

Understanding 'Syncretism'

Rahul Govind

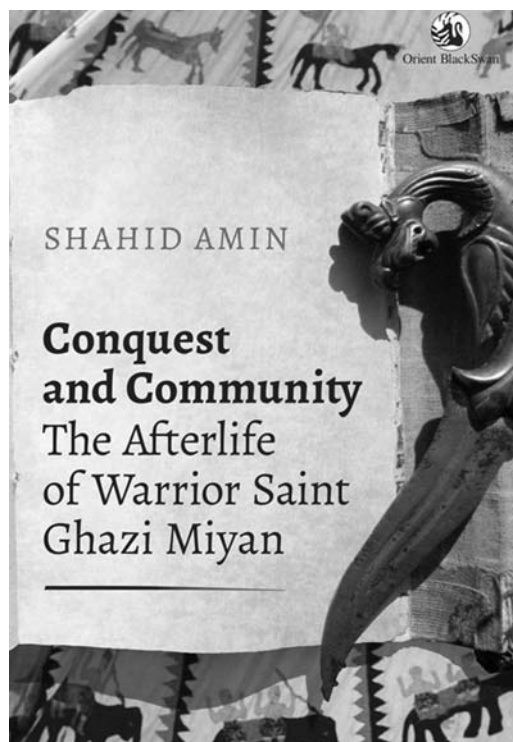
CONQUEST AND COMMUNITY: THE AFTER-LIFE OF WARRIOR SAINT GHAZI MIYAN

By Shahid Amin

Orient BlackSwan, 2015, pp. 352, ₹995.00

Shahid Amin's *Conquest and Community: The After-life of Warrior Saint Ghazi Miyan* is an ambitious exercise in history writing that combines a range of sources, textual and ethnographic. It is also self-consciously a critique of the existing practice of the historian's craft, insisting, by way of introduction, that the political realities of the day require 'new ways' to write and imagine history. More concretely, Amin's work examines the figure of Ghazi Miyan, who exists in contemporary popular memory in the Bhairach region. The fascinating paradox that forms the impetus for his 'historical' investigation is the fact that Ghazi Miyan, described as Mahmud of Ghazni's nephew across this material, does not seem to have in fact existed; contemporary chronicles of Mahmud of Ghazni make no mention of him. It is Amin's argument that a study of the figure of Ghazi Miyan and the veneration accorded to him, across centuries, is a sign of the historical 'displacement' of the figure of Mahmud of Ghazni as a foreign conqueror-marauder. However, Ghazi Miyan is no 'rosary fondling Sufi' (p. 6). The crucial intervention that Amin makes is to study the way in which the figure of Ghazi Miyan has been altered across textual and folk imagination so as to address the more granular, mundane everyday needs and anxieties such as child-bearing. Thus, it is not as though 'conquest' is simply erased or forgotten, but it is 're-fashioned' to suit the everyday, and it is in terms of such creative refashioning that we can understand the nature of popular veneration or the contemporary 'syncretism' of the Ghazi Miyan cult as a historical process. To simply ignore conquest, Amin argues, would be to cede completely the narratives and facts of conquest to majoritarian writings.

The main evidence that Amin mobilizes for his argument includes Abdur Rahman Chisthi's *Mirat-i-Masudi*, the hagiography of Ghazi Miyan written in the early 17th century, textual material from the 19th and early 20th centuries, as well as his own field work in the 1990s among the balladeers singing songs of Ghazi Miyan in the Bhairach region. Abdur Rahman Chisthi was a prolific writer, but Amin's interest does not lie in interpreting the *Mirat* in the light of his



oeuvre. Focussing exclusively on this *Mirat* (for there were other *Mirats* penned by Chisthi), or rather on certain segments, Amin narrates its plot, which tells the story of the nephew of the Sultan of Ghazni, Ghazi Miyan, who is born in Ajmer, and grows up into a religious and devout Ghazi, bent on spreading Islam, ultimately dying in this cause, at Bhairach, in battle with the 'infidels'. Amin contends that while this was a 'particular elaboration on the "Sword of Islam" motif in India', all the same there were several features that set it apart from the genre. 'Doubtful Islamic parallels notwithstanding, a clutch of things Indian adhere to the personable Ghazi: restrictions on the acceptance of cooked food, the constant chewing of betel leaf with areca nut and quicklime, Masud's stress on personal hygiene and his penchant for "pure garments and fragrant essences", thought part of a Sufi comportment, seem almost brahmanically Indian' (p. 37). In the light of the work on translations and the intense engagement between Muslims and local traditions, especially that of Muzaffar Alam's recent work that analyses Abdur Rahman Chisthi and his milieu, it is not clear how or why the case for the uniqueness of this particular *Mirat* is made. Not sufficiently engaging with the extant literature, Amin focuses on two episodes in the last chapter of the *Mirat* which speak of supernatural happenings. The first has to do with a son being born to an 'infertile milkmaid by the grace of the grave and Bhairach' (p. 56), leading to the spread of the fame of the Ghazi, especially among the

'cowherd tribe'. The second episode spoke of the divine love of a blind girl of Rudali for the Ghazi, and of her constructing a regular mausoleum at the site.

These two features find their elaborations in the ballads sung around Ghazi Miyan in the 19th and late 20th centuries. The curing of infertility, and the blind girl from Rudali, the Ghazi as nephew of the Sultan of Mahmud of Ghazni, all figure prominently in the many ballads that surrounded the folk hero. Amin then switches to retelling some of the tales from the ballads, as recorded in the early 20th century and the contemporary (1990s), contextualizing them with the 17th century hagiographic text, by arguing, for instance, that 'The seventeenth century text is sparse, but it has the structure of feeling that constitutes banjness in north Indian villages' (p. 63). A key motif in the ballads is Ghazi as groom, who leaves for battle and martyrdom on the eve of marriage. And he leaves because, as one of the ballads puts it, of a *gwalin's* appeal to rescue the cows and herdsmen from the arrogant Sohal. Much of the lore is about the everyday anxieties regarding fertility and family life. While the close relationship between Ghazi Miyan and pastoralist groups are proved beyond doubt, the *historicity* of this relationship i.e., the changing histories of the functions and roles of pastoralist groups across centuries—in which would be nested the songs and ballads—that might have once wielded considerable politico-military power, are not sufficiently analysed.

Other ballads speak of the poignant relationship between Amina Sati and a 'Turkic' brother, someone from the same land as hers, and the penchant that Ghazi Miyan has for clipping the ears of animals and cutting the noses of idols. In the *Banaras Ballads* recorded by R. Greeven in the late 19th century, the idol Shobnath requires for his appeasement sacrifice, and when appeal is made to the Ghazi for help, the idol begs for mercy and becomes a Muslim. The idol prays as a Muslim, and while all the gods including Mahadev run for cover, the ferocious Durga becomes a devotee of Ghazi, offering him cockerel and sweets—only to have her nose cut. In the light of this, it is difficult to understand what Amin precisely means when he writes, referring to these ballads, 'seemingly unconnected with doctrinaire animus desecration, iconoclasm and conversion all operate here in the realm of the wondrous' (p. 108).

The exploration as to who were the devotees of Ghazi Miyan is to a certain extent addressed in the section on the Shrine. The devotees of Ghazi Miyan made a pilgrimage

to Bhairach, or attended a 'surrogate' fair closer home, and also worshipped him at domestic altars. Such devotees were also known as Panchpiriya, followers of Ghazi Miyan and his four associates. Relying on colonial records, Amin tells us that 1.7 million were recorded in the 1891 census as panchpiriya. Their practices and the saints of the latter seem to have diverged greatly, for instance, the Kahar-palanquin bearers venerated the ferocious Amina Bhavani. There is not enough explanation given as to how one is to understand this figure and relate it to the Sati Amina of another cycle of the Ghazi Miyan ballads, making us wonder about the coherence and precise significance of the category panchpiriya. Relying on Grierson, Amin informs us that a panchpiriya was a Hindu who worshipped Muslim saints, and lists of the latter included the Koris, Kurmis and Ahirs. Yet more might have been done to better understand the histories of these communities, their inter-relationships and changes across time, especially in the light of recent writings on the census and colonial administration, caste and sectarian movements, which speak of the constitutive roles of the latter in identity formation.

Well aware of this difficulty, yet not fully addressing the problem, Amin writes that it was nearly impossible to disentangle the figure of Ghazi Miyan from other folk heroes, both within and outside the familiar 'Hindu' provenance, and their own cycles of ballads. Interestingly, he points out that even the 17th century *Mirat* had documented divine punishment in the form of a resounding slap to a Maulavi who disapproved of the popular practices of the pilgrims of Bhairach. This disapproval of the ways of the cult was ironically to be found in the late 19th century among sections across the Hindu Muslim divide. At the same time, while a 19th century Urdu translation of the *Mirat* transformed the story into one that was an overtly 'Sword of Islam' text, with none of the nuances that Amin finds in the *Mirat*, on the other hand, Arya Samaj pamphlets too use the *Mirat* to try and argue that Ghazi Miyan was indeed nothing but an invader bent on the killing of infidels. These latter tracts were attempts to 'educate' those 'Hindu' devotees of the shrine, telling them that they were being duped for they were not told that the real historical character, Ghazi Miyan, was nothing but an invader.

Towards the end of its narrative *Conquest and Community* persuasively demonstrates the haunting presence of the figure of Ghazi Miyan, as a norm, as an ideal, not only in the ballads but also in the writings of Prem Chand and Ismat Chughtai. Nonetheless, by

consistently refusing to analyse in detail, the ballads, the hagiographic text or the historically changing nature of the communities that venerate(d) Ghazi Miyan, Amin risks the very intelligibility of his narrative, the very intelligibility whose exposure was the initial impetus of the work. While a crucial argument about the relationship between 17th century text and popular culture/orality is made, the articulation of their relationship would have necessitated a critical and historical analysis of key terms and categories. Some of the connections are a little forced, almost stereotypical, like the claim that Masud's concern with personal hygiene was Brahmanical. One might also ask, what would a 'milkmaid' have been in the 17th century, and how could one not be attentive to the historicity of pastoralist groups, for such groups in the 11th century, in the 17th century, and in the 20th century might have been differently positioned. The work on these matters by Simon Digby and Sunil Kumar, though flagged, are not sufficiently engaged with.

This has implications for the crucial argument that Amin makes, because according to him 'popular culture' had 'refashioned' conquest, but this subtly implies that the conquerors and the conquered bequeathed singular legacies, the Mahmud of Ghazni iconoclastic moment, which were then 'transformed' by popular culture. Yet one might wonder how we are so certain that the people who were visiting the shrine, whether in the 13th century or the 17th or even the 20th, were 'Hindu' and conscious of their historic defeat only to then transform this consciousness through their eclectic practice. In other words, exactly where is one to locate the transformation or 'displacement' from Mahmud of Ghazni to Ghazi Miyan? One must have an analysis of the combination of the iconoclasm and the everyday in the figure of Ghazi Miyan beyond merely documenting their seeming incommensurability. For surely this cannot be seen to be an unconscious process occurring through the subcontinental—or rather Indo-Gangetic—popular. There is a danger at times of the category 'Hindu' as used in *Conquest and Community* functioning merely as a residual category at the level of the broader thesis on conquest, memory, forgetting and the everyday. None of this, however, detracts from Amin's originality in approach and infectious enthusiasm for his subject, or the fact that *Conquest and Community* is as bold in its ambition as it is riveting in its narrative.

Rahul Govind is with the Department of History, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Delhi, Delhi.

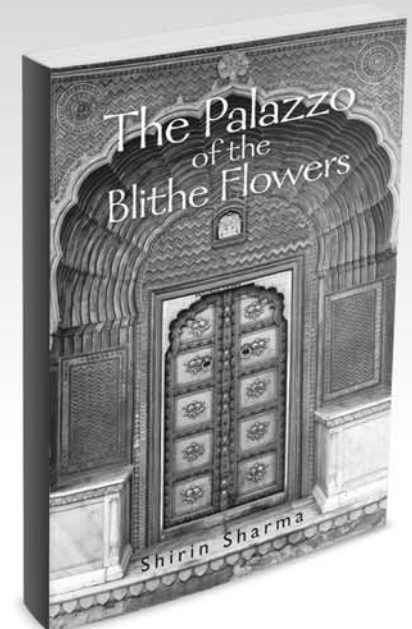
The Palazzo of the Blithe Flowers

Shirin Sharma

SOFTCOVER | ₹899.00

E-BOOK | ₹169.00

www.partridgepublishing.com



The Palazzo of the Blithe Flowers encompasses personal anecdotes topped with a sudden bout of lame jokes and some poems to make you sniffle and fill you with nostalgia. Jump along with Shirin Sharma and visit half the world.



PARTRIDGE