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Bigelow, Anna. 2010. *Sharing the Sacred: Practicing Pluralism in Muslim North India*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press. ISBN 978-0-19-536823-9. 314 pp. \$74.

Anna Bigelow's important study of Malkerkotla, a Muslim majority town in Hindu dominated Punjab, uses the the 15th century Sufi saint Haider Shaykh's tomb shrine -- 'an important conceptual and physical zone of interreligious encounter... [-- as a] window into how such interactions unfold' (7). *Sharing the Sacred* provides a fine-grained ethnographic analysis of how the social and historical context of this particular shared shrine is refracted in inter-communal interactions within the precincts of the holy place; as Bigelow says, the *dargah* [tomb complex] of Haider Shaykh 'resonate[s] at the same frequency as its environs' (194). Her study, by segueing between descriptions of practices within the shrine, recountings of town and regional histories, and vignettes of contemporary interactions between Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and Jains both within the *dargah* and in the surrounding town, demonstrates the 'daily work of community maintenance' (122) involved in perpetuating a haven of inter-communal conviviality in the midst of a region which had been deeply incised by ethnic cleansing and population displacements within historical memory.

Six years before the Partition of 1947 the Punjab had a Muslim population of 53%, a Hindu population of 31% and a Sikh of 15%; by 1951 the Muslim demographic had dropped to .8%, while the Hindu had risen to 62% and the Sikh to 35%. By 2001 Muslims made up 1.5% of the state, Hindus 36.8% and Sikhs 59.9%. Malkerkotla has resisted the regional trend, maintaining a demographic since pre-Partition of 70% Muslim, 21% Hindu, with small percentiles of Sikhs (between five and eight percent), Jains and Christians. Bigelow's study seeks to understand what underlies this anomaly, and in doing so offers a theoretically sophisticated counterpoint to studies of those sites of endemic inter-communal conflict which fuel the arguments of advocates of "the clash of civilisations". While Bigelow clearly recognises the validity of Paul Brass' concept of an 'institutionalized riot system' (Paul Brass, *Theft of an Idol: Text and Context in the Representation of Collective Violence*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1997) operative in 'areas plagued by hostility or repeated acts of violence' (17), she here analyses a setting in which conflictual events, rather than triggering widespread violence through well-established channels of communication, are instead "managed" through 'self-policing on the part of the various religious communities' (224). In Malkerkotla such events serve as 'peace triggers, mobilizing local leaders, government officials, neighborhoods, friends and enemies to counteract the conflict, setting the institutionalized peace system into motion' (243).

'Malkerkotla is not a utopia' (3), and Bigelow is not a naïve advocate of a humane perspective on human nature. *Sharing the Sacred* demonstrates not only the intensity of the "work" of producing and maintaining good inter-communal relations within the shrine precincts and the surrounding town but also the way Malkerkotla's history, and its telling and retelling by its inhabitants, has 'cultivated' (245) these shared spaces. Here the use of the shrine as an ocular device for developing a perspective on the town is particularly illuminating. The materiality of the shrine and the character of practices (marked by the 'absence of a highly structured ritual process' [190]) carried out within it are set out in detail in chapter five, illustrating the shrine's ability to provide generalised rather than sect

specialised blessings (one Hindu tells Bigelow ‘we find power in this *pir* [saint] so we come’ [185]). In preceding chapters Bigelow examines the history of the legendry of Hayder Shaykh (chapter 1), the activities of the hereditary Muslim ruling family of the princely state of Malkerkotla from its founding in 1454 to its effective dissolution with Independence (chapter 2), the pre-Partition history of the town (chapter 3), and its experience during and after Partition (chapter 4). These histories, and their variant shapings and retellings by different constituencies, go some way to explaining the appeal of the site to worshippers of different confessions, illustrating a ‘semantic multivocality [that] allows multiple users to maintain relations with a site that is central to their local or religious identity without overdetermining the site and rendering it fixed and unavailable to contrary uses and interpretations’ (27).

With Partition Malkerkotla, its Muslim majority population augmented by a flood of refugees drawn by the reputation of Iftikhar Ali Khan, its *nawab* (prince), as well as by reputed protective power of the shrine, found itself a Muslim-majority enclave within a Punjab denuded of its Muslim population. Bigelow suggests that this situation *might* provide an explanation for Malkerkotla’s cultivated tolerance: ‘local Muslims feel strongly that because of their minority status in Punjab they cannot afford to let tension take root...[and therefore] maintain the security and satisfaction of non-Muslim populations’ (148). Earlier she also posits that ‘as a Muslim majority town, in a Sikh majority state, in a Hindu majority nation, no group is able to establish dominance. All religious groups are in some regard vulnerable and cognizant that their well-being depends on their positive relations with others’ (10). This explanation of communal harmony as a consequence of a balance of potentially antagonistic powers concurs with Robert Hayden’s conception of ‘antagonistic tolerance’ (“Antagonistic Tolerance: Competitive Sharing of Religious Sites in South Asia and the Balkans”. *Current Anthropology*. 2002. 43, pp. 205-31) but fails to concur with the more general sense of inter-communality Bigelow notes permeates the town.

Both within the *dargah* and in the surrounding town Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and Jains engage in intricately involved patterns of mutual dependence, ritual attunement, and neighbourly commensality (in the latter case ‘on occasion transgressing normative rules regarding diet’ [220]). That this ‘practice of everyday pluralism’ (217) may stand as a desired alternative to the inter-communal conflict that had occasionally marked pre-Partition Malkerkotla and which came to fruition in its surroundings in 1947 is evidenced in changes in the ways the local community interprets the shrine. ‘The ritual life of the tomb shrine seems largely unchanged from before the 1947 Partition. This lack of alteration in terms of ritual practice contrasts with the substantial shift in [its] symbolic significance’ (151). Whereas before 1947 stories about Hayder Shaykh and his tomb served to legitimate his lineage and *dargah*, after Partition local narratives focussed explicitly on the saint’s ‘role as a uniter of a devotional community made up of multiple religious adherents’ (62). Practically ‘residents and pilgrims physically and discursively situate themselves in ways that validate the simultaneous presence of multiple religions’ (152). Although Bigelow recognises that the civic pluralism of Malkerkotla and the apparent ‘rejection of religious division and...denial of the communalized identities associated with Partition’ (Ibid) by worshippers in the shrine are vulnerable to the violent dissolution evidenced in Tone Bringa’s *Being Muslim the Bosnian Way: Identity and Community in a Central Bosnian Village* (Princeton: Princeton

University Press. 1995), she asserts powerfully and empirically that cultures of peace can be cultivated and maintained despite of, and against, external and internal forces working towards violence and fragmentation.

Unlike Ashutosh Varshney, who claims that urban ‘institutional peace systems’ (*Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Muslims and Hindus in India*, New Haven: Yale University Press. 2002) are dependent on formal associational links between communities, Bigelow argues that such cultures of peace require ‘a vibrant community life in the streets and homes and shrines of a locale’ (223). Her book demonstrates that communities in mixed religious settings are able to co-exist without perduring conflicts not because fear of the other makes them do so but because they want to do so: “[t]here is undeniably a historical, political, and social process in Malerkotla that suppresses divisiveness and rewards conviviality. Peace, pluralism, and a unified conception of community...are the products of the convergence of spiritual, political and cultural interest’ (244). *Sharing the Sacred* is an exemplary study of shared spaces, both civic and religious, as ‘crucial part[s] of the practice of pluralism’ (245). Its nuanced presentation of ‘the daily activities and micro-strategies of engagement that contribute to Malerkotla’s peace’ (ibid) is a non-polemical retort to those who contend that inter-communal relations can only be conflictual.

Glenn Bowman
School of Anthropology and Conservation
University of Kent
Canterbury, United Kingdom