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THE CREST SELECTION

Namaaz & Namoh Namah

They quote the Quran and deliver lectures on the Vedas. Slokas trip off their tongue as easily as verses from the hadith. Meet the small but growing number of Muslim pundits

Mohammed Wajihuddin | TNN

While Muslims consult him with queries on fatwas, Hindus seek him out to deliver discourses on the Vedas. He is Pandit Mufti Mohammed Sarwar Farooqui of Lucknow's massive Nadwatul Ulema or Nadwa *madrassa*. The bearded pandit-mufti quotes the Quran and *hadith* (Prophet Mohammed's sayings) with as much felicity as he does *shlokas* from the Puranas.

In Mumbai, Pandit Ghulam Dastagir Birajdar juggles many hats — he is general secretary of the Varanasi-based Vishwa Sanskrit Pratishthan, member of the Maharashtra government's Sanskrit Standing Committee, a body that oversees Sanskrit education in the state, and head of Sufi saint Syed Ahmed Badwi's centuries-old *dargah* near his house in Worli.

Farooqui and Birajdar are among the handful of Muslim pandits in the country who have not only mastered Sanskrit but are also actively taking the language forward. For these scholars, two religions and cultures sit comfortably in one soul.

Farooqui, who is a specialist in fatwas and holds a post-graduate degree in Sanskrit from Sampurnand University, credits his love for Sanskrit to a Quranic command that says one should learn as many languages as one can. To him, Islam's concept of monotheism is a reiteration of the Vedic principle *ekam brahma dutia nasti* (God is one and there is none except Him). "Even Prophet Mohammed once said he felt soothing breezes coming from India. This belief led me to explore the exciting world of Hindu scriptures," says 41-year-old Farooqui who has written several books, including commentaries on the Quran in Hindi.

Birajdar too is considered a walking encyclopaedia on Sanskrit. "Muslims are learning Sanskrit as it houses vast knowledge," he says. "For far too long, the Brahmins held Sanskrit captive. They spread the lie that the language would be ruined if non-Brahmins learnt it," says 75-year-old Birajdar, seated in his book-lined house where volumes of the Vedas share shelf space with the Quran and its commentaries.

As a child labourer in Solapur in Maharashtra, Birajdar worked in the fields by day and went to school at night. He fell in love with the language when he was nine, mesmerised by the sound of children chanting Sanskrit lessons. "One day, I asked the Brahmin teacher if I too could study. Though it was a *pathshala* exclusively for Brahmin boys, the teacher relaxed the rules." Years later, the Brahmin teacher would proudly introduce Birajdar as his most accomplished pupil.

Some Hindus even ask Birajdar to solemnise marriages, preside over pujas and help perform last rites. "I decline such offers since they are purely religious. Instead, I have trained many Hindus to perform such rituals," he says.

Recently, Farooqui addressed a massive Hindu gathering at Ghazipur. "Many in the audience thought the organisers had invited the wrong speaker. They were amazed when I spoke on Hinduism," he says, smiling.

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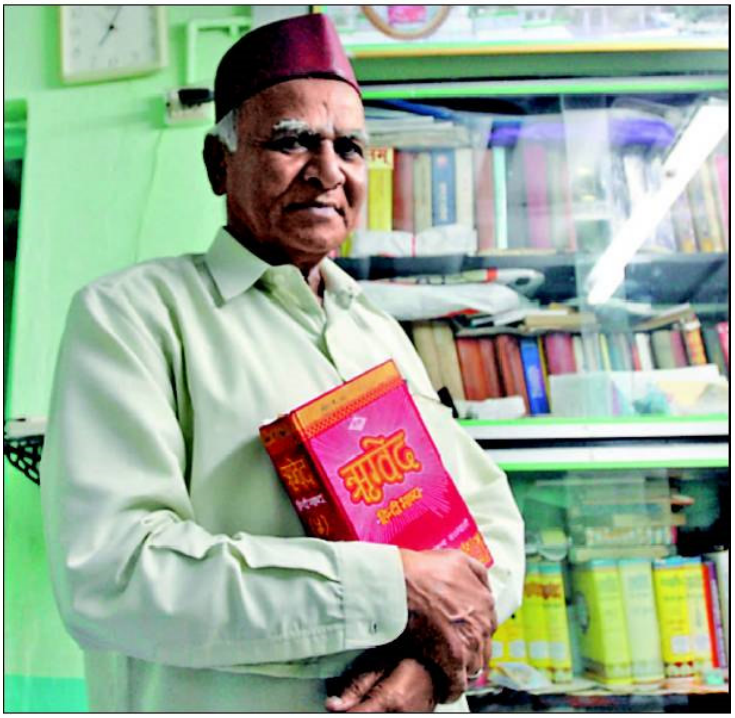

For Pandit Ghulam Dastagir Birajdar (above) and Pandit Mufti Mohammed Sarwar Farooqui (right) Islam and Hinduism are two sides of the same coin

Prashant Nakwe

V Sunil

As a schoolboy in Maharajganj in UP, Ashab Ali avidly read the Vedas, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. He went on to study the Vedas in detail and do a comparative study of Islam and Hinduism

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