



SYNCRETIC TRADITIONS of the
INDIAN SUBCONTINENT

VARIED VOICES

IIC WINTER 2025
SPRING 2026
Quarterly

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EDITED BY

JYOTSNA SINGH

K. E. PRIYAMVADA

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Gulam Mohammed Sheikh,
About Waiting and Wandering,
Oil on canvas, 1981,
Courtesy: Neelima Sheikh

The India International Centre is a society promoting understanding and amity between the different communities of the world by undertaking or supporting the study of their past and present cultures, by disseminating or exchanging knowledge thereof and by providing such other facilities as would lead to their universal appreciation

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EDITORIAL

This special thematic issue brings together many of the papers presented at a seminar on ‘The Syncretic Traditions in the Subcontinent Over the Ages: Contemporary Challenges’, organised collaboratively by the IIC and the Dara Shikoh Centre for the Arts, in November 2024. Some more articles were specially commissioned for this collection. As our world faces conflict and turmoil, the ideas conveyed by these essays—of connecting with one another as human beings and building bridges between people and nations—are more relevant than ever.

It is with an awareness of the illustrious legacy of the *IIC Quarterly* that I write this Editorial. With an aim to carry forward the standards of excellence set by past editors of the journal, I would like to acknowledge the guidance of the Chairman of the Editorial Board, Dr Karan Singh and the Members of the Editorial Board. It has been a privilege to work with them, as well as the contributors to this special issue.

While I consider myself pan-Indian, having lived in—and travelled to—many regions of our diverse country, my roots lie in the beautiful state of Kerala. I am reminded of the words of one of the state’s great social reformers, Sree Narayana Guru (1856–1928), who said, ‘Whatever be the religion, it is enough if the man is good’. In his article on the 14th Dalai Lama, in this special issue, Rajiv Mehrotra mentions His Holiness as saying, ‘My religion is very simple...my religion is kindness’. While India’s multiplicity of beliefs offer believers many spiritual paths, the humanity and clarity of these spiritual leaders’ thoughts are all the more relevant today in these times of uncertainty and conflict.

The articles in this collection reflect varied voices from different fields of study and regions of our country. Offering perspectives from academia to art, religion to translation and

architecture to folk songs, the voices convey many possibilities of understanding our complex subcontinent. A tribal perspective, voices that convey ideas from Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Sikhism, Sufism, Bhakti, polytropy or religious fluidity and syncretism, all find a place within these pages.

The photo essay, in black and white, reveals different facets of the vibrant city of Mumbai. It depicts how the metropolis is home to many of the religions of India with images of the immersion of the idols of Ganesh, the *dargah* (shrine) of the Sufi saint Haji Ali, churches, a Jewish wedding ceremony and a Parsi *agiar*y (fire temple). Along with some unusual vignettes of the city, images of two unifying influences—one could even call them religions due to their devoted fan followings—cricket and cinema, also feature in its pages. The photo essay reveals the disparate realities of this city of dreams—a microcosm of our complex and aspirational nation.

The cover visual by the eminent painter Gulammohammed Sheikh, which also featured on the brochure of the seminar on ‘Syncretic Traditions’, reflects the artist’s cultural syncretism.

Finally, I’d like to thank the Guest Editor Jyotsna Singh, who organised the seminar that led to the confluence of voices in this special issue. We hope you enjoy reading it.



K. E. PRIYAMVADA

FOREWORD

The glory of Indian culture and tradition lies in its multifaceted character. Multiple religions, multiple languages, multiple dances, multiple music, multiple architecture and multiple philosophies have been the basis of Indian culture for many centuries.

Despite centuries of repressive rule, first by Muslim invaders and then by British colonialists, we have been able to maintain unity and cultural integrity against all odds.

This is where the concept of syncretism is so important. The theme of this issue is this syncretic tradition of the Indian subcontinent to which there have been several thought-provoking contributions including, rarely, one of my own.

We have seen that when syncretic traditions break down they tend to be replaced by fundamentalism, accompanied by large-scale violence. The whole history of India's partition can be traced back to this process. We must, therefore, be particularly careful not to accept recrudescence of a communal divide.

I come from a Muslim majority state where, for centuries, Hinduism and Islam have flourished simultaneously, resulting in the Kashmir Shaiva philosophy and the Sufi input. There was a shrine where *namaz* was being read in the mosque and simultaneously, in the same building, on another floor, *aarti* to the Goddess was being performed.

Despite all attempts by our unfriendly neighbour to sow the seeds of communal hatred they have not, except for a few tragic events, succeeded in doing so.

It is interesting that we have multireligious neighbours—Nepal (Hindu), Sri Lanka (Buddhist), Pakistan and Bangladesh (Muslim). In all these countries the cultural impact of India has been overwhelming, mainly through the religions themselves. It is, therefore, not only in our internal interest but also in our

regional context that syncretism is so significant. There are shrines belonging to all these religions in our neighbouring countries which are visited by millions of Indians every year.

It is my hope that this special issue of the *IIC Quarterly* will be widely read by members of the IIC as well as by the general public, when—in due course—it will be published as a book, as have so many of our annual special editions.



KARAN SINGH