Afzar Mohammad, senior lecturer in the Department of Asian Studies, is doing research on Sufi doctrines, practice and rituals in South India. He teaches courses on South Asian religions, Indian literature and Telugu studies at the University of Texas, Austin. His dissertation topic, ‘Following the Pir: Shared Devotion in South India’, comprised the focus of his recent book published by Oxford University Press, NY, 2015, entitled ‘The Festival of Pirs: Popular Islam and Shared Devotion in South India’. He will be presenting his work at a conference in India called ‘Practice and Performance at Sufi Shrines’ from August 1 to 4, which is organised by the American Institute of Indian Studies, Aurangabad.

A prolific writer in Telugu (his native language) and in English, his articles have appeared in various international academic and local Telugu journals. He has received various Literary awards including Saraswati Bhushan Samman and National Award from the Government of India for Poetry. Excerpts from an interview:

I began by quoting you, “To me, a person growing up in an unregulated cultural setting – reciting the Qur’an every day, memorising the classical Ramayana and Mahabharata verses, and reading progressive Urdu and Telugu poetry…” It seems that very early on, a Hindustani amalgamation was to mark your personal and professional journey?

Most of my work – both research and teaching – is deeply rooted in my upbringing. At home, I was fortunate to have a great environment that happily blended diverse streams of a pluralist life – blending multiple aspects of religions and ideologies. With her profound Arabic and Urdu linguistic skills, my mother Munavar Begum taught me those languages. Being a proficient writer, my father Kowmudi made me read different types of modern literature. Despite their religious backgrounds, my parents had a deeper knowledge of classical Ramayana and Mahabharata.

The village of Chintakani, where I grew up, was a fantastic site of the amalgamation of Hinduism and Islam. The pir-house and its premises was the venue for public religious events such as the wedding of Lord Rama and the commemoration of the Karbala martyrs, or ‘the Festival of pirs’ (peera pandaga). It is clear that the seed of your research stemmed from ‘reading’ the wall writings in public places in the 1970s and 1980s in India. Tell us about this journey.

In India, we are the products of the post-Emergency (1977) post-Babri Masjid (1990) and post-globalisation (2000) era. I grew up witnessing these three major moments that had an impact on me. In the 1970s, we were reading the wall writings such as ‘Long Live Revolution!’ In the 1990s, our youthful minds were occupied by the painful dispute of the Babri Masjid and Ayodhya that resulted in the polarisation of Hindu and Muslim identities. And then, we entered the new millennium as the offspring of an influential technological revolution and globalisation. This journey from the wall writing to the times of billboards made our public spaces crowded with new ideas and theories, and our private realms became shockingly thin. The public spaces of the post-globalisation are so crucial that we just stopped living our personal lives and increasingly became ‘public-oriented’.

This new environment has also impacted public religious discourses, and devotion has become a commodity of its own.

What drew you to Sufi ritualistic practices and how and why does South Indian Sufism require special attention?

My focus is on popular manifestations of Sufism than talking about textual or high Sufi concepts. Sufism is a mystical dimension of Islam, and there are studies that expose us to various levels of textual Sufism, so I believe it’s a well-covered territory. I’m trying to talk about another layer of Sufism that actually exists and lives dynamically on the ground – a down to earth mode of Sufism. In a way, I want to discuss more about an Earth bound Sufi devotion than a heaven-bound spiritualism.

South Indian Sufism is still an unexplored field. With all its ritualistic patterns and oral textual traditions, South Indian Sufism is a goldmine. Not only classical, even contemporary modes of Sufism in South India deserve more attention. Currently, I’m gathering materials for two different works related to this field.

What was telling about your stay in Gugudu? Your account of ritualistic practices in Muharrum and Islam are akin to some Hindu practices.

Gugudu village is a small place, but the Muharram performances here attract 3,000 pilgrims and devotees each year. Most practices and stories about this village’s Muharram differ from the Muharram in the Shia context of Hyderabad or other urban sites. My book captures that distinctive moment with an emphasis on local interpretations of Islam and Muharram. Yes, a few of these practices are akin to Hindu practices, as this village adapts and appropriates Hindu temple practices too.

Also the mention of non-Muslim practitioners of Muharram is intriguing. Non-Muslim participations are not uncommon. The local name for Muharram, ‘The Festival of pirs’ (peera pandaga), was given by non-Muslim practitioners. This naming includes the ‘pir’ (Sufi master) tradition in this public event, and even the family of the Prophet are considered Sufi masters. Hence, in the popular religious imagination, Muharram is a celebration of a local specific Sufism as people narrate that Prophet Muhammad is the earliest Sufi master and most Sufi concepts revolve around his stories. Most of those stories modify the history of Islam and the Prophet too.

I think this interview would be incomplete without mention of your fascinating research into the metamorphoses of Fatimah and Sita into a single identity during a Muharram celebration in South India.

I’m now transcribing and translating more than 25 stories where women performers talk about female characters such as Fatimah, the wife of the Prophet Muhammad. It would be rather simple if they just confined it to the story of Fatimah, but these local narrators blend the story with the life story of Sita. I just wrote one essay about how these two characters are blended in a local narrative. If people can reconcile Sita and Fatimah, it shows that the barriers we made between Hinduism and Islam are adventitious, and not inherent.