

South Asia

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An annual religious procession makes its way along darkened brick-paved and packed-earth streets through the various neighbourhoods of Arampur, a village in Bihar, India. Young men chant formulaic slogans while ritually clashing in shows of weapon-handling. Women, men, and children stand in the night or sit on string beds outside their homes watching the lively action come and go on their otherwise non-eventful street. Occasionally they shout their support for the prancing adolescents. In this village with nearly equal numbers of Hindus and Muslims, is this procession Hindu or Islamic?

Scholars have become increasingly aware of how political interests have depicted 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' identities as artificially singular to suit their own agendas, whether of the colonial state, Pakistan movement, or Hindutva cause. Despite their disapproval of militant attempts to both equate 'Indian' with 'Hindu' and denigrate Muslims, scholars demonstrate far less cognizance of their own acceptance of a monolithic understanding that suffuses post-colonial Western scholarship regarding South Asian cultures. This is to say, Western scholars may recognize the socio-political ramifications of essentialized religious identities but do not often enough practise scholarship in ways that challenge problematic categories.

The example of the procession described above demonstrates a crisis in identification for religious studies, the import of identity politics on the national level, and the dynamics of identity practices on the local level.

The description could accurately portray two different annual processions in Arampur: one which occurs on Muharram and another on Durga Puja. Attempts to categorize these events as Muslim or Hindu demonstrate both the multiple meanings each term allows and the uncertainty which commonly accompanies their use. With equal vitality and energy for the proclamation of their heroes, the boys and young men of each procession brandish long, hardened bamboo staves and differ only by the heroes they memorialize: Muslims commemorate Husain and Hindus celebrate Durga. However, the participation of both Muslims

Muharram swordplay.

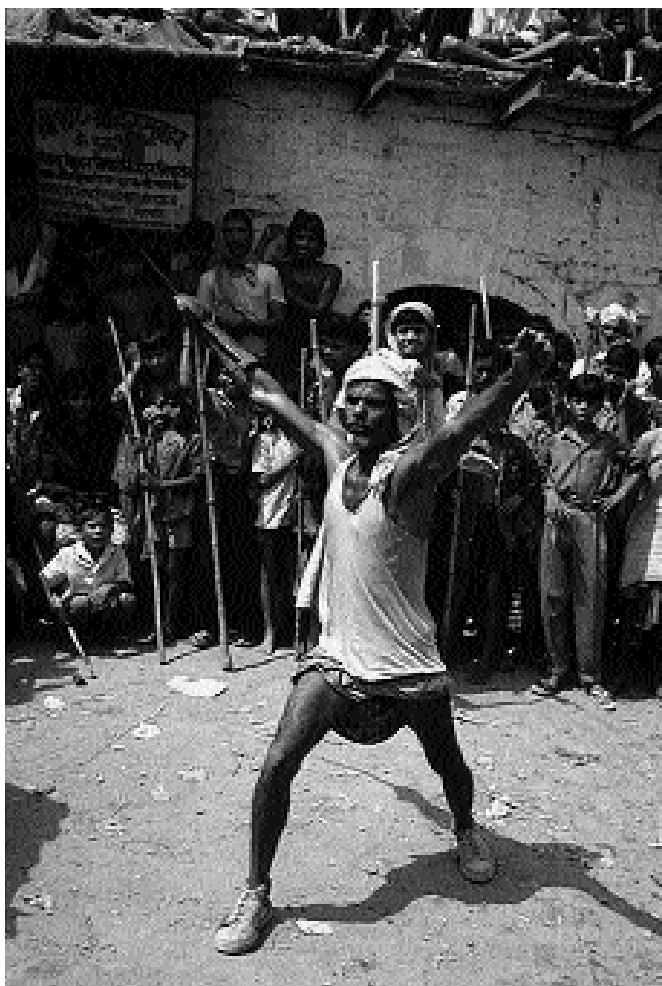


PHOTO: PETER GOTTSCHALK, 1994-1995

The Problem of Defining Islam in Arampur

and Hindus among the watching, if not cheering, crowd problematizes efforts at exact labelling.

Problems of definition

Efforts to label such rituals as 'Islamic' or 'Hindu' often rely on unclear definitions and thus overlook the often shared identities and participation in each other's lives. Three options for determining the religious character of each ritual come to mind: historical origin of the ritual, essence of the ritual, and identity of the participants. We might label the Muharram procession as Islamic and not Hindu (or Sikh or Christian) because it originated as a commemoration of the martyrdom of Husain. Yet, if the historical origin alone determined the assessment of a memorial day's character, would All Souls Day then be defined as pagan instead of Catholic based on the primacy of its beginnings? Secondly, Muharram might be defined as Islamic simply because it is accepted, assumedly, as essentially Islamic by Muslims in Arampur. In fact, however, some Muslims in the Arampur area, not to mention elsewhere in the world, disparage such rituals as counter to Islamic principles as they understand them. Finally, the Durga Puja procession might be labelled Hindu because those processing identify themselves as Hindu. Yet can the event be so narrowly described as to define participation solely based on the procession? The audience, which includes Hindus and Muslims for both events, does indeed participate in each procession, if only by attendance. To label it as 'Hindu' disregards the presence, support, and involvement of many Muslims. Overall, then, no single criteria exists for the application of the descriptors 'Islamic' and 'Hindu'. Rather, the use of either term can refer to any of the three criteria given above (if not others) and thus the meaning remains unclear.

In contrast with the elusive definitions of 'Islamic' and 'Hindu', the term 'communal' conveys a very specific meaning in South Asian studies. The Anglophonic use of 'communal' has come to commonly assume nothing less than acrimonious relations between antagonistic religious groups. The pervasive dominance of this expectation regarding community in South Asia demonstrates the degree to which scholarship has been shaped by a focus on religious communities imagined to be monolithic in composition, exclusionary in principle, and hostile in practice. When the term 'communalism' is used in an Indian context, the burden of anticipated religious exclusivity prohibits the imagining of any shared community among Muslims and Hindus.

Hindu, Muslim or modern

Caught between secular expectations and communalist rhetoric, scholarship often struggles against three contingent, essentializing assumptions: firstly, that Islam and Hinduism in India (if not elsewhere) are not 'just' religions, but lifestyles. That is, the first assumes that most Muslims and Hindus eschew the possibility of a shared secular public sphere because they allow their respective religious traditions to pervade completely their lives.¹ Too often the additional assumption follows that, this being the case and because Hindus and Muslims embrace practices and beliefs entirely apart from the other community, they are either Hindu or Muslims and seldom, if ever, share an identi-

ty. The third assumption is that not only do the personal identities and cultural spheres of Hindus and Muslims not overlap, they stand in binary opposition to one another (e.g. cow veneration versus beef consumption, iconic representation versus strident iconoclasm). Despite the professed secularism of India's democracy, scholars expect most social and cultural phenomena to be uniformly Hindu, Muslim, or – when neither term fits – modern. The current spate of Hindu nationalist language that has been the focus of ample Indian and Western scholarship has only intensified the expectations among many that Hindus and Muslims live in irreconcilably different cultures. Trapped by secular presumptions that religion can and should be safely isolated from the public sphere for the preservation of social order, scholars often deride the political use of communalist language while accepting its underlying assumptions regarding the social divergence of Hindus and Muslims.²

In fact, the terms 'Islamic' and 'Hindu' are inherently multivalent. This is because religions in India (and in much of the West) are not purely self-contained systems which reside neatly behind definite boundaries. Rather, religious symbols, terminology, and behaviour permeate the public cultures within which they thrive and a wide variety of phenomena can be 'Islamic' or 'Hindu' in myriad ways. Further, what these terms define – what practices, beliefs, dispositions, emotions, and physical manifestations they include – vary so greatly even among the residents of a single village that, were Hinduism and Islam to exist within tangible and mutually exclusive limits, their internal variation would challenge any notion of consistency.

These problems may impel some, like Wilfred Cantwell Smith, to declare that religion is too ill-defined to be an adequate concept. But increasingly people perceive these religions as objective systems within which they involve themselves and so their academic rejection would be naïve.³ Smith also called for a study of believers in context; that we must look through their eyes at the universe and see what they see.⁴ Issues of the limits of this ideal aside, Smith is right insofar as this universe also includes the broad socio-cultural world of believers. The religious lives of Hindus and Muslims are informed by the relationships of diffusion and antagonism with other religious and non-religious cultural traditions. When scholars imagine that they see the world through the eyes of believers, they too frequently suffer a far-sightedness that overlooks neighbours, classmates, and teammates who may share in any dimension of life except religion.

We must be sure to recognize that few Muslims and Hindus understand themselves solely as such. They not only see differences among the members of their own religious communities broadly construed, but they also understand themselves as members of communities without an explicit religious character. Each resident of Arampur recognizes not a single identity but multiple identities with which they navigate through the multiple social interactions and associations as they live their lives. As they consider publicly and privately their own meaning of 'Islam' or 'Hinduism', they do so within a web of conversations and interactions which shape their thinking and identity

practices. Because identity is more than how one thinks – it is perhaps even more how one communes bodily – we must more extensively explore the fuller range of interrelations among Muslims and those living in the broader cultural realm along with them.

So perhaps, for example, one of the audience members who watches the Muharram procession pass by her house and identifies herself as a Hindu will think about Aurangzeb's infamous deprivations against Hindus and wonder whether any of the cheering young men would be a future iconoclast. Can Muslims ever truly be loyal Indians like she and her family are? But while such thoughts may prompt her to ponder Hindu-Muslim differences, they may not come to mind as she prays at any of the local *dargahs* for the intervention of a Sufi in her life. Or a boy, who identifies himself as Muslim, takes part in the procession and feels encouraged by hearing the narrative of Husain's sacrifice. He is following a very deliberate path through the village – a path along which he and many others – Hindus and Muslims alike – use their bodies to affirm that they all belong to the village, not unlike his local cricket team. In these two imagined but not impossible moments, identities of Hindu and Muslim mingle with those of nation and village, family and team.

Part of the answer to this crisis in religious studies lies in expanding the contextualization of religious traditions, not only in the multi-religious cultures in which most Indians live, but also in the socio-economic environments in which they thrive as individuals with multiple identities, shared and not shared, in varying combinations among them.

Notes

1. Asad, Talal (1999), 'Religion, Nation-State, Secularism', in Van der Veer, Peter (ed.), *Nation and Religion: Perspectives on Europe and Asia*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 181.
2. Chandra, Bipan (1984), *Communalism in Modern India*, New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, p. 12.
3. Smith, Wilfred Cantwell (1962), *The Meaning and End of Religion*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, p. 137.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

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