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Politics and Poetics of Syncretism: Case Studies of the Bonbibí Cult, the Mappila Teyyam Performances, and Three Poems of the Bhakti Tradition from the Indian Subcontinent

Akhila Vimal C, Dipanjali Deka, Poulomi Das

The concept of syncretism has often been at the receiving end of much scholarly criticism and scrutiny. In this article, we explore the politics and poetics of Hindu-Muslim syncretism in select cultural traditions from the Indian subcontinent. Poulomi investigates the religious ecosystem of the Bonbibí cult of Sundarbans in the eastern Indian state of West Bengal. Akhila studies the ritual healing practice of Teyyam in the North Malabar region of the South Indian state of Kerala. Dipanjali reads three mystic poems/songs from three different geo-cultural contexts (by Lal Ded of Kashmir, Azan Fakir of Assam, and Kabir of the Northern Indian subcontinent). Through the lens of cultural, performative, and poetic/lyrical spaces, this article acknowledges and analyzes the organic yet contradictory forces of hybridity and acculturation prevalent within these syncretic traditions. The arrival of rigid institutionalized Islam and the larger cultural appropriation of popular folk myths by Hinduism in India have accentuated existing social conflicts. In the light of this emergent crisis, this article also foregrounds how syncretism has often been used as a rhetorical strategy to cover underlying religious and political frictions.

Keywords: *syncretism, religion, Bonbibí, Teyyam, Bhakti*

Syncretism has been loosely understood as the synthesis of religious and cultural ideas wherein two or more faith patterns and practices combine in varying degrees to become an amalgamated hybrid. It has often been observed that there is an instinctive tendency in many South Asian cultural and social contexts to romanticize the idea of religious assimilation between Hinduism and Islam, their overlapping ritual practices and their hybrid performance traditions.¹ On the surface, these in-between cultural and performative spaces have often been identified as the loci of syncretic forces, vectors that result in neat hybrid zones of harmonious appropriation. However, in most cases, they are a result of discordant and dissimilar indigenous interactions, which are malleable enough to precariously co-exist out of people's sheer need to survive and live. While discussing syncretism in India it is important to use a lens that enables us to interpret the varied dynamics of the

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phenomenon and to weave in the possibilities of accommodating complex and extended connotations of the concept. This article therefore invokes the category of “space” to read the syncretic tendencies in the three select embodied practices and knowledge systems, viz. the Bonbibi cult, the Mappila Teyyam performances, and three poems of the Bhakti tradition. In doing this, it also underscores the age-old tendency of Hindu-Muslim polarization that has often threatened the secular nature of our democracy.

Among the numerous “little traditions” of Bengal’s religious ecosystem,² Sundarbans’s Bonbibi cult gets a lot of attention because of its seemingly syncretic beliefs and practices.³ The people of Sundarbans, who are dependent on the resources of the forest and rivers for their bare subsistence, irrespective of their religion hold deep reverence for Mother Goddess Bonbibi. They believe she is a Muslim *pirani* (religious lady) who was sent by Allah to safeguard them from Dokkhin Rai: the Brahmin-tiger God, an incarnation of the ferocious Royal Bengal tiger, which threatens their lives. The origin of Sundarbans’s variant of syncretism is polyphonic and a matter of conjecture. In *Forest of Tigers*, Annu Jalais analyzes the works of Richard Eaton⁴ on the Islamization of Bengal and finds that the roots of this cult might be traced to the “new agrarian communities [that] started professing an Islamic identity”⁵—the new converts to Islam who associated the expansion of agricultural endeavors to Sufi saints who tamed and controlled the forest. In *Bonbibi of Badabon*, Sujit Sur speculates it to be related to an ancient tribal deity, who later became extremely popular among the migrants of both religions, inhabitants who settled in the islands since precolonial times.⁶ But no matter how much contested the origins of the cult might have been, what remains the ground reality today is a unique palimpsest of traditions that affirm and contradict each other. Therefore, rather than assuming that the Bonbibi cult is a spontaneous wholesome acculturation of the rites and ritual practices of the two religions, the first case study analyzes the cultural manifestations of the cult as a shade of syncretism that selectively appropriates customs arising out of the dire necessity of a precarious ecological existence, hinged on fear and faith. As the data collected from ethnographic field visits were conducted on the Indian side of Sundarbans, this study does not refer to the half of Sundarbans that lies in Bangladesh.

Teyyam is a popular ritual healing practice prevalent in the northern Malabar region of the south Indian state of Kerala. The term *Teyyam* is a colloquial form of “Daivam” or “God,” and this practice of community worship commemorates dead heroes and local deities. Teyyam originated as an indigenous form in which different communities of the region had ritual participation. Teyyam performance is rich in its use of spectacle, music, and movement. Anyone from these communities, irrespective of their caste, religion, or occupation can achieve the status of Teyyam. However, the right to performance is vested with specific caste groups like Vannan, Malayan, Velan, Pulayan, Koppalan, Mavilan, and so on, who belong to various “Hindu lower castes”. In the Muslim Teyyams, as also in the performances of the

Bonbibu cult, the faith of the characters (Muslims) is different from that of the performers (Hindus) who embody them. In such spaces, syncretism tends to become a psychological process where performers have to overrule their identity conflicts before the performance. The second case study problematizes syncretism through the lens of Muslim characters in Teyyam pantheon. This will help to identify how Muslim Teyyams engage and position themselves in the Teyyam space, which has been transformed into a Hindu ritual with the intervention of Hindu upper castes starting around the thirteenth century. It is important to understand the paradigm shifts in Teyyam and how it negotiated with the changing space and patronages in various sociopolitical scenarios.

The Indian Bhakti movement came into being around the seventh century in Tamil South India and gradually swept across other regions of the subcontinent. The Bhakti movement is considered to have played a multifaceted role in decentralizing devotion from the brahmanical priesthood by bringing vernacular languages to the fore and in producing a rich oral tradition of poetry and music. The commonly used English translation for bhakti, “devotion,” fails to capture fully the spectrum of experience that bhakti covers. Bhakti poetry can be a passionate call of longing for God, praise of *zīr* form and attributes or a call to the formless divinity,⁷ life lessons, critique of the worldly disparities of religion and caste, and sometimes even a call for communal harmony and religious confluence. This last category of song text is what the third case study of this article explores. Amidst the plethora of bhakti voices that are believed to facilitate an inclusive syncretic space, we take examples from three distinct geographical terrains, cultures, and languages: Lal Ded, a fourteenth-century Kashmiri Saivite yogini; Kabir, a fifteenth-century *nirgun* poet popular across the northern Indian subcontinent;⁸ and Azan Pir Fakir, a seventeenth-century Sufi poet from Assam. The song of each poet arises from their own context of historical and sociocultural necessity, leading to a distinct variant of poetic syncretism that is explored in this study.

This article uses space as a methodological lens to explore the idea of syncretism. The first kind of space is the “cultural space” of a community, which in itself is the macrocosm of a society and all its elements: practices, performances, emotions, thoughts, “forms,” and often even their “contradictory effects,” as argued by Carolyn Levine.⁹ To understand Bonbibu, who is at once a goddess, a myth, a belief, a philosophy, it is the lens of cultural space that adequately dismantles the synchronicities of the mythical and ritualistic performances intermingling in it. A more focused tool is the lens of “performance space” to explore syncretism. Through the lens of performance in Mappila Teyyam, political negotiations manifesting at a performative and cultural level is mapped in the rhetorical narrative of syncretism in North Malabar. Invoking Henri Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space*, K. Arunlal and Sunitha Srinivas C argue that “like other cultural spaces, poetic space is at once both ‘lived’ and ‘conceptualized’.”¹⁰ A certain syncretic image or message that is conceptualized in the poetic realm of thought can have

the potential to be manifested in the physical sociocultural space. Keeping faith in this potential, bhakti poetry is often invoked to call forth the message of syncretism. The poetic or lyrical space is hence the third lens of space that is explored in this article to understand the multiple shades of syncretism in the Indian subcontinent.

Syncretism in the Cultural Space of the Bonbibi Cult

The present population of Sundarbans, either descendants of the Indigenous tribes who converted to Islam or those who migrated and settle in the deltas,¹¹ are Paunda Kshatriya, Namoshudra (Chandal), Bagdi, Kapali, Malo, Napit, Kaibarta, Jalia, Tior, Dhoba, Jogi, Suri, Kaor, and Rajbangshi—low-caste Hindus¹² (the scheduled castes); Shaikh, Mirshikari, Sapuria and Bediya—low-caste Muslims; and Santhal, Munda, and Oraon (the scheduled tribes). The dispossessed poor who had been fleeing their places of origin to escape the oppression of the mainstream society for centuries or who had been brought by the British for deforestation and reclamation work to yield revenue for the state¹³ had taken up cultivation, fishing, crab-collecting, woodcutting, seafaring, and honey/wax/timber collecting as their occupation to survive in the dense mangroves. But frequent tornados, regular tidal floods, and the presence of wild and dangerous animals, especially the Royal Bengal tiger, have made them peg their faith in the powers of a sylvan goddess, Bonbibi. This potent Muslim deity is their only messiah who can ensure their safety irrespective of their religion, gender, caste, class, and age, but only if one enters the terrain in need and not greed. It is, however, not unusual to find low-caste Hindus praying to a divinity of Islamic lineage instead of trusting the prowess of their existing divinities of the Puranic pantheon. What is rarer is that some Muslims who depend on the forest and rivers of Sundarbans for their sustenance, practice idol worship, something that is prohibited in the tenets of Islam. The Bonbibi cult is therefore no simple portrayal of religious hybridity; instead, it is the prototype of a religious logic that organically springs from the functionality of a cult. This case study closely analyzes the inherent threads of syncretism embedded in this religious cult and its sociocultural manifestations, to dismantle the politics of rhetorically using the tropes of syncretism. This will in effect foreground the deep-seated ecological necessity and the often-neglected real-life functionality of a syncretic cult.

The cult of Bonbibi affects and absorbs the past and the present of islanders in more ways than can be strictly encoded. It is not just the fulcrum of the community's ancestral existential wisdom but also a vessel and vehicle of their omnipresent fear of death and misery on the one hand, and their indomitable hope of a better life on the other. The presence of Bonbibi is ubiquitous in their collective and private lives: their rituals and faith systems, their celebrations and festivities, their everyday utterances and adages. The mythic tale of their cult text, *Bonbibi Johuranama* (the Islamic word *johur* means “jewels,” and *nama* means “chronicles”) in fact merges, dilutes, and sometimes over-empowers the ground reality of human settlement in

Sundarbans. Moreover, a close reading of the *Johuranama* written by the Muslim authors¹⁴ would reveal how the literary practices of the Hindu Mangal Kavya and the Islami Pir Sahitya traditions¹⁵ have informed and influenced each other to birth this prototype religious text.

The narrative of the *Johuranama* is representational and mimetic of the lives of the islanders to such an extent that the forest-going folks often identify themselves as Dukhe: the child-protagonist of the story, who is extremely poor and unfortunate. Bonbibi saves this small hapless Muslim boy from the cunning conspiracies of his greedy, rich merchant uncle, Dhona. Dhona had connivingly planned to sacrifice Dukhe to the fearful tiger-god Dokkhin Rai in exchange for the forest's store of honey and wax. The life of the poor bartered to make the rich richer: an age-old and timeless tool of oppression. The forest-dependent poverty-stricken inhabitants of Sundarbans feel an intimate resonance with this narrative. Reciting it in parts or whole is an essential ritual practice of the Bonbibi worship ceremonies: the *pujas*, which happen on and around the time of the full moon in the winter month of Magha (corresponding to January-February). Its plot forms the basic storyline on which the Bonbibi *palas*¹⁶ are performed, which are unequivocally one of the most popular forms of ritual performances and an integral part of the annual festivities of the community. To adequately comprehend the ecology-driven syncretic texture of the fabric of Sundarbans's community life, it becomes inevitable to untangle the minute threads of inherent yet incongruous thoughts that have flowed and merged in the common crucible of their cult text.



Fig. 1. The cast of a Bonbibi *pala* performance from Annpur (with the director of the team, Anuja Adhikari, who is also playing the role of Dukhe's mother, clad in a white saree in the picture), 2017. Photo credit: Poulomi Das.

The *Johuranama* starts by telling the tale of Bonbibi and her brother Shah Jongoli's arrival, gaining control of and cultivating the mangroves, after defeating and then befriending the erstwhile human-devouring form-changing Brahmin tiger-god-ruler Dokkhin Rai and his mother, Narayani. This is almost symbolic of the beginning of agriculture and Islamization in the mangroves. The *Johuranama*, with its curious mixture of Arabic and Persian words laced with Bengali, is interestingly read backward from the last page to the first, like books in Arabic or Urdu, but it is composed in *payar chhanda*, a specific meter¹⁷ in Bengali that is traditionally used in Hindu *panchalis*.¹⁸ Though this text was indeed "an idealized creation of Hindu and Muslim minds, which were...eager to meet with each other on a common platform of cordiality and unity,"¹⁹ its story has contradictions and fractures that frustrate attempts of unidimensional religious hybridity.

In the first part of the *Johuranama*, Bonbibi defeats Narayani and Dokkhin Rai, but instead of completely ousting them from their position, Bonbibi enters into a relationship of sisterhood with Narayani and in the process, accepts Dokkhin Rai as her adopted son. However, by the time we reach the second part of the book, it seems Bonbibi has completely forgotten this arrangement. On the verge of vanquishing Dokkhin Rai for attacking Dukhe, she has to be reminded by Gazi Pir of the prior settlement and the conflict ends in an amicable treaty.²⁰ This is no mere authorial slip but evidence of intersections of numerous oral myths. The resources of the forest—the honey and the wax—belong to Dokkhin Rai, but if a human devotee of Bonbibi enters the forests in search of basic subsistence, they will remain unscathed. Therein lies the seeds of ancient ecological wisdom that prioritizes neither man nor animal but foregrounds the centrality of nature as a supreme entity. Bonbibi is the custodian of the balance of life in Sundarbans—in its soil, water, air, trees, and its beings. Such an intense sense of community adherence and ecological cohesion is mostly seen among tribal societies. In fact, Sur locates the existence of her cult to a time that predates or circumvents the debates of Hindu-Muslim connections. The basis of his speculation is embedded in the story itself. When Dukhe leaves his mother, she reminds him to remember Bonbibi in times of need. Could it mean that Dukhe's mother belonged to the clan that worshipped Bonbibi? When Dukhe successfully returns to the village, he carries a totem of an axe in a necklace. Could this imply that he was saved by a community of woodcutters, who worshipped Bonbibi and therefore the connections between Dukhe and Bonbibi ensued?

The philosophy of ultimate balance and surrender to ecology is also reflected in the mind-set of the people who work in the *bada* (the mangroves), irrespective of their religious affinities. They often take pride in the fact that they are better in terms of constituency of heart and health than those who work in the *abad* (inhabited land) because the forest is a sacred nondiscriminatory place. It is Bonbibi's territory, a space with special healing powers. They believe that the soil of the forest has an intrinsic cooling quality that alters the health and disposition of the person who connects with it, but only for those who obey Bonbibi's rules, or else one is doomed

to meet death by becoming a target of wild animals or being killed by the roots and branches of the mangrove trees. In fact, the soil of Bonbibi's *thaan* (place of prayer) is believed to have miraculous medicinal properties and can allay diseases of the mind and the body: a faith that runs deep in the psyche of both Hindus and Muslims.

Bonbibi is intrinsically linked to the community's occupational cycles. She is worshipped every time they venture into the forest and rivers of Sundarbans. While the rhythmic reading of *Bonbibi Johuranama* in the *panchali* melody takes up a central place in the ritual, it has to be done by a non-Brahmin, even better, by a Muslim. It is interesting to note how numerous Islamic words like *hajat* (devotional penance), *shinni/shirni* (an offering to the goddess primarily made of rice and milk), *manot* (the solicited blessing), and *khoirat* (the custom of donation) have seamlessly woven themselves into the ritual ecosystem of the cult. *Khoirat* is integral to the worship ritual; it is symbolic of a community's altruism, a way to bridge the haves and have-nots, a benevolent society's responsibility to look after the needy. However, equally significant are the non-Islamic practices such as idol worship, worshipping earthen mounds, and offering *prasad* (cooked food) to the goddess.

The idol of Bonbibi is in the form of a woman, mostly with Dukhe on her lap, but not always, though. She is always accompanied by Shah Jongoli and often by two other male human figures: one of the Gazi Pir and the other of Dokkhin Rai. Dokkhin Rai is sometimes portrayed as a tiger, sometimes as a Brahmin, and sometimes even half-tiger and half-human. Scholars have argued that "in response to their environment the locals have evolved a religion which is a curious mix of animism, pir-ism and Shakti cult."²¹ However, the regional variations in the iconography of Bonbibi and her cohort is what contradicts the uniformity of a hybrid syncretic divinity. In the Hindu majority regions, her depiction is more like the idols of Hindu goddesses: crimson-colored in complexion. She is clad in a saree, with a crown on her head, usually garlanded with wildflowers. However, in "the Muslim majority regions [she]...is...dressed in a *salwar kameez*, wearing necklaces, hair plaited and at times head covered with a *dupatta*, or with a decorated Muslim *topi* (cap) and feet covered with shoes and socks. She is either empty handed or portrayed carrying an *ashadanda*."²²

Therefore, in light of the aforementioned analysis, the cult of Bonbibi seems overtly syncretic; however, it is not without its internal contradictions that refuse any homogenous categorizing. Hindus and Muslims do not just have different types of idols for worshipping Bonbibi. They live almost segregated in different villages, clearly marking their religious affiliations. During the annual-ritual Bonbibi *pala* performances the portrayal of Muslim divinities and characters is considered pious, however, there are hardly any Muslim performers. These are indicative that the domain of Bonbibi has immensely fluid boundaries that can be permeated easily without even shedding the markers of individual fundamentalist religious practices.

Syncretism in the Performative Space of Mappila Teyyam

The Mappila Muslim identity has undergone tremendous transformation over the past thirteen centuries.²³ The syncretic notion of cultural integration between Mappila Muslims and other communities in North Malabar is a complex postulation. The integration, in varying degrees and depth, is visible in the everyday life of the people of North Malabar, ranging from food and rituals to traditions. Though this cultural and religious fusion fits into the framework of syncretism perfectly, it is important to have a multilayered approach to understand the nuances of this blend of syncretic texture.

According to Roland E. Miller, Mappila culture of North Malabar “is the offshoot of a successful marriage between the Malayalam and the Islamic cultural traditions.”²⁴ In *Malabarile Mappila Teyyangal* (Mappila Teyyams of Malabar), R. C. Karippath states that the Arabs who married women of Keralam were called Mappila.²⁵ Mappila is a blended identity in local culture and the term signifies outsiders who got incorporated into the community. According to Miller, *Mappila* means “great child,” and the title was given to them by Hindus out of respect when they first came to Keralam. It is the oldest Muslim community in South Asia, and “the name carries intimations of their double-streamed Arab–Malayalam cultural background.”²⁶

North Malabar celebrates this cultural integration and even has a prominent dialect called Mappila Malayalam or Arabi Malayalam, developed through the creolization of Arabic and Malayalam. Mappila Malayalam is used widely in Mappilapaattu (a Muslim song genre) and the literary traditions of Mappilas, including the *Mappila Ramayanam*. “These texts and their oral transmission proved decisive in shaping...[the] ‘Mappila habitus’ across the region. A range of collective ritual conventions and performances propagated by these texts in practice helped to determine how vernacular Muslims in Malabar conceived their cultural practices and social order in their new surroundings.”²⁷

The major characters of Mappila Teyyam that range across different classes, vocations, and genders are Mappila, Aali, Bappiriyan, Koyi Mammad, Mukripokker, Kallayi Mammu, Soolikkallu Moothachi, Neytyar, and Ummachi. Some of these characters of Mappila Teyyam are unjustly killed, whereas some are the ones who caused an injustice. However, the one who caused injustice will attain the status of Teyyam only if they are killed by the goddesses or come in contact with a divine entity or divine place after death. Their becoming a Teyyam is therefore a divine intervention that justly accommodates them within the folds of mainstream social order. According to Ezhom Pavithran, a performer of Teyyams from the Vannan community, the main objective of narrating and rendering these characters is to ensure and retain social equilibrium while adopting new members within the structure of the community.²⁸

Mappila and Aali are performed along with Chamundis,²⁹ a prominent Hindu Teyyam, and they are addressed as Mappila Chamundi and Aali Chamundi.



Fig. 2. Bappirian Teyyam with Mappila Porattus at Mottammal Parambath Karoth Bhagavathy temple, Kannapuram, Kannur, 2013. Performers: Madhu Thavam (Bappirian) Balakrishnan Odayanmad, and Prabhakaran Pallichal (Porattus). Photo credit: Ashokan Neelima.

According to the myth of Mappila Chamundi, Mappila beat Karimchamundi and broke her back for killing his pregnant wife and devouring the fetus. Later, Chamundi killed Mappila and both of them became Teyyams. Ali was a trader who was killed by the woman he raped, and he is performed along with Parachamundi, who helped the woman to kill him. Bappiriyan is one of the most popular and extensive Teyyam characters performed in parts of Kannur district by the Vannan community.

Bappiriyan gets staged with the Hindu Teyyam Aryapunkanni, a rich woman with magical powers from Malabar who traveled across the sea in search of diamonds and gold with her brothers and was shipwrecked. Bappiriyan helped Aryapunkanni to find her brothers. Mukripokker, a *mantrik*,³⁰ was the caretaker of a ruling family of Malom and was killed during *namaz* for having an affair with a woman of Malom family. The fact that during the *namaz* he lets down his guards makes it possible to kill him. The performance of Mukripokker has an elaborate sequence of *namaz*, as a reminder of his identity and the injustice meted out to him. Soolikallu Moothachi was a female mystic with healing powers who became a Teyyam after saving a king from a lethal disease.

Mappila Teyyams are commonly addressed as Mappila Poraatt, and according to R. C. Karippath, the term *poraatt* indicates “ritualistic fun.”³¹ Community identity gets reflected in the costumes, dialogues, and performance of Mappila Teyyams. Other than Bappiriyan, all other characters of Mappila Teyyams use the attire of local Muslims as costumes. Male Mappila Teyyam characters wear a specific style of moustache to indicate Muslim identity. Female Mappila Teyyams cover the

head using a scarf and wear bangles, sartorially resembling Muslim women during the old days. Earlier, Mappila Teyyams were important in terms of character and ritual context. They were also active in criticizing and challenging social actions. But with the changing times, Mappila Teyyams have lost importance and have become *poraatt*.

Muslim association and participation in Teyyam are not limited only to performing Teyyam characters. Neighboring Muslim devotee families participate in the ritual and are hereditarily entitled to the share of offerings made by devotees during Koyi Mammad Teyyam, while it is performed at Kaappattukavu Daivathaara temple. Vishnumoorthy Teyyam, a “Hindu” god, when performed at Padarkulangara Bhagavathy temple, visits the neighboring Munirul Islam Juma Masjid as part of its ritual practice. Teyyams address the Muslim community as “Madayinagaram,” the people of Madayi, the place where the first Mosque of northern Kerala was built during the seventh century. Meanwhile, Muslim Teyyams address Hindu devotees as *odappirannore* or *koodappirappe* (brother). Teyyams bless Muslim devotees by stating the historical bonding in the local community and proclaim to protect them by ensuring livelihood and safeguarding religious practices. The blessing indicates the assurance given by the Teyyam, the local deity, to a new person/family who joins the community. There is a prolonged dialogue sequence with Mappila devotees in the performance of various important Teyyam characters like Muthappan and Thondachan, who are considered wise elders. This sequence is called Mappila Vedom, which comprises stories about the arrival of Muslims to Malabar, events that led to their integration into the community and their celebrations as part of the community. Adaptation and integration of Muslims into the community is clearly visible in the myths of Mappila Teyyams or stories associated with community participation. Hence, it is important to regard community participation of Muslims in the Teyyam context as established examples of coexistence or harmony in its actual sense.

Teyyam is a festival rather than a form, where every community from the region has a ritual role. According to Y. V. Kannan, Teyyam performance existed from the time of indigenous culture, but it underwent reformations during the fifteenth century and became more aestheticized.³² In the last five hundred years, Teyyam underwent various changes, adaptations, and integrations whereby the local myths were incorporated into a larger narrative and the upper castes got involved in the performance. It was during this time that the rituals of upper-caste Nambutiris gained prominence and it influenced Teyyam rituals as well. Sacred groves, where Teyyams were performed, were converted to temples dominated by upper-caste Nambutiris. Teyyam performers, who were part of sacred groves, lost their prominence and became mere performers who were allowed to be part of temple rites only during the performance. The period marks a major shift whereby Teyyam transformed from an indigenous form to a Hindu ritual that is much tauter than the aboriginal framework.

Bringing a culturally blended art form, having different characters from various communities, including Islam, into a Hindu religious space led to conflicts. When Teyyam became a Hindu ritual performed within temple premises, Muslims, who were part of the traditional belief system, became the “other,” and Mappila Teyyam was thrown into a quandary. Generally, performers of Teyyam who identify themselves as Hindus while playing the Muslim figures (Mapillas) experience no dissonance between their real and performed religious identities. However, on various recent occasions the performers have raised concerns regarding the Hindu-Muslim conflicts that might affect the portrayal of characters and its identity.³³ For instance, Hindu fundamentalists and even some people belonging to the Teyyam community raise speculations about the religious identity of characters like Bappiriyam.³⁴ In another situation while witnessing one of the Bhagawati (goddess) Teyyams in Kannur district in 2017, the Teyyam character embodying the goddess commands the devotees to reclaim the land from the “Madayinagaram”. While traditionally Teyyams have played a functional role of resolving disputes related to land and theft that led to socio-religious conflicts; in the recent times, the rising pan-Indian fundamentalist tensions have fed seeds of discordance within the syncretic space and practice of Teyyam.³⁵

Sometimes religious conflicts also arise from within the organizers of temple festivals. A recent incident was the erection of a signboard restricting entry of Muslims from the Malliot Temple during festivals. The organizers justified the move, stating that the board was in place for over three decades. However, no such restriction was imposed or followed in the past. The latest move by the organizers repudiates the history of the area and shatters the long-term harmony among Hindus and Muslims.³⁶ The shift in the scenario has also affected the relationship between Mappila characters and the performance space. The performance of *namaz* and recital of *takbir*³⁷ has been inherent to several character portrayals. As Teyyam performance spaces became temple premises, these performative elements, which were part of the ritual belief system of these spaces through their historical/mythical order, started creating uneasiness and bitterness.

This discourse is not only centered on the friction created by Muslim assimilation into the “Hindu space” but also the trouble generated in the religious structure of “true Islam.” It was common for Muslims to witness Teyyam performances and make offerings to the deity. However, Muslims visiting temples during Teyyam performance has become a rare sight nowadays owing to restrictions imposed by fundamental Muslim religious thoughts. Such associations go against *din* (judgment, custom, and religion): the core of Islam. The incorporation of Mappila Muslims into the larger structure of Islam threatens their identity as a native Muslim community. Meanwhile, tensions and conflicts within and between these communities create frictions largely affecting the integration and involvement of Mappila Muslims in the cultural spaces of Malabar.

Syncretism in the Poetic and Lyrical Space of Bhakti Poems

In the poetic or lyrical space of bhakti, one can identify multiple textures or modes of syncretism, and not one monolithic kind. These modes are not isolated from the social and historical contexts in which they were conceived or were transmitted. Fueled by their cultural necessity, what manifests in the poetic realms of Lal Ded and Azan Fakir is a syncretic mode that can be read as assimilative and accommodative in nature. In Kabir, the radical opposition to all kinds of religious orthodoxies facilitates a space of negation in his philosophy and poems that translates into his syncretic mode of thinking. The following sections thus explore the disparate categories of syncretic conceptualizations: assimilation and accommodation through the poems of Lal Ded and Azan Fakir as well as the category of negation through a poem of Kabir.

In the fourteenth century, Lal Ded (fondly addressed as Lalla) utters, *shiv chhuy thali thali rav zaan* (Shiva is everywhere, know Him as the sun):

Shiva is everywhere, know Him as the sun,
Know the Hindu no different to the Musalman;
If you are wise, know yourself,
That's the way to know the saheb!³⁸

The above is a *vakh* (four-line poem). There are many translations and interpretations of this *vakh* available, but the above translation by Neerja Mattoo takes the analysis of the word *zaan* (to know) to such a philosophical depth that it lends a rationale to my interpretation of syncretism through the mode of assimilation.

At the commonest and obvious level, *zaan* (to know) means the ability to see the sun, something that is clear as daylight and that almost everyone can comprehend. The second line goes up to a higher level of knowing, i.e., discernment, the ability to understand the essential non-difference between Hindus and Muslims. The third line raises the level of understanding still higher, asking the listener to look squarely at something most of us are unable to see, our own self, and then to see it as one ray of that very light of the sun, as a part of that glorious supreme light which pervades the whole universe... Only after passing... [the test of our understanding] can we claim to have found what the poet has sought: God realization and the real meaning of life.³⁹

There are *vakhs* that abound with Lalla's transcendent yearnings for the formless divinity within, as well as others that are ruthless criticism of the idolatry of brahmin pundits. The aforementioned *vakh*, however, has a more compassionate tone. Through the most ordinary yet irrefutable of things as the sun, Lalla dissolves

the boundaries between a Hindu and a Muslim. In doing that, she builds a poetic space of syncretic confluence between the two.

Lalla was from the Trika philosophy of Kashmiri Saivite tradition and had her spiritual training from Siddha Mol Srikanth.⁴⁰ However, despite that background, she has often dismissed the ritualistic aspects of high-elite brahmanical worship. In her *vakhs*, she even calls out the hypocrisy of worshipping idols and stones. Lalla endorses reaching the formless Shiva consciousness instead. This antiauthoritarian streak sets her apart from the “Sanskrit literature of the following centuries,”⁴¹ and instead makes her an integral part of “Kashmiri folk imagination.”⁴²

However, Lalla also needs to be located vis-à-vis her contemporary Muslim Rishi tradition of Kashmir. In *Sufism In Kashmir*, Rafiqi sees the spread of Islam in medieval Kashmir in terms of two streams of thought: the immigrant Sufis from Persia and Central Asia, who were mostly attached to the royal court and worked to spread Islam in Kashmir, and the Rishi Sufis, who were active in the countryside amongst the rural people, who taught in the native tongue and “did not concern themselves with Islamic missionary activities or the establishment of madrasas and kept themselves aloof from the ruling classes...[They] did not hesitate to borrow the ideas and practices of the Hindu ascetics, especially those of the Saivites of Kashmir.”⁴³

Nund Rishi or Sheikh Ul Alam was a Muslim Rishi, a younger contemporary of Lal Ded, and is considered the patron saint of Kashmir today. In practice and in philosophy, both Lal Ded and Nund Rishi did not fear to push the boundaries of their orthodox parent religions to assimilate other religions. This deviance is crucial to understanding the assimilative syncretic nature of Lal Ded’s thoughts. It is through the lens of this deviance that we can sufficiently understand her acute voice against ritualism as well as place her philosophy of religious syncretism and inclusivity.

Moving ahead three centuries into the far eastern Indian context of Assam, we read another song (called *zikir*) *mur monot aan bhab nai o allah* (I carry no discrimination in my mind O Allah) by another mystic poet, Azan Pir Fakir of Assam.

I carry no discrimination in my mind O Allah,
I do not see a Hindu different from a Muslim, O Allah!
When dead, a Hindu is cremated
While a Muslim buried under the same earth...
You leave this Home
To reach that Home
Where All merge into One!⁴⁴

Azan Pir Fakir is said to have traveled to India from Baghdad via Ajmer and Gaur to Assam around the seventeenth century.⁴⁵ On arriving, he realized that the Muslims in Assam were far from practicing the tenets of Islam. He learnt the local

language and customs, understood the deeply embedded Vaisnavite faith that was in vogue in then Assam, pioneered by the fifteenth-century saint-poet Srimanta Sankardeva. The erstwhile Vaisnavite faith propagated the philosophical tenet of *Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma*, which is a philosophy that called for the unified devotion of one god, Vishnu or Krishna. *Zikir* songs are the Muslim devotional songs that Azan Fakir composed to infuse Islamic tenets in Assamese Muslims. But he did that by philosophically and musically keeping in line with the already existing Vaisnavite faith, religious vocabulary, and local folk tunes. There are *zikirs* that sing of the five tenets of Islam: *kalima* (the sacred Word), *namaz*, *roza* (fasting), *haz* (pilgrimage), and *zakat* (religious obligatory offerings). There are also *zikirs* that sing of Sankardeva and Azan Fakir as brothers of the same spiritual journey. Azan Fakir introduced Sufi Islam in Assam not through conflict but through a philosophy of devotional assimilation. As Carl W. Ernst puts it, there is no generic Sufism, and one has to locate Sufism in its “distinctive local sacrality.”⁴⁶ In the case of Assam, the local sacrality is a space of accommodative syncretism between Sufism and preexisting Vaisnavism.

However, it is the category of negation that surfaces in a popular song, *moko kahan dhoondhe re bande?* (Where do you search for me, Seeker?) of fifteenth-century Kabir, who can be historically located between Lal Ded and Azan Fakir.

Where do you search for me, Seeker? I am close to You.
 Neither am I in icons and idols, Nor in solitary abodes
 Neither in temples, nor in mosques, neither in *Kaba* nor in *Kailash*
 Where do you search for me? I am close to You.
 Neither in prayers, nor in meditation nor in fasting
 Neither in yogic exercises nor in renunciation
 Seek earnestly and discover, In a moment of search!
 Says Kabir, Listen! Where your faith is, I am there.⁴⁷

In this poem, Kabir begins with a question. Here it is a question in the voice of Divinity itself—Where do you look for me? Then he answers it through a series of refutations—that it is present neither in the temple nor in the mosque, neither in holy mountains nor in rituals. This structure of negation leads up to the affirmative statement at the end, which says *main toh hu vishwas mein*, meaning, “Where your faith is, I am there.” What Kabir does is in tandem with the Upanishadic *Neti Neti*, or method of negation. It also resonates with the Sufi method of negation and affirmation as is found in the fundamental Islamic *kalima*, *la ilaha illallah* (There is no god [negation] but God [affirmation]).

As a society we constantly place faith on the *outer*: some rules, an image, some dogma, a scripture, an idol. What Kabir hints at is that having faith in anything outside creates binaries and conflicts, and hence he rejects all outer religious manifestations. In refuting both the *mandir* and the *masjid*, both the Mecca and

the Kailash, Kabir turns his back on the sacred beliefs of all religions. But I argue that this negation itself creates the space for syncretic thought. After clearing the mental space of futility of all the outer countenances, Kabir leads us towards an all-inclusive inner space close to us, the *hriday* (heart). Kabir finally affirms his *vishwas* (faith) in this intimate space within—the most sacred of all spaces and yet the most secular. By negating the “specific” as sacred, Kabir makes the “whole” as sacred, thus making it an all-encompassing space for both religions.

According to the most popular legend, Kabir was believed to have been born in fifteenth-century Varanasi to an unmarried Hindu Brahmin woman, who abandoned him in the river, only to be found and adopted by a Muslim couple, Nima and Niru in a class of weavers (*julaha* caste) recently converted to Islam. These weavers were earlier the lower caste *julahas*, who even stood against the brahmanical caste system. Kabir has repeatedly called himself a *julaha*, but never a Hindu or a Muslim. Beyond an obvious spiritually heightened meaning of this negation, perhaps it also has a more grounded societal meaning.⁴⁸ It is through this lens of negation that Kabir speaks radically against the orthodoxy of both Hindus and Muslims, and it is through the same lens that we understand Kabir’s syncretic message in the space of his songs.

Thus, pertaining to the lens of the poetic/lyrical space that is employed to analyze the utterances of medieval bhakti poets, there is a possibility of reading disparate syncretic forces in the conceptual realm. As opposed to this intangible lens, the earlier case studies of the Bonbibi cult and Mappila Teyyams employed the tangible lens of cultural space and performative space, respectively. However, the force and urgent functionality of these polyphonic syncretic forces cannot be completely comprehended unless we punctuate our interpretation with the politics and relevance they hold in the current schema of contemporary Indian politics.

Politics and Relevance of Syncretism Today

The seeds of concordant and diverse cultural beliefs and practices that were organically ingrained within the past and continuity of the Bonbibi cult have never encountered such dissent and irrationality as it does today at the wake of fundamentalist forces, who find it problematic to accommodate democratic ecosystem-driven faith patterns within their rigid decree. Some Hindus have internalized the worship of this Muslim deity with such gusto that they seem to have forgotten the indiscriminate philosophy of the cult. Disregarding the conscious act of the cult practices to challenge oppressive caste distinctions, they are employing Brahmins to perform the worship rituals, thus reinforcing the brahmanical hegemony. On the other hand, *maulavis* (Muslim religious scholars) of the prominent mosques in Sundarbans are increasingly prohibiting the worship of any God entity other than Allah. Fearful of being declared outcasts, Muslims are increasingly denying their affiliation for the deity publicly. However, the force of their bearings can be understood in the light of news reports about how Hindu fundamentalist forces are

trying to polarize the gods by claiming Bonbibi to be exclusively for the Hindus and denying her joint heritage, thus offending the Muslims.⁴⁹ Though the Muslims are being weaned off the tradition, in casual conversations they unanimously agree that they enjoy a Bonbibi *pala* performance in the village: “The *pala* is so much fun to watch. It tells our stories, our struggles, about our rivers and forests.”⁵⁰ With the access to secondary education and alternatives of safer occupations, with the penetration of developmental and tourism initiatives in Sundarbans, some sections of Sundarbans’s society are slowly but gradually climbing the economic ladder, and with it there is a decline in their dependence for livelihood on the forests and rivers, but there is no faith lost in the cult of Bonbibi. She has evolved to become a goddess who ensures good health and grants the wishes of her devotees—such as getting the desired job, the birth of a son in the family, guaranteeing that the lost are found, offering peace, success, and justice to the poor and needy. The non-native vectors of religious polarization have surely attempted to detrimentally impact Bonbibi’s all-expansive faith, but the cult—flexible, malleable, and resilient like the ecosystem that hosts it, has emerged in a metamorphosed avatar every time it has been battered with regressive politics.

A similar tendency of religious polarization is operative in the context of Mappila Muslims, their representation and participation in Teyyam spaces, which has undergone a thorough process of alteration. Nowadays, Mappila Teyyams are rhetorically used to define an ideal situation of harmony within the current scenario of intense political tensions. Harmony facilitates peaceful and happy coexistence; communal harmony as a political term refers to being together or sharing of spaces. However, ongoing political killings and incidents like the Marad massacre⁵¹ indicate that Malabar now lacks “ideal harmony.” The sociocultural position of Mappila Teyyam in the current framework is being politically and superficially construed to project the abstract idea of harmony. The fact that the Mappila Teyyams have recently gained popularity and attracts a larger crowd is the evidence of this political maneuvering. Raju Maniyara, who has been performing Mukri Pokkar, vouches that he has witnessed a shift in the attitude of people who come to view and participate in the performance.⁵² He states that, over the past fifteen years, the reception for Mukri Pokkar has changed from devotion to curiosity. People are more curious to see Muslim representation in a Hindu ritual. Romanticizing such practices while sidelining existing tensions does not contribute to the essence of integration that Malabar as a region propagated. Instead of perceiving the organic devotional consonance, what attracts people now is the reductive trope of Hindu-Muslim syncretism. Thus, the framework of syncretism cannot be limited to a religious blend in the context of Mappila Teyyam; rather, it manifests as an intense problematic cultural blend. The problem and politics get divulged in the identity shift that the Mappila Teyyams have incorporated. Rather than being a ritual that derives its force from within the society, they have mutated to become a political symbol of overt harmony. Hence, this intricate probing of the syncretic elements of

Mappila Teyyams have aided us to discern how a ritual enactment gets transformed from being an indigenous integration to a political adaptation.

A variant of political adaptation also emerges in times of political crises when the medieval bhakti figures and their poetry are invoked to spread messages of syncretism and religious tolerance. Kabir has been the most invoked bhakti figure in progressive and activist circles, especially since the aftermath of the Babri Masjid massacre. In post-Partition India, there are constant debates in the scholarly circle to claim Lal Ded into a completely Pandit-Hindu fold on the one hand as Lalleshwari, and into a Kashmiri-Muslim fold on the other as Lal Arifa.⁵³ However, for common Kashmiris, both Hindus and Muslims, she remains a grandmother figure whose *vakhs* they remember by heart along with the *shrukhs* (spiritual poetic utterances) of Nund Rishi or Sheikh Ul Alam. This “un-indoctrinated folk approach” of looking back at the connected history of Lal Ded and Nund Rishi has always been an inclusive one,⁵⁴ and one that goes into what is called Kashmiriyat. The word *Kashmiriyat* however, is also often seen as a “deliberate design, part of a perceived grand hegemonic Indian project...to trivialize the political aspirations of Kashmiris.”⁵⁵ The narrative of syncretism is therefore not without its inherent internal political contradictions. In a distinct context of Assam, which is currently ridden with debates around citizenship,⁵⁶ Azan Fakir and his *zikirs* become relevant today to highlight who the ideal “indigenous” Muslim figure is. The assimilation of Azan Fakir and Sankardeva, both philosophically and musically, becomes a potent representation for projection of *xomonyoy* (religious confluence) that was and that is to be sought in times of current political conflicts to build one *brihhotor axomiya jaati* (vast Assamese community).

Therefore, the shades of Hindu-Muslim syncretism in the Indian subcontinent are not akin to the result of an alchemy experiment that gives birth to a third mixture, one that has no identifiable attributes of the parent elements. Instead, it is more like a palimpsest, or a delectable concoction of rice, pulses, fruits, and nuts—better known as the *pulao* or *pulav* in the Indian household. Yet there is no one taste or flavor or version of syncretism that would be the most authentic or ideal one. The dynamics of Hindu-Muslim religious confluence in India, as has been demonstrated in the three case studies, is location, history, and context-specific. Molded by the push and pull of othering, negating, appropriating, assimilating, accepting, and contradicting forces, the Indian blend of Hindu-Muslim syncretism is composite and plural.

Notes

1. Sumanta Banerjee, *Logic in a Popular Form* (Kolkata: Seagull Books, 2002); J. J. Roy Burman, “Hindu-Muslim Syncretism in India,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 31, no. 20 (May 1996): 1211–15.

2. Banerjee, *Logic in a Popular Form*, 7.

3. This is the author’s experiential observation of being a native of Bengal and a deduction of her six years of ethnographic fieldwork.

4. Annu Jalais, *Forest of Tigers: People, Politics & Environment in the Sundarbans* (London: Routledge, 2010), 152: "...from 1200, Sufi holy men and their converts cleared the forests of the northern parts of Sundarbans. Agriculture came to be intimately linked to the spread of Islam in Bengal." Here, she cites R. M. Eaton's seminal book, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier 1204-1760* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993).

5. Jalais, *Forest of Tigers*, 153. Here, she cites Eaton's paper "Human Settlement and Colonization in the Sundarbans 1200-1750" presented at a workshop at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., 20-21, November 1987.

6. Sujit Sur, "Bonbibibi of Badaban" (unpublished, typescript manuscript, December 12, 2014).

7. Zir is a gender-neutral term, used intentionally in this article to denote the God-entity.

8. While *saguna* bhakti implies devotion of the manifest form of God with attributes, *nirguna* bhakti refers to a divinity without attributes, where truth is unmanifest.

9. Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 7.

10. K. Arunlal and Srinivas C. Sunitha, "All in the Space of a Poem: Spatial Logics in Poetry," *Journal of European Studies* 47, no. 3 (2017): 250.

11. Sur, "Bonbibibi of Badaban."

12. According to Danda, "Amongst the Hindus, about 74 percent belong to the Scheduled Castes (SC) and 10 percent to the Scheduled Tribes (ST); strictly speaking STs are not within the Hindu fold." A. A. Danda, "Surviving in the Sundarbans: Threats and Responses: An Analytical Description of Life in an Indian Riparian Commons" (PhD diss., University of Twente, 2007), 12.

13. Before the Bengal Forest rules came into force as late as the 1870s and in the period prior to that, the British considered forests chiefly as hindering agriculture.

14. First written by Boinuddin in 1877 but later versions written by Md. Khater and Abdur Rahim (alias Md. Munshi) in 1888 and 1898, respectively, were more popular.

15. Mausumi Mandal, "Bonbibibi-r Palagaan of the Sundarbans: An Interpretive Analysis" (PhD diss., Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2011), 27.

16. Performances, replete with songs, dances, and dialogues, that enact the story of the *Bonbibibi Johuranama*; usually done along with the ritual worship by the devotees of Bonbibibi.

17. Rhymed couplets where each line has roughly twelve syllables and a caesura, in the middle.

18. Local poems eulogizing Hindu deities.

19. Banerjee, *Logic in a Popular Form*, 74.

20. A local Bengali Muslim *Pir*, or saint, known for his powers over dangerous animals and demons, powers that were of great significance to the new settlers of the Sundarbans as they penetrated the dense mangrove forests.

21. Burman, "Hindu-Muslim Syncretism in India," 1212.

22. Mandal, "Bonbibibi-r Palagaan of the Sundarbans," 32. *Salwar* is a pair of light loose trousers with a tight fit around the ankles worn by women from the Indian subcontinent; *kameez* is a long tunic worn by many people from the Indian subcontinent; *asadanda* is a stick symbolizing the scepter of a Muslim kingdom, which is also carried by the *pirs* or *piranis*.

23. The Mapillas came to Kerelam in and around the seventh century.

24. Roland E. Miller, *Mappila Muslim Culture: How a Historic Muslim Community in India Has Blended Tradition and Modernity* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2015), 3.

25. R. C. Karippath, *Malabarile Mappila Theyyangal* (Kannur: New Books, 2014), 18.

26. Miller, *Mappila Muslim Culture*, 4.

27. P. K. Yasser Arafath, "Polyglossic Malabar: Arabi-Malayalam and the Muhiyuddinmala in the Age of Transition (1600s-1750s)," *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society* Series 3, 30, no. 3 (2020): 518.

28. Ezhom Pavithran (*teyyam* performer) in discussion with the author, Kannur, October 5, 2019.

29. In the larger narrative of Hinduism, Chamundi is a goddess who is born to kill Chanda and Munda. In the Indigenous context of Teyyam, Chamundi is not one goddess; rather, she has multiple characterizations, myths, names, and attires.

30. Those who derive magical healing powers by practicing mantra are known as *mantriks*, loosely translated as "magicians" or "sorcerers."

31. Karippath, *Malabarile Mappila Theyyangal* (Kannur: New Books, 2014), 23.

32. Y. V. Kannan, *Kanaladi Manasu: Teyya Prabandhangal* (Thiruvananthapuram: Kerala Bhasha Institute, 2015), 9.

33. Revealed during conversations with Teyyam performers like Unnikrishnan Peruvannan, Pavitrnan Ezhom, and Rahul Kasargod.

34. During recent field-work in Kannur some of the Teyyam performers narrated Bappiriyan's character as if denying his Muslim lineage.

35. The North Malabar region is influenced by the ‘logic’ of a functional god, embodied in the Teyyam performer, who talks and listens to you, heals your illnesses, solves problems and even resolves legal disputes. Though the system has changed, the beliefs and cultural memory of Teyyam is deep rooted in the values of the region.

36. V. K. Anil Kumar (documentary filmmaker) in discussion with the author, Kannur, October 20, 2020.

37. The Arabic prayer call—*Allah-ho-Akbar*, meaning “God is great.”

38. Neerja Mattoo, *The Mystic and the Lyric: Four Women Poets from Kashmir* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2019), 41.

39. Mattoo, *The Mystic and the Lyric*, 23–24.

40. A philosophy that is concerned with the threefold existence of Shiva (the universal being), Sakti (the universal energy), and Nara (the individual).

41. Jaishree K. Odin, *Lalla to Nuruddin: Rishi Sufi Poetry of Kashmir* (New Delhi: Motilal Banaridass Publishers, 2016), 5.

42. Odin, *Lalla to Nuruddin*, 6.

43. Abdul Qaiyum Rafiqi, “Sufism in Kashmir from the Fourteenth to the Sixteenth Century,” (PhD diss., Australian National University, 1972), 12.

44. *Zikirs* have been transmitted as part of the oral repertoire of Assam’s folk traditions since the 17th century. This English translation, however, is by the author.

45. Gaur was the ancient capital of Bengal from fourth century to the beginning of seventh century, after which it remained to be a powerful seat of authority, education, and culture.

46. Carl W. Ernst, “Situating Sufism and Yoga,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Third Series, 15, no. 1 (April 2005): 21.

47. This song too has been transmitted as part of the oral repertoire of Kabir’s song traditions since the 15th century. This is the author’s translation from the Hindi version.

48. Hazari Prasad Dwivedi, *Kabir* (New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 1971), 9.

49. Tamaghna Banerjee, “In polarised Bengal battle, even the name of a deity is changing.” *The Times of India*. May 18, 2019. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/elections/lok-sabha-elections-2019/west-bengal/in-polarised-bengal-battle-even-the-name-of-a-deity-is-%20changing/article-show/69381811.cms> (Accessed January 20, 2021).

50. This is a collective opinion that the author encountered during her field-work.

51. The Marad massacre marks a scar on the history of Malabar’s secularism. On May 2, 2003, eight Hindus were massacred by a Muslim mob at Marad Beach, Calicut. This was a planned revenge for a quarrel that happened in January 2002, where three Muslims and two Hindus were killed.

52. Raju Maniyara (*Teyyam* performer) in discussion with Akhila Vimal, Kannur, February 5, 2018.

53. Here, Pandit refers specifically to the Kashmiri-Pandit population and not the generally understood “priestly” or “scholarly” connotation of the word *pandit* among Hindus. The tendency to claim Lal Ded to one side rather than seeing her as a common heritage can be traced back to centuries of conflicts between Islamic ruling forces and the local Hindu communities in Kashmir, resulting in the displacement of Kashmiri-Pandits at multiple points in history. However, in recent times their exodus in the 1990s has created a deep scar in the relation between the Muslim and Hindu communities in Kashmir, resulting in a cultural amnesia where their shared syncretic history (referred to as *Kashmiriyat*) seems to have taken a blow.

54. M. H. Zaffar, “Mystical Thought of Kashmir,” in *Parchment of Kashmir History, Society and Polity*, ed. Nyla Ali Khan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 71.

55. Neerja Mattoo, “Syncretic Tradition and the Creative Life: Some Kashmiri Mystic Poets,” in *Parchment of Kashmir History, Society and Polity*, ed. Nyla Ali Khan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 89.

56. There is no consensus on who qualifies as “indigenous” to the state of Assam because its demography has been shaped by multiple waves of migration of communities from various parts of South and Southeast Asia over the centuries. The State’s exercise of identifying illegal Bangladeshi immigrants in Assam from the “indigenous” population, called the National Register of Citizens, has therefore become an immensely contentious debate. The 2019 Citizenship Amendment Act added a communal angle to this ongoing debate. This has increased anxiety in Muslims all across India, including those in Assam, and accentuated their need to claim a connection to the region. Azan Fakir from the seventeenth century, existing much before these debates, thus became an important landmark figure symbolizing a bridge to the land and history for Assamese Muslims.