Shariff from a small town near Bidar. Although his compositions are very popular, the place of his origin is
now a nondescript town. Shishunala was a wandering bard who was not interested in establishing his presence in any particular place. Since the lives of Saints like Shishunala are not mired in controversy, the place of their origin largely remain remote and do not attract many people. Saudatti, another pilgrim place visited by Sikand, is known more for the practice of the ‘Devadasi’ system and less for the Sufi shrine that is there. Sikand tries to trace the emergence of ‘Yellamma’, a Goddess worshipped by the dalits and now appropriated by the upper caste Hindus, by declaring that the Goddess is another form of ‘Shakti’. Just as in Shirdi, the mainstream culture has been successful in imposing its views and appropriating the Pirs and Goddesses into their pantheon and worshipping them in their own way.

The sixth chapter deals with the weird and impractical ideas of an eccentric, Deendar Channabasaveshwara of Asif Nagar, who went about with a near militant zeal, converting the Hindus of India to Islam. A close understanding of the Deendar Anjuman sect, makes Sikand realize that:

“Religious syncretism and inter-faith dialogue may not always be what they might appear to be .... Often, they can simply be a pretext for a missionary agenda that, having appropriated elements from other faiths or having established other into the fold of what must be imposed as the only true faith.” (Sikand 2003: 95)

Deendar Anjuman, a sect that was involved in acts of violence in the year 2000 is traced by Sikand. His opinion about the sect is expressed in his words:

“…the hidden agenda slips to reveal the use of dialogue as a means to pursue sinister, often violent ends.” (Sikand 2003: 95)

Sikand does not make any attempt to hide his disapproval of the sect and the maulvis who speak to him about the teachings of their leader and founder, Syyed Siddique Hussain. The Hindu-Muslim antagonism that was felt during the freedom movement was the main reason for Siddique Hussain to pursue the path of serving with a missionary zeal. Siddique Hussain chose to live in Hyderabad which was a state where the majority were Hindus ruled by the Nizam. The higher echelons were occupied by the minority community that led to hostility between the two communities. Sikand says that this hostility or antagonism was not peculiar to Hyderabad, but was a phenomenon observed in many parts of North India. In such a scenario, Siddique Hussain
believed that conversion of all Indians into Islam was the right solution and considered himself to be ordained by the Almighty to do it.

Retracing his steps, Sikand comes to an understanding:

“... how similar the Deendaris seemed to be to their Hindutva foes despite their conflicting claims. Both repeated clichés of universality and respect for all faiths. Yet both were impelled by a fiercely intolerant vision, pedaling fury in the name of faith.”
(Sikand 2003: 115)

Shirdi Sai Baba, one of the rare saints in India has a large number of devotees who cut across all barriers; barriers of religion, class and caste. Sikand traces the popular legend about the Baba’s birth, although there is nothing that the Baba has revealed about himself. According to the legend, Baba, born to Brahmin parents was abandoned, raised by a fakir and taught by a Brahmin. The author does not endorse this legend and feels it is completely fabricated by the dominant section of the society, the Hindus and Brahmins who took Baba in their fold. Again, just as the ‘The Star of the Seas’, it was acculturation that the dominant society exhibited when they were not able to fight or marginalize anything that was against the interest of the dominant society.

Sikand gives references of other works that have researched about the origin of Sai Baba. Kher and M V Kamat rubbish the legend that has become popular over time and say that Sai Baba, being tutored by a Pir came to settle in the small town of Shirdi. His teachings of harmony and peace drew people from all communities unabatedly. Sikand also points out that during the last part of the nineteenth century, the region where Baba came into prominence had been a region where Sufi saints had their influence on the common people. Marrianne Warren, a westerner’s research on Sai Baba throws more light about his life. Warren too is of the view that Sai Baba, a Sufi Muslim was greatly influenced by the Sufi Movement in the Deccan regions. Being a Western biographer, her inputs seem to be more valuable to Sikand and the readers. Details in the book penned by Marrianne warren and Arthur Osborne point to the fact that the Baba was well versed in Arabic and Persian languages and used them extensively while preaching. As long as he lived, the Sufi tradition of worship, maintaining a fire, ‘Dhuni’ and serving food to everyone was followed diligently by Baba and his disciples who were both Hindu and Muslim. There are instances recorded wherein, Baba ate fish and meat with his disciples although
vegetarian fare was served for those who did not. Abdul from Nanded was one of Baba’s close associates who lived with Baba for almost three decades. He often discussed verses from Quran and has recorded all that Baba said in a book which is in the possession of his grandson who lives in Shirdi. A valuable source of information which Warren has referred to tells of Baba’s faith in harmonious and peaceful living. The manuscript has been eclipsed by the turn of events after Baba’s death, and this has helped in projecting him to be more a Hindu than a Muslim.

The time that Baba died coincided with the rise of Hindu Nationalism. Bal Gangadhar Tilak led a movement discouraging Hindus from participating in the ‘Urs’ started by Baba and instead asked them to participate in the processions held during Ganesh festival. The large number of devotees who were very strong in their loyalty and followed Baba could not be ignored. Hence, the other route of taking Baba into its fold was played by the dominant Hindus. The Sufi tradition of worship slowly gave way to worshipping Baba in the Brahmin tradition. This change can be seen across temples where Baba is worshipped even to this day. Baba is worshipped with the chanting slokas in Sanskrit as is the practice in any other temple.

‘The appropriation of dissenting voices in the orthodox Brahminical fold by spiritualizing and ritualizing them....Unable to combat the pressure of rapidly expanding Hindu assertiveness, the Sai Baba tradition was slowly, yet surely absorbed into the fold of Brahminical Hinduism, unit it was transformed beyond recognition’ (Sikand 2003:130)

The author’s closing note on Shirdi is his visit to Abdul’s house, the disciple of Baba. He takes a peek into the manuscript of Abdul and a cursory glance at it confirms Warren’s observations. The Urdu and Sufi teachings are unmistakably recorded by Abdul.

While describing Shirdi Baba’s life and the changes that came about later, Sikand’s narrative does not take an objective approach. The reverence for the saint is unmistakable but his indifference or rather cynical attitude towards the Brahmans is also quite obvious. The chapter highlights only the details of how the cult of Baba came into existence and what changed the outlook of this cult. The faith of millions who throng the place is not underscored by the author.

Traversing across places like Shabari Malai, Baba Budan Dargha, Shirdi etc., Sikander arrives at Panna in Madhya Pradesh. The book gives an extensive account of a lesser known sect called the
Pranamis – the followers of Mahamathi Prannath, i.e., ‘The Enlightened One’ or ‘The Lord of the Souls’.

The Pranamis occupy a unique place in the subcontinent. It is interesting to note that in the aftermath of incessant Moghul invasions, several Sufis, scholars and holy men took up a number of initiatives to bring Hindus and Muslims closer. Consequently, several religious sects came into being and one such was the sect of the Pranamis.

Prannath’s intent was to end polytheism and the practice of meaningless rituals. Like the Sufi saints and saints of the Bhakti Movement, Prannath composed verses extolling the Oneness of Humankind; these spiritual verses are recognized as the holy scripture of the Pranamis called ‘Kuljan Swarup’. The cult’s main place of worship is in Panna, Madhya Pradesh. Sikand records that today there are approximately eight million Pranamis spread across Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Rajasthan.

Conversing with the local people, Sikand is able to make out the dichotomy of their origin, as some Muslims claim Islamic roots and some trace it to Hindus and their ambiguous history is one of the reasons that made things difficult for the Pranamis as they are many a time forced to identify with either Muslims or Hindus. A group that identifies itself with the Hindus is called Krishna Pranami. The fear of not being accepted in the mainstream society for their unique position compelled many of them not to disclose their cult. The unique concept of being neither Muslim nor Hindu did not gain popularity in the 20th Century and as a result of the pressure from the mainstream societies, some of the Pranamis came to identify themselves with either the Hindus or Muslims. In fact, the writer mentions the absence of the cult in the census too. Pranamis are listed as ‘others’. Although the author does not mention it explicitly, the post-independence period has brought about the changes in the Pranamis where they are forced to identify themselves as either Muslims or Hindus.

The author begins all his chapters with the description of the first sight that he comes across in the town he visits. It shows that he is not there only to know about the deity or place of worship, but gives information as to how the place looks like with his sense of keen observation

“The rickshaw made its way out of the bus-stand, deftly dodging a pack of hairy hogs nosing through a pile of rotting mango skins and cabbage leaves... The rickshaw deftly
went down the lane by the portals of Hind Mother Teresa School, one of the numerous convents in town. Across the road loomed the abandoned ruins of ancient *chhatris* built over the graves of long-forgotten warriors.” (Sikand 2003: 134)

Sikand next goes to the abode of Goga Pir, ‘one of the most popular folk deities of Northern India’. Goga pir’s history and origin is shrouded in mystery just as those of the many folk deities. Different versions abound regarding their antecedents. History of Goga can be gleaned from the popular ballads of Rajasthan and from the literature published by the authorities. Both depict different versions and the time of Goga spans from 8th century to 14th century. Syncretism in the Goga cult can be recognized by the fact that the main priests who have been serving in the temple are Muslims from Rajasthan. Rajput kings who held sway for a long time have attempted to project Goga as a Hindu and because of the patronage and the funds received by them, this change went unopposed. The cult of Goga that drew both Muslims and Hindus into its fold is being presented in different ways.

“... the legend of Goga is hurriedly rewritten. In the process, the remarkably fluid religious identity of goga and the cult centered around him are being suitably modified and firmly cast in an orthodox Hindu, if not distinctly anti-Muslim, mould.” (Sikand 2003: 168)

Sikand displays his scholarly expertise on some of the Sufi saints who had led queer lives while giving an elaborate introduction to the tale of Sarmad Shahid and Abhay Chand. This scholarly expertise as some critics have observed is chiefly aimed at the lay person, the reader, is intended to support the writer’s credibility. Also, the information that is researched imparted so meticulously, contributes considerably to the knowledge of the world. Modern travel writers like Sikand are able to use the genre’s flexibility to disseminate knowledge in an informal manner.

“... the subjectivism permitted in the modern travel book is not always self-indulgent; rather, it may sometimes serve an important philosophical and moral function, exposing and countering the limitations and biases inherent in seemingly more rigorous, academic modes of intellectual inquiry.” (Thompson 2011: 95)

The tenth and eleventh chapters give details about Sarmad Shahid, The Martyr for Love and The Baba of Bhatinda. The lives of these two saints was mired in controversy even during their life time and this is gleaned by the author through the historical references available. Their shrines
are in Delhi and Bhatinda respectively and they have followers from both religions. If the
contentestation in the Southern and Central part of India was between Hindus and Muslims, in
Punjab, it was between the Sikhs and the Muslims. Both the groups lay claim to the Baba of
Bhatinda as their own. Since the position of the dominant culture is not as forceful as it is in
South India, the Baba is worshipped by both Sikhs and Muslims and both have their own ways of
conveying history and claiming Baba to be theirs.

It is the personalities, the Baba and Sarmad Shahid who become more significant in the narrative
unlike in the other chapters. The chief intent of the writer comes to fore when he observes that
the paintings in the Gurudwara spewed hatred and enmity between the Sikhs and Muslims and
instead of bridging the gap, there seems to be a clear purport of widening the gap. The peace and
harmony that the Sikh Gurus stood for is totally lost in the paintings.

Sikand adopts different techniques to make his work credible and authentic by sometimes giving
details like, ‘It was a Thursday afternoon, a special day at all Sufi shrines’.

The first glimpse of a place the writer describes has always been far from being pleasant and
welcoming. Jammu is described as,

“A sleeping mass of humanity, like corpses impatiently awaiting an undertaker, lay at the
entrance, (of the bus-stand) while street dogs sniffed piles of rotting garbage. A man
dressed in a tattered election banner munched hungrily on a half-eaten cob of roasted
corn that had been tossed aside in a drain clogged with dirt.” (Sikand 2003: 215)

Jammu and Kashmir was a congenial region for many Sufi saints who came from Iran and the
Middle-East. The saints were able to continue their preachings due to the presence of a vast
Hindu and Muslim population. Everything changed with partition and the Sufis who were
revered for their knowledge started fading slowly. The writer, in an attempt to record the
popular Sufi saints of Jammu, with the help of a native, Inayat visits a number of dargas. The
entire Jammu region according to the writer was a ‘syncretic region’. As elsewhere, legends
here too abound with miracle stories.

Altogether, Sikand visits six Sufi shrines in and around Jammu. A mix of Hindu, Muslim and
Sikh devotees is met by him in the shrines. Lack of awareness, poverty is the common feature
that can be seen amongst the devotees who visit these places. Squalor and dirt are an integral
part of all these shrines. The shrines that were once revered have lost their importance, yet people for various reasons visit them. A woman recounts her travails of travelling a long distance to be blessed by the Panj Pir. The woman wanted the blessings of the Pir to help her daughter who was being harassed for dowry by her husband. Inayat and Sikand feel that a good thrashing would have solved the matter instead of taking such an arduous journey.

Visit to the dargah at Chamaliyal serves two purposes for the author. He is excited to visit a village very close to the border. The healing powers of the Baba draw many people to the shrine and the writer is skeptical about the healing powers. The road to the shrine is a traveler’s delight.

“As the tonga wobbled along the potholed road, we passed by lush green wheat fields, alternating with stretches of bright yellow mustard flowers, like a patchwork frock. Robust Sikh women carried bales of hay on their heads while herds of buffaloes lazed around in little muddy pools.” (Sikand 2003: 239)

The last destination is to the Sufi shrine near Srinagar, Chrar-e-Sharif, the abode of the patron saint of Kashmir, Hazrat Nuruddin Nurani, also known as Nund Rishi. The chapter opens with the writer waiting for the Pir in a boat-house and it also introduces the writer to all aspects of Kashmir: The boat-house, Kashmir carpets, hukkah, Kawha, Sufi music, gun shots and the curfew.

Having been invited by the Pir, Sikand sets off to the shrine of Nund Rishi and gets a peek into the difficult life of the people of the valley. Sudden exchange of fires which results in the death of an innocent youth, number of check-posts, and mute spectator to the army’s intervention are what he encounters on his way to the shrine from Srinagar.

The man made destruction in Kashmir had not spared the shrine of Nund Rishi. A fine Kashmiri architecture was reduced to rubble during the author’s visit. He becomes quite emotional and sentimental while recalling the incident that caused the destruction in 1995.

“Memories of that fateful day in April 1995, when the shrine, along with scores of houses in the town, went up in flares, filled my mind. I shuddered at the thought of all those who perished in the flames that had engulfed the town as the Indian army and Islamist militant fought each other in a grim battle that lasted many days. The thought that I had probably
been walking over the ashes of scores of little red-cheeked children transformed in a flash to mangled corpses, filled me with horror and guilt.” (Sikand 2003: 253)

For the first time, the writer does what the other pilgrims do while entering the shrine.

“I followed the pilgrims, and bent down to touch the stone step at the entrance.” (Sikand 2003: 254)

The journey to Chrar Sharif is significant in many ways to the author. He gets to know the history of the spread and decline of Sufism in the valley. The Pir of the shrine gives him all the details of the history without the embellishments of miracles and legends. The writer is not skeptical about the details provided by the Pir.

Not much is known about Lal Ded, the woman who was a great inspiration to Nand Rishi, except that she was a rebel in her own way, led the life of a mendicant, composing songs. Her life is reminiscent of the mystic poet of Karnataka, Akkamahadevi. That both of them wandered nude is a striking similarity. Yet the dates mentioned by the author convey that they lived almost two hundred years apart – Akkamahadevi during the twelfth century and Lal Ded, during the fourteenth century.

The fear and threat the common people face in Kashmir is again reiterated in the words of Salman and the death of Hamid in Srinagar. It is with a disillusioned heart that the author leaves Kashmir, his last destination. In the conclusion he mentions the places he visited had lost their syncretic importance.

“Having spent their lives crusading against narrowly inscribed religious brriers, they had now been completely transformed out of recognition, into straitjacketed ‘Hindus’ or ‘Muslims’. Saints who had bitterly critiqued sectarianism had been summarily appointed as founders of sects and religions that claimed to represent them. Reduced to the status of communal icons themselves, the radical thrust of their own basic message – their trenchant opposition to soulless ritualism, invidious distinctions of caste and community and the tyranny of priests – had almost been completely forgotten, or else drained of all subversive potential.” (Sikand 2003: 268)
Travel writers claim the authority of eye-witness account. It is this authority that gives them the liberty not to mention the details of their travel account. Carl Thompson calls it ‘autopsy’ which has been a part of Western culture. Herotodus, can be said to be one of the early proponents of this ‘autoptic’ principle, wherein he travels to Egypt and other places to report the wars. The use of first person helps in the claims of the writer that he was in that particular place. In modern books of travel too, the same tools have come to the aid of the travel writer. Sikand does not reveal any date or time of his travel, but claims to be a travel writer according to the ‘autoptic’ principle. At a time when verification of the travel account can be got, vivid description helps Sikand to present himself as a travel writer. People, who have already visited the place, can relate to it easily and people who might go there later on will also be able to do the same. Accurate descriptions of the route that pilgrims take to reach the shrine of Aiyyappa, the rituals that are followed which the writer gives etc, are adequate proof of his travels.

This ‘autoptic’ principle was first followed by Herotodus when he went to Egypt to know for himself the conditions there, rather than rely on hearsay. Hence, the use of the pronoun ‘I’ acts more as establishing credibility than being subjective. Although travel writing is highly autobiographical in form, the subjectivity of the author is just as important as the report of the world that it presents. This balance is achieved by Sikand in *Sacred Spaces*.

Travel writing, over the ages has exhibited different approaches adopted by writers. Many of them have concentrated more on their experiences rather than the places they have visited. Travel becomes merely a tool for introspection and self-analysis. Travel writings that are able to balance the description of the outer world which would lead them to self-introspect are narratives that critics like Paul Fussell have appreciated. Paul Fussell, author of The *Norton Book of Travel and Abroad: British Literary Travelling between the Wars*, is of the view that the essence of travel writing lies in the two journeys undertaken by the author, inner and outer. Rob Nixon, another critic of travel writing observes that the modern travel writing is characterized by both ‘semi-ethnographic, distanced, analytical mode’ and ‘an autobiographical, emotionally tangled mode’. Since personal feelings and expressions constitute a significant part of the narrative, the first person narration is often adopted by writers and due to this, Travel writing is brought under the category of *life writing*. 

“...travel writing has frequently provided a medium in which writers can conduct an autobiographical project, exploring questions of identity and selfhood whilst simultaneously presenting to others a self-authored and as if were ‘authorized’ account of themselves.” (Thompson 2011:99)

Yoginder Sikand narrates his journey in the first person thereby giving authenticity to the experience. At the same time objectivity is also maintained by limiting the use of first person to functions like ‘I took the bus...’, ‘I hailed an auto...’ etc.

In modern times, sometimes, travel is undertaken to prove a point by the writer and drive his beliefs and understanding of the wider world. The image of the self that is projected in such travel narratives is that of one who is a ‘reliable eyewitness’ and one who has the qualities of bravery and ‘self-knowledge’. To maintain the image of the ‘self’ the author usually tries to discriminate the ‘other’ to the ‘narratorial self’. The ‘other’ is evident in the places, cultures and people that the author meets in the course of his journey. Sikand’s description of the South Indians and the way they speak is a good example of how he tries to appropriate them for his own identity formation.

‘You see, Maatha is Maatha’, Venkat said.

‘Well, she sure must be’, I answered, trying to be cheeky, ‘just as Venkat is Venkat’.

Ayayo, you naat understanding’, Venkat protested. ‘She being great gaad-ess. Just like power gaad-ess Shakti, gaad-ess of wealth Lakshmi, gaad-ess of wisdom Saraswati. She be big, big gaad-ess. She doing whatever she want-ing’.

‘We starting new life, me and my Mrs. So we start on auspicious note with gaad-ess blessing’. (Sikand 2003: 43-44)

Debbie Leslie observes that travel narratives are

“fashioned over and against a series of others who are denied the power of representing themselves.” (Leslie: 2006)

The traveler then, portrays himself to be a person whose intellect and sense of reasoning is far superior to the people he encounters. Sikand, while recounting the conversation with pilgrims, emphasizes on the error filled English spoken by them, thereby mocking their knowledge.
The difference between the author and the others is brought about by the feeling of superiority expressed implicitly by the author. The traveler, a ‘mobile’ figure differentiates himself from the locals and feels his breadth of knowledge, understanding and modernity is far greater than the others. Perceiving other travelers as ‘tourists’ is another strategy of writers to differentiate themselves. Wherever Sikand goes, he sees ‘tourists’ and ‘pilgrims’ whose purpose of being in that place is different from that of his own, a travel writer.

The important paraphernalia of a travel writer, the logbook is nowhere indicated to be maintained by the author during his travel. Perhaps it is a deliberate attempt, since his focus is only to find out on his own the mood in these syncretic places and the description is enough to give credibility to his visit.

“Across the bus – stand stood a large arch built across the main road. at the foot of the arch squatted a grim, almost comic, statue of Indira Gandhi mounted on a pedestal and shaded by a painted stone umbrella.” (Sikand 2003: 35)

The common recurring theme in Sacred Spaces and the other two primary texts, that is, From Heaven Lake and Temptations of the West, is that the writers show great interest in the common people of the land. The various conversations they have with ordinary folks such as tea vendors, seller of wares, or even the local people who run hotels, mean a lot to the writers. These interactions help them to understand the culture of the land and thus gain a get a better perspective of the times they live in.

Can Sikand’s journey in Sacred Spaces be classified as a spiritual journey? It is a fact that he visits sacred places belonging to diverse religions and records his sharp and detailed observations about the people and places around him. But it is also to be noted that at no point of time is he influenced by the faith of people or the power of religion. Nor is there any individual or particular incident that touches his heart. A cursory comparative glance shows that William Dalrymple, in his work, Nine Lives expresses a kind of reverence when he meets the extra ordinary ‘religious’ people spread across the country. Although Dalrymple has expressed his desire to be objective in recording what he sees, the tone of reverence and wonder is unmistakable.
Swami Rama’s narrative, *Living with the Himalayan Masters*, reveals a spiritual upliftment in the events and people that he meets. The spiritual journey of Swamy Rama is palpable in many of the incidents quoted by him.

Dalrymple and Swamy Rama partake in the beliefs of the common people when they meet the ‘extra-ordinary’ people. This kind of involvement is absent in Yoginder Sikand.

Except in the introduction, where the readers get to know a little bit of background information about the author, there are not many autobiographical details revealed by the author in the course of the narrative.

The period or time during which the author undertook the travel is not disclosed by the author in any part of the book. In this aspect he strongly deviates from the conventional travel accounts where date and time are meticulously recorded. Vikram Seth and Pankaj Mishra’s books also give cursory details of time. Only towards the end of the book, Sikand mentions the Gujarat riots that took place as he was penning the last part of the book, and through that we get to know the approximate time of his travel could be between 2001 – 02.

In the conclusion, the writer admits that it took about two years for him to cover all the places. The focus of travel is more on the changes that have come about in these places and to record a first person account of the journey along with the description of the place that throws light on the change in attitude of the people and society over the ages. Perhaps, the author does not find it necessary to establish credibility by giving actual dates of travel and time. This is in contrast to VS and PM whose narratives clearly show the dates and duration of their travel. In fact, VS states in his travelogue that his writing was based on a diary he had maintained and the book contains maps and photographs of the places he visited and people he met, thus adding authencity to his narrative. Pankaj Mishra’s narrative gains credibility due to the various interviews he has conducted in the course of the journey. His interactions are not just with the common people but people in authority, like the Minister Uma Bharathi, the Tibetan Prime Minister, the army personnel in Jammu and Kashmir etc.,

Some interesting parallels can be drawn between Pankaj Mishra and Sikand. These writers travel both within and outside the country with the objective of investigating the causes for the disgruntled lives of the people and their search for a solution through spirituality. In both the
cases, it is Buddhism that acts as a restorative. This is seen in Sikand’s article that he wrote in 2012 and Mishra’s work, *An End to Suffering*. In a limited way, Seth’s narrative also reveals his interest in Buddhism, when he visits the ruins in Liuyuan.

Both Pankaj Mishra and Sikand display concern for the common people while describing the situation in Kashmir. While Mishra attributes violence in the valley to the developments of events pre and post independence, Sikand attributes it to the growing unrest in society due to communal disharmony.

Travelling across a dozen places within the country, Sikand tries to seek many answers. At one plane he embarks on a journey to record the shaping and reshaping of the places of worship, while at another is his journey within, trying to discern the self and more inward. The place becomes a text for the author, and through that, he tries to realize the deeper aspects related to the ‘self’.

The inner journey that Sikand experiences in the course of his outer journey is obvious in the candid introspection and reflection that is expressed in the article penned by him in *Countercurrents.com*. The article lucidly expresses that a journey outward necessitates a journey inward.

The Introduction to *Sacred Spaces* begins with Sikand pondering about his identity and in 2012, when he expresses himself through an article, he has traversed a full circle in trying to resolve this crisis which he faced in most part of his adult life. Frank admissions in the article in *Countercurrents.org* that he was reveling in a false pursuit show his intellectual maturity and a mind that has been turning towards spirituality – to seek the ultimate peace. The realization of ‘self’ becomes all the more important in this ‘search’. This technique of ‘self-historicizing’ or ‘self-narrativising’ is, according to Thompson, a form of autobiography employed in travel writing. Although the technique cannot be seen in the entire book, glimpses like this help the reader to identify the inclinations of the writer.

“... some modern travel writers also go to much greater lengths than was ever previously the case to situate their journeys in a larger personal history of the self.” (Thompson 2011:113)
Literary critic Paul Fussell is of the view that a blend of inward and outward travel ‘represents the aesthetic ideal in travel writing’. Such revelations in travel writing present the journey as a way of understanding the traveler and his life. The author’s expressions of ‘self-knowledge’ and ‘self-realization’ mark the transition from the outward journey to an inward journey.

“…the literal, exterior journey principally as a means of mapping an interior landscape.”
(Sikand 2003: 112)

Sikand’s ‘self-knowledge’ or ‘self-realization’ in the book is recognized when his travels come to an end. Autobiographical travel narratives accommodate an evolution in the author’s self, culminating in a new understanding of the wider world:

“... a sense that human identity is a fluid, contingent construct, forever being performatively constituted in response to events and circumstances. Here the self seems to have no fixed, stable essence of unique to itself, but rather is always evolving dialogically, as it were, or relationally; that is to say through its interactions with the wider environment and with others.” (Thompson 2011: 128)

‘Journey’ has always been considered as a metaphor for introspection and spiritual progression. The main idea discussed in the thesis, that outward journey translates to inward journey in the course of the travel correlates with the writer’s articulations as expressed in Countercurrents.org. Countercurrents.org is an e-journal published with the intention of bringing to fore the ‘crises and search for meaningful solutions’ that trouble mankind:

“wars going on in several parts of the world, rising food and fuel prices, growing hunger, natural calamities of horrifying proportions, water scarcity, debt crisis, unemployment, social tensions among communities, growing human rights violations and unprecedented ecological degradation”. (Sikand 2012)

It is here that Sikand minces no words when he says that little can be changed by ‘Social Activism’. His candid observations and revelations help readers to understand that the primary motivation for his journey to syncretic places was social activism.

It appears that Sacred spaces and Bastions of Believers were the initial responses of the writer to observations of conflicts in the society around him. The journeys that he undertakes to syncretic
places and the madrasas are a serious attempt to study the forces that have greatly influenced and impacted people in general and the nation at large.

Communal disharmony in society is a matter of concern to him since he considers himself to be an ‘activist writer’. The candid discussion in an article that he contributed to the journal, *Counter Currents.Org* in 2012, reveals Sikand in an introspective disposition, presenting a mindset that is antithetical to the ideas expressed in *Sacred Spaces*. This marks yet another phase of his life’s inner journey, beyond sacred spaces. In the article, Sikand displays an attitude and approach that is quite different from what he expresses in Sacred *Spaces*. His outward journey appears to have propelled this inner journey that sustains well beyond the physical journey. The life of Gautama Buddha as revealed in Herman Hess’s *Siddhartha* reveals this aspect of the inner journey.

Tracing Sikand’s progression, the ambition of his life in the initial years is expressed as follows:

“I’ve been desperately trying to change the world, as a self-appointed missionary of the 'Revolution'. I began identifying with communities in India that saw themselves as 'oppressed', and took it upon myself to champion their 'cause'. How desperately I craved to be recognized as one among them! That is how I became what is called a 'social activist', and began writing mainly about Muslims, but also about Adivasis and Dalits and other such 'marginalized groups', attending their conferences and participating in their protest demonstrations, and even churning out ponderous tomes about them, all of which further reinforced my belief that I was indeed a seriously committed do-gooder.” (Sikand 2012)

However, such a quest is seen to take a different turn a little later. The reversal in his thinking is recorded towards the conclusion of the article. The rancor he nurtures towards the system is completely denounced. He explains why he shunned the ‘social activism’ that he was engaged in for more than two decades. A disturbing ‘negativity’ has set in in him.

“Being a 'social activist', I imagined that the sources of all oppression and negativity were external--'out there', in the 'world beyond'--in classes, castes, structures and ideologies that I identified as 'oppressive'--Brahmins and Banias, Jews and Americans and their Saudi-Wahhabi stooges, Feudalism, Communalism, Capitalism, Casteism, Zionism, Brahminism, Religious Fundamentalism, Imperialism and so on. If these were successfully combated, I was led to believe, all the problems of the world would be set
straight. Directing my energies and anger onto these external forces, I saw no need at all to introspect and recognize, leave alone solve, my own inner negativities, which I left completely ignored and unaddressed all these many years.” (Sikand 2012)

The zealousness with which he set about fighting and writing for a cause evaporated and he felt that the world is too complex to be assessed. His realization points to the truth that both the oppressor and the oppressed are to be blamed for the situation that has existed over the centuries.

“I lost complete faith and interest in the 'social activism' that had kept me going and had supplied my life with purpose and meaning all along. Although I recognized that social injustice was indeed a universal reality, and a harsh one at that, especially for certain minority groups, I had to admit that 'minorities' were often as guilty of it, in their own ways (such as victimizing women and other minorities within their own communities) as were 'majorities', and that no community had a monopoly over virtue or vice... The only Revolution worth striving for, I now realized, was the 'inner' one. My only task, I found, was now to focus on my own 'inner' revolution and not any other”. (Sikand 2012)

He concludes that inner peace is what is more important to a human being and that attempting to change the world through social activism is pointless. If at all the world has to be changed, Sikand feels, it is in the’ hands of God’!

Ultimately, reminiscent of Gautama Buddha, who abandoned his home and travelled in search of enlightenment, Yoginder Sikand too endeavors to take solace in Buddhism, embarking on the path to spirituality, the ultimate journey in life. As reinforced in Herman Hesse’s ‘Siddhartha’ travel in the outer world invariably runs parallel to the journey inward. Such a progression could be considered an integral feature of a valid travel narrative.