

SOCIO-RELIGIOUS INTERACTIONS AND MEDIA NARRATIVES: UNDERSTANDING HINDU-MUSLIM DYNAMICS IN AN INCLUSIVE INDIAN SOCIETY

Himanshu Shekhar*

ABSTRACT

India's identity as a plural, inclusive society is grounded not merely in its constitutional architecture but in the deep historical reality of Hindu-Muslim socio-religious interactions that have shaped the subcontinent's cultural life for more than a millennium. This paper offers a comprehensive review of those interactions, tracing their historical formation through the Bhakti-Sufi synthesis of the medieval period, their institutional expression in shared sacred spaces, their embodiment in composite traditions of music, language, food, and life-cycle ritual, and their ongoing contestation by reformist movements and adversarial political mobilisation. The paper further examines how India's mainstream media represents, and systematically misrepresents, this socio-religious relationship, deploying the analytical frameworks of Framing Theory, Agenda-Setting Theory, and Cultivation Theory to demonstrate the mechanisms by which a conflict-saturated media narrative diverges from the lived reality of everyday coexistence. Drawing exclusively on published scholarship, government data, survey reports, and documented ethnographic accounts from across India's regions, the paper argues that India's inclusive tradition is neither a historical relic nor a political slogan but a structurally embedded social reality under active pressure from organised reformism, political polarisation, and media distortion, and that its preservation requires institutional recognition, responsible media practice, and an empirically honest scholarly engagement with how ordinary Hindus and Muslims actually live together.

Keywords: Hindu-Muslim relations, syncretism, Ganga-Jamuni Tehzeeb, Sufi traditions, Bhakti movement, inclusive society, media framing, Indian pluralism, communalism, composite culture, media narrative.

INTRODUCTION

The claim that India is an inclusive civilisation has been made in almost every register of public discourse, philosophical, constitutional, diplomatic, and political. It is invoked from Jawaharlal Nehru's articulation of 'Unity in Diversity' to Amartya Sen's argument that

*Himanshu Shekhar is a Ph.D. Research Scholar, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. He had previous experience of working in media, government and academics. Email: hshekhar.iimc@gmail.com

plural, heterodox identity is foundational to Indian intellectual and social life (Sen, 2006). Yet across that long tradition of assertion, the evidentiary base has remained surprisingly thin. What is documented richly is conflict: communal riots, partition violence, political mobilisation along religious lines, and the architecture of mutual suspicion between Hindus and Muslims. What is documented sparsely, and almost entirely in qualitative terms, is the vast ordinary domain of shared social practice, composite devotional culture, and inter-community cooperation that constitutes, for most Hindus and Muslims in most of India, the actual texture of daily life.

This gap between the richness of assertion and the thinness of documentation has real consequences. It allows the conflict narrative, amplified by political actors, media organisations, and social media ecosystems, to occupy the representational space that empirically accurate accounts of coexistence should fill. It allows reformist religious movements, operating in both communities, to treat the shared composite culture as an aberration to be corrected rather than as the historical norm to be understood and preserved. And it leaves scholars, policymakers, and citizens without the evidential foundation they need to make defensible claims about the actual state of Hindu-Muslim relations in contemporary India (Varshney, 2002; Brass, 2003).

This paper addresses the documentation gap through a synthesis of published scholarship, historical research, ethnographic accounts, sociological studies, and media analysis drawn from across India's regions. It does not claim to replace the systematic empirical work that the field still needs; it argues, rather, for the conceptual and evidential framework within which that work should be situated. It proceeds in five movements: the historical formation of Hindu-Muslim composite culture; the sociology of shared sacred spaces and devotional practices; the composite traditions of everyday life; the forces of contestation and decline; and the role of media in constructing and perpetuating the conflict narrative that now dominates India's public understanding of itself.

HISTORICAL FORMATION OF HINDU-MUSLIM COMPOSITE CULTURE

The Philosophical Substrate of Indian Pluralism

The inclusive orientation of Indian civilisation predates its encounter with Islam. The Rigveda's declaration, 'एकम् सद् विप्रा बहुधा वदन्ति' (*ekam sad viprā bahudhā vadanti*) which means: The Truth is One; the Wise call it by Many Names. Upanishad's doctrine of *vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam* (वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम्, The World is One Family) establish, at the deepest layer of the Hindu philosophical tradition, an epistemological humility regarding the plurality of paths to truth (Thapar, 2004). This philosophical substrate did not guarantee communal harmony in any automatic sense, but it created cultural conditions in which the arrival of a new religious tradition could be accommodated within an existing framework of doctrinal tolerance. When Islam arrived in India, first peacefully through Arab traders on the Malabar coast in the seventh century, then militarily through the Ghaznavid and Ghurid invasions from the 11th century onwards, the response of Indian society was, characteristically, neither uncritical absorption nor unqualified resistance but a complex, centuries-long negotiation that produced new cultural forms from both traditions (Eaton, 1993; Thapar, 2004).

The Bhakti-Sufi Synthesis

The most consequential cultural event in the history of Hindu-Muslim relations was the simultaneous flowering of the Bhakti movement within Hinduism and the Sufi tradition within Islam between the 12th and 17th centuries. These were not mirror images of each other, but they shared enough formal and spiritual features, the primacy of direct personal devotion over institutional mediation, the use of vernacular languages over Sanskrit or Arabic, the rejection of caste hierarchy, and the centrality of the saint-poet as teacher, to generate an extraordinary creative exchange.

Kabir Das (c. 1440–1518), born into a Muslim weaver community in Varanasi and initiated into the Nirguna Bhakti tradition by the Hindu saint Ramananda, is the paradigmatic figure of this synthesis. His *dohas* refuse to choose between mosque and temple, between Allah and Ram. His lineage through the Kabir-panthi tradition, which continues to be followed by both Hindu and Muslim communities across north India, is a living social institution of Hindu-Muslim composite culture (Vaudeville, 1974). Sant Ravidas, Mirabai, and Guru Nanak extended the Bhakti tradition in directions that further eroded the formal Hindu-Muslim boundary: Guru Nanak's incorporation of compositions by the Muslim Sufi Farid Shakarganj in the Guru Granth Sahib is perhaps the most institutionally significant act of cultural synthesis in Indian religious history (Singh, 1969).

On the Islamic side, the Chishti, Suhrawardi, Qadiri, and Naqshbandi Sufi orders established a network of *khanqahs* (spiritual hospices) across the subcontinent that became institutionally open to devotees of all backgrounds. The *khanqah* at Ajmer, the dargah of Muinuddin Chishti, the Garib Nawaz, became, and remains, the most visited shared sacred site in India, attracting Hindu and Muslim pilgrims in roughly equal numbers every year. Richard Eaton's (1993) comprehensive analysis of the Bengal Frontier demonstrates how Sufi missions, bringing both Islamic teaching and practical aid in the form of agricultural land clearing, produced the largest single mass conversion in Indian history without requiring converts to abandon their existing cultural practices, which is why Bengali Islam retained so much of Bengali Hindu culture for centuries after conversion.

The Mughal Composite Culture and Ganga-Jamuni Tehzeeb

The Mughal period (1526–1858) institutionalised the Hindu-Muslim composite culture at the level of court, cuisine, music, architecture, and language. Akbar's Din-e-Ilahi, however short-lived as a formal movement, embodied a philosophical project of inter-religious synthesis that drew on both Vedantic and Sufi thought. The Mughal court's patronage of Hindustani classical music, which incorporated both Dhrupad from the Hindu tradition and Qawwali from the Sufi tradition into a single musical culture, produced the most durable single institution of Hindu-Muslim cultural exchange in Indian history (Sharma, 1996). The Urdu language, developed in the military camps ('urdu' means 'camp' in Turkish) as a vernacular that could bridge the Arabic-Persian vocabulary of the Mughal court with the Khari Boli Hindi base of the north Indian common people, became the mother tongue of both Muslim *ashraf* families and Hindu *kayastha* and Brahmin literati in the Ganga-Yamuna plain.

The concept of Ganga-Jamuni *tehzeeb*, the composite culture of the Ganga-Yamuna plain, is the conceptual name for this institutional inheritance. As Tully (2007) has argued in his study of Lucknow, this *tehzeeb* is not simply a matter of elite cultural exchange between Muslim nawabs and Hindu courtiers; it is embedded in the shared vocabulary of everyday social life, the greetings, the hospitality codes, the festival calendars, the food culture, and the shared veneration of saints across community lines that constitute the social grammar of north India. Burman (2002) has documented its material expression in the hundreds of syncretic shrines across Maharashtra, Rajasthan, and the Deccan where Hindu and Muslim devotion converge around a single sacred site. Das (2006) has traced its anthropological dimensions across Bengal, Gujarat, and Tamil Nadu, demonstrating that composite culture is not a north Indian regional peculiarity but a pan-Indian social fact with regional variations.

SHARED SACRED SPACES AND DEVOTIONAL PRACTICES

The *Dargah* as Institution of Everyday Pluralism

The *dargah*, the Sufi shrine, is the most important single institution of Hindu-Muslim socio-religious interaction in contemporary India. India has an estimated 70,000 *dargahs* of varying sizes and regional significance, from the pan-Indian pilgrimage centres of Ajmer (Rajasthan), Nizamuddin (Delhi), and Nagore (Tamil Nadu) to the countless local Peer Baba shrines in villages across the country. What distinguishes the *dargah* as a site of inter-community interaction is precisely the feature that has made it a target of reformist Islamic criticism: it makes no exclusive theological demand on the devotee. A Hindu villager who ties a *mannat* (vow) thread at a local Peer Baba's grave is not being asked to affirm Islamic doctrine; she is accessing protective supernatural power through a locally trusted intermediary. This low theological threshold is the institutional mechanism that makes the *dargah* the most visited inter-community sacred space in India (Bigelow, 2004; Mayaram, 2004).

The sociological literature on shared sacred sites is extensive and geographically distributed. Froystad (2012) documents the 'divine intersections' of Varanasi, where Hindu and Muslim ritual practices at shared sites blend without formal theological acknowledgement from either community. Assayag (2004) examines the Yellamma Devi temple in Karnataka, shared between upper-caste Hindus and Dalit communities, but also visited by local Muslims, as an example of how shared sacred spaces operate through practical need rather than doctrinal agreement. The Seethalai Madam temple in Nagore, Tamil Nadu, where the annual Kanduri festival is celebrated jointly by Hindus and Muslims, and the Nagore *dargah*, where Hindus constitute a significant proportion of pilgrims, are among the most thoroughly documented southern instances of this national pattern (Miller, 1992). The Pew Research Centre's (2021) nationally representative survey found that 69% of Indian Muslims and 36% of Indian Hindus reported visiting a shrine or *dargah*, figures that, even allowing for the survey's acknowledged limitations, confirm that shrine visitation is a mainstream rather than marginal inter-community practice.

Festival Sharing Across India

Festival participation across community lines is another well-documented dimension of Hindu-Muslim social interaction. The *Navbharat Times* (2020) reported Hindu and Muslim

communities in Faridabad celebrating Holi together for more than three decades as a formal inter-community event; similar reports from across north India confirm the pattern. At the other end of the calendar, Eid-ul-Fitr and Eid-ul-Adha are celebrated with Hindu participation, through visits, gift exchange, and shared meals, across the neighbourhoods of virtually every north Indian city. The Ramlila tradition provides particularly well-documented instances: The *Print* (2022) reported Muslim participation in the Ramlila of Ayodhya since 1963, including the crafting of props, the making of costumes, and the organisation of the event by Muslim artisans and community members. In the Muharram procession, the annual Shia commemoration of the martyrdom of Husain at Karbala, Hindu participation across north India is historically documented and contemporarily reported, including the making of *tazias* (replicas of Husain's tomb) by Hindu craftsmen and the participation of Hindu families in the procession (Hossain, 2018).

The reciprocity of this festival exchange is sociologically significant. It is not a one-directional borrowing by one community of the other's celebration but a genuine, habitual mutual participation whose roots lie in the shared social life of neighbourhoods, commercial relationships, and agricultural communities that have functioned as composite social units for generations. Kanungo (2014) has documented both the historical depth and the contemporary attrition of this festival exchange, arguing that politicisation rather than modernisation is the primary driver of its decline.

COMPOSITE TRADITIONS OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Language and Music

The most immediate visible expression of Hindu-Muslim cultural synthesis in everyday Indian life is linguistic. Urdu and Hindi are, in their spoken forms, a single language, Hindustani, whose vocabulary is drawn from Sanskrit and Prakrit as well as from Persian and Arabic. The Devanagari versus Nastaliq script distinction is real and politically loaded, but it is a distinction of written form rather than spoken content; the language in which a Hindi-medium school student and an Urdu-medium school student communicate outside the classroom is the same Hindustani that their grandparents used before Independence. As Kaviraj (1997) has argued, the attempt to purify Hindi of its Perso-Arabic lexical inheritance is itself a political project rather than a linguistic one, an attempt to demarcate a Hindu linguistic identity that did not exist before that project began.

Hindustani classical music, *raga*-based, rooted in the ancient *Natyashastra* tradition but developed under Mughal court patronage into its present form, is the single most durable institutional expression of the Hindu-Muslim composite culture. The great *gharanas* (hereditary schools) of Hindustani classical music, Agra, Gwalior, Kirana, Dilli, Patiala, were almost all founded by Muslim *ustads* and have been sustained by both Muslim and Hindu practitioners across generations. Tansen, Amir Khusrau, Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, and Bismillah Khan belong to a tradition that is fully Hindu and fully Islamic in different dimensions simultaneously: rooted in the Hindu theory of *raga* as a cosmological category while expressed through the musical vocabulary of a Mughal court whose aesthetic sensibility was shaped by Sufi devotional values (Sharma, 1996). Qawwali, the Sufi devotional music of

the Chishti order, is consumed across community lines at *dargahs* throughout India and has become, through the recordings of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, one of the primary vehicles through which Islamic devotional aesthetics have entered mainstream Indian popular culture.

Food, Craft, and Material Culture

The composite culture of India is perhaps most popularly visible in its food. Biryani, whose name derives from the Persian *birian* (fried before cooking) and whose development is attributed to the Mughal royal kitchens, is today among the most consumed dishes across India, celebrated equally by Hindu and Muslim families in every region. The *kebab* tradition of north India, the Mughlai cuisine of Delhi and Lucknow, the Hyderabad *haleem*, and the Kashmiri *wazwan* all represent culinary inheritances that belong to the national culture rather than to either community exclusively.

The craft traditions of India tell a similar story. The hand-block printing of Jaipur, the brocade weaving of Varanasi's Banarasi *sarees*, the embroidery of Lucknow's *chikankari*, and the *filigree* metalwork of Moradabad are all crafts maintained by Muslim artisan communities for Hindu markets, crafts whose designs, motifs, and patterns are drawn from the composite aesthetic of the Ganga-Yamuna world. The *saree*, widely regarded as the quintessential emblem of Hindu feminine dress, is, in its most celebrated form, the Banarasi, woven by Muslim weavers in Varanasi's Madanpura neighbourhood using Persian brocade techniques introduced to the subcontinent by Mughal-era weavers. This productive interdependence is not a historical curiosity; it is a living economic and cultural relationship that binds Hindu consumers and Muslim producers in a shared aesthetic world (Jeffrey, 1997; Neyazi, 2018).

Life-Cycle Rituals and the Shared Social Grammar

Across India's regions, the most intimate expressions of Hindu-Muslim cultural exchange are found in the life-cycle rituals that mark birth, marriage, and death. In the Muslim communities of north India that descend from converted Hindu castes, Rajput converts in Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, Brahmin converts in Kashmir, Kayastha converts in Bengal, and weaver-caste converts across the Gangetic plain, the Hindu inheritance is most visible in the marriage ceremony. The *haldi* (turmeric) ceremony, the *mehndi* (henna) ceremony, the *sehra* (floral veil) of the groom, the *bidaai* (bride's farewell from her natal home), all practices with roots in the Hindu Rajput or Brahmin wedding tradition, have been absorbed into the framework of the Islamic *nikah* across large swathes of north India (Madani, 1993; Ahmad, 1981).

Mayaram (2004) documents the shared devotional and ritual life of Ajmer, where the annual *Urs* of Muinuddin Chishti is celebrated by Hindu and Muslim pilgrims jointly in ways that extend well beyond simple co-presence: Hindu pilgrims participate in the qawwali singing; Muslim devotees receive prasada from the adjacent Brahma temple; and the local economy of flowers, sweets, and devotional objects is served by both Hindu and Muslim vendors whose families have maintained the same spots at the same shrines for generations. This is the everyday secularism that Mayaram theorises, not an ideological position but a habitual, non-reflexive sharing of social and sacred space that is simply what ordinary life looks like in communities that have always lived together.

FORCES OF CONTESTATION: REFORMISM, COMMUNALISATION, AND THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY

Organised Reformist Movements

The composite culture documented in the preceding sections has never existed without contestation. Within the Muslim community, the Wahhabi movement, introduced to India by Sayyid Ahmad Barelvi in the early 19th century following his exposure to the teachings of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab in Arabia, specifically targeted the syncretic practices of Indian Islam as *bidah* (forbidden innovation). The Deoband seminary, established in 1867 in the aftermath of the 1857 revolt, institutionalised a reformed Islam that explicitly rejected *dargah* veneration, the celebration of the Prophet's birthday (*mawlid*), the use of music in religious contexts, and the maintenance of Hindu-origin customs. In the 20th century, the Tablighi Jamaat (founded in Mewat, Haryana, in 1926) extended this reformist project from the seminary to the village through a systematic programme of lay Muslim education in correct Islamic practice (Sikand, 2004; Metcalf, 1999).

The impact of these movements on syncretic practices has been studied across India's regions. Kanungo (2014) traces the shift from syncretism to communalism in Orissa, where Wahhabi-influenced organisations systematically targeted shared shrines and inter-community festival participation from the 1980s onwards. Hossain (2018) documents the same process in West Bengal and Assam, where the Ahl-e-Hadith and Jamaat-e-Islami movements have been particularly active. Stewart and Shaw (1994) provide the theoretical framework: what matters is not the content of the reformist argument (the theological question of whether syncretic practices are doctrinally permitted) but its political function, the construction of a purified, bounded Muslim identity distinct from and incompatible with Hindu culture, which serves the political mobilisation projects of parties and organisations that require religious identity to be exclusive and antagonistic rather than porous and composite.

The Pew Survey and What It Tells Us

The most comprehensive recent evidence on the state of Hindu-Muslim social relations in India comes from the Pew Research Centre's (2021) nationally representative survey of 29,999 Indian adults across 17 languages and all major religious communities. The survey's findings are simultaneously reassuring and alarming, and the tension between them is itself the most analytically important feature of the data.

On the reassuring side: 84% of Indians agreed that 'respecting all religions' was very important to their national identity; 91% of Hindus and 89% of Muslims said they were 'very free' to practise their religion; and large majorities across all communities expressed respect for other religions. On the alarming side: 66% of Hindus said it was very important to be Hindu to be 'truly Indian'; 65% of Hindu respondents said it was important to avoid eating beef; and strong majorities in both communities preferred their children to marry within their own religious community. Critically, only 20% of Hindus reported having many Muslim friends, and only 28% of Muslims reported having many Hindu friends, a figure that, when read alongside the data on shared festival participation and shrine visitation, suggests that inter-community social relations are maintained at the level of neighbourhood and occupational life

while formal social friendship networks remain largely community-bounded (Pew Research Centre, 2021).

This pattern, what Varshney (2002) calls the distinction between everyday inter-community relations and associational civic life, is consistent with the broader sociological literature. Varshney's study of six Indian cities found that cities with dense inter-community civic associations (trade unions, professional bodies, political parties with cross-community membership) had significantly lower communal violence rates than cities where inter-community engagement was limited to informal daily interaction without formal associational structure. The composite culture, on this analysis, is necessary but not sufficient for social peace; it requires institutional scaffolding to make it politically resilient.

MEDIA NARRATIVES AND THE REPRESENTATION GAP

The Structure of the Conflict Frame

India's media landscape has undergone a dramatic transformation since liberalisation in 1991. The number of television channels grew from a single state broadcaster (Doordarshan) to more than 900 channels by 2020, and the digital media ecosystem has added hundreds of millions of additional content producers and consumers. Within this expanded media environment, the representation of Hindu-Muslim relations has been shaped by structural commercial incentives that reward conflict, outrage, and drama over the quotidian social reality of coexistence. Neyazi (2018) and Ninan (2007) have documented how the Hindi media market, in particular, is organised around the emotional registers of religious nationalism, regional pride, and communal anxiety, registers that make the conflict narrative structurally profitable.

Entman's (1993) Framing Theory provides the conceptual vocabulary for analysing how this works. The conflict frame selects certain aspects of the Hindu-Muslim relationship, the communal riot, the disputed mosque, the interfaith marriage controversy, and makes them salient while rendering invisible the tens of thousands of daily acts of cross-community social interaction that constitute ordinary social life. The frame operates through omission as much as through commission: a news channel that broadcasts three hours of coverage of a communal riot in Muzaffarnagar while giving thirty seconds to a report on Hindus and Muslims jointly rebuilding each other's religious properties in Nagaur is not lying, exactly, but the cumulative effect of that selection ratio is a picture of Hindu-Muslim relations that is as systematically distorted as if it were fabricated (Entman, 1993; Hall, 1997).

Agenda-Setting and the Muslim Image in Indian Media

McCombs and Shaw's (1972) Agenda-Setting Theory predicts that the issues on which media focuses become the issues the public regards as important, regardless of their actual frequency or significance in lived reality. Applied to Hindu-Muslim media coverage, the theory predicts that the systematic prioritisation of conflict stories creates a public agenda in which communal tension appears as the permanent, defining feature of the Hindu-Muslim relationship, making the composite culture of shared life invisible not because it does not exist but because it has been systematically excluded from the agenda.

Narayana and Kapur's (2011) content analysis of Muslim representation in English-language Indian newspapers found that Muslims were disproportionately represented in crime, terrorism, and communal conflict stories relative to their presence in ordinary civic, professional, and cultural life. Aryal and Bharti (2022) documented a significant increase in the proportion of media coverage framing Muslims as a threat to social order, a shift they associate with the narrative framework. Khan *et al.* (2022) have demonstrated that the adversarial media framing of the Pakistan-India relationship, in which Pakistani and Indian Muslims are discursively conflated, further deepens the association between Muslim identity and national security threat within Indian media narratives.

Cultivation Theory and the Social Effects of Sustained Conflict Framing

The social consequences of sustained conflict framing are best understood through Gerbner's (1976) Cultivation Theory, which proposes that heavy television consumption shapes viewers' understanding of social reality in directions consistent with television's dominant messages, even when those messages diverge from the viewer's own direct experience. The theory predicts that heavy consumers of television news, which in India overwhelmingly features the conflict frame for Hindu-Muslim relations, will develop increasingly negative perceptions of the other community, even if their own direct social experience is of peaceful coexistence.

Bano and Mishra (2005) found, in a study of Hindu and Muslim children in Uttar Pradesh, that inter-group perceptions were significantly more negative than actual inter-group interactions in the same communities would predict, a finding consistent with the cultivation hypothesis. Ghosh and Kumar (1991) had earlier documented a systematic divergence between Hindu and Muslim children's stereotypes of each other and their actual behavioural interactions, finding that stereotypically negative perceptions coexisted with individually positive relationships in ways that the cultivation model helps explain. The social media environment of the 2010s and 2020s has dramatically intensified this cultivation effect: the algorithmic amplification of outrage-generating content in WhatsApp groups, Facebook feeds, and Twitter/X timelines means that the conflict frame now reaches communities that barely had television access a decade ago, and reaches them in the most intimate social spaces, family WhatsApp groups, neighbourhood chat threads, in ways that fundamentally alter the social cost of maintaining composite cultural practices (Rajagopal, 2001; Aryal & Bharti, 2022).

The Digital Counter-Narrative

Against the dominant conflict frame, a counter-narrative has emerged through social media, digital journalism, and independent documentary practice. YouTube channels documenting syncretic folk music traditions, Instagram accounts celebrating the composite food culture of north India, and documentary films on shared sacred spaces have created a parallel media ecosystem in which the composite culture is visible and celebrated. The viral reach of videos showing Hindus and Muslims jointly celebrating festivals, protecting each other's religious property during communal tension, or maintaining shared traditions of music and craft constitutes a genuine, if structurally marginal, challenge to the conflict frame's dominance.

Natarajan (2014) has argued for the strategic value of this counter-narrative in the context of India's international image; its domestic social function is equally important. When a

Hindu family in Madhya Pradesh discovers, through a YouTube video of a Sufi concert, that Qawwali is a thousand-year-old tradition of devotional music shared between Hindu and Muslim audiences, or when a Muslim family in West Bengal discovers, through a Facebook group, that the Baul tradition they have participated in for generations is celebrated across the country as a unique example of Hindu-Muslim syncretism, media is doing the work of cultural recognition that the mainstream news industry conspicuously fails to perform. The Pew survey's finding that 22% of respondents regularly follow religious teachers or scholars of other faiths on social media is a tentative quantitative indicator of this counter-narrative's reach (Pew Research Centre, 2021).

TOWARDS AN EMPIRICALLY GROUNDED UNDERSTANDING OF INCLUSIVE INDIA

The evidence reviewed in this paper supports neither the sentimental assertion that India is simply and naturally a land of religious harmony, nor the counter-sentimental assertion that Hindu-Muslim relations are defined by irreconcilable conflict. What it supports is a more complex, more historically honest, and more analytically productive account: that India has generated, over fourteen centuries of Hindu-Muslim coexistence, a composite social culture of extraordinary richness and depth, that this culture has always coexisted with communal tension and sporadic violence, and that it is currently under more organised and institutionally resourced pressure than at any previous point in the post-independence period.

Bhargava's (2009) concept of 'principled distance', the Indian state's constitutionally mandated posture of maintaining equal respect for all religious communities without formal separation of religion from public life, provides the legal framework within which the composite culture operates. Articles 25 through 30 of the Constitution protect freedom of religion, the right to manage religious affairs, the right of religious minorities to establish educational institutions, and the right of every citizen to receive state support for cultural practices. This constitutional architecture does not create the composite culture, but it provides the institutional conditions under which it can continue to function in a democratic polity.

Sen's (2006) argument in his book, *'Identity and Violence'* is directly relevant here. Sen demonstrates that the communalist construction of identity, in which every person is assigned a single, exclusive religious identity that overrides all other affiliations, is a political act rather than a social description. The actual identity of any Hindu or Muslim in India is irreducibly plural: a person is simultaneously a practitioner of a religious tradition, a speaker of a regional language, a member of a caste, a citizen of a state, a participant in an occupational culture, and a bearer of family customs that may or may not correspond neatly to the formal requirements of their religion. The composite culture documented in this paper, the Muslim family that maintains the Tulsi plant, the Hindu craftsman who makes the *tazia*, is not an anomaly in this account; it is the predictable expression of the irreducible plurality of real social identity. What is anomalous, in Sen's terms, is the communalist reduction of that plurality to a single dimension: the reduction that Wahhabi reformism seeks to enforce.

Varshney's (2002) empirical finding that inter-community civic associations are the most reliable predictor of communal peace suggests the policy direction. The composite culture

needs institutional scaffolding: inter-community cultural bodies, joint educational curricula that teach the shared heritage of the Bhakti-Sufi synthesis and the Ganga-Jamuni *tehzeeb*, media guidelines that require proportional and empirically grounded representation of inter-community cooperation alongside conflict, and a political culture that treats cross-community civic engagement as electorally legitimate rather than as religious betrayal. None of these are sufficient on their own, but each contributes to making the maintenance of the composite culture socially less costly and politically more supported.

CONCLUSION

The Hindu-Muslim relationship in India is not what either its celebrants or its detractors claim. It is not the seamless harmony of the syncretic ideal that liberal nationalist discourse sometimes constructs; nor is it the irreconcilable civilizational conflict that Wahhabi reformism asserts. It is something more complex, more empirically interesting, and more humanly important than either representation allows: a relationship of genuine, historically deep, socially embedded cultural exchange that has always coexisted with tension, periodic violence, and organised attempts to sever it, and that has survived those attempts because it is not a political programme but a social inheritance.

The Bhakti saints who refused to choose between temple and mosque, the Sufi mystics whose *khanqahs* were open to all seekers, the weavers of Varanasi who made the garments for both communities' ceremonies, the musicians who carried the *raga* tradition across the formal boundary of Hindu and Muslim identity, the villagers who maintained each other's harvest festivals and mourning calendars, these are not exceptional figures in Indian history. They are the statistical norm of everyday social life. What is exceptional, what requires explanation, is the organised, institutionally resourced, politically motivated effort to make them exceptional: to redefine the ordinary as the aberrant, the shared as the contaminated, and the composite as the polluted.

India's media has a specific and urgent responsibility in this context. The representation gap, the divergence between media's conflict narrative and the lived reality of composite social life, is not simply a failure of accuracy; it is an active social force that raises the cost of maintaining the composite culture by making every act of cross-community sharing visible as a political statement. Responsible media practice requires the same commitment to proportionality and evidential accuracy in covering inter-community cooperation as it currently applies, however selectively, to inter-community conflict. That representational correction, combined with the institutional scaffolding that Varshney's research identifies and the constitutional protections that Bhargava's framework articulates, constitutes the minimal condition for the preservation of an inclusive Indian society that is not a slogan but a social fact.

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