

THE FAITHSONG

When the Venetian merchant Marco Polo travelled across what is now the Middle East on his way to India and China in the late 13th century, it was an exciting place, a melting pot of ideas, influences and an amazing space where faiths intermingled. The intrepid traveller with an eye for the unusual, came across Jews, Christians, Muslims, Persians, Turks, Mongols, Buddhists and others. Though the Crusade had already been fought, cultures were still feeling each other out and imbibing each other's influences and assimilating. The degree of sharing and coexistence was indeed remarkable. According to Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela, another traveller of that time, the city of Baghdad, the capital of the Muslim Abbasid Caliphate, had 28 synagogues. Jews in Azerbaijan lived in complete harmony with Turks and others. In his *Travels*, Polo wrote about Nestorian Christians, Muslims and 'idolaters' living peacefully together.

This liberal cosmopolitanism was clearly fuelled by economic prosperity of the region which, in its turn was the outcome of global trade along the historic Silk Route. In a place resembling today's Tabriz in Iran, Polo saw silk being interwoven with gold. He captured the upbeat mood in the bazaar humming with the activity of merchants from India, Baghdad, Mosul, Hormuz and Europe as well. With trade came ideas and religious beliefs – Nestorian, Armenian, Jacobite and Georgian Christianity, Persian Zoroastrianism, Islam and Buddhism. "Marco Polo's *Travels*," writes American researcher Jason Freewalt during the course of a brilliant paper, "offer numerous additional examples of cultural diffusion throughout the Middle East." He ascribes this cultural interaction, and more specifically, the intermingling of religious ideas, to the presence of merchants from China, Persia, Afghanistan, India, and even the West. Technology and innovations – gunpowder, papermaking, block printing, compass – travelled from China through the Middle East to Europe. "The timing of this flow of products, inventions, and information points to the likelihood that the exchange between Europe, the Middle East and China that occurred during Marco Polo's time contributed to what would later become the European Renaissance," Freewalt perceptibly observes.

That flourishing region is now at war with itself, once prosperous cities being ravaged either by despotic regimes in power or the rebel armies. Despite enormous oil reserves under its earth, the Middle East is now the world's most dangerous territory, an obvious source of instability and terror. At least three countries – Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon – are in serious proximity to turning into anarchical wilderness. But this was not that irrevocably dark even 20 years ago, even after the debilitating Iran-Iraq War. In 1986, a history student from Cambridge, along with his Oxford girlfriend, decided to retrace Polo's footsteps through the Middle East. And what he discovered during the arduous trek, further toughened by a tight budget, was very reassuring – much of the composite culture, interface between the faiths recorded by Polo was still intact. Despite the turmoil in the region, the Khomeini Revolution in Iran, 10 years of devastating conflict between Shi'ite Iran and Saddam Hussein's progressive, almost left-leaning Iraq, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the neighbourhood, the liberal social mosaic of the region was largely extant.

The crusaders from Europe who had descended on Turkey to resist Islam by the fag end of the 11th century, borrowed from the Turks' ideas of church and castle architecture. William Dalrymple learnt about the absorbing process of cultural crossovers between the local Armenians and the campaigning crusaders. Wondering about the "remarkable and ingenious castles (by the Europeans) within a few years of arriving in Palestine", he surmised that the crusaders had learnt the art from the Turks. Such innovations, Dalrymple believed, were transferred to Europe to "revolutionize" castle building there. Written with burlesque candour, *In Xanadu* actually reiterates the accommodation that cultures have always offered each other. In Tabriz he indeed discovered the handloom in the backyard of a village

home for weaving silk. *Abricham* – Farsi for silk – was the key to discovery of the silk farm in the mud-brick hut.

The finest embodiment of this interlacing of faiths was none other than Genghis Khan himself, the Mongol superstar. Deeply interested in religions, born a Nestorian Christian, he became a Shamanist, then a Buddhist and a Shi'ite Muslim before embracing the Sunni sect of Islam. Despite the Pope's hope that the mighty Mongols destroy Islam, despite the ghastly wars between the Christian crusaders and the emerging Muslims, the Middle East – unlike the burnt-out case it seems to be now, at the time of Marco Polo's travels, was a fertile ground for cultural exchange, for one religion cradling another on varying terms. In the absence of later structures and missionary armies, religious spaces, despite the bloody battles and periodic slaughtering, were mutually interchangeable, nestling each other.

In Srinagar to attend a conference, one morning in early autumn years ago, I along with a few other participants, visited the famed Hazratbal Shrine. The soft white structure, resplendent under a bright, blue sky, was quietly welcoming. After taking off our shoes we did ablutions and covered our heads before walking in. The cool serenity of the insides affected all of us. We sat down, hands joined, eyes closed, heads mildly bowed. I, for one, had no prayer to say, but experienced a bliss. It never bothered me that as an idolater who had stood in obeisance before many gods and goddesses, I could be a misfit on the cool floor of Hazratbal. That this was not *my* place. I looked at the others, and saw the faces beaming. Across seven centuries, we, a handful of journalists from different parts of India, here in Srinagar for a conference, experienced something not very different from what the author of *Travels* had seen in Baghdad and Tabriz – faith, if not politicised and indoctrinated, offers accommodation to many without inhibition. And Marco Polo too had come to Kashmir.

Faith, unspoiled by outside interventions, has an openness that its seekers find reassuring. From the other side of Lakshman Jhula roared a high-power bike down the hanging bridge. The bystanders gawked in surprise at the rider – a tall, hefty Westerner dressed like Shiva, ash-smearing, matted hair, the trident... spot-on to the minutest detail. He laughed enjoying the attention.

On the other side of the river it's a different world – busy cyber cafes, little makeshift restaurants offering continental cuisine and then a large Shah Rukh Khan poster on the *paan* shop wall. A bulky white man tried to dance to the beats of the band of a wedding procession. The women in the group laughed. The man too. After the party moved away, I talked to him. A Dutchman, he comes to Rishikesh in late winter every year. "God lives here," he explained why.

I bargained hard with the driver of a ramshackle Hindustan Trekker and climbed into it for a trip further down – into the forbidding wilderness. Past the ashrams and little colonies, the forest approached. The rusty Trekker forded a stream, negotiated the boulders and climbed up an elevation to the dilapidated arches of a township in ruins – Chaurasiya Kothiya, the name by which locals called Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's fabled spiritual retreat. This is where the Beatles would come, and many other celebrities from across the Atlantic. Now monkeys screeched amid clear signs of wild elephants and other nocturnal visitations. Facing the river and the misty Himalayan ranges beyond, are the Japanese-style caves, exactly 84, giving the place its name. Walking past them, I stood on the riverbank. The mysterious mountain peaks seemed to be talking to me about our past. *Is this my faith? Does it explain me as part of a culture shaped by the river below?*

Coming back from the Maharishi's haunted commune, I wondered if the moments on the riverside looking at the Himalayan peaks shrouded in gossamer clouds were any different from the Hazratbal experience.

“Look, look, here it is!” Mandal, my guide, gushed. Pushing the thick branches of the sundri trees in the mangrove forests of the Sundarbans, I moved forward. He pointed to a small brick structure, smaller than a roadside kiosk. “This is what you wanted to see,” he said pointing to the deities inside – a Hindu goddess next to a bearded Muslim Pir. “Ban Bibi and Ghazi Baba – before going into the jungles villagers offer puja to both of them, both Hindus and Muslims pray here.” Knowledgeable about the ways of tiger country, Mandal explained how the fear of the predators brought two religions together.

Talking of synthesis between two other religions, Dalrymple points out that “there is no precedent for gold, frankincense and myrrh being grouped together in the Old Testament. The gifts are, however, often recorded together as Persian temple offerings.” Cultures and religions, interchangeable on a sublime plane, often swap conventions and rituals. Flourishing of a culture and its robust renewal which historians at certain points identify as renaissance, happens only through a process of osmosis or coalescing, by a constant give-and-take. Rejection of the *other* leads to isolation, to lumpenisation of a culture or religion or both. Think of ISIS, Donald Trump and closer home – the perpetrators of intolerance.

To the unfamiliar and uninitiated, Vrindavan is a rundown small town, a relic of the past which does not fit into the modern times. But here, if you know the ways, the dust of the street pulls the faithful down, does not let them go. The rickshaw-wallah says “Radhe Radhe” asking someone to give way. Behind the old crumbling town, quietly flows the Yamuna, lean, almost parched up. Small black turtles bob up and down in the water. On the other bank farmers drive their oxcarts home, laden with vegetables from the field. The ghat, built by a *maharani* of a princely state of Rajasthan almost a century ago, still waits for the bathers though there are hardly any, certainly not a princess with a retinue of female attendants. Fluttering the quiet and the sense of desolation come the cymbal notes and beats of dholaks and in a somewhat tuneless voice “Krishna Krishna...” The born-again Krishna disciples from the West, are on a round of Braj, their spiritual promised land. To turn this faith song into a hate chant, I realize, is just not possible.

Bhaskar Roy