

# An Image Bazaar for the Devotee

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Walk on any street of an Indian town, and you cannot miss the buzz of popular visual art—cinema billboards, commercial ads, religious images, and even political heroes in giant cutouts. But the most vibrant images are the religious posters and calendars depicting deities, saints, and shrines, sold at shops or roadside stalls near temples, mosques, and shrines. While it is easy to find a large variety of posters for a Hindu devotee, it is also not difficult to buy images depicting Muslim themes and folklore. The majority of Muslim posters in India portray the shrines in Mecca and Medina, or Quranic verses in calligraphy, but one can also find portraits of local saints, their tombs, and miracles, represented as vividly as in any Hindu mythological scene.

Many buyers of the Muslim posters happen to be pilgrims visiting large shrines from small towns and villages. They embark on these pilgrimages, covering in one trip many tombs of saints such as Haji Ali at Mumbai or Moinuddin Chishti at Ajmer, especially during the *urs* (death anniversary); naturally, they need to take back souvenirs. And what better gift than a poster that is bright and colourful, has religious as well as decorative value, and helps them relate to the big shrine and its fervour back home. Many posters purchased at major festivals such as Eid or Ramadan, decorate a newly painted house or a shop (as many Hindus do at the festival of Diwali). In the market where these posters are sold, the devotee cannot ignore the many other devotional items such as songbooks, prayer manuals, shiny stickers, 3D images, framed and gold-plated pictures, revolving lampshades, clocks and electronic gizmos, all with the necessary symbols of Mecca and Medina.

Interestingly, the artists, manufacturers, and sellers of these images are not necessarily all Muslim. The publishers are often those entrepreneurs who deal with posters of any religion, irrespective of their own faith. One can easily spot the byline of the printer in a corner of the poster: Brijbasi, Khanna; or of the artist such as Balkrishna, Raja, or Swarup. Whether it is a Hindu artist drawing a Muslim theme, or vice versa, does not seem to bar him from expressing the characteristic pathos and devotion particular to the image. In the entire process of image manufacture, no one, including the commissioning person, artist, printer, or distributor, seems to bother about which religion they cater to, as long as their product augments their client's devotion and their client's spending power. But in the process, they do seem to transplant the icons, symbols, and myths across the borders of faith, making these images so unique to their subject.

## Between iconoclasm and idolatry

It is important to explore how this iconography has not only been legitimized in Islam, but also allowed to thrive in the form of an urban mass culture in South Asia. So far, no one hears a complaint or blasphemy charge from the orthodox Muslim clergy about these graphic

**India's publishing industry nurtures a unique popular art form—the religious posters in which Islamic themes derive liberally from the images and symbols of Hindu iconography and vice versa. There is more to the diversity of these images, however, than simply the tactics of the industry—the very concepts of Islam's monotheism and iconoclasm are often redefined here. Ironically, some of these images are commonly venerated in south Asia's Muslim society and reveal a liberalism that would mock the current cartoon crisis around the Muslim world.**

depictions, some of which could look rather provocative to the purists. Is it because these images circulate only between the lower middle class or rural Muslims rather than amongst elite/urban brethren, who define Islam to be purely monotheistic and iconoclastic? Do the purists overlook these posters simply as part of the larger *bid'ati* culture—to be shunned as un-Islamic? Or, are the market forces too powerful to be affected by the purists?

Among the common users of Muslim devotional posters interviewed, many

seemed unclear and sometimes confused about the status to be given to these images, unlike, say Hindu devotees, who would use the image or idol of a deity solely for worshipping. Since most Muslim users of these images come from poor or lower middle class or rural areas, many are probably not familiar with the concept of iconoclasm in Islam. They broadly know that idolatry is certainly taboo (and that this is what differentiates them from the Hindus), but the images of local saints, shrines, Islamic folklore, and many symbols of shared culture, transmitted orally in their families, are openly accepted and venerated, without drawing a line between Islamic and non-Islamic—that is, until someone with a Wahhabi bend of mind "*shirks*" them from doing so. Some devoted Muslims who shun iconography do so because of a popular hadith (tradition) ascribed to the Prophet that anyone drawing the picture of a living thing would be asked on the Day of Judgment to fuse life into it. Though one may mention here that the Quran while it does taboo idolatry it does not have a single line prohibiting the drawing of living organisms.

In a Hindu devotional image, there is absolutely no hesitation about the use of figurative icons or plurality of gods. In fact, iconography and pantheism are the very founts of an average Hindu devotee's faith. Hence, an artist's liberty to interpret and use the representative icons results in a variety of Hindu images that reflect her/his own religiosity, as well as a collective memory of the myth. Pantheism is also a boon for the industry—the more the gods and deities, the better the economics. However, in the case of Muslim images, the publisher is catering to a client who seems to fall in a grey area. While some artists and producers are extremely sensitive about Islam's iconoclasm, and consider it a taboo to portray any figurative image, others have less inhibition and draw freely portraits of saints and holy men. But on the whole, one does notice a sense of reluctance of iconography in many Muslim posters—although it does not seem to limit the diversity of visuals and concepts in them.

Sometimes an absolute (or partial) iconoclasm forces an artist to look for more creative ways to illustrate a concept or folklore without representing the taboo figures. Since the Muslim images are not meant for worship, unlike the Hindu ones, they also provide limitless possibilities to an artist to choose the subject matter and innovative symbols. One cautious poster, for instance, simply shows a large knot of a rope with Quranic text at the bottom: "Hold on tight to the rope of the God's message...and do not disperse..." A rosary, a rose plant, a setting sun, and some flying birds, probably to enhance its mundane look, surround the knot. Another creative poster shows 6 arches, each labelled with a prophet's name—Adam, Noah, Moses, Muhammad and so on—showing symbols of popular folklore related to each: an arc for Noah, fire for Abraham, a cradle for Jesus, and so on—but not the persona of any prophet. Thus, there always remains an unlimited scope for commissioning new works based on innovative visual interpretations of Islamic themes without using human or living figures.

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## Printers of the divine

The mass-production of devotional and calendar art was probably pioneered in India by a lithographic colour press established in 1894 by Ravi Varma (b. 1848), the self-taught portraitist from the Travancore royal family, whose realist style of painting Hindu gods and goddesses has remained popular till now. Some images dating back to 1920s from the Ravi Varma Press portray Islamic themes such as Mecca, *Duldul* and *Burraq* (mythical steed of the Prophet), in a somewhat company school style.<sup>1</sup> Ravi Varma's enterprise was followed in 1950s by Hemchandra Bhargava (Delhi), and much later by Brijbasi and many others who focused mainly on Muslim images. Even though Mumbai and Chennai remained for decades the most productive centres of religious art, presses in other towns such as Delhi, Sivakasi, Meerut, Calcutta, Nagpur, and Mathura also turned out cheap posters in large numbers.

The publishers often rely on feedback from the streets of what images sell and where. Local competition compels them to commission new work all the time. But, since some of the old masters who painted the classic images of Mecca, Medina, Karbala, or pious Muslim women in the 1960s, are not active any more, a lot of recycling does take place. Some posters today are hurriedly done remakes of the old images, further decorated with tasteless frills to dazzle the innocent buyer. An artist's quest for showing maximum attributes of a saint and his shrine, using minimum effort, sometimes ends up in a pastiche where the arch and dome come from separate faded photos, the saint's person comes from an old painting, the trees and hills are cut out from a Swiss landscape, the lion from a wildlife magazine, and the *diyas* (lamps) from a Hindu poster. Such cost-cutting measures and cheap assembly lines often produce collages that seem devoid of any visual harmony.

However, among the more competitive and successful publishers in India today, the Chennai-based J.B. Khanna & Co., works at a different plane altogether. With a three-generation old business, Rajesh Khanna, the proprietor, has recently acquired some of the latest state of the art equipment from Mitsubishi that allows him to produce devotional posters at an extremely low-price but with much good quality. The computer makes even his recycling and pastiches as seamless as new. His countrywide business is dominating the small printers. The biggest threat to the J.B. Khanna poster business comes from the frequent piracy of their designs and images.<sup>2</sup> Besides pirating full images, many unscrupulous printers plagiarize Khannas' images or image parts by making slight changes. The new technology, however, gives Khanna a comfortable edge over their competitors, as their dazzling but cheap posters flood the market every Diwali and Eid.

## Images for utility

Among the Muslim images that do brisk business are the tantras or talisman printed in attractive style. The traditional practice of treating or solving day-to-day problems of health, business, family, security and so on, through the use of amulets has existed in the Muslim societies since ages. Some of the 99 names or attributes of God are commonly used in talismans: *Ya Razzaq* (O, Sustainer) calligraphed repeatedly in a poster found in many Muslim shops is meant for *makan aur dukan ki khair-o barkat* (the welfare and prosperity of the home and the shop). The small print at the bottom of the poster says, "the enemies of the householder/shopkeeper would bite the dust; the shop would prosper, the profits would soar; the home would be secure from diseases; others' spells would go vain..." For its utility, one cannot help but compare it with Hindu posters of the goddess Lakshmi doling out coins from her hands, with mini astrological charts in the backdrop.



IMAGE BY H.R. RAJA / COURTESY OF YOUSUF SAEED

Most amulets are issued for specific problems and users, and cannot be used in general. Some were originally drawn or hand-written in one colour. But when a publisher decided to print these for mass consumption, the artist copying them added colour, floral patterns, and the necessary icons of Mecca and Medina, crescent and star, and so on. But according to a senior *aalim* who issues talismans, "these artistic additions may affect the potency of an amulet, as they are not a part of prescribed prayer." The common believers buying them do not pay much attention to these, as long as the poster describes in small print the benefits of the talisman. An image that both looks beautiful on the wall and "benefits" their lives is an ideal gift to buy. Hence a compact disc printed with the *safar ki dua* (prayer for a safe journey) hanging from your rearview mirror is the most attractive way to show off your car as well as guard yourself from road accidents in India.

Today, the publishers of traditional Muslim images face a new kind of challenge, in the form of a "sanitization" of religious iconography by the purists. Some new publishers, many of them Muslim, have started producing "educational" charts for the elite and educated class of urban Muslims, or those settled abroad. The producers of such charts completely ignore the earthy folklore of the past, and start from scratch—teaching a young Muslim how to make an ablution (washing before the prayer), the correct postures of a prayer, the family tree of the prophets, the timeline of Islam's history, and various moral commandments, in a visual language and symbolism that does not connect with the syncretic past. Such sanitized images may look pretty on a whitewashed wall of a rich Muslim home, but probably not in a roadside haircutting saloon, which continues to be blessed visually with a saint's miracles.

**A stereotyped image of an Indian Muslim boy wearing a Turkish cap, with the backdrop of Mecca and Medina**

## Notes

1. Erwin Neumayer and Christine Schelberger, *Popular Indian Art, Raja Ravi Varma and the Printed Gods of India* (Oxford University Press: New Delhi, 2003).
2. NK: JB Khanna and Company, in *Indian Printer and Publisher* (NOIDA, June 2003).

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