RESEARCHING MUSLIM SAINTS OF THE MARATHI DECCAN: SOME PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES

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This paper seeks to review some of the dominant trends in the research on Muslim saints of the Marathi Deccan. It attempts to locate the main problems in the nexus of the uncritical application of modern collective categories organised along the lines of ethnicity, language and religion to pre-colonial materials. These problems and the lack of clarity that they cause are illustrated by an example from the study of Shaikh Muhammad from Shrigonda, a popular Muslim saint, whose medium of communication was Marathi. The last part of the paper makes some suggestions about how it is possible to see Muslim holy figures differently and why this is, perhaps, necessary.

Keywords: collective identity, Maharashtra, Muslim, nationalism, saints, Sufi

Introduction: Highlighting the Problems

It is hardly possible to look at the South Asian past and the plentitude of figures who shaped it without at least some engagement with those individuals who acquired an aura of sanctity. The study of religion in South Asia may be, and to many extents certainly is, the heritage of the colonial discovery of the "Sacred books of the East" and the search for understanding "natives" through learning about their worldviews, values and moral codes. Yet, if only the recent examples of idolizing political figures almost as saints is considered, it is possible to admit that the modes of devotion are intertwined with the very matters that many would nowadays prefer to call merely 'social.' This article will not address the complexity of such intertwining, that being an academic debate of its own. However, it aims to discuss some of the processes that sanctify people in concrete terms: namely in terms of so-called collective

religious identities. I will attempt to do so by arguing that interpreting those seen as holy as belonging to a certain religion that is timeless and collectively shared, is a rather modern and academically driven practice. I will also try to show that there might be a different way of looking at these historical figures, without overtly emphasizing their religious identity while still keeping an open mind as on their sanctity. My efforts will be limited to and referenced by the materials that pertain, discursively or by date, to the pre-colonial Deccan – a historically well-known region of today's India.

The presence of Islam in the Deccan – as a set of ideas, ideals and practices – has a history of many centuries. At least from the times of the Khalji and Tughluq sultans, it took a variety of forms in terms of organization, the evidence for which is abundant. These forms may be the result of state patronization of what has been understood to be Islam and Islamic, or the result of the more disparate individual efforts of those concerned, whether pious, learned or saintly.[1] Viewing saints historically means a thorough engagement with a variety of sources where different people for different reasons are called holy, and consequently remembered, invoked and worshipped by different means. Overall the process of sacralization, or of making a Muslim saint, displays the agency of devotees. So, it is perhaps not too inappropriate to call it a "process from below." This does not mean that the state and its elites have had no say in constituting and representing holiness. The Deccan does indeed have a rich history of kings and other potentates being very close to those understood as holy, including some of the kings being proclaimed holy too. For instance, Indo-Persian writings speak about Ahmad Shah Wali[2], the Bahmani and Lingayats see him as an avatar of saint Allama Prabhu. Marathi narratives remember another Bahmani king turned into a saint, Shah Bahmani Muntoji alias Mrtyunjay, and they also associate several other royal figures with the saints (e.g. king Shivaji with Ramdas).[3] The holiness of any of these, and of many other figures, is perpetuated by continual worship, belief in their miraculous powers, as well as narratives and memorialization that are firmly set in the concrete and the local and enable the category of "below" to exist

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[1] For more on these themes see ALAM, M. *The Languages of Political Islam. India 1200 – 1800.*

[2] Wali in this respect denotes 'a friend of God', i.e. saint.

[3] For Ahmad Shah Wali as a saint see BRIGGS, J. (transl.). *History of the Rise of Mahomedan Power in India*, Vol. II, pp. 250–251 and as Allama Prabhu see SHERWANI, H. K. *The Bahmanīs of the Deccan. An objective study*, p. 213. For Mrtyunjay see DEVĻE, S. R. (ed.). *Śrī Bhaktavijaya* [The Victory of the Devotees], pp. 397–401 and for Ramdas and king Shivaji see ABBOTT. J. E. *The Poet-Saints of Mahārāshtra*, *No. 8. Rāmdās*, pp. 50–63, 109–112, ff.

meaningfully in time. This paper will also try to evaluate the approaches of historians to the processes that create the saints and will make some preliminary observations about how the history of holiness could be done in a still different manner.

Obviously, a variety of different localities where the living worship of the real saint has its own particular history poses a problem for any attempt to generalize and find some characteristics common to the process itself across time and space. When trying to grasp the localized variety in general and analytic terms several obstacles appear. They blur the dynamic richness of the localness and its trans-local connections – as has been epitomized in the above-mentioned relationship of the powerful and saintly – and hence disengage the analytical work from the basis on which the saintliness is formed, produced, and on which it continually relies for decades or centuries. The most obvious obstacles that discursively fuel the particular forms of disengagement from saintliness as it is socially practised are the well-known historical processes of nationalism and religious nationalism. Without going too much into the particulars of its historical appearance I understand nationalism as perhaps the strongest form of collective identity that globally overshadows other ways of conceiving collectivity (family, social strata, or gender to name but a few examples). By religious nationalism, following Peter van der Veer,[4] I understand the ways which supply the idea of collectivity with the content of one undivided religious community constituting a nation. In simple, not to say oversimplified, terms nationalism has enabled some idealized collectives to be studied with more fervour than others. Religious nationalism, in turn, has enabled religious collectivity to be preferred over religious diversity. This has also conditioned how the saints, historical figures sacralized from below, came to be viewed in order to homologize them with the prevailing constructions of the national and religious collectives.

With respect to the Marathi Deccan (that corresponds roughly but not exactly to the current Indian state of Maharashtra), the history of the Islamic presence that made Muslims and their saints a firm part of the region has been to a considerable extent nationalized by the histories of power and in that by the nationalistic narrative of Maratha historical success. This occurred for a few reasons. Perhaps the most important reason for the popularity of the Marathas[5] among Maharashtrian intellectuals commenting on the past lies in the Marathas'

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[4] VEER, P. van der. *Religious Nationalism. Hindus and Muslims in India.*

[5] Note that the Marathas, as a warrior caste-group, whose different clans proved to be tremendously successful in the Deccan in military, political, social and economic terms roughly from 17th to early 19th century, should not be confused with all Marathi speakers.

own and admirable capacities to assert themselves politically and socially over a huge part of the South Asian subcontinent throughout the eighteenth century. However, the sentimental attachment to Maratha glory should not be overstated. There is another important factor that framed what was remembered from the past and what was forgotten. It can be seen in the efforts of the British colonial administration to ideologically substantiate its dominance and critically dismiss the claims of the previous rulers of India, who somewhat simplistically were associated with the so-called Muslim period of Indian history.[6] This, in the context of the Marathi Deccan and apart from practical questions of the transformation of the Peshwa's state into the British Raj, could lead many to favouring those historical narratives that were seen as constructing opposition, again in simplistic terms, to the noted period. It is in this context that the narrative of the Marathas' struggle against the Mughals (seen essentially as Muslims) gains its academic and certainly also its increasingly popular prominence in the early part of the twentieth century. This development, to a great extent, reflected the period of a two-nation struggle on the whole of India level, and later derived fresh impetus from the Samyukta Maharashtra movement,[7] and it still has its current societal repercussions. Yet another important factor explaining the overwhelming presence of the Maratha narrative in regional historiographical writing and imagination relates to the processes of modernization of Indian society throughout the nineteenth century that accompanied its nationalism. Increased use of the printed word, the spread of new knowledge via new media, and their embeddedness in the public culture that set as its priorities to shed the shackles of national suppression played their part in imagining the equally constituted and ever-present community (of ethnic Marathas and exclusively Maratha Hindus).[8]

There may be still more factors to list, yet what emerges is that the pre-Maratha, i.e. Bahmani and Nizamshahi periods in the Marathi Deccan received much less public attention from Indian and foreign scholars compared with the period of the Marathas. This is not to say that the Bahmani and Nizamshahi were somewhat deliberately overlooked in academic production, far from it. There certainly exists a considerable body of academic literature discussing one or other aspect of the pre-modern Deccan. I simply wish to suggest that the

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[6] ELLIOT, H. M. Sir Henry Elliot's Original Preface. In ELLIOT, H. M., DOWSON, J. (transl. and ed.). *The History of India as Told by Its Own Historians: The Muhammadan Period*, pp. xv–xxvii.

[7] A movement (1956 – 1960) that demanded the creation of the Indian state of Maharashtra on linguistic grounds as a separate state for Marathi speakers.

[8] DESHPANDE, P. *Creative Pasts. Historical Memory and Identity in Western India, 1700 – 1960.*

complex, and not only academic, process of constructing, publicizing and preserving the memory of Maratha glory[9] historically overshadowed the other pasts and kept them solely, and even there marginally, in the discursive realm of academia.[10] Now, this has had an important influence on how figures such as saints, who certainly could be idealized in the national imagination, were treated historically. Positing the Maratha/Hindu period as a boundary meant searching for this division in other societal categories, religion notwithstanding. But before I delve into explaining in greater detail how increased attention to the Maratha past rather than other pasts conditioned the interpretations of precolonial holy people, it is necessary to point out more factors that are directly connected to what may be described as marathizing/hinduizing the past of the Marathi Deccan.[11]

With respect to the method used, one attribute of the aggrandizement of national narrative, and in my opinion an important one, is 'logocentrism'[12] – an orientation to text as the main source of knowing the past. Criticizing historians for engagement with texts may well be a futile exercise given that their method is textualist par excellence. But given that it is literary and epigraphic studies that dominate our knowledge of pre-modern Deccan,[13] and this holds

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[9] One of its results is easily seen in the statues of Chhatrapati-Shivaji that are literally dotted around on the map of Maharashtra (and the Marathi areas of the adjoining states). On the politics of memory in Maharashtra see JASPER, D. Of Relics and Living Traditions: Creating heritage in Maharashtra. In DEÁK, D., JASPER, D. (ed.). *Rethinking Western India: The Changing Contexts of Culture, Society, and Religion*, pp. 105–119.

[10] Some insight may be gained by comparing the number of works that cover many aspects of the pre-Maratha Marathi Deccan with the writings particularly on the Marathas. Starting from Grant Duff's magnum opus through the works of V. K. Rajwade, D. V. Potdar, G. H. Khare, V. S. Bendre, G. S. Sardesai, or outside Maharashtra, Sir Jadunath Sarkar, up to comparatively recent authors such as A. R. Kulkarni, and to certain extent also current analysts, it seems that the Maratha world looms much larger than the one which is assumed to precede it.

[11] The detailed analysis of different discursive layers that framed this past to be engaged with in the terms of collective identities is found in DESHPANDE, P. *Creative Pasts. Historical Memory and Identity in Western India, 1700 – 1960*. A good attempt to explain the complex world of pre-colonial political and cultural alliances that were far from the idea of timeless nations can be found in FISCHEL, R. S. *Local States in an Imperial World Identity, Society and Politics in the Early Modern Deccan*.

[12] CLOTHEY, F. W. *Religion in India. A Historical Introduction*, p. 8.

[13] For recent positive deviations from this trend see SOHONI, P. *The Architecture of a Deccan Sultanate: Courtly Practice and Royal Authority in Late Medieval India*; HAIDAR, N. N., SARDAR, M. *Sultans of Deccan India, 1500 – 1700: Opulence and Fantasy*; EATON, R. M., WAGONER, P. B. *Power, Memory, Architecture. Contested*

particularly true when its holy figures are concerned, one wonders whether all means of understanding the people who are said to be holy lie only within the realm of the texts. True, this is a complex question and one in which the scarcity of other than written materials also plays its role, yet often the written narratives of the saintly lives (e.g. *caritra, tadhkira*) have been utilized as direct sources of historical knowledge about the personas concerned.[14] The saintliness of the saint, presupposed in these kinds of texts, was taken for granted and often uncritically recounted within the traditional framework of the stories and woven into the national, collective narrative of the particular religious group.

Another result of the logocentric approach to the past that helps the collective identity agenda to permeate the approach of historians is the lines along which the history-oriented writings seem to be divided. The political and cultural aspects of the Deccan sultanates tend to be seen as compartmentalized with their boundaries by language and religion, both of course being strong collective markers. But since languages are employed across religions, it is problematic to seek any direct association between the language employed and the religion followed. Recent research has convincingly shown that language and the ideas of religious/ethnic collectivity in South Asia do not automatically follow the Herderian monolingual nationalistic model.[15] It certainly makes sense to approach the study of the Deccan's Muslim society via Persian or Dakhani texts. Yet, it is much more fruitful to see these texts as part of a polylingual *oecumene* functioning on the sanctioned or preferred ways of communication rather than as representative of the Muslim voices heard from the pre-colonial times. This holds particularly true for those, such as some saints, who opted for a different medium of communication than solely Dakhani or Persian – and let us admit that this choice does not make such people any less Muslim. The same may be said for those who became their followers and, in

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Sites on India's Deccan Plateau, 1300 – 1600; PHILON, H. (ed.). *Silent Splendour: Palaces of the Deccan, 14th – 19th centuries*; MICHELL, G., ZEBROWSKI, M. *Architecture and Art of the Deccan Sultanates (The New Cambridge History of India)*.

[14] A good example of how misleading such an effort may be is found in the brilliant study by MCLEOD, W. H. The Hagiography of the Sikhs. In CALLEWAERT, W. M., SNELL, R. (ed.). *According to Tradition (Hagiographical Writing in India)*, pp. 15–41.

[15] TRUSCHKE, A. *Culture of Encounters: Sanskrit at the Mughal Court*; POLLOCK, S. *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men. Sanskrit, Culture and Power in Pre-Modern India*; GUHA, S. Mārgī, Deśī, Yāvanī: High Language and Ethnic Speech in Maharashtra. In KOTANI, H. et al. (ed.). *Mārga. Ways of Liberation, Empowerment, and Social Change in Maharashtra*, pp. 129–146.

many ways, participated in sustaining the saintliness of the saints but through the medium of a different language.[16]

With respect to the forms of precolonial religion and its saintly representatives as they are conceived of and examined in the variety of Maharashtrian localities of the rural-urban continuum, it is then rare to find works on the saints of the Marathi Deccan that would attempt to historicize what has been termed as '*sant (or Sufi-sant)-paramparā*'. The result is to be seen, for example, in the fact that it is often forgotten (or overlooked) that for instance the Varkaris – the mainstream Maharashtrian tradition that, so to speak, 'lives on saints' – can historically trace their development precisely to the periods of the Bahmanis, Nizamshahs and Mughals. As if the postulation of Maratha/Marathi/Hindu identity hampered the meaningful inclusion of the pre-Maratha period in the narrative of regional history. The concentration on the ethnicity-language-religion nexus also causes a lack of detailed historical research that would enable us to historicize the creation of such important works as the canon of those who were popularized as particularly important Marathi saints. There exists an overt attention to the saint-poetry and hagiographies and their contents rather than to, say, social conditions and relations at the time of the creation of these texts, their patronization, transmission, variation across the different manuscripts, and contact with the oral world of the transmission of knowledge. For instance, the well-known *Sakalasantagāthā* (Songs of all the saints) has been reprinted several times and in various editions, and its later texts also include poetry by a few Muslims (Shaikh Muhammad, Kabir, Kamal, Dadu, Latif Shah and Sajjan Kasai).[17] However, we know much less about how these 'words of saints' historically came to be. There do exist recent counterforces to this prevailing current of understanding the saintly heritage of the Marathi Deccan. Ernst's, Novetzke's, Keune's, Green's and Naregal's works[18] may be cited as examples of the increased attention paid to the

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[16] Consider in this context Pushkar Sohoni's idea of "vernacular as a space" and that "vernacular or localized worldviews operated through a continuum of tongues". SOHONI, P. Vernacular as a space: writing in the Deccan. In *South Asian History and Culture*, 2016, Vol. 7, No. 3, p. 264.

[17] See for instance GOSAVĪ, R. Rā. (ed.). *Śrī Sakalasantagāthā* [Songs of all the Saints]. The historical precursor of *Sakalasantagāthā* was *Navanīt* published by pandit Parashurampant Godbole as early as 1854.

[18] ERNST, C. W. *Eternal Garden (Mysticism, History and Politics in South Asian Sufi Center)*; NOVETZKE, Ch. L. *Religion and Public Memory. A Cultural History of Saint Namdev in India*; KEUNE, Jon M. *Eknāth Remembered and Reformed: Bhakti, Brahmins and Untouchables in Marathi Historiography*. GREEN, Nile. *Indian Sufism Since the Seventeenth Century. Saints, books and empires in the Muslim Deccan*; NAREGAL, Veena. Language and Power in pre-colonial western India: Textual

historical contexts of the people whom others sanctified, although close ethnographic observations of the current re-presentations of the precolonial saintly heritage, which could be enriched for instance by learning from studies in historical architecture, are totally lacking.

An important factor, particularly as far as Muslim saints of the Marathi Deccan are concerned, is that all too often the conundrum of ethnicity-language-religion causes them too to be easily compart-mentalized under the category of Sufism mainly in regional Marathi scholarship. This has two easily observable results. One is seeing all those numerous differently honoured and known saintly figures, whose graves are to be found all over Maharashtra, as Sufis. However, this is arbitrary and unsystematic. It is one thing to convincingly show that a certain holy figure of a certain locality had indeed connections to the religiosity that defines itself as Sufi (say in the transmission of religious knowledge, in religious practice and philosophy, in a body of followers, or well-known Sufi interregional networks[19] – after all, we need certain identifiers for distinguishing a Sufi; otherwise the term completely loses its descriptive power). It is quite another to imagine one along the lines of a recently conceived ethnicity-language-religion nexus. A good example in this respect is the well-known publication by S. M. Pagdi from the early 1950s called *Sūfī Sampradāya* which drew heavily on Malkapuri's early 20th century *Tadhkira-ye-awliyā-ye-dakan*.[20] There Pagdi grouped together under the category of Sufi Chishtis of Khuldabad, for whose lives and teachings there exist numerous historical sources, other rather obscure figures whose only Sufi qualification was their being Muslims, having a tomb and an alleged Sufi '*silsila*'. His approach is in a different fashion mirrored in the studies in which we again meet the uncritical acceptance of Sufism as one uniform expressive mode of Muslim religiosity, which is compared to the philosophy of the '*advaita vedanta*'.[21] However, it would be much more fruitful to ask what criteria and historical evidence allows us to view certain saintly figures as Sufi than simply assume them to be Sufis.

The second result of the uncritical extension of a Sufi denominator to any Muslim saint lies in the attempt to project Sufism as a kind of lighter and more peaceful version of Islam. It reflects the Orientalist search for different facets of Muslim religiosity vis-à-vis the uncompromising monotheism accompanied by

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hierarchies, literate audiences and colonial philology. In *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 2000, Vol. 37, No. 3, pp. 259–294.

[19] VOLL, J. O. Islam as a Special World-System. In *Journal of World History*, 1994, Vol. 5, No. 2, pp. 213–226.

[20] PAGḌĪ, S. *Sūfī sampradāy. Tattvadnyān āṇi kārya* [The Sufi Tradition. Principles and Practice].

[21] VAKĪL, A. *Sūfī sampradāyāce antaraṅg* [The Heart of the Sufi Tradition].

militarized agitation around which the West has constructed an ideology of its own historical experiences with Muslim societies. Such a view then translates into attempts to interpret Muslim saintly figures according to the categories of syncretism, or communal harmony. The former is often seen as representing those forms of religious beliefs and practices that combine elements coming from different religions whereas the latter corresponds to a higher social ideal.[22] Beyond these efforts – sincere no doubt in the main with respect to the time of their appearance, which roughly corresponds to the increased sensitivity to the political pronouncements of imagined religious nations and the memory of partition − however, linger once more the premises that operate with the variable of monolithic, timeless collectives.[23] In this context it is perhaps the constraints posed by the ethnicity-language-religion nexus that caused so-called syncretic figures to have been rarely seriously approached by scholars whose works are situated along the lines of Muslim-Dakhani-Sufi collectivities and their constructed pasts.

Therefore, there exist only a few complex works dealing with Muslim saints in the Marathi socio-linguistic environment. Among the most influential should be mentioned R. C. Dhere's *Musalmān marāṭhī santkavī* (Muslim Marathi saint-poets) republished as *Ekātmatece śilpakār* (Shapers of Unity) and Y. M. Pathan's *Musalmān (sūfī) santāñce marāṭhī sāhitya* (Marathi literature of the Muslim [Sufi] saints).[24] However, Dhere's and Pathan's studies adopt a synthetic rather than an analytic approach, even though this means that in their texts we have what is up to now the best and most detailed collection of information also on those Marathi Muslim saintly figures who, from the perspective of a neglected pre-Maratha past, could have served as examples of how to connect historically and meaningfully the so-called Muslim Shahi and Maratha periods. They do try to show these connections, but Dhere's effort especially is overwhelmed by concerns that lead him to prefer collectivistic contexts of unifying Hindus and Muslim rather than seeing his materials as

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[22] E.g. AHMAD, A. *Studies in Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment*, pp. 140–200. With respect to the Marathi Deccan and communal harmony see e.g. SHYAM, R. The Succession States and Indo-Muslim Cultural Synthesis in Deccan: Medieval Period. In MATE, M. S., KULKARNI, G. T. (ed.) *Studies in Indology and Medieval Indian History* (Prof. G. H. Khare Felicitation Volume), pp. 173, 189.

[23] For more on this in the context of syncretism see ERNST, C. W., STEWART, T. Syncretism. In MILLS, M. A., CLAUS, P. J., DIAMOND, S. (ed.). *South Asian Folklore. An Encyclopedia*, pp. 586–588.

[24] ḌHERE, R. C. *Musalmān marāṭhī santkavī* [Muslim Marathi Saint-Poets]; ḌHERE, R. C. *Ekātmatece śilpakār* [The Forgers of Unity]; PAṬHĀN, Y. M. *Musalmān (sūfī) santāñce marāṭhī sāhitya* [Marathi Literature of the Muslim (Sufi) Saints].

evidence of a pre-colonial composite world, which was not in all cases necessarily struggling for religious unity. Engaging in the unity agenda then prevents him from discussing the contents of Marathi Muslim poetry side by side with the history of its authors, transmitters, patrons and audiences. Also, Dhere's and Pathan's somewhat easy adoption of Sufism without providing the term with historicity in connection with researched saintly figures makes an otherwise great collection of information slightly more problematic. Similarly, just as Pagdi essentialized all Muslim saints with Sufis, Dhere's and Pathan's Muslim Marathi saint-poets are arbitrarily given Sufi identities without questioning why saints such as Muntoji Bahmani, Shaikh Muhammad, Alamkhan, or Shaha Muni are largely unknown to any of the Sufi networks active in the Deccan, or why it is rather Marathi (and predominantly Vaishnava) discourse that accommodates them. Moreover, the evidence on those saintly figures is often the product of later canonization. Therefore without excluding the Sufi option, it is still worth asking whether local Muslim religiosity could not be articulated differently and what the Sufi networks, ideas and practices contributed to that articulation.

Illustrating the Problem: Shaikh Muhammadbaba from Shrigonda

By taking the example of a well-known Marathi Muslim saint I shall now briefly demonstrate how all the claims made above relate to him being claimed to be a Sufi, syncretic figure, as well as one whose heritage helps to overcome the division of local society into the modern blocks of Hindus and Muslims. By so doing I want to show that it is the imagined religious collectivity and lack of historical enquiry into the forms of collective organization of people's lives that causes several problems in interpreting the saintly figures in historical terms. The lack of attention to the history of the saintliness of the historical figure concerned, i.e. to the processes whereby today's saint has come to be considered as holy, are in fact very much connected with how collectives organize themselves, ideationally and practically. Without understanding these processes, any interpretation is bound to adopt rather than produce a satisfying explanation.

Shaikh Muhammadbaba from Shrigonda (ca. 1560 – 1650) is a relatively well-known figure among the followers of bhakti in the Indian state of Maharashtra. Briefly, Muhammadbaba is without a doubt the most famous Muslim saint-poet whose preferred language of literary expression was Marathi and whose chosen way of religious expression was Varkari Vaishnava bhakti. He is also believed to be an avatar of his northern counterpart-saint Kabir, and Marathi folklore directly associates him with the most popular Varkari saints

Dnyanadev, Eknath, Namdev and Tukaram in saying '*Dnyānyācā Ekā, Nāmyācā Tukā, va Kabīrācā Śekā*'.[25] Thanks to narrations of his own spiritual experiences, as well as to many miracle-narratives, Baba is also known to be a proverbial yogi and siddha. Such a portrayal is also present in all the major works that discuss his life. Muhammadbaba's hagiographer Dasganu as well as the great modern Maharashtrian politician and lawyer Mahadev Govind Ranade called Baba a convert to Hinduism.[26] Other, mainly non-Maharashtrian, scholars saw his personality as a great example of the interaction (syncretism) between Hinduism and Islam.[27] Influential Marathi researchers such as Vasudev S. Bendre, Ramachandra C. Dhere and Sadashiv G. Tuplule preferred to interpret and emphasize the Shaikh's Sufi connections and particularly highlighted the Qadiri Sufi '*silsila*' to which some of the Shaikh's followers claimed he belonged. Yet none of them, and plainly because of the overwhelming evidence from Baba's writings, challenged his image as a Muslim saint who joined the Varkaris in their devotionalism.[28]

What clearly transpires through this brief discussion of the academic approach to the Shaikh is the interpretation that the Shaikh belongs to a wider collective of devotees grouped together either under the label of Vaishnavism-Hinduism or Sufism-Islam. But what the Shaikh had to say about it is a question rarely asked and makes the Shaikh a subject for modern debate. Also, what has been rarely considered is the agency of his followers in creating the current understanding of who the Shaikh was. Although full of regional idiom, the Shaikh's works[29] suggest a greater complexity of personality than mere

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[25] "*Eknath is like Dnyanadev, Tukaram like Namdev, and Shaikh like Kabir*". In MODĻE, B. V. *Sant kavī Śekh Mahammad: Ek cikitsak abhyās* [The Saint-Poet Shaikh Muhammad. A Critical Study]. p. 50.

[26] RANADE, M. G. *Rise of the Maratha Power*, p. 75; JOŚĪ, Ś. N. (ed.). *Dāsgaṇuma-hārājkṛt ākhyān samuccaya* [A collection of stories by Dasganu Maharaj], p. 83.

[27] CHAND, T. *Influence of Islam On Indian Culture*, p. 224; AHMAD, A., Ibid., p. 159.

[28] BENDRE, V. S. (ed.). *Śekh Mahammadbābā yāñcā Kavitāsaṅgraha* [A collection of Shaikh Muhammadbaba's poems], p. 21; ḌHERE, R. C. *Ekātmatece śilpakār* [The Forgers of Unity], pp. 79–82; TULPULE, Sh. G. *Classical Marāṭhī Literature from the Beginning to A.D. 1818*, pp. 379–380. For my own take on the association of the Shaikh with Sufism, which is doubtful when seen through the historical evidence but makes sense when seen through contemporary societal concerns, see DEÁK, D. Making Sufism Popular. A few notes on the case from the Marathi Deccan. In *Deccan Studies*, 2013, Vol. 11, No. 2, pp. 5–24.

[29] Perhaps the only authentic among them is the *Yogasaṅgrām* [The Battle of Yoga]. For the sake of convenience that will allow avoiding the different kind of discussion related to the different editions and surviving manuscripts of the *Yogasaṅgrām* I will refer to this text in Dhere's edition of the work (ḌHERE, R. C. (ed.). *Śekh Mahammad viracit*

adherence to Varkari bhakti, let alone Sufism. Apart from a pronounced devotionalism (*bhakti*)[30] grounded in terms of monistic (*advaita*) philosophy we find there a great deal of social critique directed at his contemporaries, but also yoga experiences, concepts of the body and its position in the universe related to siddha philosophy and practices, as well as occasional expressions of Islamic monotheism in the language of *bhakti* intelligible to his audiences. Overall, it may be said that the regional ways of understanding a religion strongly infused with *advaitic*[31] and *bhakti* interpretations of religious conduct – with numerous references to mythological personas and concepts within the Indo-Sanskrit cultural ambit and comparatively few references to Islamic personas and concepts–certainly dominate Muhammadbaba's written works.

What then did the Shaikh have to say about what we today frame as collective identity? With regard to his own life he says very little and we are left to read between the lines of his religious message composed for those who listened to him (*śrote*). He engages in the polemic about seeing the Muslim as a member of a lower caste (*hīnayātī*)[32], which occurs in several places in his writings and reveals thus the social setting of the time. But importantly, while explaining whom he understands to be Muslim in *Yogasaṅgrām* the Shaikh makes a pun on the Marathi word *mūs*, i.e. the form, or mold. In doing so he seems to allude to the classical Islamic principle that every person is born without sin, and therefore in a state of submission to God's will, i.e. as a Muslim.[33] The Muslim then, as far as I understand his words, is the one who

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Yogasaṅgrām [The Battle of Yoga composed by Shaikh Muhammad]. The collection of orally preserved poetry *Kavitāsaṅgraha* [A collection of Shaikh Muhammadbaba's poems], due to its comparatively recent date and its nature as a compilation, always brings up the question of authorship. The other works attributed to the Shaikh – *Pavanvijay* [The Victory of the Wind], *Niṣkalaṅka Prabodha* [*Unstained Knowledge*] and *Dnyānagangā* [Ganga of Wisdom] have hardly been subject to scholarly scrutiny and therefore I have omitted discussion of them from this paper. However, their contents do not alter the argument presented here.

[30] For more on *bhakti* as devotional philosophy embodied in practice see in PRENTISS, K. P. *The Embodiment of Bhakti*.

[31] Although Baba employs the language of non-dualism (*advaita*), it is quite possible that he is translating the Islamic monotheistic idea for local audiences. *Advaita*, for instance, could well stand for '*tawḥīd*'. For more on such processes of translation see STEWART, T. K. In Search of Equivalence: Conceiving Muslim-Hindu Encounter through Translation Theory. In *History of Religions*, 2001, Vol. 40, No. 3, pp. 261–288.

[32] What is important to note is not the mere fact that Shaikh engages with this very Indic understanding of Muslim social identity, but rather the historical presence of the social environment of which his social position was doubtless very much a part.

[33] *Yogasaṅgrām* [The Battle of Yoga], 6:11–15.

understands the worth, and perhaps also the divinity, of this very form (his nature in other words) and by breaking the misconception of duality (*dvaitācā śram*) finds the form of devotion and wisdom that stems from the renunciation of all duality (*bhaktidnyāna vairāgyarasañcī mūs*).[34] It is also clear that not all who fall into the category of '*musalmān*' behave according to the meaning suggested by Shaikh Muhammad. Therefore, he despises those Muslims who destroy what others love (e.g. the images of God) or misunderstand their status.[35]

However painstaking this exposition of the Shaikh's might seem, the effort he put into the explanation displays his own interest in the matter, and most importantly it displays the contemporary terms of the debate regarding collective religious identity. This debate is influenced by one's social identity obtained at birth (*jāti*) and by the individual efforts of a person struggling for an understanding of the world they live in. Put plainly, the Shaikh did not see any problem in remaining a Muslim and at the same time being a bhakta, a yogi, and perhaps also a Vaishnava Varkari! His family background provided Muhammadbaba with the necessary markers of Muslim identity of which he also had been socially made aware, as well as with the local knowledge of Islam. But being a Muslim and professing Islam – and this term is strangely absent from his work – clearly did not signify merely social ties. Rather it was the engagement with the world around him, which he saw as divine and which he experienced via the local religious environments infused with Varkari bhakti and yogic knowledge.

Now, to be clear, most of the Shaikh's writings do not discuss religious identity much, but rather share his inner religious experiences and give (often mystical) hints of how these should be understood. True, in this context he did discuss the role of religious figures from different groups (*qāzīs*, *mulāṇās, faqīrs, yogīs, jaṅgams, brāhmaṇs, vairāgīs, sannyāsīs*).[36] The other references towards the ways of postulating belonging to a religious group, which we already noted, may be found connected to the Shaikh's views on the social identity of '*musalmān*' against internal (vis-à-vis Sayyids) and external social divisions (vis-à-vis Brahmans, Marathas). Apart from the *Yogasaṅgrām* these appear in some of his poems whose present form has been based on oral transmission. However, the discussion of religious identity in particular, and of collective social belonging in general, appears in specific terms. These do not

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[34] Ibid., 18: 301–327.

[35] E.g. Sayyids (*Yogasaṅgrām* [The Battle of Yoga], 18: 151–152); see also BENDRE, V. S. *Śekh Mahaṃmadbābā yāñcā Kavitāsaṅgraha* [A collection of Shaikh Muhammadbaba's poems], poem no. 236, p. 96.

[36] Cf. *Yogasaṅgrām* [The Battle of Yoga] 5:79–105.

correspond to a Vaishnava-Sufi, or Hindu-Muslim binary, but rather to several identity markers of the 17th century that are far from any simplified collective forms (*musalmān* as ideal; *musalmān* as *hīnayātī*; *brāhmaṇ-sayyid* as *uttamayātī*; Maratha-Yavan as different linguistic, as well as, religious groups; *sannyāsī*, *faqīr*, *jaṅgam*, *qāzī*, *yogī* and the like as those who in one way or another approach and discuss the Lord – *Īśvara*). Why then is the Shaikh seen as a Hindu convert, syncretistic figure, or saint whose religious message primarily integrates Hinduism and Islam? How is it that today his often-heard description given by his Hindu devotees is "he was a Muslim and yet became one of us"? Why then do we hear from his Muslim devotees that he was above the Hindu-Muslim division, an *awliyā*, or *sant*? Why is it that all of the academic works that discuss the Shaikh never fail to mention his belonging to an imagined religious collective, if the belonging itself does not figure in any prominent way figure in the primary material at our disposal? Why is it so important to address him as a Sufi, or Varkari sant?

The answers lie in the neglected history of the Shaikh's saintliness. It has hardly been questioned because saintliness, it is true, is primarily a matter of belief. However, belief in the Shaikh's power – in his ability to help his followers, the ability of his remembered and textually preserved words to inspire all those seeking knowledge – appears, as it were, ever present. But in another context – the one that documents how the persona of the Shaikh was interpreted, represented and publicly constructed – his saintliness is also a historical process connected to all those who followed and shared the glory of their saint, and this is frequently forgotten. There certainly was a Shaikh Muhammad of 17th century, but the Shaikh Muhammad of the posterity is clearly different from the historical person who speaks to us in the *Yogasaṅgrām*. This other, let us say discursive, Shaikh, who is constructed through texts, stories, songs, periodic practices or even objects of worship and who is perhaps today much better known than his historical model, is composed of elements that display a variety of concerns (individual, public), as they were historically layered one on another. It is here that we should locate the history of how collective belonging crept into the overall image of the Shaikh. But this is a modern tale starting with Ranade and Dasganu proclaiming at the turn of the 19th – 20th centuries the Shaikh to be a convert and continued in academic discussion of his "peculiar" combining of Hinduism and Islam in the works of historians who lived through the time of partition, or proclaiming him to belong to Qādirī *silsila* by the authors who elevated his lineage, perhaps in order to prove Sufism's lighter character, or finally to see him as an ideal person who integrates Hindus and Muslims, which is clearly a present day concern.

All these claims that make the Shaikh belong to a certain collective body are understandable as stemming from the social contexts articulated both in

academic and popular forms. But they help an understanding of Shaikh Muhammad and his followers, today or across the centuries, rather arbitrarily. These claims are far from the world seen in the Shaikh's texts; their proponents seem to seek no other meaning in the reading of other similar texts from the Sheikh's era than the concerns of their own present and hardly allow the posing of questions about the social concerns of the 17th century authors. These claims do not answer questions about the origin, persistence, and local uniqueness of the Shaikh's popularity, or about the personal involvement of its different historical agents, its social appropriation and interpretation in different times by different people (as different as Dasganu and Ranade), nor do they help us to understand any of the economic and political contexts in which the popularity of the Shaikh involving several thousands of people occurred.

Excessive concentration on Maratha military and social success, if seen through a collective lens, neglects the agency of other contemporary societal agents. With respect to saints, and as an example Shaikh Muhammad, this causes his separation from other saintly contemporaries and overall social relations in the 17th century. For instance, pointing towards the folk tradition that connects the Shaikh to Tukaram has no other goal than to show the Shaikh's attachment to yet another great Marathi and Maratha saint. But how could this tale develop historically? How does it relate to other tales making the Shaikh interact with Brahmans as different as Jayramswami and Kashi pandits, and what does it say about the people and communities discussing *Īśvara*, *dharma*, *jāti* in the time when Bhosles challenged Mughal power and Husain Ambarkhan wrote his commentary on the Bhagavadgita at Shahaji Bhosle's court? Why has the relation of Shaikh Muhammad to Maloji Bhosle, which is evidenced by the document in which Shaikh is given land in Shrigonda by Maloji and is called his guru,[37] hardly been discussed in order to show the precolonial social ties in which Shaikh acts as both benefactor and beneficiary as well as a reclusive individual and yet a public person? With respect to the discursive making of the saint, how much of the Shaikh's family negotiations with powerful people such as the representatives of the Mughals[38] and Shindes (who dominated Shrigonda for a considerable span of time) conditions the way in which the Shaikh is perceived and his memory constructed? Perhaps the inserting of his name in the Qādirī *silsila* by an unknown author at the time of the third generation of the Shaikh's descendants relates to a time when the Mughal presence in the Marathi Deccan was at its height, and association with

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[37] BENDRE, V. S. *Tukārām mahārāj yāñce santasāṅgātī* [The Companions of Tukaram Maharaj], pp. 69–70.

[38] According to Shaikh's current descendants, Aurangzeb granted them the land for building a mosque, which still stands near the dargah.

the elites could certainly create social capital. Perhaps it could come as a response to Qādirī prestige in royal circles as embodied in Dara Shikoh, or it could represent a political stance in the fight for the Mughal throne. All these are historical questions worth pursuing because they show us the details of social relations in the precolonial Deccan, which viewing them through a collective lens prevents. In addition, searching for a collective Hinduism in the time of the Shaikh, prevents us from explaining historically the lived religiosity and the extent and nature of the socially rising Maratha gentry's interactions with such locally known public figures as the Shaikh.

Furthermore, imagining Sufism as a softer form of uniform Islam which provides the Shaikh with a Sufi identity prevents us from understanding the evidence of the Shaikh's peculiar locally formed understanding of Islam, as well as completely neglecting the historicity of the effort of some of his descendants (and/or followers) to provide him with Sufi *silsilah*. And even if the claims of Qādirī lineage were accepted,[39] how would we understand his *Yogasaṅgrām* vis-à-vis the religious teachings of the Qādirīs in the Deccan? What would account for the gradual disappearance of the Qādirīs from Shrigonda (for there apparently must have been some, or some that were deemed such)? And in that context how do we understand the silence of contemporary and later Sufi sources on Shaikh Muhammad himself, let alone his texts?

Thus, researching the history of the Shaikh's saintliness, that is the historical processes that provide his different followers with competing claims for his religious identity, enables also a deeper insight into how those communities came to be, as well as recognition of the fact that they hardly can be seen as

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[39] I have recently seen a copy of a bilingual Persian-Marathi manuscript of a land grant referred to by Bendre (*Tukārām mahārāj yāñce santasāṅgātī* [The Companions of Tukaram Maharaj], pp. 69–70). Its Persian part is a summary of the longer Marathi version that appears also in other slightly different manuscript renderings. The Persian part of the bilingual document proves that Maloji Bhosle gave land to Shaikh Mahammad and called him '*darvíš qādirī*'. This appellation is, however, absent from the Marathi text where the Shaikh is referred to as a '*mokadam* (village headman)'. Similarly, the Persian text does not mention Maloji's recognition of the Shaikh as his guru. These differences show that different linguistic variants were composed for different audiences and different claims were made. Yet, they again suggest that the identity of the Shaikh was in his time far from being clear in terms of modern collective identity. The 'Qādirī' appellation does not explain why Shaikh when referring to his preceptor, or other holy man, omits the Qādirī' *silsila*, why the poetry of his descendants and followers does not acknowledge any association between the Sheikh and Qādirī' Sufis, or why there is no documented Sufi practice among his immediate followers. I would like to express my gratitude to Naveena Naqvi and Miklós Sárközy for their help with reading the Persian text.

divided simply into Hindus and Muslims. How does the fact that two tombs of the Shaikh exist, both in the possession of his descendants, who today, and largely because of the social conditions that make them see themselves as part of one (Sufi) or other (Varkari) religious collective, speak about the local relations and competing claims to his memory? What kind of social cohesion, or social application of the integrative heritage of Shaikh is there, if in fact the ethnographic fieldwork[40] provides us with evidence that his own family is divided according to each one's ability to handle the outward social discourse of a collective religious identity divided between Hindu and Muslims, which has been strengthened by the academic adoption of that very same division?

Conclusion

Historicizing saints, disenchanting them from the current beliefs and socio-political tendencies that level the richness of their pasts to a collective identity or communal harmony, is certainly a way to grasp the history of the pre-colonial period differently. That difference is marked by avoiding anachronisms, such as applying modern collective categories to times to which they do not belong, and by seeking the question that are framed by the available evidence. To put it more plainly, seeing collective identity as a problem helps us to ask different questions than those that dominate the writing on pre-colonial saints, especially in local scholarship. What factors participate in the creation of a religious group? What are the impulses that give rise to collective identification? What is it that creates a saint in the minds of the people? Is it just the texts, or is it a family, a local tradition, practices and experiences? Is it the dynamics of the oral and written testimonies and personal experiences along with the practices upheld periodically and occasionally, as well as the stories told, heard and reproduced? How is a saint socially appropriated? Without asking such questions it is hardly possible to locate saintly figures historically.

   With respect to Muslim saints of the Marathi Deccan, there is huge scope for future researchers to explore how they historically became venerated and what the gradual process of veneration says about their pasts as well as the pasts of the communities of their devotees. All of these historical figures present us with the voices of Deccani Muslims whose peculiar specificity with respect to the

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[40] Cf. DEÁK, D. Making Sufism popular. A few notes on the case from the Marathi Deccan. In *Deccan Studies*, 2013, Vol. 11, No. 2, pp. 5–24 and DEÁK, D. Emplacing holiness. The local religiosity between Vaishnavas, Sufis and demons. In SENGAR, B., HOVELL MCMILLIN, L. (ed.). *Spaces and Places in Western India. Formations and Delineations*.

historical formation of such voices needs consideration. Instead of projecting modern collectivities on them, there is the challenge of discovering how these collectivities came to be socially articulated. The only census that mapped Maharashtrian sacred geography and traditions related to saints from 1961 provides literally dozens of names and localities where the local religiosity continually produces its societally conditioned forms.[41] Grouping together the saints hidden behind these enormous societal ideals and practices, which in several cases have pre-colonial models, only under the modern collective markers and their derivations literally blinds us from recognizing these figures as social actors who did create history. In fact, these people, whose tombs lie unattended or neglected and who are hardly known to a modern logocentric and monolithic approach seeking to locate them along the lines of ethnicity-language-religion and which always discusses only a select few, are in fact those who reveal much more about how Muslim saints are a part of the social environment. It would be a mistake to reduce them to being only carriers of communal harmony even if they may serve to inspire the overcoming of the communal tensions. What then do saintly *littérateurs* such as Sheikh Muhammad, Shaha Muni, Mrtyunjay Bahmani/Brahmani, Alamkhan, Husain Ambarkhan – as well as the far more numerous host of holy figures such as Haji Malang, Shiv-Ling Badshah, Chand Bodhle, Avadhut-Pir, or Piroba to name but a few – tell us about how Deccani religiosity was formed, and how it historically created its still visible social presence?

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[41] See Fairs and festivals in Maharashtra. In *Census of India 1961*. Vol. 10, Pt. VII-B.

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