

Southern Exposure

Highlighting the work of artists and photographers from the Majority World



'FORGIVE ME, SAYED ALI'

A woman asks for mercy at the shrine of the Sufi saint Hazrat Sayed Ali Mira Datar on the outskirts of Ahmedabad city in Gujarat, India. Many Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims come here to rid their souls of evil spirits. The atmosphere is heavy and intimidating with the crescendo of the mercy pleas by the Hajris, as the 'possessed' are called, some of them

chained to pillars and most others to a staunch belief that Sayed Ali has the cure.

Visitors can stay at the shrine for a nominal fee. What comes free – as revealed by a wary mother – is the lewd behaviour of the Mujjawirs (caretakers of the shrine) towards the young resident girls.

To me, it also seemed like a home to many a homeless, for whom being 'possessed' was not too much of an act.

What is this elixir that Sayed Ali offers which makes pilgrims leave their families, home and hearth behind? Why are their bouts of madness so well timed? How are the Hajris able to threaten me as I take their pictures, if they are in a state of trance? Forgive me Sayed Ali, for I reason too much.

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