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RESEARCH ARTICLE (PEER REVIEWED)

## Silence, Exile and Cunning: Concealment and Worship at the Holy Infant Jesus Church, Bangalore

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### Abstract

In the context of escalating religious tensions in India, sites that still openly welcome practitioners of different belief systems or encourage a propensity for interreligious ritual engagement face a range of complex challenges. At the Holy Infant Jesus Church in Bangalore, there is a shrine set aside for people of non-Christian religions, both Hindu and Muslim, who view this deity as a *jagrata* or 'awake' god who responds to the 'desire' of the supplicant, granting boons and wishes. Despite the contemporary hardening of boundaries and the quest for religious purity, this site exhibits the persisting appeal of ritual engagement across religious boundaries. The consequence of such engagement is not always open connections or dialogue but rather concealment (silence), cunning (skill) and exile (creating of a liminal space to enable syncretic practices from others in the supplicants' communities). Against this background, this paper explores the following questions: Is religion a site of interaction rather than of intra-communal withdrawal? Is religious synthesis now threatened by multiple quests for religious purity? Why are some syncretic practices more resilient than others and how do people engaged in such practices make sense of what remains and what is lost?

### Keywords

**Religious Syncretism; Indian Christianity; Hinduism; Islam; Jagrata**

## Prologue

In this article, I borrow the words of Stephen Dedalus who chooses ‘silence, exile and cunning’ as weapons to defend his quest to be a writer in James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1992) to explore the ways in which religious pressures and political differences in India in the last decade re-shaped the public spaces where, previously, religious boundary crossings had been common. I discuss the ways in which majority community (Hindu) access and use of a Christian religious space (the Holy Infant Jesus shrine) led to minorities, in this case, Muslim, to use similar weapons to enable behaviours that might have been unacceptable to their own communities.

## Setting the Scene

It is a hot and muggy Thursday in the IT city of Bangalore. I pick my way through small hillocks of garbage into a narrow street lined with various stalls. The first shops are those selling meat; the visceral sight of hanging carcasses gives way to cheap clothing, then religious offerings of flowers and garlands and last of all temporary stalls with miscellaneous flimsy objects that might be picked up for a song. The street in all its dirt, business and squalor contrasts with the large edifice in the compound opposite it, the blue and white church dedicated to the Holy Infant Jesus. The church is well kept, the paint meticulous and the compound obviously swept and mopped on a regular basis. There is a massive chariot on the left which is used to ferry the image of the Infant Jesus around Bangalore on the major feast days. It is impressively, if gaudily, decorated and resembles closely the giant chariots of the Jagannath temple in Puri.

I am not visiting the church, however. My destination is the building on the right, the shrine to the Infant Jesus that is open to people of all religious persuasions who believe that a particular set of rituals as well as visits on Thursdays can effect miracles and grant boons. Inside, it is cool and dark and very crowded. There is a large statue of the Infant Jesus high up on the wall opposite the entrance with the epigraph ‘The more you honour me, the more I will bless you.’ On either side and lower down are two smaller versions of the statue. Men and women mill around these smaller images, jostling to put garlands around their necks, or incense and candles at their feet. There is the murmur of numerous Indian languages, Kannada, Tamil, Bangla and Hindi. It is like a confluence of the diversity of India.

This polyglot environment seems appropriate to Bangalore, a city which, in the twenty-first century, symbolises the aspirations of the new global India, while simultaneously lending itself to the designs and orientations of global capitalism. It takes pride in its flexibility, new technical workers and embrace of elitist global lifestyles. Integrated into the circuit of global capitalism, the city and its landscape, identity, orientation, and its key actors have been appropriated and altered to suit the needs and regimes of the new flexible capitalism. The employees of the hyper-new modes of production in the dazzling edifices of the IT companies in Electronic City are serviced by the myriad spaces of consumption: gated residential communities, vast, sparsely populated malls displaying global brands of consumer goods, international food chains and luxury cars. Unlike Hyderabad, Delhi and Mumbai, Bangalore, until recently, could boast a salubrious climate. The mounds of garbage on the way to the shrine of the Infant Jesus, however, point to the fact that the infrastructure of the city, long neglected, has collapsed under the weight of the now voluminous population and traffic. Stagnant drains, unpaved sidewalks, pitted roads and crowded streets become the bane of an aspiring international city (Vasavi 2008). It is vastly different to the city I first visited in 1992 when I was woken by the clip-clopping of horses being exercised by the Army, down Hundred Feet Road.

These signs of global lifestyles are uneasily linked with the larger social and economic realities of the city. Bangalore is the destination for large numbers of migrant workers, not only from within Karnataka, but from further afield. The beauty salons are staffed by women from the north-east, migrant workers from all

over India work in garment factories or as domestic labour. At the same time, new-age spiritual gurus, like Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, have set up their bases on the outskirts of Bangalore, and their devotees, both Indian and foreign, throng the ashrams that combine aspects of resorts and therapeutic centres with spiritual abodes.

For ordinary people in India, sites of pilgrimage and shrines are an integral part of life. Worshippers stop by them steadily throughout the day, marking them as dynamic spaces, replete with the power of faith, not leftovers from the past. Diana Eck writes that ‘there are so many *tirthas* (pilgrimage sites) in the sacred geography of India that the whole notion of “sacred space” as somehow set aside from the profane is cast into question. In Hindu India, sacred space is so vastly multiplied that there is little untouched by the presence of the sacred’ (Eck 2012: 76). These spaces, she writes, are created not only by priests and sacred literature, but also ‘by the countless millions of pilgrims who have generated a powerful sense of the land, location and belonging through journeys to their hearts’ destinations’ (Eck 2012: 76).

According to Srinivas (2006: 321), there are several ‘accretions of change’ in the embedded and experiential world of popular religion. She argues:

in the changing, competitive and multisectarian field of urban sacred landscapes in India, [priests, both Hindu or Christian] act as “religious entrepreneurs” and agents of change to create “dynamic” adapted rituals that enable innovative approaches in order to expand their devotee base. The restructured and revitalised rituals lead to the invention of a “new cultural grammar” that allows a reinterpretation and contextualisation of the language of traditional ritual to suit the needs of “modern” devotees. (Srinivas 2006: 321)

The clergy of the Infant Jesus church have adapted their devotional grammar to accommodate Thursday visits to the shrine by devotees of non-Christian religions. Examples of these adaptations are the acceptance of the presentation of garlands and sweets and the procession of Infant Jesus in a chariot in January, both of which have Hindu antecedents.

It is in this context that the shrine of the Infant Jesus flourishes. It is a location of aspiration, a space of desire, a destination that promises everything that its devotees need or want. The migrant worker, the IT expert, the domestic help, the young urban professional, all congregate at this point to hope for those things that might not accrue to them in the normal processes of their lives. The shrine is a place where one’s religious, class and ethnic identity are immaterial. All that a devotee needs is an unshakeable belief in the Infant Jesus; all devotees are equal at this shrine, a liminal space between religious belief and worldly aspiration.

In India, over the last three decades, various communities have vehemently protested apparent or real disrespect of their religious beliefs, whether criticisms of personal and civil codes, caste discrimination or the status of women. Such hostilities between communities do not necessarily reflect only past experiences but also emerge out of contemporary situations. Thus, the context of any particular event is constituted of a multiplicity of factors. If this is the case, how do communities deal with sites that are presently locations of multi-religious rituals and beliefs? How does past conviviality transform in the face of contemporary hardening of boundaries? How do worshippers deal with the history and context of such sites in the continuing political present? In this article, I analyse a site of shared worship to illuminate the contradictory and contested nature of boundary crossing.

## Ways of Worship

Every Thursday, the *Deccan Herald*, the local newspaper of Bangalore, has many paid testimonials of ‘thanksgiving’ to the Infant Jesus of the Viveknagar/Ijipura shrine for fulfilling various petitions (Narayanan 2004: 23). It is clear from the names on these testimonials, and those on the shrine’s website, that the

petitioners are mostly Hindu and Christian who are expressing gratitude for Jesus's help in solving domestic or professional problems or for receiving a boon ([Hawley & Narayanan 2006: 6](#); [Thanksgiving Notices 2020](#)).

The Infant Jesus Church is a very popular shrine dedicated to the Infant Jesus of Prague. The parish and shrine are relatively recently established in India's religious landscape, founded in the late 1960s. No one really knows when non-Christians, especially Hindus, began to come in large numbers or why they chose this particular church rather than another. Large numbers of devotees attend the nine Thursday novena masses and the seven Sunday masses. The church serves a primarily Tamil speaking community, but also has masses in seventeen other languages. The official foundation story of the church and shrine is that, in the mid-1960s, a parish priest saw a rose garden and thought that it would be a good place for a church:

One day as the Parish Priest was walking; he entered a garden in Somanahalli. It was a well-maintained rose garden. He was impressed. "If only I could get this land for the Church," he wondered. "Oh! How nice it could be." But then, he felt that it was impossible, because over a lakh of roses were exported per week from there. (Infant Jesus Church, History)

According to Narayan, 'after saying a cycle of nine novenas daily to the Infant Jesus of Prague for two months, his wish was fulfilled and the land bought for the church' ([2004: 23](#)). The Father at the church in 2015 confirmed this story and pointed out that roses, of course, are sacred to Mary. He added some unofficial stories which were more mundane and less symbolic. A priest sleeping in a hut on the site heard a baby crying for seven nights running but could not find the infant. He then had a dream in which the Infant Jesus told him that he was weeping because there was no church on the site. In 1969, a foundation stone was laid but permission to build a church on the site was only acquired after a series of supposed miracles, all of which happened on Thursdays. Several other miracles have since been reported and the shrine sees itself as another Lourdes. This narrative is immediately emotional, emphasising the 'infant' nature of Jesus and the personal and direct nature of his intervention; the feelings of empathy for him as a baby needing/ desiring attention and evidence of his willingness to respond to that need provides the basis for the universalist appeal of the shrine. This Jesus is not the Jesus in agony on the Cross or Christ resurrected; this Christ child is like the mischievous baby Krishna or the child Murugan ([Narayanan 2004: 3](#)).

The votive practices resonate with the ones in Hindu temples or in local dargahs. A shop run by the church, as well as a set of open stalls and small covered shops, sell stainless-steel and silver oil lamps, such as those used in Hindu rituals, candles, cassette tapes and pamphlets. I also saw menorahs for sale. The church is approached through narrow streets, studded with the piles of garbage which are a perennial sight in Bangalore. There were crowds, colour, noise, butcher's shops, clothes stores, stands of flowers, a Tamil song playing 'Wondrous child, Yesu' loudly in the background. The words seemed familiar-very pious but sharing in the common idiom of Hindu piety rather than being uniquely Christian in tone ([Narayanan 2004: 1](#)).

The shrine's motto, 'The more you honour me, the more I will bless you,' is a peculiarly instrumental attitude to prayer; it resonates, however, with a common strand of Indic religions. Devotion is seen as a transactional relationship to God which in turn provides the blessings of good fortune and prosperity and the latter are among the goals of spiritual life. [Landy \(2020\)](#) recounts an incident where two women were praying in the shrine for the return of properties they had lost when a nearby slum was cleared to make way for the construction of a new shopping centre. The women had brought their title deeds to Infant Jesus for examination. They pointed out that, among the pictures of politicians on a large poster facing the shrine, seeking blessings from the Infant Jesus, was the very politician who had been discovered taking huge bribes from the wealthy and displacing many poor people. He had, they claimed, 'illegally demolished their homes,' but police were preventing the return of the inhabitants ([Landy 2020](#)).

I heard similar stories many times at the shrine; students about to sit for examinations came with books to be blessed by the Infant Jesus; a couple who wanted to buy an apartment brought the purchase

documents for Infant Jesus to approve; a young man applying for jobs brought the advertisements he was considering to Infant Jesus for perusal.

Sight (*Darśan*) and touch (*Pranāma*) associated with Hinduism appear to be crucial at the site and is an example of the adaptation of Christian godhead to Hindu practice. The corporeality of seeing and touching are intrinsic to a real and tangible apprehension of the divine. The saint or deity and the devotee must both be in sight of each other. Another essential component is the haptic one—to touch marks both respect and corporeal connection. Both Catholic and Hindu worshippers touch the feet of the religious statues in the Hindu sign of devotion. Consequently, many churches have been putting their images of saints and deities behind glass barriers to discourage dirt and the touching by devotees. As mentioned above, at the Infant Jesus shrine, there are two small images whose feet may be touched while the larger, central image is placed higher and so may only be seen. At the base of the statues, there are small dishes, heapings of salt, peppercorns, coconut shards or other sweets.

The shrine is busy every day but the crowds desiring *darshan* of the Infant Jesus on Thursdays snake all the way out of the doors and into the covered veranda. Hindus of all castes and walks of life, as well as Christians, prostrate themselves Hindu-style before the Infant Jesus, offering garlands or lighting candles. They ask for boons. Another common practice is the Hindu style shaving of the heads as an act of piety. They also dedicate votive images, another popular practice in Hindu temples, Muslim dargahs, and other Christian shrines in South India. I was reminded of the *milagros* I saw being offered at shrines to the Virgin de Guadalupe in Mexico. People seeking cures from diseases can buy pieces of silver etched with images of the ailing parts of the body from one of the many vendors near the shrine and place them in the offering box. These votive images are not just limited to body organs. Those who wish to acquire houses, cars or motorbikes offer etchings depicting these images. Students buy models of pens or carved books to dedicate to the Infant Jesus to ensure that they get good results in examinations. Another shrine notable for these practices is the Basilica of our Lady of the Mount or Mount Mary Church in Bandra, Mumbai, a church which claims that miracles are performed on its site. Non-Christian worshippers conceive of these customs as a kind of sympathetic magic, bringing their piety and practice with them ([Narayanan 2004](#)). I saw many examples of the offerings in 2015 and 2016 in a large room on the first floor of the shrine that is dedicated to their display.

When I went to the shrine for the first time, I heard a devotional song, Kuzandha Yesuve Saranam, that repeated the word *saranam* or refuge. Other devotional songs repeated this trope:

Jesus, Saviour, Lord, lo, to Thee I fly;  
 Saranam, Saranam, Saranam;  
 Thou the Rock, my Refuge that's higher than I:  
 Saranam, Saranam, Saranam.

Devotees who attend the Infant Jesus shrine might go to a *dargah*, Hindu temple or mosque for similar devotional reasons. Particular sites of the 'other' religions may possess an inherent 'power' or *shakti*, similar to many other sacred places in Hinduism. Hindu pilgrims often call these places '*jagrata*' or 'awakened' and my interlocutors repeated this word. This power or *shakti* comes from the fact that the deities at these particular places are awake and responsive to the pleas of their devotees. This trope of the waking god is reinforced by the narratives of miracles performed there and by all the other devotees who flock there with the same hope. Their deity is a font of strength and pity, a divine being who is beyond earthly desires but understands them and rewards those who are still caught in the mundane world of *maya*. As [Narayanan \(2004: 9\)](#) says, divinity is both generic and specific; it may appear in many sacred places, but is particularly powerful when, as in the form of the Infant Jesus, it is local. People who come to the shrine of the Infant Jesus are acutely aware that this is a Christian place of worship but they do not think that they are betraying their faith by their attendance. The Infant Jesus shrine is near the Sai temple and my Hindu interlocutors knew the difference

between the two and many went to both on the same day. They instinctively believed that there was spiritual power in particular spaces which transcended institutional identification and categories. Narayanan concludes that ‘it is perhaps this feature that distinguishes many Hindus from their Christian neighbours who may live and participate in a diverse, pluralistic society, but theologically be connected exclusively to their own deity’ (2004: 28).

## Religious Crossings or Trojan Horses?

The Christianity of Madura under the Jesuits was indeed disguised idolatry. Except that the image of the Virgin Mary was worshipped in the temples and paraded upon the cars, there was little change in the old ceremonies and processions of Hindooism. There was the same noise of trumpets and taum-taums and kettledrums, there was the same blaze of rockets and Roman candles and blue lights, there were the same dancers, with the same marks of sandal-wood and vermilion on their naked bodies. (Kaye 1859: 3)

As Veena Das comments, ‘shifting ideas of sovereignty, public order, and the new pressures generated by the diversity of religious groups within a single polity, bring certain anxieties (e.g. about conversion, religious freedom, or public order) within the public domain even as these processes at the level of the state become the conditions of possibility for new kinds of boundaries to be drawn around groups’ (2013: 75). Her research in ten low-income urban neighbourhoods in Delhi, made obvious that social relations extended beyond one’s own community so that there were many quotidian ways of connecting to the presence of the other in one’s social life. Hindus and Muslims living together produced certain kinds of sociality in these areas, though events with potential for Hindu-Muslim conflict—such as the destruction of the Babri Masjid or the pogrom against Muslims in Gujarat in 2002—affected seriously the relationships between these local communities. Das found that the residents of these areas developed strategies to deal with such moments of crises and that Hindus and Muslims inhabited the same social world in a mode of agonistic belonging rather than in complete peace and harmony (2013). Or, as Ashish Nandy says, sometimes relationships between communities ‘can stand enormous asymmetries and even the strange or esoteric cultures of other communities, because these are not seen as humiliating but as peculiarities of these communities’ (Nandy 2010).

I interviewed Hindu, Christian and Muslim worshippers at the Infant Jesus shrine in Bangalore over a period of six years. All claimed that it was a place where they felt welcome. They visited the shrine and participated in mass public rituals such as the chariot procession without any obvious signs of disagreement. Did this apparent amity signify a particularly harmonious approach specific to that shrine? Or do worshippers at the location take a conscious or unconscious decision to keep silent about a plethora of disagreements concerning both the sacred and the profane? Does this lack of conflict conceal deep differences in social, political and moral values, in attitudes to co-existence, community relationships and personal connections, or is it Das’s agonistic belonging? Is it possible that the ‘lack of disagreement’ stems from the fact that the space of the shrine is public? Maybe the ritualised nature of some of the events (for example, the chariot procession that I describe below) allows participants to stick to circumscribed roles, whereas more unstructured mingling with the potential for spontaneous interaction might have created opportunities for disagreement. These questions are fascinating though I have no clear answers.

In 2014, before the election of the current government in India, I spent two weeks visiting the Infant Jesus shrine and talking to the priest there, Father M.A. The Father was an erudite man who told me the various myths that surrounded his sacred site and, when he found out that I was interested in syncretic practices or ritual crossings, became voluble. ‘Lots of Hindus come,’ he said. ‘They sometimes come and see me to ask for advice or prayers. I often give them copies of novenas and Bibles. They say that our Infant

Jesus is more powerful than any other god that they have encountered.’ He smiled when I asked him if there were Muslim visitors as well. ‘Not as many as the Hindus,’ he replied. ‘But they do come. Most of them have some personal, some domestic problems. They are not happy in their lives or their families. Some come and talk to me and ask me for advice, what to do. I try to help. They are not Christians but all are human beings. We help them all.’

This spirit of amity was visible during the festival day for the Infant Jesus in early January of 2015, in the *ratha yatras* or chariot processions. Thousands assembled to watch the image of the Infant Jesus in richly decorated robes ride in the ornate wooden chariot around the roads of prosperous Viveknagar pulled by several hundreds of devotees. I watched as these impressive vehicles were carefully serviced and fitted with new parts. A busy laneway fronts the church with vendors selling images of the Infant Jesus—produced in much the same style as a baby Krishna. At a quick glance, it would be hard to distinguish them from the images of gods at Hindu temple festivals. In recent years, such celebrations have increased and Father M.A. expressed pride that the devotees attending the festival were increasingly from all religious groups. By 1989, the magazine *Frontline* reported great enthusiasm for chariot festivals at temples ([Waghorne 1999: 97](#)). It noted, ‘The pomp and splendour and pageantry of the car culture has an appeal to Christians and Muslims also ... a Hindu institution, the car festival through the centuries has influenced other religionists too thus serving as a symbol of “unity in diversity”’ ([Ganapathi Stapati 1989](#)).

This annual chariot procession is loved and attended by the Roman Catholic community of the Holy Infant Jesus Church as well as Hindus. These outward manifestations of faith make a claim to the public space of the city through their progress through the streets as well as ‘exhibit God/s in public on the uncertain periphery of their domains. Everyone is invited to come together in these public streets at the borders where all worlds meet. The very site of the procession is a shared public space where no single deity or religious tradition can claim clear title’ ([Waghorne 1999: 96](#)).

[Waghorne \(1999: 99\)](#) further comments that shared forms of public ritual may not imply a shared theology, even though they may use a common religious idiom. This idiom, like the chariot, rather than blurring the distinctions between the God/s who ride them, ‘serves to stress difference’ ([Waghorne 1999: 99](#)). In the cool month of January, devotees of various faiths know that the Infant Jesus is established on the chariot pulled through the street and not a Hindu god like the Jagannath of Puri. However, this Infant Jesus contains within him a multitude of deities, inserting Christianity into the Indian world of spectacle.

Church rituals in India nowadays often include Hindu religious customs such as chariot festivals or displaying a ritual flag. In the past, the Catholic clergy in particular maintained strict boundaries between Christian and non-Christian rituals but since the mid twentieth century, the Church promoted accommodation with local religious practices and inculturation was accepted as enabling converts to transition more smoothly to their new religion. This was a response to anti-conversion feeling in India which increased steadily in this period. It is a matter of speculation as to whether the enthusiasm for these chariot processions is because devotees of different religions seek shared spaces for worship in contrast to new resurgent religious movements within India wishing for a subservience to Hindu nationalism.

The answer to the question above is mixed. Tensions have arisen in the last five years or so, with militant Hindus arguing that missionaries were using ‘Hindu’ or ‘local’ customs as Trojan horses with the covert motive of conversion, deliberately misleading the unsuspecting pilgrim or devotee. The Hindus to whom I spoke were most comfortable when Christian rituals were differentiated from Hindu ones. They were uncomfortable, for example, with Indian/Hindu forms of music and dance being used to teach the gospel. They felt that saffron clothes for nuns and priests, yoga, Sanskrit epithets, or calling Jesus or God by the name of local deities, and vegetarian food on feast days were ways to smuggle Christian teaching into non-Christians via a shrine that was supposed to be open to all religions. They claimed that they had always disapproved of such specific ritual crossings but they ‘never talked about it.’ ‘No one does,’ they said. One

said, 'It is better to keep quiet but we tell our friends and children that we enter the shrine as Hindus and leave as Hindus.' On the other hand, some Christians at the shrine expressed both dismay and a tinge of resentment at what they saw as a Hindu takeover of the site and its rituals. They were proud that their divinity pulled in so many from other religions but were both puzzled and resentful of the increasingly loud and divisive Hindu rhetoric in the public sphere.

The last time I spoke to Father M.A. he looked old and tired. I asked him about the shrine and its visitors and his response was defensive and brusque, very different from our conversation four years earlier. The same priest who, in 2014, spoke of Muslim women who had consulted him on the best novenas to say for certain boons had apparently forgotten this on my visit in 2017. He strongly asserted that the clergy at the Holy Infant Jesus Church were definitely not converting anyone or giving out Bibles. 'Yes, Hindus come to the shrine,' he said, 'but that's their business. We don't interfere, we don't even talk to them.' 'But,' I said, 'I thought they came to you for advice and reading material?' 'No, no, I tell them to go to their own priests and if they want reading material they can buy it in the shop.' 'How about the Muslim women?' I asked. 'I don't know,' he said irritably, 'I don't keep watch.' 'Don't they come to see you anymore?' I asked. He closed the conversation by saying, 'Look, we don't try to convert anyone. If someone is interested in the Infant Jesus, we tell them to buy information booklets from the shop—or whatever else they want. I don't like talking about this, it just leads to suspicion and ill feeling. Everyone is welcome here, that's all I have to say. And we've told our congregation, leave the shrine to the others. You have the church. Go to the church and pray to the Infant Jesus. He will give you all you need.'

## Silence, Exile and Cunning: Looking for the Elusive Muslim Other

I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to use, silence, exile, and cunning. ([Joyce 1992](#): 191)

At the time I was doing my fieldwork, the presence, indeed the dominance, of Hindu worshippers at the shrine was obvious during my many visits there. Yet, all my interlocutors told me that they had seen Muslim women at the shrine. They were not sure if Muslim men came but they knew about the women because they wore the all-enveloping *burqas*. Many said that they came very early on Thursday mornings. Others said the Muslim women came in the afternoon, which made sense as this was a period of lull from domestic work. I visited the shrine at various times, early on a Thursday morning, in the afternoon, later at night. I didn't see anyone in a *burqa* or a *hijab*. My random conversations with people every day highlighted this trope. Yes, there were Muslim women who visited; they hadn't been seen for a while but my informants had seen them recently, or a few months ago, or last year.

One winter afternoon in 2016 as I was sitting outside the shrine with my recorder, deciding on my next interviewee, I saw a group of seven or eight young women, dressed in casual modest clothing, laughing and chattering at one of the doors to the shrine. They were toting large bags and had clearly come from college. They didn't seem to be accompanied by family and my interest was piqued. I went up to talk to them.

The women were college students and were at the shrine to ask the Infant Jesus to grant them good results in their forthcoming examinations. Out of the eight, three were Hindus, two Christian and three were Muslims. The latter were very reluctant to be recorded, so I took notes. I have called them Layla, Nusrat and Niloufer for this essay.

Layla and Nusrat used to come with older female family members to the Infant Jesus shrine until the latter stopped visiting a few years before. 'Why?' I asked. 'Our family and community don't like it anymore,' they replied. 'They say that it is a Christian shrine but it has idols.' Niloufer said that her father considered it a Christian place of worship dominated by Hindus and not welcoming or proper for Muslims. Nusrat's

mother said that the last few times she visited she felt uncomfortable, as if the other devotees were staring and talking about her. She felt disturbed, somehow. The pressure to abandon the shrine was relatively recent and came mostly from men in their families and male community leaders. The shrine was no longer seen as a safe space in which to worship; rather it now represented a dual sign. It was a Christian place of worship; it was dominated by Hindu worshippers. The very characteristics that had given the space its shared and welcoming ritual aspects had become unstable.

I asked if the older women in their families who used to visit the shrine missed those experiences. All three agreed. Yes, they said, they did miss these early Thursday morning visits. Besides, Nusrat confided, her aunt's boons had all been granted. Her son had found a good job and her daughter had given birth to a son. According to Layla, her mother just liked coming here. It was spiritual and welcoming, she loved just sitting here quietly. She had a few problems at home; conflict with her mother-in-law. She liked getting away from that. But now Layla's father and grandfather had forbidden her to come.

When asked why they themselves continued to come, the answers were confused and contradictory. All three admitted to peer group pull; other women in their group at college frequented the shrine and so did they. They were also influenced by their female family members' positive memories of the shrine. Clearly, though this was not fully articulated, the shrine represented a space away from the constrictions of family and community. Niloufer, the most vocal of the three, said, 'there is so much we are not supposed to do. My mother fought hard to make sure that I went to college. I want to be a fashion designer but I have to wear a *burqa* to and from my (girls') college.' Nusrat added: 'I had to fight to go out with my friends after college and, even so, I have to be back by a certain time every day. I like coming here and I pray to Infant Jesus that my father gives me more freedom.' 'Anyway,' added Layla, 'Jesus is a prophet for us as well. So there is really nothing wrong with it; it's like praying to a saint. It's just a nice time to spend with our friends and pray for what we want.' 'Do you always get what you want?' I asked. Niloufer laughed. 'Oh no, some boons are granted, some not. But I think that those not granted are boons in disguise. Infant Jesus knew that they would not be right for me.'

'Obviously, your family and community know nothing about this,' I said. All three burst into giggles. 'Oh no! that would be terrible. We go somewhere after college on Thursdays to take off our *burqas* and come here. No one knows who we are or that we are Muslim.' One of them added, 'We keep *dupattas* (scarves worn with the churidar kurta by both Hindu and Muslim women) over our heads of course.' But after a moment, their Christian friend said to Nusrat, 'I think your mother and aunt know. The last time I popped into your house, they asked me if I still went to the Infant Jesus shrine and whether I would pray that you did well in your exams.' Layla becomes quiet for a bit, looking off into the distance. 'You know, I think they may suspect. But I don't think Abba wants to know. As long as I don't go out late, say my prayers, and all that stuff, he just doesn't ask.' Nusrat adds, 'And my cousin knows. He covers for me sometimes. He doesn't see any harm in it. He says, "it didn't do any harm when Amma visited regularly; in fact I got a good job after all their prayers."'

The visits by these Muslim women to the Infant Jesus Church open up contradictions in the way in which religion is conceptualized in modern India. There is no desire for the dramatic rupture of conversion, breaking with the old and a wholesale adoption of new beliefs, practices, social networks and sources of authority. Rather than a rejection and repudiation of their old beliefs, this is a partial openness to the other bolstered by the fact that it is part of their (female) family tradition. Elements of this other ('Jesus is also our prophet,' 'I just like sitting here quietly') are selectively adopted and adapted in the context of the different logic and values of their own cultural and religious systems in the encounter. Maurus Reinkowski uses another term, 'crypto-religion,' to designate the religiosity of people whose 'real religious views are not in accord with their official religious affiliation and who frequently may seek to hide this fact from the broader public' (2007: 409). This is not the case here. Layla, Nusrat and Niloufer remain devout Muslims. Their

secret visits to the Infant Jesus shrine are rather a supplement that they do not wish purified out of their belief systems; something excess to Islam rather than other to Islam.

In his classic essay, 'The Secret and the Secret Society,' Georg Simmel analyses secrecy by discussing the telling of untruths. Lying is the basis of all social interactions and the give and take of knowledge. Simmel posits that the secret is a 'consciously desired concealment' which enables the retention of power. Keeping secrets means that group cohesion is maintained as the social distribution of knowledge is managed and restricted. Secrecy is intrinsic to the networks of society, especially to the technologies of power and control ([1950](#): 312–317).

In relation to the Muslim women's visits to the shrine, the fashioning by these visitors of their own social and religious practices is crucial. For example, how do this group of women parse their intersubjective domains of secrecy? What if these visits are part of a 'public secret,' one that most people in their community or family know, but no one is willing to speak openly? Michael Taussig's idea of public secrecy in *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labour of the Negative* ([1999](#)) offers ways to examine the relationship between public secrecy and transgressive boundary crossings. Taussig deploys Elias Cannetti's argument that 'secrecy lies at the core of power,' positing that the sacred can be produced by both defacement and concealment ([Cannetti 1984](#); [Taussig 1999](#): 7). The revealing of a familiar public secret is transgressive and dramatic; and its power lies in the fact that, paradoxically, the public secret is maintained by an active not-knowing. This is why the 'secret' requires periodic disclosure and then concealment so that the potential for re-enchantment is renewed. Liminal spaces and boundary crossings depend on public secrecy to exist as well as enable and subvert the regimes of power.

These processes of revelation and concealment connect public secrecy to local history and politics. All the women in the group talked about how their visits to the shrine cemented their friendships, and the non-Muslim women were careful not to give their Muslim friends away. Whether Hindu, Christian or Muslim, the girls worked together to maintain the secrecy around their visits. The social and psychological dynamics of secrecy both complicated and cemented their relationships. The attendance of Muslims at the shrine is a public secret. Christians and Hindus claimed to me that Muslims visited the site, but they did not personally know any who did so and they could not introduce me to any. The relationship of these Muslim women to the site is open to polyvalencies and ambiguities since uncovering and concealment are an intrinsic part of the logistics of power in their own community and the larger society. While everyone assures me that Muslims go to the shrine, the visitors keep themselves concealed, setting up a public secret, which is invoked at particular moments of crisis or conflict in the context of interfaith politics. Revelation and concealment are hinged on the perception that such crossings are now increasingly shrouded in silence.

Through these visits to the shrine, Layla, Nusrat and Niloufer were trying to express themselves as freely as they could in their limited circumstances using the only weapons they had: silence, exile and cunning ([Joyce 1992](#)). The group maintained silence and secrecy about their visits. Layla, Nusrat and Niloufer found in their clandestine attendance at this Christian site a space of temporary and self-chosen exile from the restrictive milieu of home and community, a means of securing a measure of autonomy as their lives became increasingly circumscribed by the patriarchy in their own communities and the hardening religious boundaries of India. The Muslim women who earlier came to the shrine wore *burqas*. Layla, Nusrat and Niloufer wear them to college and take them off before visiting the shrine so that they are shorn of obvious religious markers. The putting on and removing of obvious Muslim markers is a display of strategy to enable them to continue their visits. The shrine becomes a liminal space where a suite of transgressive practices and public secrets are revealed only through the attempt at concealment. It enables plausible deniability. They know what not to know.

## The End and the Beginning

Karnataka, where this fieldwork was undertaken, banned the wearing of hijab/burqa in schools and colleges some months ago ([Ellis-Peterson 2022](#)). This ban was upheld by the State High Court ([Dhillon 2022](#)). These events imbue the recounting of my narrative above with melancholy for times lost. In my fieldwork, I can see the foreshadowing of the breakdown in relationships between majoritarian Hindu governments in India and minority communities. It is incumbent on me to state that it is very likely that the conversations and friendships I reported might not be possible under the current dispensation in India.

My fieldwork attempts to illuminate the nuances of the 'religious' relationships between worshippers and this site. Historically, Hindus associated Christianity with hospitals and education; this is less true in the post-colonial era where the State has entered, however partially, the area of healthcare and education provision, especially for the poor ([Narayan 2004: 22](#)). Religiously, according to Narayan 'while Hindus might enthusiastically participate in certain rites ... in some Christian places of worship, and for specific reasons, they certainly do not participate in many other practices and do not frequent all churches' ([2004: 22](#)). In the social context, while Hindus might have a cordial relationship with the Christian management of their children's school or have good Christian friends, in the current era of Hindutva politics, they might not approve of some of the conversion rhetoric and strategies utilised by Christian missionaries ([Narayan 2004: 22](#)). On the other hand, for Muslims, this form of concealment, according to Kent 'is a direct result of the same processes of cross-cultural encounter, conflict and mutual influence that give rise to conversion and syncretism' ([2011: 700](#)). It is often motivated, she adds, 'by starkly unequal power relations,' both within the Muslim community and the larger Hindu majority society, resulting from persecution or the threat of it for those who 'opt out of the dominant religious worldview' and endeavour to maintain their own views or compromise between two otherwise irreconcilable worldviews ([Kent 2011: 700](#)).

Romila Thapar contends that we should be wary of projecting onto the past what emerges from the experiences of the present ([2004: 230](#)). By the same token, we should not conflate present harmonious co-existence with the absence of dissonance. In this article, I have explored the relationships that various communities have with the Infant Jesus site, asking whether the apparent amity exhibited at the site is an exorcism of past differences or whether this is a withdrawal from discussion and dialogue and a retreat to silence. I have also discussed attempts by some Muslim visitors to the site to negate offence to their own communities, and to the majority communities, by deploying various strategies that I have called silence, exile and cunning.

Since my last visit to the Infant Jesus church, there have been many popular movements against attempts to marginalise minority groups in India. There have been protests against Government instruments such as the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) 2019, which offers citizenship to Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, Parsis, Buddhists and Jains, who arrived in India before 31 December 2014 to escape religious persecution, but excludes Muslims facing persecution in, for example, Myanmar. Soon after the reading of the Act, a group of Muslim women began occupying a patch of street at Delhi's Shaheen Bagh, registering their protests against the Act and the proposed National Register of Citizens. The sit-in protest made national headlines and became a focal point of resistance for people of all religions and classes, unfolding across the country. The protest site was replete with images of Gandhi and Ambedkar, the poetry of Faiz Ahmad Faiz and street theatre and performances. The protesters withstood months of vilification. This sit-in was attended by grandmothers, women and families with children and women were at the forefront till the demonstrations were forcibly dispersed by the government. Besides opposition to their marginalisation in their own country, these Muslim women made a powerful and poignant claim to their rightful place within the imaginary and the idea of India. It is interesting to speculate whether these claims made an impact on the views of Muslim women who covertly visit the shrine of the Infant Jesus. Did the performance poem by Syeda Umme

Kulsum quoted below resonate with their secret resistance to internal and external, family and community pressures?

I am a daughter of Hindustan  
 I put vermilion on my forehead  
 I cover my head when the azaan sounds  
 I spread my hands at the dargah  
 I fold those hands at the temple  
 I am a daughter of Hindustan.  
 ([Kulsum 2020](#))

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