



Kelly Pemberton, *Women Mystics and Sufi Shrines in India*

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IN *Women Mystics* Kelly Pemberton addresses the issue of women's participation in the role of ritual specialists at Sufi shrines in India. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in North India (among Gudri Shah Chishtis in Ajmer, and among members of two branches of the Firdausi order of Sufis in Bihar Sharif and Maner), Pemberton points to the apparent contradiction between narratives that exclude women from ritual and spiritual roles in Sufism, and the very obvious presence and participation of women in such roles in contemporary Indian Sufism. In the preface, introduction, and conclusion, Pemberton delineates her research questions, her impetus for this line of research, her own experiences in the field, and the broader theoretical paradigms and

academic discussions that have informed her work. These sections bookend chapters that take a more detailed look at how the role of women in religion was viewed in the colonial era, and the historic and contemporary participation of women in three primary aspects of South Asian Sufi practice: master-discipleship (*pīri-murīdi*), the offering of prayer and praise in the Qawwali style of singing as part of Sufi ritual audition (*samāʿ*), and the petitioning of the saint for his intercession (*shāfaʿat*). The book is interesting, insightful, and rigorous in its analysis, and in my opinion, its most significant aspect is Pemberton's interdisciplinary approach to a complex question.

In presenting the seeming dichotomy between narrative and practice, Pemberton rejects simplistic explanations of mere contradiction; instead, she argues for a dialectic understanding of the position women occupy in the ritual and spiritual life of Sufi shrines; a dialectic between notions of ideal Islamic femininity and gender-hierarchy, and the lived complexities of gender relations and women's agency. She argues that narrative elements such as female subordination to male religious authority, the clear delineation of the home as appropriately women's space, and the inappropriateness of women holding positions of religious and ritual authority are couched in terms of Islamic orthodoxy and adherence to *sharīʿah*. On the other hand, operating within this framework, women exercise their agency in accordance with their own spiritual motivations and the ritual and spiritual needs of Sufi adherents in the course of the day-to-day practice of Sufism at shrines and auxiliary sacred spaces. The dialectic interaction of these two realities results in decidedly complex phenomena: (1) Women, in accepting and embodying the subordinate feminine ideal, are able to parlay their status as pious women into positions of authority and agency; and (2) markers of spiritually and ritually elevated women are entwined with the ideal of servitude (*taʿabbud*), making the position of an exemplarily submissive woman not one of inferiority, but of spiritual elevation. This kind of dialectic confounds simplistic notions of agency, victimhood, and authority that often dog Euro-American feminist analyses of the role of women within religious communities. Pemberton's work is a strong complement to MAHMOOD (2005).

One must argue against an uncomplicated categorization of women's roles at Sufi shrines as being an unmitigated wielding of agency. Pemberton herself points to this countering argument when she discusses in detail how many of the arenas open to the women of Sufi communities are, by necessity, marginalized spaces. These sites (such as prayer chambers auxiliary to Sufi shrines and the shrines of minor figures) are away from the more prominent spaces at shrines (such as the tombs of the saint and his major disciples, or the shrines' mosques and schools). These spaces are not under the direct oversight of the shrine's hereditary (male) custodians and are also often ignored or disregarded by conservative religious scholars or members of reformist Muslim groups as not being Muslim spaces at all; they are thus doubly marginalized. As Pemberton argues, though these women wield agency, it is certainly within larger constraints that limit their power, influence, and status as religious leaders.

To reiterate, Pemberton's work is significant in the multidisciplinary nature of her research and analysis. In presenting her ethnographic work, she places her insights and findings within the context of an historical analysis of women's roles, and the perception of these, in the religious life of South Asians in the colonial era. She

also presents analyses of contemporary constructions of Islamic orthodoxy, Islamic reform movements, notions of scriptural piety, orthodoxy, and conservatism. The contextual framework that Pemberton provides is essential, not because it provides a standard against which to measure lived religion as authentic or inauthentic, but because these discussions about authenticity and legitimacy are very much a part of the lived religion and everyday conversations of Muslims in India today.

The book goes a long way in bridging the disciplines of religious studies and anthropology, which I consider to be a necessary and fruitful development. As an anthropologist of religion, I find most works in either field to lack something essential that the other provides. Scholars of religious studies who focus on lived, contemporary religion often use ethnographic methods (such as interviews, participant observation, and so on), but often do not immerse themselves in a community for a considerable period of time, that is, ethnography. This dearth of intensive ethnography can result in a lack of reflexivity on the part of the scholar—there is ethnographic analysis, but discussion of their presence in the field, access, questions of ethics, and the dynamics between researcher and interlocutor do not figure in the final product. On the other hand, scholars of anthropology often fail to contextualize their ethnographies within larger discussions of reform, orthodoxy, religious conservatism, legitimacy, and so on. As I have noted above, these are important points of discussion for the ethnography of religious groups because these discussions are often part of the zeitgeist of religious practice and belief. A combination of both approaches—the ethnographic/anthropological, and that of religious studies—gives the scholar and the reader an insight not only into the utterances of belief and the practices of religion, but also into silences and strategies that convey strong messages of identity, faith, cooperation, and conflict. This book succeeds in providing a breadth of analysis in its multi-pronged handling of the subject.

There are, however, a few lacunae in Pemberton's work, some glaring, others not so much. More in-depth descriptions of the sacred spaces graced by "women mystics" would have lent texture to this work. Better description is also missing in terms of Pemberton's lay interlocutors; in quoting them, Pemberton many times does not give us a sense of who these people are, for instance, their gender, age, class, or their relationship to Sufism. This book would have been richer, too, for the voices of these Sufi women. While Pemberton does convey to us their stances and does quote them, it seemed to me that in a book about women mystics and ritual specialists, their voices might have been more prominent. Having said this, for all the reasons detailed above, the book remains a successful endeavor and an important contribution to the fields of religious studies, anthropology, and Asian studies.

REFERENCE

- MAHMOOD, Saba
2005 *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

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