

## Book Review

Ibad, Umer Bin., *Sufi Shrines and the Pakistani State: The End of Religious Pluralism*.  
245pp., I.B. Tauris 2018

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This book is ostensibly about the progressive ‘nationalisation’ of numerous Sufi shrines by the post-independence Pakistani State. Its ramifications, however, are much wider since it impinges on the very ideology which the State has adopted, almost from the beginning, and its repercussions on people’s relationship to culture and custom, as well as to their neighbours who may belong to a religion other than Islam or to a different kind of Islam from the one promoted in the dominant narrative.

According to the author, what has happened to the shrines is the result of a ‘double reterritorialisation’: territory is claimed for Muslims to be able to live as Muslims without let or hindrance, but then a kind of ‘singular Islam’ is imposed by the State on its citizens, alienating them from their customary, soil related and syncretistic practices thus leading to widespread deracination and loss of identity. Such an imposition has effects not only on the beliefs of people but on their daily habits in terms of food, dress and relations with the ‘Other’ who is now perceived as alien and with whom only limited social intercourse is possible. This is particularly galling when the ‘Other’ happen to be Christian or Harijan groups that actively supported the creation of Pakistan. At the same time, the State not only ‘unifies’ the nation in the name of religion but also enriches itself from the sequestration of funds and property from the shrines, using these resources to further propagate its version of Islam, and, at the same time, reducing the shrine’s capacity for social welfare and educational activities.

The writer is aware that, as far as the shrines are concerned, the project to Islamicise them has been only partially successful. In many of the remote areas, but also in some metropolitan ones, the old practices and veneration of the hereditary pirs continues and the latter still wield spiritual as well as political influence over their adherents. Behind this attempt by the State to enforce a particular vision of religion on its citizens, there are both the movements for reform which

began in the British imperial era (not ‘colonial’ as India was never a colony) under the impulse of ‘enlightened’ education and rationalism, and Islamic revivalism which arose to combat Christian missionary work and aggressive Hindu attempts at ‘reconversion’. The emerging middle classes began to look on with distaste at the ‘superstitious’, ‘permissive’ and ‘syncretistic’ practices of the shrines and their devotees. A purified Islam, it seemed to them, was what was needed to meet the requirements of changing times. For the author, such a consensus between the emerging middle classes and the State has been disastrous for the soil based, customary and assimilative ethos of the shrine.

Both Allama Iqbal and his son Javed Iqbal have been mentioned repeatedly as representing the reformist and revivalist tendencies in South Asian Islam. As far as the former is concerned, he is an enigma. On the one hand, it is certainly true that he was searingly critical of pantheistic, monist Sufism of the Wahdat Al Wujud type, which seemed to him to have enervated the Muslim masses, who needed waking up from their mystically induced slumbers. On the other, he was equally critical of the mosque-based clerics who caused division and conflict among the people. He was an advocate of a radical ijthad of the Shari’a and many of his Persian and Urdu verses are breathtaking in their acknowledgement of plurality. We can agree, however, that Iqbal was eventually in favour of a purified Sufism as represented, for example, in the work of Sheikh Ahmad Sarhindi.

It is true, of course, that the takeover by the State in the interests of a puritanical Islam is not all that has happened. Since the time of Sir Thomas Arnold (a revered teacher of Allama Iqbal’s), there has been a growing realisation that many of the Sufis, buried at the shrines, propagated Islam peacefully rather than by conquest and the sword. In the wake of Islamist terrorism, the world has, rightly or wrongly, viewed Sufism as an acceptable face of Islam. Sufism

continues to inspire poetry, music and art of a high calibre. In fact, when there have been 'secular' minded regimes in Pakistan, such as that of Yahya Khan and the early years of the ZA Bhutto government, they have promoted the artistic and cultural aspect of the shrines and of the devotees there. Others though, like that of Zia-ul-Haq, have gone back to attempt the Islamisation of the shrines and the activities around them. Whether Sufism is capable of bearing the weight of expectation that is put upon it and whether all its exponents have been peaceful are matters of continuing debate. As Dr Akhtar Injeeli has demonstrated, there have been militant expressions of Sufism, in West Africa, the Middle East and even in South Asia. Recent events have shown the deep involvement of Sufis in political movements, for instance, in Turkey. Whether 'soil-based', syncretic expressions of religion are necessarily peaceful and integrative is also a question that can be asked in the light of the emergence of militant Sikhism.

The central question posed by this work is whether the existence of a State, which has been created solely on the basis of the religion of a particular group, especially one as absolute as Islam, necessarily leads to the expression of a singularist interpretation of that religion, resulting in the suppression of other forms of its historical manifestation. The book recognises a conflict, even a contradiction, among the founders and ideologues of the new State. Figures like Iqbal, Jinnah and Liaquat Ali Khan were instinctively political, even religious, liberals yet, at the same time, they knew that communal Muslim identity had to be unified and strengthened if Pakistan were to become viable. It is not only diversity in the expression of Islam that has suffered but also groups like the Christians and the Harijans who supported the creation of Pakistan in the belief that a nation being created for one minority would be friendly towards others. Certainly, the founding fathers were sympathetic to such expectations but it has not turned out so, perhaps it could not, given the inflexible nature of a system which has been accepted as the basis for national life.

The issues raised and explored in this book are of much wider importance than the fate of the Sufi shrine, however important that may be, and should be discussed much more accessibly, perhaps in the form of a symposium or dialogue. I look forward to it.

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