

Report on “Sufism as a Mediating Force in South Asia,” Held at Connecticut College on October 13-14, 2011

The American Institute for Sri Lankan Studies, in conjunction with Connecticut College, sponsored a symposium on *Sufism as a Mediating Force in South Asia*, which was held at Connecticut College in New London, CT. Intellectually, the symposium followed from an earlier AISLS workshop held in Colombo in November 2010, where one of the themes was how Sufism mediates among other forms of Islam in Sri Lanka. This symposium broadened the inquiry to cover all of South Asia to see what sorts of comparative insights could emerge. The event, which was convened by Frank Korom (Boston University) and Sufia Uddin (Connecticut College), was open to the public. Approximately 60-75 people attended the plenary lecture on Thursday evening, and anywhere between 30 and 45 were present at any given time during the proceedings on Friday. The audience consisted of Connecticut College professors and undergraduates, members of the general public in the New London area, and a small number of academics who came from further afield. The event was designed to appeal to both specialists and newcomers to the study of Islam.

The symposium began with a plenary lecture delivered by Vasudha Narayanan of the University of Florida concerning the interface between Islam and Hinduism on the level of popular piety. To illustrate this, she used examples from Tamil literature, and she also showed a number of pictures of sites in Tamil Nadu, India, where both Hindus and Muslims utilize the same sites for religious and ritualistic purposes.

The following morning Andre Wink of the University of Wisconsin--Madison discussed the role and function of Sufis in the Indus Valley, in what is now Pakistan. His presentation, illustrated with maps and slides of various Sufi shrines, focused on the early modern period, what he termed the “age of anxiety,” which was a time of uncertainty for people of all faiths. Wink argued, counter to many scholars who have written about conversion to Islam in South Asia, that Sufis were the ones who

comforted people's anxiety, which gradually made Islam appealing to many people who were desperately looking for something to which to cling. He also addressed the political and economic role of Sufis, many of whom established hereditary estates that made them very powerful in the socio-economic arena. His talk set the mood for the remainder of the historical papers delivered during the morning session.

Lindsey Harlan, of Connecticut College, gave a paper about legends concerning the interaction between Rajasthani "warrior heroes" and Muslim "saints" who died in battle. Her lecture drew on oral history and ballads as well as ethnographic observation. She claimed that even though the annual martyrdom anniversaries are held for the Hindu heroes of Rajasthan, the deceased Muslim saints are also included in the observance because they died "noble deaths" in battle. Therefore, they are also remembered.

The last paper of the morning session was delivered by Thibault d'Hubert, who teaches Bengali at the University of Chicago. He focused on Sufi manuscripts from the Bengali region. These texts are in Bengali but written in Arabic script, a common phenomenon in South Asian Muslim communities. He argued that using Arabic script allowed Bengali Muslims to forge their own identities, even though they shared many linguistic and literary traits. Thus, he opined that not much research is being done on the pre-modern literature of the region, which is his area of specialization. He ended by suggesting that to really understand medieval Bengal, as well as the Islamization of the region, we need to go back to the texts to understand the fusion of two distinct world views.

After a break for a bountiful lunch there was an afternoon session that focused more on contemporary and ethnographic issues. The first paper was by Dennis McGilvray of the University of Colorado (Boulder). McGilvray discussed his decades of research in the Tamil speaking regions of south India and Sri Lanka. His presentation was an "anthropological tour" down the coasts of Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu to explore the

transnational links forged by Sufis among merchant and trading communities, not to mention seafarers. His paper set the stage for the third presentation of the afternoon that will be described below.

The second paper was by Carla Bellamy, who teaches at Baruch College. Her paper focused on a shrine in north India named Husain Tekri, where both Hindus and Muslims go to get healed of various maladies, both physiological and psychological. Her paper was micro-ethnographic in the sense that she focused more specifically on the experiences of a few select women who came to the shrine to solve familial problems. This gave her presentation a more personalized feel, and was much appreciated by many of the students in the room.

Lastly, Susan Schomburg of Bates College presented ethnographic material from her doctoral dissertation in which she surveyed a number of shrines in Tamil Nadu. The talk introduced the audience to a number of lesser-known shrines in south India about which very little is known.

Each paper was followed by a period of questions and answers, and there were ample opportunities over meals and in the hallways during coffee breaks for informal conversation between the audience members and the presenters. Although there are no formal plans to publish the presentations together, some individual panelists plan to send their papers to *Asian Ethnology*.

In conclusion, feedback from the audience showed that event served its purpose well. It introduced localized versions of Islam practiced in South Asia to an audience that was not very familiar with the region or with Islam as it is practiced there. It also stimulated the discussion of Islam on the Connecticut College campus, where a program to study global Islam is currently being established.

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