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## Playing with the Gods: the Making and the Un-making of the Baba

*Chandrabhanu Pattanayak*

Sometime in 2014, a controversy arose in the Indian media about whether one of the saints/gods of India was indeed a god. More importantly, whether he was a “Hindu” god. *Śaṅkarācārya* is a commonly used title of heads of monasteries called *mathas* in the Advaita Vedanta tradition. The title derives from Adi Shankara, an 8<sup>th</sup> century CE reformer of Hinduism. He is honored as *Jagadguru*, a title that was used earlier only to Lord Krishna.

Shankaracharya is also seen as an avatar of Shiva (Shankara). Shankaracharya is responsible for founding many *punyakshetras* throughout India by taming avatars of Parvati and imprisoning her essence in Sri Chakras.

### The Sai Baba-Sankaracharya Controversy

True to the tradition that he has to uphold, Dwaraka Shankaracharya denounced the worship of anyone other than Rama or Krishna just as any Shaivite acharya would expect his followers to worship only Shiva. He, therefore, questioned the fact that Sai Baba of Shirdi, who was a mere mortal could not be worshipped as God. He also said that since Sai Baba himself used the phrase “Allah Maalik” in all his discourses, he was a Muslim and therefore could not be worshipped as a God. Of course there were counterarguments. Things escalated with Baba devotees going to court and Naga sadhus coming to defend the Shankaracharya who is facing a vilification campaign by what he calls the neo-Hindus. The arguments for and against were many. But just two examples from two very popular blogs of the time may suffice here.

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## The Argument FOR

This blog comes with a prescript:

### Non-random Thoughts

This blog aims at bringing out the past glory of India, Hinduism and its forgotten values and wisdom. This is not copyrighted so as to reach genuine seekers of these information. Its my prayer that only genuine seekers—and not vandals & plagiarists—come to this site.

In my opinion this controversy was waiting to happen and it had happened now. With heavy commercialisation of bhakthi happening on one side and the growth of neo-Hindus on the other, who see themselves as revivalists and guards of Hinduism and think that they know Hinduism better than even the Shankaracharya, this issue was waiting to explode. What the Shankaracharya had said may have been new to neo-Hindus, but not many seemed to realise that he did not say anything new or different from what the numerous acharyas around India had been saying to their devotees. The only difference is that Dwaraka Shankaracharya had been more vociferous and his views were reported widely. Perhaps the high rate of depletion of Hindus from traditional practices in North India had an impact on the Acharya.

One may find fault with this trend saying that Hinduism is divisive and narrow minded. No, what these acharyas are saying is in tune with any one of the Shanmathas which ultimately lead one to the Brahman. These acharyas have the duty to uphold the tradition that they are expected to safeguard and preserve. All the six groups of deities of the Shanmatha are the manifestation of the all pervading Brahman and anyone following one of them can attain Brahman through the path he had taken. The fact of the matter is that Shirdi Sai Baba does not come under any of the Shanmatha concepts.

As if to overcome this, Baba devotees have started telling that he is an incarnation of Shiva. Some people say that he is an incarnation of Dattatreya. If all these spinning are acceptable

why leave out Jesus who is described by his devotees as Purusha of Purusha Suktha? It is a matter of acceptability by Hindus, one may argue. But one must remember that our ancestors did not even accept a Buddha or a Mahaveera as Hindu deities though they sprang from Hindu thought. Buddha was initially regarded as an avatar of Vishnu due to his Godly attributes as those of Vishnu. But he was removed from the list of avatars of Vishnu when it came to be known that his ideas did not align with the Vedic concept. Those questioning the Shankaracharya must probe why Buddha and Mahaveera were severely rejected by all acharyas, azhwars and nayanmars. They must also probe whether they (Acharyas, aazhwars, etc.) would accept Sai Baba as a Hindu God if they are living now.

Looking on those lines, accepting Shirdi Sai Baba as a Guru by Hindus raises some basic questions. A Guru is one who not only removes the darkness of ignorance but also connects a devotee to God. A Guru is essentially a medium between a person and God. Which God is being shown by Sai Baba as the object of ultimate realisation? Are any of the deities of Shanmatha or their parivar deities pointed out by Sai Baba as a Guru to the Hindu devotees? In the absence of this, what people are doing by extolling him as Shiva or Dattareya are attempts at cult-formation and giving a Hindu status to him.

Giving a status as a Hindu Guru and Hindu deity to Sai Baba has no basis in the Hindu concept of deification. One may argue that numerous men and women who had lived or died for some cause had been deified as rural or local Gods in the past. So what is wrong in deifying Sai Baba who lived like a saint? It is replied here that the Godhead of those men and women were aligned with or as some parivar of one of the Shanmatha deities based on the attributes exhibited by them. Such deities were not elevated as main deities either. Even the Gurus of the Hindu fold who are worshiped are shown as subservient to the God who they worshiped and not as Gods themselves. But what is happening in the case of Sai Baba is that he is being elevated as Shiva which has the potential to mis-guide Hindus into believing what he is originally not. There were many siddhas in the Hindu cult who

gained extraordinary powers through their meditation and did miracles. Even they were not elevated on par with Shiva.

### **The Argument AGAINST**

Shankaracharya's information that Muslims do not form part of the devotees of Sai Baba is only partially true as many Muslims could be seen visiting Sai temples in Delhi, Shirdi and other places but definitely their visibility is much less.

However, it looks strange why the Shankaracharya raised the issue at the present time and while rejecting a large group of Hindu devotees to be Sanatani Hindus? His media reported comparison of the incomes of Tirupati Balaji Temple with Shirdi Sai Temple may be taken as a clue.

Shirdi Saibaba Sansthan Trust has recorded Rs 1441 crore of income during five years ending in 2013, with 22 per cent higher donations received every year, whereas the current budget of Tirupati Devasthanam reached Rs 2400 crore this year. The annual income of Veshno Devi temple is considered to be around Rs 500 crore. The most revered shrines of Kedarnath and Badrinath respectively score incomes of Rs 10 crore and 5 crore a year. Jagannath Mandir's income stands lower than Rs 150 crore. Thus, it is only the Shirdi Sai Baba temple which is competing with the richest deity in the country—Balaji of Tirupati.

It is reported that about 20,000 devotees used to visit the Saibaba's shrine daily some five years back, but the present figures show that around 60,000 people come to visit the temple everyday and the number goes up to about one lakh on weekends. In terms of devotees, Sai Baba of Shirdi has overtaken the Balaji of Tirupati which is thronged by 50,000 pilgrims a day.

The Shankaracharya's opinion that Sai Baba of Shirdi is coming in the way of Ayodhya movement may be substantiated from the fact that only 7000-8000 pilgrims visit Ayodhya per day as compared to eight times more visitors per day to Shirdi and all efforts to make Ayodhya acquire religious eminence among

Hindus have so far failed.

The controversy has inadvertently brought Islam and Muslims into the debate. Sai Baba of Shirdi preached monotheism by inculcating that "Lord of all the people is One." He spread his precepts from a small mosque in Shirdi village of the time, called by him as Dwarkamai Masjid. Such an approach instill a tolerant tendency among Hindus as regards other persuasions.

Sai Baba is not a single example of Muslim saints' influence on the Hindu society. There are instances of many Sufi saints whom mainly Muslims revere but they also receive devotion of many Hindus. The typical example of the shrine of Hazrat Moinuddin Chishti at Ajmer may be considered here. Shirdi gives a reverse view wherein Hindus are the main devotees and Muslims are lesser in number. However, the Balaji Temple of Tirupati, many Rama temples of Ayodhya, Veshno Devi of Katra, Jagannath temple of Puri, Kedarnath-Badrinath temples, Kashi Vishvanath temple of Varanasi, etc enjoy exclusive devotion of Hindus.

Kabir Panth is a typical sect now pursued only by Hindus, although all the modern objective studies depict Kabir as a discrete Islamic preacher. Kabir's preaching illuminated the way of many great saints of medieval time such as Guru Nanak. In a way the entire Bhakti movement echoes of Muslim influence under the waves of teachings of Kutban, Manjhan, Jayasi, Abdur Rahim Khankhana, Ras Khan, Dadu and many others. Raja Ram Mohan Roy formed Brahma Samaj by synthesizing the teachings of Islam, Christianity and Hinduism. Ram Krishna Paramhans is known for his appreciation of Islam. The modern maestros as Shri Ram Sharma, the founder of Gayatri Pariwar movement and J. Krishnamurti founder of another Hindu movement are said to be the descendants of lesser known chains of Muslim saints.

By raising a controversy on the increasing devotion of Hindus on Sai Baba of Shirdi, the Shankaracharya of Dwarka has only negated the whole legacy of Bhakti movement. His attempt to discredit any meaningful movement among Hindus having inclination towards a Muslim saint reveals the increasing

intolerance among some sections of the country and also the frustration on the declining support for the Ayodhya movement in spite of all recent efforts by Hindu organizations.

The Shankaracharya blames the followers of Sai Baba cult for dividing the Hindu society but his own attempt to create an issue out of a non-issue may lead to this divide in an unimagined way. Already members of Ramakrishna Mission have declared themselves as non-Hindus. If the present controversy goes on unabated then the adherents of Sai Baba may also follow suit.<sup>1</sup>

During the 2013 ARC Roundtable, I spoke of the Asaram Babu rape case. Asaram Babu was a tremendously popular baba or guru who was arrested for raping a young girl. Before this there were several other cases registered against him which he had denied. Despite the fact that there was a case registered against him and that he was sent to jail, his several million devotees from across the world insist that he is innocent. I have always asked myself: Are we, as a race, that stupid or that blind that even after we are shown empirical evidence to the contrary, we are convinced of his innocence? Asaram is not the only one in this kind of a situation. There are many in the same boat.

### **The Asaram Babu Case**

#### Land encroachment

In 2000, the Asaram Ashram was allocated about 10 acres (4 has.) of land in Bhairavi village of Navsari district by the Gujarat government. The ashram encroached on an additional 6 acres (6 ha), leading to protests in the local villages. On a complaint filed by locals, and after repeated notices were ignored, the district authorities with police assistance bulldozed the encroachments and took possession of the land.

The Yog Vedanta Samiti of Asaram was reportedly given permission to use the premises of the Mangalya temple in Ratlam in Madhya Pradesh for 11 days for a satsang in 2001. The samiti failed to vacate the premises after the satsang, and continue to occupy a total of 40 ha (100 acres) of land, valued at over R7 billion.<sup>[27]</sup> The land belongs to the now defunct Jayant Vitamins Limited.

Asaram denied any involvement, saying the reports were baseless and untenable.

The Nashik Municipal Corporation destroyed a part of Babu's ashram in Bhilwara for a 10-year encroaching on government-owned land.

#### 2012 Delhi gang rape

Asaram was widely criticised after his remark that the 2012 Delhi gang rape victim was equally guilty along with those responsible for the sexual assault on her. He is reported to have said: "Only five or six people are not the culprits. The victim is as guilty as her rapists... She should have called the culprits brothers and begged before them to stop... This could have saved her dignity and life. Can one hand clap? I don't think so." He is also reported to have said that he was against harsher punishments for the accused in the Delhi rape victim case, as the law could be misused. To support his point, he is said to have stated that, "Dowry law in India is the biggest example of law being misused."

Asaram denied giving any statement in which he blamed the girl for the gang rape. According to him, his statement was distorted and misrepresented.<sup>[34]</sup> He announced a reward of 50,000 rupees for anyone who can prove he blamed the victim for the gang rape.

#### Allegations of sexual assault

In August 2013, Asaram was accused of sexually assaulting a 16-year-old girl at his ashram in Jodhpur on the pretext of exorcising her from evil spirits. Two days after the alleged assault the girl's parents filed a complaint with the police in Delhi and a medical examination confirmed that she had been assaulted. When Asaram did not appear for interrogation by 31 August, Delhi police booked him under Indian Penal Code sections 342 (wrongful confinement), 376 (rape), 506 (criminal intimidation), and sections of the Juvenile Justice Act, and the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act. Asaram remained inside his other ashram in Indore and avoided arrest while his devotees

clashed with journalists and policemen outside. Eventually, the Jodhpur police arrested him on 1 September 2013 from his ashram. He has dismissed the girl's allegations and said accusations were a conspiracy orchestrated by Sonia Gandhi and her son Rahul Gandhi of the ruling Congress Party.<sup>2</sup>

Before I go any further, I must mention that we have 330 million gods and goddesses in the Hindu pantheon and it is believed that from a person who worships one god to a person who does not believe in any god with 330 million gods and goddesses in between, all of us are Hindus. Seen within this context, it seems to me that the Sai Baba controversy is a facetious one. Just like it is believed by scientists across the world that bio-diversity is not only desirable but a necessary condition for human existence, it must be believed that cultural, linguistic and religious diversity are also necessary conditions for the health of human civilization.

I must also emphasize here that syncretism and assimilation have always been the defining factor in the Hindu way of life. When large populations of indigenous people in India were converted into the Christian faith, Christianity did not replace their own religious beliefs. They simply added a set of new beliefs to their own and there was no contradiction in their minds at all. In fact, in most cases they even put the crucifix along with their own gods and goddesses and continued with their own rituals. A long time ago, I met a member of a very primitive tribe in Odisha on my fieldwork and asked him why they had kept Jesus Christ in their little altar along with their tribal deities, he retorted "if our Gods listen to us when we do Puja to them then this is a bigger god who has come from foreign, he surely will understand our language and surely our rituals, and if God has no problems why do you ask?" This great ability to syncretize and assimilate is most aptly demonstrated when Buddha whose thoughts and philosophy is framed by the reaction to Brahmin Orthodoxy, was assimilated into the fold of the Vaishnava hierarchy which is represented today by the Sankaracharya.

In this context, I would like to talk about the making of a baba and his unmaking. How does a baba operate and how can we actually theoretically contextualize this process?

In the paper that I had presented in 2013, I had spoken about a film that was made by Vikram Gandhi called 'Kumare.' I had then suggested that the

babas and gurus of modern India could in fact be created by the mechanisms and processes of advertising and media and that one of the ways of reading this phenomenon is by looking at it as "play." I would now like to take another story of which I am making a film. I haven't yet had the time and gathered the resources to make the film, however, I would like to narrate a story that one of these babas told me. I shall not mention the name of the baba or the place where he practices now, but the story itself is nevertheless true. I shall then try to extend the attempt to theorize that I had attempted last year.

A baba worships in a temple. He wears clothes of a holy man and sports a robust beard which has streaks of grey in it. His eyes are kind of droopy and his look is distant, as if immersed in great mystical thought. He finishes his puja, washes and settles down to talk to me. He asks all else to leave us alone and lights a 'chillam'. He begins to speak. "I come from a 'untouchable' family and yet I am priest today." I was intrigued and ask how this might be possible. He said, "my father was a priest in our village temple and worshipped our caste deity. He died when I was young. The members of my village asked me to take his place. But I knew nothing about being a priest. So I hit upon a plan to escape. I told them that I was ignorant about priesthood, however, if they collected money and gave me I would go to the Himalayas and learn how to be priest and return to take over the priesthood of the temple. This was my plan to get away from the whole thing. Everybody agreed and they collected about Rs.6000.00 and gave me a grand farewell. I was going to study to be a priest. I left the village and went to the city and took a train to Delhi and then a bus to Haridwar where I spent a few months. I observed every baba, sadhu and guru in Haridwar. I made friends with a couple of them. Among them was also a foreigner Sadhu. They were travelling to the himalayas and I joined them. They had very good ganja and a lot of it grew wild all along the way. Many weeks of walking and resting we arrived in a small village off the main road, deep in the mountains. I found that there several others just like me from different parts of the country. I was welcomed and given a place to stay. Most of the time we just sat around a fire and smoked ganja. We walked to the various temples and got food. We had a great

time. Months later, I felt I ought to go home. So I bid farewell to my friends, some new and old, and started back for home. Again I came to Haridwar, bathed in the holy Ganga and started back home. The big city close to my village was a hundred miles away. I stopped there and bought myself some clothes which made me look like a Baba. My beard had already grown and my hair was unkempt. I headed home. When I arrived home I was welcomed with great fanfare and even the upper caste people came to see me. I had changed, they told me.

After a few days, I found that I had to take over the temple. I decided to again go to the people and raise funds to build a bigger, better temple. I raised enough money to build a big temple and decided to install Krishna in it as Krishna is the one God who has no caste. Then I requested the BDO to link our village temple with the main Road and the highway under the prime ministers rural road scheme. Once this was done, Most of the upper caste women from the upper parts of the village started coming to worship in our temple which is the untouchables village and where no upper caste people used to come before.

Wendy O'Flaherty, in writing about the concept of *Maya*, says, "magicians do this; artists do it; gods do it. But according to certain Indian philosophies, everyone of us does it every minute of our lives.....This concept of maya as a kind of artistic power led gradually to its later connotation of magic, illusion, and deceit.....it often means not merely bringing something into existence.....but manipulating the existent forces of nature or invoking the power to create and achieve the marvellous."<sup>3</sup> The other concept *lila* is, however, more ordinary word meaning play, sport, or drama. It is etymologically linked to the latin word *ludus* and English word *ludic*. Richard Schechner writes, "Gods in their lilas make maya, but so do ordinary people, each of whom shares in the identity of individual *atman* with their absolute *bramhan*. Maya and Lila create, contain and project each other; like a snake swallowing its own tail."<sup>4</sup>

Maya-lila is fundamentally a performative-creative act of continuous playing where completely positivist distinctions between "true" and "false", "real" and "unreal" cannot be made. Psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott, while describing the process of playing that begins in infancy says:

That the essential features in the concept of transitional objects and phenomena.....is the paradox, and the acceptance of the paradox: the baby creates the object, but the object was there waiting to be created and to become a cathected object.....we will never challenge the baby to elicit an answer to the question: did you create that or did you find it?<sup>5</sup>

Such a paradox concerns the whole world: did we humans create it or did we find it? And within this paradox, precisely does the baba operate. He "plays" in and with the believer and is both the creator as well as the performer as in the case of the story I narrated above. The priest/guru is both a crook and a social reformer because in the lila that is ensuing, there is no true and no false.

Winnicott's ideas mesh nicely with Van Gennep's, Turner's and Bateson's, in whose "play frame" (1972: 177-93) "transitional phenomena" take place. The most dynamic formulation of what Winnicott is describing is that the baby – and later the child at play and the adult at art (and religion) – recognizes some things and situations as "not me .... Not not me." During workshops—rehearsals, performers play with words, things and actions, some of which are "me" and some "not me". By the end of the process the "dance goes into the body." So Olivier is not Hamlet, but he is also not not Hamlet. The reverse is also true: in the production of the play, Hamlet is not Olivier, but he is also not not Olivier. Within this field of frame of double negativity, choice and virtuality remain open.<sup>6</sup>

In religious terms, *maya-lila* is the presence of the "performer" enacting the "not" of his role. The guru/baba does not exist in the playing field between rehearsal, performers, performance, dramatic text, performance text, spectators and believers. Just as in *Ras Lila*, where little boys (*swarups*) enact/become young Krishna, his beloved *Radha*, and all the *gopis* who dote on Krishna, wanting to dance with him. Just as Krishna summons the women of Braj away from the mundane occupations to come out to the forest and dance with him the mating dance, the dance of love, the *ras*; and as the peacock rotates in order to be visible to every eye, so does Krishna multiply himself to be available with equal intimacy to every girl he summons. The role of *Radha*, *Krishna* and the *gopis* are sanctified and dignified by the *swarup*, which means that the Bramhin boys who adopt them

are thought to take on the very form of the personages they portray once their costumes are complete. The term applies quintessentially to *Radha* and Krishna, and once the two don the crowns appropriate to their roles they are venerated as the divine couple itself.

Richard Schechner has suggested that “these appearances are the same in principle to the Christian Eucharist, but are, in fact much less abstract, so immediate in the flesh-and-blood presence of the *swarups* and the acts of devotion shown to them by the thousands who gather to catch a glimpse, a *darshan*, of the divine.”<sup>7</sup> One must understand that as Gods, the boys don’t stop being little boys, the two realities exist side by side completely porous. The boys/Gods swat at flies, doze, giggle or look longingly for their mothers; but they acquire sudden dignity while dancing or while reciting the lines whispered into their ears by ever attentive priests/directors. This kind of performing-being-playing is not unique to Raslila. It constitutes an essential quality of a number of performance genres in India.

It is my contention, as was in my paper last year about Kumare, that we must see the phenomenon of the guru/baba and the faith imposed in them within the frame of “play.” Our concept of “play” as enumerated in the *Natyashastra*, (2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE – 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE), is Maya. Maya is simply the multiplicity which the world is, creative, slippery and ongoing. In simple terms, just keeping the world going takes a playful effort on the part of Bramha or whichever God you want to have. This playfulness accomplishes the art of creation. The cosmos itself, from the highest heavens to the Raslila, Ramlila and then to the most mundane and commonplace activity on earth is a great playground. This playground is not necessarily always a happy place. Shiva dances the creation into being and then destroys it after every *yuga*. Shiva’s dancing, both creates and destroys maya and is his lila. Asserting that existence is a continuous dance is not merely a soft-headed metaphor in India nor is it entirely inconsistent with modern theories of particle physics or cosmology as astronomers playfully construct them. This “play” is what gives sustenance to the everyday mundane life of the Indian people.

In the eleventh teaching of the *Bhagavat Gita*, Krishna allows Arjuna a theophany:<sup>8</sup>

“I see the gods in your body, O God, and hordes of varied creatures... I see your boundless form everywhere, the countless arms, bellies, mouths, and eyes. Lord of All, I see no end, or middle or beginning

to your totality.... Throngs of gods enter you, some in their terror make gestures of homage.... As moths in the frenzy of destruction fly into a blazing flame, worlds in the frenzy of destruction enter your mouth.... Tell me – who are you in this terrible form?” Krishna replies: “I am time grown old, creating world destruction.”

Theophany is one of Krishna’s favourite kinds of dark play. In the story of the young Krishna eating mud, Yashoda asks him to open his mouth. Then she saw in his mouth the whole universe, with the far corners of the sky, and the wind and the lightening and the orb of the earth with the oceans and the mountains, and the moon and the stars and space itself; and she saw her own village and herself. She shuddered with terror and joy at the same time, and when she asks her son to close his mouth, shutting out from her all knowledge of the absolute, she felt relief. What the babas/gurus do with their hordes of believers is a performance of the interrealities coexisting on different scales simultaneously. This system of non-exclusive, porous, multiple realities of maya-lila rejects the Western systems of rigid, impermeable frames, unambiguous metacommunications and rules inscribing hierarchical arrangements of reality. As Schechner asks, “but if reality and experience are networks of flexible constructions, dreams of dreams, unsettled relationships, transformations and interactions, what then of “ordinary play”—children manipulating their toys, adults playing ball and so on?” Of course, these exist in India as they do anywhere in the world, but they can suddenly, shockingly open to whole worlds of demons, humans, animals and gods as Yashoda found out when she looked into her son Krishna’s mouth.

In my paper, *An Act of Faith: From Spiritual to Ritual*, presented at the 6<sup>th</sup> ARC Roundtable, I argued that there is a difference between the internal and the external and that in India we play with the internal while keeping the external constant. I take this argument a step forward and suggest that if we look at the whole phenomenon of the baba/guru in the context of “play,” the internal and external are no longer mutually exclusive but in fact porous categories which can be moved in and out of without much disturbance to the nature of things. It is entirely acceptable that the celebration and violence are one and the same in the larger play of the cosmos. This may seem a bit far-fetched, however, Schechner tries to explain this by his concept of dark play. He says that dark play maybe conscious playing, but it can also be playing in the dark when some or even all of the players don’t know that they are playing. Dark play occurs when contradictory realities coexist, each seemingly capable of cancelling the other out as in the old Indian tale of “the Bramhin who dreamed he was an untouchable who dreamed

he was a king” but he could not determine who was the dreamer and who was the dreamt of because each of his realities tested out as true.<sup>9</sup> Dark play subverts order, dissolves frames, breaks its own rules, so that playing itself is in danger of being destroyed, as in spying, con games etc. Unlike the inversion of carnivals, ritual clowns and so on (whose agendas are public), dark play’s inversions are not declared or resolved, its end is not integration but disruption, deceit, excess and gratification. Playing occurs on several levels simultaneously, an on-going construction-deconstruction, destroying creating. Like the theophany of Krishna, it is impossible to look at this play for a long time. It is as terrifying as it is exciting, as blinding as it is beautiful. In order to live our daily lives, lives of mundane work and play, humans have created “cultures.” The many genres of play, sport, game, art and religion are part of these cultures within maya-lila. Therefore, it is possible to surmise that maya-lila exists outside of cultures. Therefore any “play”, the play of Kumare, the play of Sai Baba, the play of Asaram babu, are only efforts to contain, enslave, tame, use and colonize playing. We really need to look so seriously at the play genres and look more carefully at “*playing*,” the ongoing, underlying processes of off-balancing, reconfiguring, transforming – the permeating eruptive disruptive energies. I think that if we look at the phenomenon of the guru/baba in India in terms of denied or repressed playing and therefore not sustainable, we will realize that whether Saibaba is a god or not, or whether Kumare is a god or not, or whether Asaram Babu’s devotees believe him to be innocent or not, become meaningless in our context. I am not trying to be cryptic here. All I am suggesting is that there is a dark play happening and all the players are not necessarily aware that it is happening.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The contributor is a known interfaith activist and an author of many books including his recent rendering “Islam in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Dynamics of Change and Future-making”.

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<sup>2</sup> Extracted from Wikipedia on Asaram Babu

<sup>3</sup> O’Flaherty Wendy Doniger (1984), *Dreams, Illusions and Other Realities*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 117-19

<sup>4</sup> Schechner Richard, (1993), *The Future of Ritual*. New York: Routledge, pp.29

<sup>5</sup> Winnicott D.W.,(1971), *Playing and Reality*. London: Tavistock. Pp. 89

<sup>6</sup> Schechner Richard, (1985), *Between Theatre and Anthropology*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, pp. 110.

<sup>7</sup> Schechner Richard, (1993), *The Future of Ritual*. New York: Routledge, pp. 30

<sup>8</sup> Vyasa (1986), *The Bhagavad Gita*. trans. Barbara Stoller Miller, New York: Bantam Books. pp. 99-103.

<sup>9</sup> O’Flaherty Wendy Donniger(1984), *Dreams, Illusions and Other Realities*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp 134-35.

## Impact of New Communication Technology on the Shias of South Asia

*Nadeem Hasnain*

### Introduction

South Asia has the largest Muslim population in the world. It is estimated that around 40 percent of the Muslim population lives in this region mainly in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. In terms of sectarian composition, India and Pakistan have the largest Shia population after Iran and Iraq. It is estimated that 10-15 percent of the Muslims of South Asia are Shia. There were only a few Shia ruling dynasties in India and among them the Nawabs of Oudh in the North and the Qutubshahi dynasty in the South are the most important in terms of power and grandeur. Lucknow, the capital of Oudh, has been the center of Shia culture and politics and hub of Shia intellectual life.

### Changing Religious Communication

The ways of religious communication have been changing through the ages. Making the journey from oral to audio, audio-visual, satellite television and Internet. The medium and the message have both changed. The 'cyber Islamic environment' has produced and coined new terms—'E Jihad,' 'digital sword,' 'online *fatwa*,' to mention a few. Like others, thousands of Islamic groups are also using the television and the Internet. Thus, for the first time in its history, we have 'Islam online' and different religious groups have waged a war in cyberspace. Lack of control or censorship has facilitated the propagation of different versions and interpretations of Islam.

A typical feature of Islamist or Islamic missionaries has been 'Daawaa' (*Daawat*/ invitation) because they think that it is enjoined upon them to invite

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