

# ELIJAH'S VILLAGE: BETWEEN PEACE AND PERSECUTION

K. Kunhikrishnan

**M**embers of my family would attend prayers in this synagogue,' reminisces Josephai Abraham pointing to the Paradesi synagogue. Built in 1568, it is the oldest synagogue still in use anywhere in the Commonwealth. One of the five remaining Jews in the fabled Jew Town of Mattancherry in Cochin, Abraham heads the Association of Kerala Jews. His group is in the midst of a losing battle to preserve the rich heritage of the community. They have taken an initiative to renovate the Thekkumbhagom synagogue on Jew Street in Ernakulam. At the latest count, there are just 26 Cochin Jews still remaining in Kerala. Around 50 members of the Kerala Jewish community are expected to come from Israel for the Passover holiday in April. 'We have a Rabbi who will conduct the prayers,' Abraham said. The once dynamic Jew Town community now has been reduced to just five octogenarians – four women plus Abraham – all in the autumn of their life.

The Jews in India, estimated around 20,000 in the 1940s, made an impact with their excellence in different professions. Lt. Gen Jacob, the 'hero' of the 1971 Bangladesh War, was one of the most prominent members of India's Jewish community. Unknown to many, some of the early Bollywood stars – Sulochana (Ruby Myers), Pramila (Esther Victoria Abraham) and Nadira (Florence Ezekiel) – were all members of the Jewish community. Looking at the crumbling synagogues and desolation around Cochin's Jew Town, it's now difficult to conjure up the time when members of the thriving community were making a mark in highly challenging professions. And now there are only three people who know how to read the Torah or the Jewish Scripture. Kadavumbagam synagogue caretaker Elias Josephai admits that they do not have a trained priest to conduct ceremonies anymore. The usual air of dejection turns into an upbeat, feel-good mood whenever news reaches here of an expat group from Israel *coming home* on a nostalgic trip. 'Elderly men lead the prayers,' Josephai says.

Eminent Malayalam writer Sethu's novel, *Elijah: The Last Jew in the Village*, offers a clue to the reverse *exodus* of Jews from Kerala to Israel. One day in the late 1940s, the Jews in the village, indistinguishable from the others in terms of physical features and language, took out a procession holding aloft the flag of an unknown country. When the other villagers raised an eyebrow, the Jews said that somewhere very far away their own country had come into being. Asked if the land where their forefathers had been born was not their own, the Jews said that Israel was their 'Promised Land'. With the steady departure of Jews for the new nation that had agreed to accommodate them, the life of the community in Kerala lost its lustre and verve. Those who stayed back were either too old or too involved in Indian life. Israel had issued an appeal to Jews around the world to move back to the country they had been expelled from in 66-136 CE after the Roman conquest of the ancient land.

## FOLKSY TALES FROM VRINDAVAN

Tirna Chatterjee

Vrindavan, at a cursory glance, is no longer about the ‘dust of Braj’, rickshaw-wallahs chanting ‘Radhey Radhey’ instead of pressing the bell or mendicants in ochre lazing around. The new temples coming up in this faith town are grandiose, enormous on scale, swank with an air of corporate efficiency around them. They are being built with big money as kind of advertisement for someone. Clinical in tidiness, perfect to the minutest detail, scanned and metal-detected entries, invisible CCTV cameras, immaculate marble flooring, a cool hush of hygiene, digitalized music system – these are temples from the future. You may even take them as a sample of IT-era spirituality.

But seen closely, Vrindavan is also the birthplace of Krishna, the enigmatic, capricious god of *lila*, who frolicked around the woods ravishing a gaggle of village girls. His favourite among them was Radha, born in Barsana a little distance away. Vrindavan, a mythical town of countless temples, is an evocation of that divine play enacted in the pastoral sublimity of the wooded riverbanks. This area has now been declared a *holy place* where pilgrims come from all over the world. It’s the allure of the myths, a sense of the lived past lingering on – all this creates the mystique of Vrindavan. This dusty town with its byzantine narrow lanes and bylanes, the decay and disrepair all around, is a throwback to the Krishna legends.

There are, they say, five thousand temples in Vrindavan. Though no one has actually counted them, they are all around – ruined, dilapidated, decaying and also the new-fangled five-star ones. A tradition had prevailed among the royals and zamindars in different parts of India to raise a temple in Vrindavan. With the end of the feudal system patronage stopped leading to the dilapidation of the once exquisite temples. Still some of the ancient ones – stone, redbrick or terracotta – have survived the ravages of time. They cast a charm on odd visitors like me. The unkempt, chipped look of a temple actually lends it a tone of timelessness. Strangely, the big, lavish temples coexist with the decaying, mildewed ones without any conflict. Moving around the narrow lanes and shadowy corners of the ancient town you somehow know the sanitized, luxury abodes of God represent the religious mainstream while the dilapidated ones stand for the little tradition.

I arrive at Vrindavan early one morning in late September. Everything I learnt about the place on previous visits comes rushing back. Immersed in his heavenly tunes somewhere deep in the forests, Swami Haridas, legend has it, saw an image emerge from the ground. The 16<sup>th</sup> century musician, his life covered in haze, preferred as his seat the Nidhivan, the theatre of Krishna’s amorous games with Radha. He sang in praise of the divine lover and his many manifestations.

## FOOTPRINTS OF DISSENTERS AND ICONOCLASTS

Dilip Bobb

**A** Baptist missionary along with some other members of his family boarded an English ship from London in April 1793 without valid visas to travel to India. His plans were to carry out missionary activity in Calcutta. He had been denied a visa since the East India Company bosses were apprehensive of the Indian response to any evangelical activity at that point in time. Realizing the consequences of shipping such controversial cargo, the boat's captain forced them to disembark at the Isle of Wight some 130 km from London. Determined to make the trip, the missionary thought of making it to India by land – a hazardous journey over several months. By sheer luck a Danish ship sailing to India agreed to take them on board and thus added an interesting chapter to the history of the Raj. For the man who reached Calcutta by the Danish ship was none other than William Carey, the Baptist Mission preacher who is now remembered more for his contribution to the spread of education among Indians in their own languages rather than his missionary work. But Carey's travails were not yet over when he landed in Calcutta. The non-Baptist Christian missionaries in that city forced him to leave the British Indian territory making him take shelter in the Danish settlement of Frederiksnagar or Serampore some 30 km upstream by the river.

When one now looks at the architecturally alluring, solemn churches and cathedrals around India – many of them more than a century old – an impression gains ground that Christianity in this country has a well-knit, monolithic structure. But the reality is actually very different. The Christian faith in India, unlike the notion in some quarters, is as divided and multi-streamed and susceptible to dissent as any other religious movement. Also, it is no replication from another part of the world but very much a crop sown and harvested in India. Ever since Thomas the Apostle first preached Christianity in the Malabar Coast in 52<sup>nd</sup> AD, the faith has coursed through many channels which often run at cross purposes.

Though the Hindutva propaganda machinery paints Indian Christianity with a thick brush as unrelieved uniformity, the religion has evolved with remarkable diversity. The Christian traditions and schools are mindboggling in their divergence: the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church, Chaldean Syrian Church, the Indian Orthodox Church, Malankara Jacobite Orthodox Syrian Church, Malabar Independent Syrian Church, Saint Thomas Anglican Church, and among the Protestant churches we come across such non-conformist reformed ones as Pentecostal, Baptists, Evangelical, Methodist, Presbyterian, Mennonites and Lutherans. Actually, there are many more. Facing the hostility from some extreme fringe Hindutva groups, the nuances and breathtaking diversity often get blurred. What tends to be overlooked is each stream's history of dissent.

# INTERTWINED FAITHS: FROM MAULA ALI TO BONBIBI

Saadia Azim

**O**n the day of Rakhi Purnima this year my cousin graciously invited me to attend the Satyanarayan Puja they were hosting. He and his beautiful young wife had done up their new home tastefully and made rather extravagant arrangements for the ritual with the full moon serving as a perfect setting. This ceremony, particularly popular in eastern India, is performed in every home as a form of thanksgiving when someone meets with success in their profession or move into a new home. Widely popular, the appeal of Satyanarayan Puja can be explained in terms of simplicity of norms and its acceptability among people across the social strata. The rituals performed around a full moon are intended to dispel the evil shadows or ward off bad omens.

‘She has planned all this, it’s *their* way of making a new beginning,’ my cousin said appreciatively about his wife, an upper-caste Hindu from Jharkhand. His stress on ‘their’ is a pointer to her otherness, being from another culture. We are a family of mixed-faith people and though many among us are genuinely concerned about a threat to the pure bloodline, we have somehow agreed to put up with our eclecticism. Despite reservations in some quarters people like us, we know, set an example of understanding and accommodation. We are the ultimate proof of the famed Indian pluralism.

As usual I had little role to play on an occasion like this. I quietly took the corner seat so as not to be a roadblock in the middle and unknowingly cross the lines hitting the purity cycle. I remembered a proud account of a ‘mix-up’ that was indeed very inspiring:

I am a Muslim by birth but as an army wife I have proudly put tilak on my forehead whenever the occasion demanded. I have actively participated in all kinds of pujas in the regiments like Ganesh Chaturthi, Karwa Chauth and many more. My husband and me have led pujas like Satyanarayan Puja, Holika Dahan Puja, Sarawasti Puja, Maha Mrityunjay Jap when he was the Commanding Officer. All this along with our daily namaz.

That’s Ambreen Zaidi writing a blog in the *Times of India* provocatively headlined: *I am an Indian Muslim but who are you?* Her bait to the hate brigade. Well, that’s a different story.

The stage was set: the evening unfolding under the full moon had been booked weeks before. A Brahmin priest in his saffron vest and dhoti sat self-importantly in the midst of a large gathering of women all turned out in their ethnic best. Most of them had used their leisure time in the morning for a bit of glamour in the neighbourhood beauty parlours. After all there have not been many social occasions of late when they could put on the dresses that had collected in wardrobes. The happiness over someone’s new home overflowing with foamy moonlight on the evening of Rakhi Purnima – the pert, pampered women have all the more reason to celebrate. After the puja, my teenage daughter planned to tie a Rakhi on her younger cousin.

# THE POLITICS OF THE PHALLUS

Nirmalya Banerjee

I was shocked seeing the replica of an oversize phallus prominently displayed at the entrance to the Folk Heritage Museum in Thimphu. My wife and son also looking at it, I was, in fact, a little scandalized. Anchored to the parameters of middle-class culture in which I had been raised, it simply defied my comprehension as to why a pacifist religious tradition – Bhutan is predominantly Buddhist – should venerate the male sex organ like a veritable deity. The bizarre object dominating my field of vision lacked the subtlety of a Shivalinga; it's bare, brazen and bristling, too.

Curious, I talked around and made inquiries in knowledgeable circles to learn that the phallic symbol has enormous significance in the Tantric school of Buddhism. The decorative penis at the museum, I realized, was anointed with many layers of meaning and consecrated to the stature of a deity. In the Himalayan kingdom where forces of nature prevail over interventions of modernity, the phallus stresses both renewal and regeneration. In a society which resists sweeping industrialisation, the male sex organ as an emblem of fertility assumes enormous importance. Significantly, the Tantric school of Buddhism that celebrates the penis holds sway over the Himalayan region. The mainstream of Buddhism hinges on the concept of renunciation and propagates an ascetic way of life shunning materialism. It would leave no space for something as starkly sensuous as the phallic cult.

The Tantric school on the contrary is part of a lesser tradition of the religion and clearly an outcome of its interaction with the local folk culture. Today it represents a very reassuring diversity in Buddhism suggesting it is not a unidimensional philosophy. It, therefore, had no hesitation in accommodating the seemingly bizarre idea of idolizing the penis.

Recommended by the experts as the most visible manifestation of the phallic concept, I reached Chimi Lhakhang, a temple in Punakha, Bhutan's old capital, where the male sex organ is – outrageously enough – an object of veneration. 'Lhakhang' by the way is a temple devoted to Tantric Buddhism. Out of the way and not showcased like the high-profile, picture-perfect monasteries of the kingdom, the temple evokes a world far removed from the benign orbit of Buddhism.

The approach to the temple is rugged, unlike the smooth motorway leading you to the other famed landmarks on the kingdom's tourism map. There is an air of neglect all around, maybe not neglect but idiosyncrasy that has been associated with the original myth of the place. Though tourists from all over the world come to this temple, the authorities seem to have made no effort to spruce up the place, make it more attractive to visitors. Its bare, austere look, however, seems to be in keeping with the defiance and iconoclasm of the man who built this bizarre cult within the Buddhist fold. Drukpa Kunley, the 'mad yogi' who adopted unorthodox and even ungodly methods, chose this rocky elevation as his seat.

# THE FAITH CONVERSATION

Nikhita Nair

**A**lmost screened off by their obscurity, the two shrines in less than a kilometre of each other, promote the same religious catholicity though from the standpoints of two different religions. Driving down Delhi's busy Mathura Road or the adjacent Bhairon Marg, you will most probably miss the unobtrusive spots – one practically hidden inside the tall walls of Pragati Maidan and the other overshadowed by the lofty ramparts of the Old Fort. Dargah Matka-Pir next to a petrol station may appear bare and nondescript but presides over a great Sufi tradition of liberal values. A little distance away, across the road from the dargah, is the unassuming temple of Baba Bhaironath where devotees offer premium-brand liquor as oblation in the morning.

Ignoring the uninterrupted noise and dust flying over from the site of frenetic construction activity inside Pragati Maidan, I walk up to the vantage point from where the dargah, the red-sandstone towers of the Old Fort and Bhairon Mandir appear to be three different points of a parabola. Built by Humayun, the fort was at the centre of the sixth city of Delhi. Called Dinpanah, this was the emperor's first initiative to build a city – the sixth of a total of seven that got merged into what is now known as Delhi. In the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century the new city flourished breathing a new air of liberalism. Inside the fort was the emperor's library where he spent long hours. One evening he fell down its stairs and never recovered. That was what life in the sixth city was all about – books, libraries, intellectual pursuit.

To me it seems quite appropriate that a temple dedicated to Bhairava has come up right below the fort's ramparts. Bhairava is a fierce manifestation of Shiva, the god in a destructive rage. The deity, too, seems to have fit into the liberal environ – not one high in the hierarchy of Hindu divinity but an unusual one. And this side of the road is a 13<sup>th</sup>-century Sufi dargah with its folksy history and simple recommendations for reaching out to God. In the shadow of what is now known as Purana Qila, this is an island of tolerant, humanistic faith without a hint of rigidity or intolerance that has become the hallmark of our times. A wise ruler's new city serves as the backdrop to the liberal enclave of faith.

On a sultry September afternoon – the late monsoon rains still lingering – the faithful make a beeline for the shrine of Baba Matke Shah for blessings, to get their wish fulfilled. On their trail, I move on, curious about the jostling at the shop selling clay pots, wish-threads, chadors, incense – offerings at the shrine. I tried to strike up a conversation with the lean boy who runs the shop. Ebullient and smiling, his proximity to the dargah stressed by the skull cap around his head, Mohammad Imran answers my questions in between doing brisk business. At his shop by six in the morning and winding up business late in the evening – this has been his life for the past four years.

## SHARING SACRED SPACES

Hafeezur Rahman

**I**t's Diwali in winter. The cold wave across the northern plains has brought the chill and shiver to every village and small town lengthening the night. Unending lines of people holding little clay lamps at a Sufi shrine on a December night offer an incredible spectacle. Among the believers are Hindus, Christians, South Asians, Middle-Easterners and Westerners. Sometimes the queues linger for hours with the faithful holding lighted lamps patiently wait for their turn. This is Jashn-e-Cheraghan, the festival of lights according to the Islamic calendar, at Khanqah-e-Niazia in Bareilly. The timing of the event advances by about 10 days every year since Hijri or the Islamic calendar year is shorter than the Gregorian calendar by 11 days.

A lively, liberal Sufi tradition has flourished over the centuries at Bareilly, a major centre of Islamic learning. This is indeed interesting – romanticized by Bollywood as the city of *jhumka* (earrings) and *surma* (kohl), Bareilly has been the backdrop to a sublime Sufi tradition which in turn has proved a catalyst for a thriving culture of music and poetry. Khanqah-e-Niazia, the shrine hallowed by the memory of the Sufi saint Shah Niyaz Ahmad, breathes liberal values. Not surprisingly, those who line up on the evening of Jashan-e-Cheraghan with a clay lamp in hand and a prayer inside them, are a diverse lot – Hindus, Muslims, Jains, Christians and Sikhs. All of them have been swayed by the belief that if you walk a few steps with the lamp in the Khanqah, your prayer will be answered within a year.

One is intrigued by the overwhelming response to the call of faith at the shrine. Why does this Muslim shrine pull so many believers from across the religious lines? For an answer to the question one has to trace the unique pluralism and the assimilation process inherent in the Sufi movement. The great Sufis of the past adopted an approach that was all encompassing. Shah Niyaz, like Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya, Amīr Khusrau and Sarmad Shaheed before him, was remarkably flexible in adjusting to the local culture to make their appeal more widespread. They represented what has been known as the Ganga-Jamuni Tehzeeb or the cultural syncretism encompassing many strands of Hinduism and Islam that flourished in the doab of the Ganga and Yamuna or the central plains of northern India. They deviated from the rigidly pure Islamic or Arabic traditions to take in more and more local elements for a wider appeal. Their message reflected the social values and cultural sensibilities of the people they preached to. Khusrau, Rumi and Shah Niyaz focused on the local language, customs and tradition to gain popularity in this region. Since the Sufis advocated a simpler, less complicated path to God, they had no problem in shedding the baggage of old rituals and adjusting to their environment. They were particularly sensitive to the taste and social mores of Hindus. Khwājā Ghareeb Nawaz, Khwaja Nizamuddin Auliya, Sarmad Shaheed and many others among them turned vegetarian out of respect for Hindus for whom meat-eating was prohibited.

# THE GEOPOLITICS OF RELIGIOUS CONTROL

William Dalrymple

**H**istory writing until some years ago interested only the academically inclined. Books about this subject were bought and read by only the teachers and students pursuing the discipline and those preparing for a competitive examination. And most of those who wrote such books – intellectually endowed to probe intriguing issues buried behind the haze and dust of the past – however, usually ignored the need for making the subject livelier and more interesting to an average reader. The whole culture of historiography and its appreciation remained confined within a small circle. The circle of the initiated and informed. Of course there were glowing exceptions. Romila Thapar's *Ancient India* has been read and talked about by generations of students, writers and activists. On the whole, however, history had been on the margins of the book world, fiction's poor cousin.

All that changed in 2002 when a Scot educated at Trinity College, Cambridge, who had worked for Mother Teresa's Mission for the homeless in Delhi, came out with the enchanting account of a Muslim noblewoman's love and her English husband's betrayal, enigmatically titled *White Mughals*. Written in the genre of narrative history, the book sold millions of copies throughout the world and almost overnight its title became part of ordinary conversations, loosely used in newspaper copy. In breadth and span it reads like a great 19<sup>th</sup>-century novel. A milestone in history writing, *White Mughals*, considered one of the 10 best books on the Raj, brought a new focus on India and its past internationally. Then came *The Last Mughal*, a meticulously researched biography of Bahadur Shah Zafar, effectively the last Mughal ruler. And now the gruesome story of a petty London trading company's avarice and depredation, backed by their support staff of Indian bankers and money-lenders – *The Anarchy* is truly a clinical deconstruction of British colonialism in the subcontinent. It unfolds the East India Company's superstructure of insensate exploitation of a prosperous land. One can finish the book full of gossips and anecdotes – all factual and accurately sourced – faster than an Ian McEwan novel.

In the middle of a hectic promotional campaign, Dalrymple spoke to **Nikhita Nair** of *The Equator Line* from Toronto where he was participating in a book event. Excerpts:

**In your writing you have always railed against religious orthodoxy and conservatism. In one of your earlier books you blamed the Christian missionaries for obstructing the process of healthy social interaction between the British officials and locals. Somewhere else you noted with appreciation the liberal culture that had prevailed inside the Red Fort during the reign of Bahadur Shah Zafar. Hindu festivals were celebrated within the palace. Now a liberal outlook is the essence of religious diversity. A religion finds many expressions only in a liberal social environment, an intolerant or bigoted regime on the contrary attempts to wipe out liberal expressions of faith. During the long spell of Zia-ul-Haq's dictatorship in Pakistan many Sufi seats were attacked by the fundamentalists. In Bangladesh, when the religious right was in power, the Bauls were persecuted. And now in India, Mahatma**



**Gandhi is coming increasingly under attack from the extreme fringe of the Hindutva forces. Do you see a common thread linking all such strands of intolerance?**

That's correct, a liberal outlook is the essence of religious diversity. That's not specific to regimes. There is a lot of popular activity which threatens the diversity, too. Specifically, in India the centralizing forces within Hinduism have been attacking what they see as fringe superstition such as Tantra, animal sacrifice and heterodox expressions of religious faith.

Such atrocities are not necessarily done by the regimes of the right. For example, attacks were made on Tantric practices in West Bengal under the communist regime. So I think there is a universal wish in most religions and in most parts of the world when literacy becomes widespread, to wipe out old-fashioned practices. Practices which are seen as old-fashioned, superstitions come under threat. Now we have that in Europe in Reformation. And you have many urban dwellers, well-educated people who tried to wipe out what they regarded as local superstitious practices such as counter-faith and religious festivals that did not conform to their taste and understanding of religion. This happened in Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. And you see a similar thing beginning in India since the 19<sup>th</sup> century Hindu Reform Movement when Raja Ram Mohan Roy campaigned against superstitions and so on. And, so I think you should segregate all this from politics.

I think it finds its expression in politics and what you said is quite correct. But it happens more widely and often outside the political context. What happens is the newly literate, newly urbanized middle classes look down on what they see as simple village, illiterate superstition and this has happened in Hinduism, with Tantra and animal sacrifice and in little vehicles of Hinduism, the forms I write about in *Nine Lives*, such as Pabuji ki Phad, a scroll painting of folk deities in Rajasthan, or Tantra in Bengal and to some extent Theyyam in Kerala.

You see in Islam very strong Wahhabi attacks on Sufi shrines in Afghanistan, Pakistan and some parts of India, especially Delhi, and Bangladesh. And I think it's a reaction of an urbanized middle class to what they see as village superstition. And there is a desire in all these places to go to the text. So in medieval Europe during Reformation people went to the Bible, the Wahhabis went to the Qur'an and in India the Hindu revivalists turned to the Gita. According to Romila Thapar, Brahminical Hinduism substituted the great, centralized version of Hinduism based on stories of the Ramayana, and particularly Ram and Krishna, took over from more diverse village, regional and local traditions. And historically, this has often been accomplished by force, iconoclasm, by destruction of images and shrines.

## MEDIEVAL WARRIORS ON HORSEBACK

Ajay Bhardwaj

**W**hen they are on the road, you cannot miss them. There is something compelling about their way – a platoon of 40 or 50 colourfully attired men, like soldiers of a medieval army galloping on their sturdy horses across rural Punjab. Indeed they fondly call themselves *Guru ki ladli fauj* (favoured army of the Guru). They move in groups, the outriders beating *nagadas* (kettledrums) on horseback to tell the people around that they are on the way. In the slow, hackneyed country life, the movement of the Nihangs is quite a spectacle. Hidden within the pageant are layers of history, culture and societal issues.

With their colourful attires and ways with weapons – from swords, shields to carbines – the Nihangs constitute the most distinctive group among Sikhs. While much of Sikh social and political life revolves around the big gurdwaras at the urban centres this martial sect with their strange way of life has clung to the *deras* and *taksals* deep in the hinterland. It is a logistical necessity, too, since in a city it's almost impossible to get accommodation for a group of 50 people or more, plus space to stable their horses. A boy from a poor family in a remote village who joins a *dera*, learns on the guru's watch everything – cooking, washing, crushing cannabis, riding, horse tending, using heavy and light guns. Their heavy-edged iron bracelets and shiny steel quoits hanging from their lofty conical turbans inspire awe in onlookers and raise curiosity all around.

The sect's chief, Nihang Baba Balbir Singh, bears a high-sounding but inoffensive title: Shiromani Panth Akali Budha Dal (Panjwan Takhat) Chalda Wahir Chakarvarti Punjab, Hindustan Vishv 96 Crorie Jathedar Singh Sahib Baba Balbir Singh ji Akali Nihang Singhan. Since the Nihangs call themselves the Army of the Guru, wherever they settle down becomes a cantonment. Horses continue to be an inseparable part of their life and their footwear is invariably cast in iron. Undoubtedly the Nihangs have merged into the rural landscape of Punjab.

That the Nihangs are not part of the Sikh religious mainstream is underlined by the academics who have studied the subject. 'They reflect the ethos of Sikh martial art. You would not see them meditating or performing rag-kirtan. They are dressed the way Guru Gobind Singh-ji had ordained them centuries ago,' says JS Grewal, a Sikh historian. The sect that unfailingly follows the path the Guru had raised them for, do not occupy any significant space either in the SGPC (Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee) or Akali power politics; quite removed from the limelight, the Nihangs are stuck in an old way of life, slowly fading away. Like gypsies in many parts of the world, here is another social group anachronistically caught in the trap between traditions and modernity.

## MANY SHADES OF FAITH

Selina Hossain

**F**akir Kadam Ali walking down the road humming a devotional song was a familiar sight in Barguna. People in the small coastal town, both men and women, admired the holy man for his spiritual pursuit. ‘He’s a rare man,’ women would say. ‘Spend a little time at his shrine, you will have peace.’ When I looked at the beaming face of Phooli Begum I knew she was one of those blessed by the Fakir. She was at peace, for she had experienced the beauty of the truth about religion in the presence of the ascetic.

Though I spent my childhood in Bagura and Rajshahi in the northern part of Bangladesh, after marriage I often went to Barguna where my in-laws lived. A writer looking for elements of her stories, I travelled all over the place. In Barguna, I moved around villages to meet the tribes and indigenous groups. I went to the villages of the Rakhine people and Santals. The Rakhine were Buddhist while Santals followed their indigenous, pantheistic faith. In one village I met Mohammed Jainal, a follower of the Fakir. ‘The Baba says, “Allah, Khuda, Bhagwan, Ishwar – it’s the same. Let’s sing in His praise. He croons: He alone is the man who is dedicated to his Guru...”’ He says, “To me all humans are equal.”

Fakir Kadam Ali died at the age of 80 in his little cottage in the 70s. Till the end he had propagated the glory of humanism. His numerous disciples are scattered all over the world; Dhaka of course has pockets of them. The Fakir had never raised a second shrine anywhere else. In his Chalitabunia ashram, a three-day annual Urs attracts a large number of people. Interestingly, people from all communities – Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Christian – gather there. The theme of their songs was man’s eternal urge to merge his self into the Creator. Kadam Ali was a follower of the legendary Baul singer and songwriter Lalon Shah. Anwar and I had been to the Fakir’s shrine a few times during his lifetime. His voice pleading for humaneness still seems to be echoing around me.

Whenever I remember Kedarnath Samaddar, before my eyes appear the image of an elderly man, a little reserved and with a gravitas. The dusky man of medium height in spotless white dhoti-kurta, rubber-soled canvas shoes, thick-frame glasses, was a compelling presence. When I stepped forward greeting him with salaams and said, ‘Adab’, he smiled stretching out his hand to shake mine. ‘How do you do?’ He would then follow it up with ‘Where are you from?’ In other words, he was keen to start a conversation. This man was none other than the former headmaster of Gulishakhali GK Union High School. Those who were parents, students, well-wishers of the school or had ever been a visitor in the 50s or 60s, would not be able to forget ‘Sir’. His students, particularly those who had graduated from the school in the first two decades of Independence in 1947, have always cherished the memory of the remarkable man. His humanism inspired many of them. Anwar was one of them. I was deeply impressed by his account of the great teacher.

## THE SMELL OF THE NAQSH

Zoya Anwer

**I**t was well past midnight when Haider felt like someone had jumped into the *sehan* with a thud. Thinking it would be just another cat landing on its paws, the six-year-old drifted back into sleep – only to be woken up by a commotion in the house: his room flooded with bright light. He rubbed his eyes – the morning sun glaring.

He realized nobody had woken him up for school either; now he was going to miss the coupons for a free Slice. Getting off his charpai, he headed towards the *baraamdaah* where the elders huddled. His mother kept squeezing a small pouch, while his chacha scratched his beard weighing the option of going to the police. Haider was all ears when he heard ‘police’ and moved forward to get the whole of it. He turned to his father. ‘Abba, why don’t you tell me what all has happened?’ Still dazed, the man seemed lost in his worries. ‘*Dakus* came last night, they took away some of your mother’s jewellery and also some cash.’ Haider’s father fell silent again. The boy only knew that theft and robbery were terrible things to happen, but it was beyond him that burglars had actually sneaked into their home to part with a few pieces of his mother’s jewellery!

‘Haider, can you bring the little purple pouch Hina gave you?’ his mother ruffled his hair. The boy now recalled Chacha had mocked him a lot for the flaring purple of his little bag. ‘Beta, you’re a boy, this purple is for a girl haha...’ Miserable, Haider had tried hard to hide his tears; the little purple pouch that opened with a click meant a lot to him.

The purple pouch was always kept alongside his mother’s valued items, and Haider could now make out it was missing. His heart skipped a beat. ‘Ammi, the little red bag is gone, not there anymore,’ he gasped. Before the elders could comfort Haider, tears started streaming down his face. His chacha swiftly picked him up in his arms. ‘*Arrey* I will buy you another one, rather a better one. Do you know Hina got it from Pir Bazaar, and I will buy you one from the market near my college in Saddar; that place is so far it would take you days on foot to get there.’ Chacha had by now put him on his shoulders. The boy whimpered asking for his pouch back. For Haider the purple pouch meant his friendship with Hina, all the time they had spent together. What worried him now was what all he had kept in it.

Five minutes later, Haider’s father came back, the little bag in his hand – now layered with dust. The burglars, it seemed, had emptied out the contents of the purse before leaving it on the rooftop. Haider slipped out of his chacha’s arms and ran to his father. ‘I had kept all my *maula ki eidi* in this little bag and now that’s gone!’ Haider started sobbing.

# THE COUNCIL OF ELDERS

Shankar Kashyap

**T**he earthquake had caused no damage to the Great Hall. It had stood proud and strong for as long as anyone could remember – since antiquity. In fact, legend had it that it was built, along with the Temple, by Lord Indra to celebrate the victory over Vratra. It had seen some changes since then and the Chief of Elders, Sage Shunahotra, had extended the hall to include some side rooms for priests and caretakers to live in. The walls of the Hall were made of several layers of brick and could withstand far bigger tremors than this one.

The Temple was humming with activity at this time of morning. The priests had just finished the morning prayers; Lord Indra on the central platform of the Hall and Pashupati and Varuna on either side had been decorated with ritual offerings being made to them. The priests were now waiting to offer the elephants their morning meal, but the earthquake had frightened the animals and the mahouts were calming them down first. It was a miracle that they had not broken off their chains and run amok.

Sage Shunahotra was in his usual seat at the base of the central platform, Master Kapila to his right and Master Ashwin on his left. The other dignitaries of the Council of Elders sat in a rectangle around the Agni Kunda, which was in the middle. The fire crackled in the *kunda* all the time and was never allowed to go out. It was said that the world would end when the fire in the Great Hall died. There were thirteen members of the Council of Elders, which met in the Great Hall once a week; the Great Council had five Elders. The former dealt with the daily running of the city and the latter made decisions on matters of major importance to life and society in the city. The Great Council was responsible for the security of not only the city but also of the surrounding villages. It controlled foreign trade and made decisions about the scriptures. The five Elders of the Great Council were seated cross-legged on mats of thick hemp on either side of the hall along the wall.

Sage Shunahotra, the leader of the Great Council, was a descendant of the great Sage Bhrigu and he had all the good qualities of the Saptarshis. His son, Gritsamada, was my contemporary and extremely clever. He knew the scriptures backwards and could recite almost the entire Rigveda in tune. The last time I met him, he was engaged in composing some more hymns to Lord Indra and Lord Agni. Master Kapila was one of the members of the Council, as was Master Ashwin, among others. A Master from Sindhu was always a member of the Council. A Vedic rule made it mandatory for an Elder from a neighbouring city to be part of the Council, so that there would be a balanced perspective on governance. Our own Master Kodhandaki was a member of the Great Council of Girinagara.