Abstract

The present research study is situated against the dominant narrative of categorising religious communities into neat little boxes that do not interact meaningfully and often resort to conflict. The study aims at opening up these boxes in order to challenge the dominant narrative of binarism and expose the permeability inherent in societies across the world. In so doing, the study draws from existing literature that defines religion and faith even as it attempts to conceptualise the ever shifting phenomena of syncretism and liminality – processes that attempt to lay out the contexts within which people interact with each other through rituals, socio-historical and political interfaces and through association of meaning to symbols and spaces.

Syncretism essentially focuses on the permeability and fluidity of religious situations. It has been rightly said by Peter van der Veer (1994: 208) that “This can be seen as such a broad process that indeed every religion is syncretistic, since it constantly draws upon heterogeneous elements to the extent that it is often impossible for the historian to unravel what comes from where”. This is where Eliade (1987) says that a social presupposition for the rise of syncretism can be the coexistence of various groups. The ethos of coexistence also implies resistance, contestation and power dimensions thus creating an arena where social interactions are constantly negotiated within the premise of pragmatism, accommodations and creating shared spaces.

The research concern emerged from a personal need to comprehend categories that are often employed to determine the homogeneity of religious identities. A deep analytical study of concepts of syncretism and liminality exposed the researcher to a world where people cut across normative boundaries to challenge categorical religions. What become more important to them are the religious experiences and their faith and devotion to saints who have the miraculous powers to ward off evil. Within this premise, the study began with the following objectives:

- To explore and understand the phenomenon of syncretism at various levels
Syncretism is most evident in the everyday interactions of people and communities. The aim is to capture these interactions and to examine the various implications they have on people’s lives on an everyday basis.

- To study a case where symbols and people are actively engaged in an attempt to make meaning of beliefs that cut across religious identities.
  Devotees from diverse backgrounds throng to Haji Malang to seek blessings and ask for wishes to be granted. They also make offerings when wishes are granted. An understanding of their perspectives would lead us to understand the broader objective stated above.

- To examine the role of syncretism in controlling communal conflicts and augmenting chances of peace and harmony.
  Haji Malang as a site comprises a big shrine of Haji Malang Baba along with numerous other shrines (temples, mazars, chillahs, dargahs, devasthan). The relationship between these places of worship and veneration would help us understand the processes of accommodation of various fragments to form a complex whole.

- To arrive at an understanding of the theoretical premise of syncretism within the context of state and civilisation.
  The concept of state denotes political boundaries thus defining nationalities. The study aims to explore how at the level of people, boundaries are defined as they come together at shrines of saints who symbolise the transcendental nature of socio-religious interactions.

Located in Maharashtra, the study was conducted at Haji Malang in Thane district. The exercise centred around the dargah of Haji Malang Shah Baba situated atop a mountain sixteen kilometers from Kalyan town. Literature review on Maharashtra revealed that the region has been a historical witness to intersections of communities, polities and socio-historical shifts on a continuous basis. Against this backdrop, the study attempted to understand the processes that contributed to Haji Malang as a shared complex. The term
complex here refers to the uniqueness of the setting where the dargah of Haji Malang shares its space with at least fifteen more shrines dotting the Haji Malang mountain. The influence and implications of such accommodations also go beyond into the hinterland comprising several villages which are in some way or the other associated with the sacred mountain complex.

People and communities associated with the shrine bear testimony to a confluence across traditions, beliefs and pragmatic concerns. The custodian of the dargah is a Hindu Brahmin who enjoys hereditary rights of custodianship. This never poses any contradiction and in fact becomes a matter of pride as devotees cherish their experience of association with a space that is “non-discriminatory”. Based on this understanding of people, research participants were selected from a range of networks viz. – devotees from diverse backgrounds visiting the shrine to ask for Baba’s blessings, the Hindu custodian and his family, local people inhabiting the surrounding villages, sadhus, faqirs and Malangs who defied class, caste, religious and regional barriers to come together and celebrate Malang Baba’s urs. Forays were made into certain other sites in remote villages in order to understand the processes that created shared spaces. This included a short visit to Yavatmal district where Laman Banjaras were found to coexist with other communities as they created syncretic and liminal experiences. What becomes significant is that the Haji Malang dargah with its myriad strands and processes becomes a reflection of the various elements and layers of interactions in society at large.

In going through this exercise, the study has been structured into eight chapters. Chapter I is an introduction to the general premise of the study drawing from the research concern. It goes on to dwell upon concepts and theories of religion and concepts beyond the dominant understanding of religion. This is followed by Chapter II which is an examination of literature geared towards understanding syncretism and liminality in a nuanced light. The emphasis is also on drawing from illustrations of people’s experiences that reveal how they transcend boundaries to associate multiple meanings with experiences and symbols.
Chapter III draws from the literature review to situate the study within its methodological paradigm. Since the study aims at exploring and understanding processes of syncretism, the ontological position derives from a subjective nature of reality that shifts continuously based on contextual understanding of social realities. This informs the epistemological approach of the study guided by symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology where the everyday lives of people contribute to meaning making. This involves interactions between actors, symbols, thoughts and expressions that intertwine to create shared spaces.

Since the study is geographically located in Maharashtra, it became imperative to understand the regional context in terms of history, society and politics. Chapter IV is an insight into the traditions and transformations of Maharashtra thus laying out the foreground for Chapter V that describes Haji Malang as the research setting. A description of the Haji Malang dargah along with its regional context lays out the various levels of interactions that take place at the site. This in turn brings to life the various people who have contributed to the shared values of the Haji Malang complex.

Chapter VI draws from the previous and delves into an analysis of the history and legends associated with the shrine and their implications on the syncretic processes. The chapter also looks into issues of contesting perspectives and how they have been accommodated to create an arena which becomes a reflection of the tussles in society. Chapter VII follows this with an analysis of rituals associated with the Haji Malang dargah as well as the other shrines on the mountain. An attempt has been made to look into the interlinkages between the shrines and the reason behind their establishments. The chapter also examines the nature of the shrines to establish how they are contingent upon social, historical and political processes in which people engage.

Chapter VIII attempts to bring it all together and argues that shrines such as the dargah of Haji Malang Baba have stood the test of time in establishing a moral order that overrides temporal attempts at consolidation of power. Very importantly, moving beyond the popular notion of Hindu-Muslim syncretism, the Haji Malang complex subsumes Hindu, Muslim, tribal, Parsee, Sindhi and Sikh values and traditions. Drawing from the
collective ethos of anarchism, such shrines symbolise hope and well-being for people who strive to meet everyday challenges in life. Such moments of anguish cut across boundaries of religion and region and hence dargahs and syncretic shrines become spaces where happiness could be sought as opposed to structures that impose codified rules of worship on people. The implications of the present study may be extended to the contemporary debates around the Ram Janmbhoomi-Babri Masjid imbroglio as well as the Amarnath Shrine debate in the contemporary parlance. While both are touted as emanating from a Hindu-Muslim divide, it must be reckoned that at the level of local networks, Hindus and Muslims interact across boundaries. Personal conversations with scholars revealed how many temples in Ayodhya are looked after by Muslims while the Amarnath shrine had Muslim custodians for years together till the state intervened to form the shrine board.

The present study has attempted to understand the significance of social processes as opposed to the high handedness of the state apparatus that often does not wish to reflect on the complexity of issues of identities and liminalities inherent in the society. However, at the same time, it brings out instances where the state has had to rely on the moral authority of saints and other anti state symbols to wield control over society. At the core of the exercise is the comprehension that the moral order shifts continuously in forging alliances, networks and interfaces that lead to processes of spontaneous coexistence without the use of violence or coercive tactics. So, while we have had studies examining syncretic processes from a cultural perspective, this particular exercise has attempted to understand such processes through the political economic lens of comprehending interactions and coexistence across constructed boundaries.