

# THE CITY AS A SUBSTITUTE FOR LOSS

Manjari Singh

When Wajid Ali Shah, the 10th and last ruler of Awadh, had to leave his beloved capital after

his defeat at the hands of the British forces, he soulfully intoned: '*Jab chhod chale Lucknow nagari...*' He was sad not because he had lost his kingdom but for parting with his favourite city. The city thus becomes a substitute for loss as well as a metaphor for love and longing.

Indeed, the city of Lucknow has always taken pride in a culture that is far above the petty divisions of castes, religions and ethnicities. It has not distinguished between Hindus and Muslims, Shias and Sunnis, the upper castes and lower castes. Your only identity is that you are a Lucknowvi, someone who lives in this city, speaks its inimitable language, and is imbued with its impeccable manners. If the illuminated streets exude the festive mood during Diwali, the fervent call of azan, and the sight of plump, luscious dates and heaps of sevai in the bazaar is a reminder that Eid is around. The decorated cake shops and malls emit the cloyingly jubilant smell of Christmas in winter. But do we get to see the traditional Parsi sweets during Navroz? Have we ever seen hand-embroidered Parsi saris called 'gara' in any of the shops here? Do we even know that Lucknow is home to a minuscule community of Parsis? Clearly, the answer for most of us is a big NO. But who's to blame when the number of this colourful, enterprising community has now come down to just 45?

'Have you heard of Ratan Tata and Adi Godrej? I follow whatever religion they follow.' This is how Daisy Homavazir, one of the few Parsis left in the city, seeks to introduce herself, explaining her cultural identity. That was the way Indians some 40 years ago would introduce themselves in another part of the world: *You know Gandbi? I am from his land.* Well, globalization and the communication revolution have taken India almost to the centre of the world now. You are no longer surprised when someone at a foreign airport remarks: 'You guys make the best computers in the world.' But for this Parsi woman in Lucknow, her identity crisis has only deepened, not pushed away by a new surge. Daisy keeps repeating the same thing every time someone asks what it means to be Parsi. 'They ask me if it's similar to Christianity or Islam or something in between,' she laughs dismissively.

Hazratganj, the posh neighbourhood in the heart of the city, not only caught the fancy of the East India Company officials and, before them, the nawabs, but the Parsis too. They arrived in Lucknow in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century seeking business opportunities and came under its spell – the strain of ghazals, beats of Kathak, aroma of slowly braised mutton, palaces, minarets, and above all, its cultural refinement. The city – back then referring to Hazratganj alone – charmed them, and the Parsis made it their home.

We are sitting in Daisy's apartment at Parsi Anjuman, Rafi Marg, in the vicinity of Hazratganj. When I entered the complex, it had felt like an altogether different world, so removed from the city bustling outside, even though barely 100 metres away. The serenity and hush around the place suggest an elitism Parsis are known for.

'Not many are aware of our presence in the city,' Daisy sighs. 'For most of them, our existence is restricted to Bollywood,' she says perhaps disapproving of the tendency to stereotype Parsis in films. She recalls a doctor's delight in finding a real Parsi family and that too in Lucknow! 'My mother-in-law was in [the] hospital, and then this doctor got confused reading her name. When we told him we are Parsi, he said he had seen Parsis only in movies.' Daisy beams. She counts on her fingers the entire Parsi population of Lucknow. 'Around 40, and then there are some who are associate members, meaning they are married to non-Parsis.'

I check an urge to admit to her that even I was one of those who had had no idea about their existence until I discovered a Parsi cuisine stall at an event a year ago. Farzeen, a cheerful woman, was selling dhansak. It's a Parsi dish made with dal and mutton, flavoured with a special masala. Farzeen also offered sev, a sweet dish.

Parsis, a Zoroastrian community, fled to India from Persia between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries in the wake of the Arab invasion of the country, and settled around Gujarat and Sindh. That explains why they are mostly Gujarati speaking. Their enterprising nature took the Parsis to many places, and over the centuries, a large number of them settled down in Bombay, which being a commercial hub, offered them the opportunities they were looking for. Today, three of India's 10 top billionaires are from this community, *The Wall Street Journal* points out. Taking note of the intense battle between Ratan Tata and Cyrus Mistry – both Parsis – for the control of the Tata Group, the world's leading business newspaper says, 'A battle to control India's largest global conglomerate, the Tata Group, is convulsing the powerful ethnic Parsi community, whose club of billionaires has played an outsize role in the nation's economic evolution.'

The Tata Group, which sells more than \$100 billion a year of everything from Jaguar Land Rovers to Tetley Tea to rooms at the famed Pierre Hotel in New York, is engaged in an unusual public spat between its ousted chairman and his retired predecessor.' Now, Cyrus's father, Pallonji Mistry, happens to be, like Tata, among the 10 biggest billionaires of the country.

# THE DRAGON IN DECLINE

Nirmalya Banerjee

I still remember the Chinese family that used to run a laundry on the ground floor of our building in south Kolkata when I was a child. They were our tenants. Occasionally, they would send us cooked noodles for dinner. That was my first taste of chow mein, the popular name for stir-fried noodles. The ubiquitous Chinese restaurants dotting the city were quite a distance away. Only a few famed ones had been in business serving as the city landmarks: Nanking, Chang Wah, and Peiping. Going to Peiping in Park Street for dinner would be an occasion. Chang Wah on Central Avenue and Nanking in Tiretta Bazaar, deep inside the city's Chinatown, were beyond our horizon. Somehow, those areas were not considered safe enough. I don't know why; maybe the storylines of the old blockbusters such as *China Town* and *Honrah Bridge* had perpetuated a myth.

Laundries and footwear were among the lines of business in which Kolkata's small but colourful Chinese community has traditionally excelled. The laundries – the term 'dry cleaning' was yet to gain currency – figured on almost every prominent street all over the city. The Chinese had a monopoly of the tanneries. Bentinck Street, close to the original Chinatown of Calcutta at Tiretta Bazaar, had shoe shops lining either side of the road. One had to bargain there to get quality shoes at a reasonable price. 'Check the soles, and be sure they are really made of leather,' our elders would tell us before a trip to Bentinck Street. Highly skilled with traditional knowledge, the Chinese were entrenched in areas where qualified professionals were yet to move in. Dentistry was one such preferred field for them. Among the Chinese who had migrated to Calcutta looking for opportunities were many carpenters. Chinese women ran beauty parlours. Small but enterprising, the close-knit community has been an important feature of the city's social landscape. The first recorded arrival of a Chinese on the periphery of Calcutta – Kolkata still far away in the future – was Tong Achew in the late 18th century. A trader who landed on the banks of the Hooghly near Budge Budge, he set up a sugarcane plantation with the help of a small group of Chinese that had come with him. The Chinese enclave of Achipur in that area now commemorates Tong Achew.

With the Calcuttans patronizing the Chinese restaurants and their footwear beating the price tags of the big shoe brands, the small community flourished. On a winter afternoon, people in Chowringhee Square would stop to look amusingly at a small procession of young Chinese men with a colourful papier-mâché dragon for an idol celebrating their New Year.

This happy story was jolted with the border war with China erupting in 1962. Overnight, the light-skinned man greeting every customer into his shop with a smile was suspect. People started viewing them as *agents*, from the country we were at war with. Against the backdrop of the unprovoked Chinese attack, a mood of *yellow peril* had set in. No one bothered to ask these people why they had left China in

the first place. The fact was that with Mao's partisans on the march in China, they too were a persecuted lot. Gripped by the fear of Chinese expansionism, nuances got ironed over. Were the Chinese in Calcutta from the mainland communist China at all or from Taiwan? Were they citizens of China or Indians of Chinese origin? Such questions were never asked. With the nation's confidence suddenly shaken in the wake of reverses in the war, issues got blurred, a rational approach the first casualty. Peking, as the famous Park Street restaurant was originally named, changed into Peiping. Nanking shut shop for good. The owner of the laundry in our building wound up his business and left.

In India's political history as well as in the life of the Chinese community in Kolkata, 10 October 1962 was an important date. That day Chinese troops overran Indian positions in Arunachal Pradesh; the day of reckoning not only for a section of the country's inept political and military leaders, but also for the Chinese community in the city and elsewhere in Bengal. For these hapless immigrants, it was the beginning of the dreaded midnight knocks, rounding up of families and deportation to internment camps at Deoli in Rajasthan.

Sitting in the new Chinatown at Tangra, an eastern suburb of Kolkata, a few years ago, an Indian of Chinese origin, Ming-Tung Hsieh, author of *A Lost Tribe*, had recollected to me the knock on the night of 20 October 1962 on the door of the house in Kalimpong where his family, shoemakers by profession, stayed. 'The police whisked away all of us – me, my parents, my brothers, and sisters. We spent a few nights in jails at Kalimpong and Darjeeling where we were joined by some other Indians of Chinese origin arrested from different parts of the hills.' A special train full of such Chinese prisoners from all over the Northeast and North Bengal left Siliguri for Deoli.

# THE DESERT'S SILENT SHADOWS

Paola Martani

A song starts playing on a night as starry as only the desert sky can produce. I sit barefoot in the cooling sand, a hot cup of tea in my hands and a bitter wind playing with the veil covering my head.

My cotton clothes, too heavy for the burning daytime sun, would now be too light if it were not for the fire that rocks me, in this open space without end.

A wooden lute, the *ud*, stands imperiously erect as only the sultan of instruments could do; the stringed *qanun* follows, keeping time with the melody, brass and bronze, resting horizontally on the knees of a long-bearded man, dressed in white. He caresses it with picks that seem to have been affixed, as if by magic, to his fingertips. Percussion accompanies, and I lose myself in an almost ecstatic mood that floods into my bones.

I am in the Middle East. I sit among people with no identity, not one that matters in the least. They are ghosts with blood flowing in their veins, so strong and tough that they will neither surrender nor ever forget anything.

I look at these men sitting in a land that does not resemble their own, dressed in white as they did when they were still Bedouins. I look at them and see, in their wrinkles, the dunes of the desert they have left behind; I look at them and, in their eyes, I find memories still alive, eyes crystal clear, to the point of making me forget the real place that hosts my body and taking me to where they were, seventy years ago, in the Negev desert. The iftar for this day is over and, while in the middle of the night as we await *sabur*, before going to bed and preparing for a new fast, a deep voice begins to drown out the melody that was about to trance me; it narrates a call for peace that tears me from the dream and brings me back to a land that I love to the core.

*Unadikum*  
*Asbuddu 'alaeyadikum*  
*Waebusu' l'arda*  
*Tahteni'alikum*  
*Waequluefdikum*  
*Wanhdikumdeya 'ayneyy*

I call on you  
I clasp your hands

I kiss the ground under your feet  
And I say: I offer my life for yours  
I give you the light of my eyes as a present  
And the warmth of my heart.

I loved a distant land, living far away from it, and living its tragedy from within the indelible walls that did not allow the gunshots to hurt me. I loved it from within the Lebanese borders covered by barbed fences and concrete dividers. Real and non-transparent boundaries, like those we are used to, those that have lacerated the pain and despair of a people, exiled to lands that are not theirs. Tears of people empathized by friendly nations, who, not to forget, after generations, still call them refugees and make them live in refugee camps – close to, but distant from, their real land.

*Fe me'sati'lletiahya  
Nasibi min ma'sikum*

The tragedy I live  
Is that I share your tragedies.

I am in the Middle East and as sleep takes over, looking at the crescent moon that in this part of the world is so close to my dreams, lulled by a chorus of women's voices, my heart and my thoughts are at the Gaza Strip, among the Palestinian people, in one of the few strips of land still trying to stay Arab.

We are in Lebanon, on the border of Israel; we are in the middle of Ramadan and our mouths, dry and bitter, without water or food for fourteen hours, have not tasted or tried anything for a very long time. We are waiting for the sundown, for the iftar to begin. It will take another three hours to celebrate the arrival of the evening meal. We are in Sidon, one of the largest Palestinian refugee camps in the country and, while we wait for the muezzin's call to break the fast, we pass the hours remaining in the company of a tired man still full of life to share. We kill time in the life of a woman who, as a refugee, was able to understand why she grew up without rights, in a state that is not hers.

The old man is called Ali. He scrutinizes me from behind his black-and-white check scarf, the *kefiyah*. He has his arms full of bruises from continuous manual work for a lifetime. He was a pastor once. He was young once and had a house that was not of iron plates piled in an enclosure that is called 'refugee camp'.

His movements are slow and so his words when he begins to tell me how his life changed so radically. His biological clock will count eight decades, a year more or less. No one really knows. At that time, in a land of simple people, the documents did not exist. There was only a mobile village, made of a stone house that was the point where they returned after days of walking, in desert and in little green plots, grazing animals... he lived free, with no borders – neither a terrestrial one, nor a mental one.

It was a time when they prayed to Allah and worshipped without asking for anything in return.

# RECOVERING THE LOST HOME

Sethu

**P**laying along the village dust tracks, I learnt the first lessons in pluralism looking at the crests of the shrines of all faiths and their followers. Among them, what stood out was the Jewish synagogue.

I was born and brought up in a small village called Chendamangalam on the western coast of India, which was one of the earliest settlements of Jews in this country. Although the exact date of their arrival is not known, and myths abound relating it to the times of King Solomon, it is generally believed that Jews, on the run after the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem by Romans, found the long stretch of plains along the coast of the Arabian Sea a safe haven.

It was a turbulent time in Jewish history. In 66 CE, the Jewish population rebelled against the Roman Empire. Four years later, in 70 CE, Roman legions under Titus wrested and destroyed much of Jerusalem and the Second Temple. Under attack in their homeland, Jews looked at faraway places for refuge. There were evidences and testimonials available in our village of this migration from across the seas and the community taking roots in the new land. What is of special significance is the perfect harmony in which different communities have lived over the centuries side by side in this place. In sharp contrast to what you get to read in the newspapers and see on television now about the rising sectarian tension, social groups worshipping different gods lived in peace in our village. It was a picture of true social harmony. On the northern corner of the village, atop a hillock, is a Vishnu temple, and down below a mosque, a church, and the synagogue – all located within a radius of one km. This chunk of land was donated by the raja under whose rule the area fell.

All these places of worship came up five to six centuries ago. Around that time, many parts of Europe were bleeding over religious conflicts. It is interesting to note that at the entrance of our village synagogue, there is a tombstone of a woman named Sarah who died in 1264.

I had many close Jewish friends in school. Although they wore a cap over the crown of the head and had their own customs, costumes, and practices, we never felt that they were from a different culture and that, as a community, their history was separate from ours. By and large, the Jews were a peace-loving and non-obtrusive people. Although they were proud of their religion and beliefs, they mingled freely with others. With the exception of a few who had large landholdings or the educated ones in senior po-

sitions in the government or other organizations, the Jews were mostly middle-class, engaged in trading. It is a matter of great historical significance that the benevolent rajas of Cochin extended special privileges to this small community. A couple of seats were reserved for them in the state Assembly, and they had a quota in the government service. Further, the government was sensitive to the issue of preserving Hebrew, their language. A part-time Hebrew teacher would be appointed if there were at least eight Jewish students in a class.

Given this comforting social environment and friendly milieu, the entire village gasped in surprise when the word spread that the Jews were planning to leave en masse for an unknown *promised land*. The idea of immigrating to a land they knew very little about sounded preposterous to many, particularly when the current social arrangement worked in their favour. Unlike their counterparts in Europe, here in Cochin, they were privileged rather than persecuted or pursued. We had seen people going to faraway places such as Malaysia, Singapore, Burma, Ceylone and Persia. They would leave for the distant countries only to return with their earnings. But for our Jewish neighbours, the roadmap was entirely different since, unlike others, it was going to be a one-way journey ruling out a return trip. As we talked animatedly about the exodus of those who were still our classmates, neighbours, and familiar faces, we knew the village would not be the same without them; they were an important part of our social life. Their proposed trip was beyond our comprehension. We had many questions and doubts: If they are *returning* to another country across the high seas, where did they come from? Where is this country called Israel? And why is it the *promised land*? If they had to return one day, why did they come here at all? Having enjoyed the privileges bestowed by the ruling dynasty, and having shared the love and goodwill with the locals, how can they choose to set sail from our shore all of a sudden without demur? Is there nothing here that holds them back? Memories, relationships, attachment?

Looking back, we recalled their earlier indiscretion of celebrating the proclamation of the Israeli state by taking out a procession through the streets in their traditional dress, carrying the Israeli flag. People were shocked.

Although the Jewish boys looked puzzled and could not offer plausible reasons, the Hebrew teacher came to their rescue. 'We are not ungrateful to the land that gave us refuge,' he said with a touch of solemnity. 'This is our motherland, and the other country – our fatherland,' he intoned in an unconvincing voice. The concept of dual nationality was intriguing to the boys who insisted their Jewish friends point out the newly created state of Israel on the map. Our history teacher told us later that fearing persecution from Romans, Jews had to flee their homeland centuries ago and scattered all over the world. That was how some of them had landed in Cochin, he explained. We were, however, not too convinced. The synagogue in our village, one of the oldest around, bore evidence of this 'scattering'. But there were synagogues in the nearby areas as well – Parur, Kodungallur, Mala. We were really puzzled. Why, in the first place, had the Jews on the run from their land come here, to this sleepy village, and not a more prosperous, happening area?

# LIFE IN A DAY

Jennifer Fatogun

**Y**ou wake up early in the morning and sigh. Sometimes, one day can seem like a lifetime. You sigh again and get out of bed and put on some shoes to head out to watch the sunrise. You realize you like your hometown in the Northeast at this time because its streets are empty, devoid of people. No one stares at you at this precise moment; no one calls you ‘nigger’, ‘iong’, ‘Negro’, ‘kala’. No one calls your hair ‘steel wool’. Such things sting, but you smile anyway because you’re the new kid in school and the last thing you want is an incident. You don’t protest when people grab your hair or throw chalks or paper missiles at it (and at you) or stick stuff into it. You’re new, you’re the only black kid, and you’re alone. You don’t want to get into trouble; you have zero experience in handling this shit and your ma tells you to take the higher road by ignoring it. At 15, you’re already an angry kid and the rage inside you is real and you take it out on your family. So real is this rage that your therapist tells you when you’re 25 that you don’t allow yourself to process anger. She asks you why this is and you tell her, ‘I was very scared that my anger would translate into violence, so I’d literally run or walk it off while thinking and rationalizing my way out of it.’

But hey, it’s 5 am, and the streets are still empty. It’s perfect.

You head back home, shower, eat, and head out. Down the road someone yells ‘Nigga’. You understand now that these ignorant wannabe gangsters don’t understand that nigger is offensive. They think they’re being cool. They think this is how we talk to each other. You want to tell them about Yoruba’s strict adherence to manners and respect. Bad language like that, and particularly to strangers, is considered an embarrassment to the entire family. It could get you slapped in public and thrashed by your parents if you dared mention it at home. You don’t call people ‘your nigger’. You realize that they have seen movies stereotype African Americans as gangsters and have assumed that this is the appropriate language towards all black people.

It is not.

You walk into a place for lunch and before you can even order, people want to know if you eat fellow humans or insects and other weird things in your country. You stare at them with a blank expression and say ‘yes’. People

have already asked if there are schools, cars, and tall buildings in *Africa*, and you tell them you rode to school on your pet gorilla, who is also your big brother. They are not sure if you're kidding, even then. You shrug. You want to tell them that the Yoruba Kingdom as it stood was one that not only flourished but produced some of the world's most beautiful pieces of metalwork and wood carving. That its cultural roots have grown far beyond West Africa and into the new-age religions in the USA, Brazil, Cuba, and elsewhere and have given roots to religions like Santeria and Voodoo. You want to tell them that the Yoruba system of governance was something that baffled the so-called civilized British. That if they tasted Yoruba food, they would appreciate your use of spices, your choice of vegetables and seeds, and yams. You pity them; they don't know how delicious pounded yam and ewedu are when eaten with goatmeat. They don't deserve Jollof rice, in your humble opinion.

You meet an 'intellectual' friend who tells you that you shouldn't take racism seriously and to lighten up. He does not know of the daily microaggressions African people in the country have to face, because 'Not all Indians', right? He tells you only uneducated people, lower-class people are racist. You disagree. There are racists in every class, just like there are good people in every class. The criminologist in you thinks, 'To immediately ascribe undesirable behaviours and attitudes to people of a lower economic standing and background (effectively *othering* them and thus subtly, at least mentally, criminalizing them) is pretty elitist and classist of you.' You tell him the village people throughout south-west Khasi Hills (where you've done some fieldwork), who don't speak a word of English and did not complete school, have never been offensive or racist. That they asked what Nigeria was like and you told them. It is much like India, bustling and energetic in its cities and towns. That, like India, it is still developing and has a long road ahead. They did not automatically assume that people lived in trees like Tarzan. The intellectual friend is frowning, because he cannot conceive that people within his socio-political and economic group are racist and ignorant. He doesn't even realize he's part of the problem. They admit there is a bias against people of other races, not against the Westerners or even those from the other parts of Asia, but against those from Africa.

The dichotomy in the situation is unmistakable. Long before Nelson Mandela came out of jail India's was one of the most strident voices against apartheid. In the post-colonial world India and Africa shared a lot and spoke together. Patrice Lumumba, Bishop Desmond Tutu and Mandela were among the inspiring icons generations of Indians have idolized. This country had been at the receiving end of European colour prejudices, resented the racial bias and inequities ingrained in the colonial structure of the British Raj, and protested the white man's use of terms like 'native' and 'coolie'. Mahatma Gandhi was the first champion of the anti-apartheid movement during his years in South Africa. For a large number of Indians in the idealistic 60s and turbulent 70s, Africa was a major cause to espouse. A country that celebrates diversity and where the skin colour differs from region to region certainly cannot be biased against the blacks. And still, newspapers regularly report attacks on the African students in Delhi and its neighbourhood. The young men and women, who come here with valid visas to study, are harassed and manhandled on the flimsiest of grounds. In Greater Noida, recently, four African students were attacked by a mob of about 600 with iron rods and other crude weapons on a mere *suspicion* that a local boy who had died of a drug overdose had been provided the substance by the African students from a nearby institute. The report carried by *First Post*, an online newspaper, captures the horror of the situation with unashamed racist overtones:

For Precious Amalcima, it is nothing serious if somebody slaps him on the back, calls him *Kaalu* (black), *bandar* (monkey) or *saand* (bull) on [the] road for no reason, overcharges him in a shop or an auto rickshaw or shouts at him for playing loud music at night when the sound is actually blaring out of his neighbourhood. He said he is used to all these.

# LOVING WOMEN

Rituparna and Ritambhara

One Saturday evening, women of different age-groups headed to a trendy bar in a Mumbai suburb. Clearly, they were there for a party; what was unusual about the do was the absence of men. For the organizers, it was indeed bold, actually quite risky, to send out the invite on Facebook for a lesbian party. What is quite regular in some other parts of the world is not just abnormal but considered a criminal act in India. Though the organizers had expected not more than 75 guests to turn up, by 10 pm, there were over 150 people soaking up the new sense of liberation and camaraderie.

‘Indeed, when the injustice and discrimination against this minority ends, we can hope for a more thriving socio-cultural scene that befits a cosmopolitan city,’ wrote Abha Talesara in the *Hindustan Times* about this 2015 event. ‘Till then, we live in the shadows of our aspirations, exploring freedom in our closets.’ There is, however, a subtle distinction that needs to be explained here. While non-penovaginal sexual act is criminalized – clearly to protect the reproductive process – so is not between a lesbian and a bisexual or gay.

The repressive sense of gloom and inhibition conveyed by the comment, however, has been significantly dispersed by the sweep of technology. One can set up dates on Facebook, visit internet sites and access apps to meet partners, know about their peers and set up dates. There are sites that even promise secrecy and assure a visitor that her name will not be revealed. And some of the gutsy ones, particularly in the West, play the role of agony aunts taking questions from those who have newly come out of the closet. Zara Barrie’s hugely popular column on ‘queer culture’ in the online newspaper *Elite Daily* has 3.6 million likes on Facebook. ‘We are taught the rules of the boy–girl dating game at an early age,’ Barrie writes in an upfront, maybe slightly abrasive language catering to the mass market. ‘Unfortunately for us, when we decide we prefer riding the queer train and hop off at station “Girl-On-Girl,” there is no tour guide to greet us and lead the way.’ Here she is addressing the concerns and anxiety of the young lesbians who have just come out of the closet. Another day, she talks about lesbian dating: ‘Today is the glorious day for you to pull that trigger and fearlessly dive into the wild and

wonderful world of GIRLS-DATING-GIRLS. Abandon the tired notion that pretty girls only date boys...’

In India, however, this gender-based community, a minority among the minorities, is severely stigmatized both by statutes and social orthodoxy. Same-sex marriage is not just barred but is considered a criminal act. Since neither the Indian state nor the jurisprudence recognizes lesbianism, the community can expect no protection against harassment or discrimination; and certainly, there is no question of safeguarding its rights. With a new wave of conservatism sweeping a large part of the country, the lesbians are condemned to a life of denial and obfuscation. Imagine the reaction if a woman unhesitatingly declares at a social gathering that her partner is another woman. Can you think of a woman legislator, university teacher, doctor, or lawyer publicly announcing her lesbianism? Can a woman walk into a gift shop and say: ‘I am looking for some nice imitation jewellery for my partner?’ The bias against the gay community is so entrenched in our society and patriarchy, so irredeemably possessive, it is difficult to explain to your milieu that homosexuality is just as natural, with an equally long tradition, as heterosexuality.

In the struggle of the LGBT community for dignity and rights, 3 July 2009 is a red-letter day when the Delhi High Court in a landmark judgement struck down Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which criminalizes penetrative, non-penovaginal sexual acts holding that ‘it violated the fundamental right of life and liberty and the right to equality as guaranteed in the Constitution’. The judgement came in response to a NAZ Foundation petition. It further said, ‘Section 377 IPC in its application to sexual acts of consenting adults in privacy ... discriminates a section of people solely on the ground of their sexual orientation, which is analogous to prohibited ground of sex. A provision of law branding one section of people as criminal based wholly on the State’s moral disapproval of that class goes counter to the equality guaranteed under Articles 14 and 15 under any standard of review.’ A constitutional provision, the court pointed out, ‘must be construed, not in a narrow and constricted sense, but in a wide and liberal manner so as to anticipate and take account of changing conditions and purposes.’ This was clearly a foresighted judgement acknowledging the changes happening around the world. However, in 2013, the Supreme Court reversed this judgement saying it was for Parliament to take a call on this delicate subject.

And this happened against the backdrop of a world opening up more and more to the reality of the LGBT community.

Fourteen US states with bans on same-sex marriage can no longer enforce them in the wake of a historic US Supreme Court ruling that gay marriage is now legal across the entirety of the United States. Nearly two dozen governments around the world have introduced legislation allowing gays and lesbians to marry. The majority of these are in Europe and the Americas. Ireland made headlines in May after becoming the first country in the world to introduce same-sex marriage through a popular vote. More than 62 per cent voted in favour of legalizing same-sex marriage, 22 years after homosexual acts were decriminalized in the country. Greenland’s parliament has also unanimously approved same-sex marriage and adoption. These measures are due to go into effect on 1 October 2015. Currently, same-sex marriage is legally recognized (nationwide or in some parts) in 23 countries. After a recent court verdict, Taiwan became the first Asian country to recognize its gay community. The German Parliament too recently cleared same-sex marriage. Support for legally recognizing same-sex marriage is growing in the Americas

and Australia and most of Europe. However, as of 2017, South Africa is the only African country where same-sex marriage is recognized. Israel and Armenia recognize same-sex marriages performed overseas for some purposes.

## THE ROHINGYA: REFUGEES ON THE RUN

Sangeeta Purkayastha

‘**M**y heart is pounding; I pant from running too fast. I want to get to a safe place, but I do not know where that is. I cannot go back. Our village set on fire, I run till my legs can carry me no more. Though nothing more than a nightmare that haunts me in my sleep, I usually wake up in the middle of the night with a start and my insides begin to throb with ache. I long to go back to the place I once called home. When I close my eyes, I still see the little courtyard where I used to hop and play.’

An unusual smile disperses the gloom that always hangs over her face. Shamsheeda looks up at me. She is not crying as I thought she would. Her eyes are, in fact, gleaming with joy. Her impeccable brown eyes are glinting with mischief as she recalls her childhood days in Burma’s western-most Rakhine region. Her yellow teeth peek out as she takes a bite of the watermelon I had taken for her. This is my third visit to her little tailoring shop – a bare setup with nothing more than a desk, a bench, and a few piles of clothing material apart from needles, scissors, and some rolls of thread.

‘This fruit is very juicy,’ she says, and her smile scrunches up her nose. ‘Back home, in my village, we had trees that bore jackfruits – bigger than pumpkins. When the fruit ripened, the entire courtyard would be thick with their sweet smell. Well, jackfruits are like a mix of mangoes and bananas. Sweet, juicy but not easy to manage. We rubbed oil over our hands before peeling off the giant fruit’s thick, thorny skin. It’s such a struggle, you know, to cut open the fruit for its pods. Difficult and messy.’ Her young face suddenly takes on a grim look. She looks at a distance as if to hide her terrible sense of loss. ‘I miss all that here,’ she says, admitting there is no hope of regaining their Eden.

A millennial, concerned and outgoing, I sat in an air-conditioned car peering at my smartphone as Google Maps laid out the route to Kalindi Kunj. The app did not recognize ‘Dar-ul-Hijrat’ as a valid

destination point. After driving in circles for more than an hour and a half, I decided to step out in the hot May sun on the periphery of Delhi and ask the autorickshaw drivers if they knew about this place. To my dismay, none of them knew anything about Dar-ul-Hijrat. I kept throwing out the same words at everyone I crossed – Rohingya, Burmese people, refugee camp, slum... They had never heard of such a place. Confused, I again typed ‘Rohingya camp in Delhi’ into my phone and for the 50<sup>th</sup> time it said ‘Dar-ul-Hijrat’. Exasperated, I started feeling dizzy as sweat dripped down my face. I was almost convinced that Google was wrong and such a place didn’t exist in reality, until I came across a vendor selling coconut water who knew what I was looking for. And he offered to guide me to the obscure corner, which strangely had started turning into headlines over the past couple of months.

As you reach Jaitpur Road and take a turn at the Kalindi Kunj Metro depot, you are transported to a different world altogether. Away from the glitzy shopping malls and sleek roads of the metropolis, the marshy land of Madanpur Khadar is home to a group of migrants, the Rohingya from Burma. From a distance, you can spot an old rickety signboard that reads ‘Dar-ul-Hijrat’. On a plot of land provided by an Islamic charitable organization, Zakat Foundation, a clump of about 50 families have set up a makeshift camp, igloos of tarpaulin, cardboard, and plywood. A place they now call home.

Thick with flies, the lanes stank of human excreta. Naked children ran around in the heat, their golden-brownish skin flaked with rashes and bruises. They were giggling. At the entrance of the camp, two or three hutches sell groceries. This is where I first met Shamsheeda Begum. She was at her desk, sewing sequins into a chiffon sari. She wouldn’t talk to me despite my repeated attempts at striking a conversation. Even if she did look away from her work, it was to comfort a crying Sumaya, her two-year-old daughter. But she would look through me; for her, I was invisible, like gossamer. It was only during my second visit that she acknowledged my uninvited presence with a reluctant nod.

‘I can speak Hindi,’ she said in a tone betraying an unmistakable Bengali accent. *‘Hum Burma se aaya hai par wapas nahi ja sakte. Yaha sab refugee bolta hai. Hum Rohingya hai.* (We have come from Burma but we can’t go back. Everybody here calls us refugees. We are Rohingya).’

According to the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), about 14,000 Rohingya refugees live in India and approximately 1,000 of them in Delhi and on its outskirts. Most of them migrated in 2013–14, following sectarian violence between the Rohingya Muslims and ethnic Rakhines in Burma in the latter part of 2012.

Separated from the Burmese heartland by the Arakan Mountains, with the Bay of Bengal to the west, Rakhine was the seat of power for four dynasties. As an ethnic group, the Rakhine are very different from the Burmese. Legend has it that their first kingdom revolved around the northern town of Dhanyawady. Rakhine inscriptions depict the famed cast image of Mahamuni Buddha in Dhanyawady dating back to 554 BCE. Around that time, the Enlightened One visited the kingdom. Faithfully proud of their unique identity, the term ‘Rakhine’ (derived from Pali) means ‘one who maintains his own race’. What seemed to have triggered the riots was a lurking fear among the Buddhists in Rakhine that they would soon be outnumbered by Muslims in their ancestral land.

The Rohingya, however, are ethnically, linguistically, and religiously quite different from the Buddhist majority in Burma and trace their origins to Bangladesh. The Burmese government does not recognize the Rohingya as citizens though they have lived in the country for many generations. An article in *The Citizen Bureau* says, 'The Citizenship Act 1982 of Myanmar has kept the Rohingya Muslims bereft of any voting rights and with absolutely no political representation.' Declared as one of the world's most persecuted peoples at present by the United Nations, their villages are being devastated by the violent Buddhist Rakhine militia. The Rohingya living in the steamy camps in Kalindi Kunj and Shaheen Bagh in Delhi escaped the horrendous fate and have lived to tell their stories.

## **BARKAS: A QUAIN ENCLAVE OF EXOTICA**

Mir Ayoob Ali Khan

**L**ong before Hyderabad drew the global attention as a booming IT hub it was identified with the iconic Charminar which is a reminder of the past when this city was the seat of power for the Qutb Shahi dynasty ruling over a large swathe of the Deccan. About 7 km away from the city's most famous landmark, there is an obscure, dingy settlement that too is a throwback to the long spell of the Nizams' reign. Barkas is a rundown neighbourhood where live the descendents of the Arab security men employed by the Nizams for their forces and private armies as well. The very name 'Barkas' – a slow corruption from the English 'barracks' – is reminiscent of the role the Arabs played acting as the protective shield around the the Nizams. The Nizams, surrounded by hostile rival rulers throughout the Deccan, preferred those they trusted for their military, and more importantly, personal army. The tough, tenacious, muscular men from the Arab peninsula – Saudis and Yemenis in particular – filled the ranks of the Nizams' forces. This story is from a time when neither the magic of the automobile had happened nor oil discovered under the Arab earth.

Visitors to the colony usually take the road with the Jama Masjid on its right and a large football field on the left leading to a marketplace. With a few curves beyond the suburb of Shah Ali Banda and Falaknuma Palace, this road is almost straight.

The market starts buzzing with the sunrise. Fresh vegetables from the nearby villages arrive with the vendors – both men and women – calling out to the passersby almost in a chorus. Heaps of fruits – fig, guava, mango, black berry – attract the buyers. You see a subtle gendered line of division – the men selling fruits and their women, vegetables. People come here, for things are cheaper than in downtown Hyderabad. But the reason the city folks prefer to spend an evening here is something else. A couple of restaurants in this market offer harees, an Arabic delicacy made by grounding meat and wheat and lacing the dough liberally with ghee. It is available in both regular salty and sweet varieties. Harees is sold round the year, especially in the mornings.

Idris Hasan, a businessman who lives in Barkas, is a connoisseur of Arabic cuisine. He points to the difference between harees and its immensely popular cousin haleem: 'Harees is of Yemeni origin. It has three main ingredients while haleem has travelled to India from Iran. Apart from wheat and meat, what go into it are a few varieties of lentils and spices. Haleem is for all seasons – the foodies start gathering at the restaurants from the late afternoon till midnight after breaking fast in the month of Ramzan.'

These are not the only dishes introduced by the Arabs in Hyderabad. Marag, a light tasty soup with bigger mutton pieces, is another popular delicacy served during festivals.

The list of Arab delicacies that have become part of the Hyderabad cuisine over two centuries does not stop here. Of late *mandi* has been added to the already sumptuous spread of Arabian dishes for celebrations. Huge chunks of mutton or chicken are placed over a mound of rice cooked with a dash of specially made tomato sauce or ghee.

The impact of Arab culture, especially the strain from Hadhramaut, a region in Yemen, is visible in Hyderabad. The story of the Arabs in Hyderabad began some 200 years ago.

According to Omar Khalidi, a historian and writer of Hyderabad-American heritage, 'The termination of [the] Maratha power in 1818 marked the rise of Arab fortune in Hyderabad.' In *Muslims in the Deccan: A Historical Survey*, he says, 'The proportion of the Arabs in the Nizam's army, Nazm-i-Jam'iyat, grew steadily, and by 1849 there were 5,000 of them... Like the Mughal army, the Hyderabad's army was not centralised. It consisted of units of troops and commanders were from the same ethnic or religious group...'

Thus many Arab chiefs controlled units of soldiers ranging from 100 to 1000 men. Individual Arabs were called *chaush*, a Turkish term used for foot soldiers or palace guards. *Chaush* was also a rank in the army of the Nizam. *Jamadar*, was a high-ranking militia official who controlled a few hundred men under his command.

Khalidi writes, 'From the army, many (Arabs) branched out into other businesses, particularly money lending, as debt recovery frequently involved force of arms...'

Continuing his account Khalidi says, 'By 1854 every man of any substance or influence in the Nizam's dominion retained armed Arab guards for personal security, collection of rents and debts or for the security of the treasuries.' Some of the Arab chieftains became rich enough to get involved in politics in their homeland. Among them three families stood out: the Al Qu'ayti, Al Awlaqi and Al Kathiri.

Getting increasingly uncomfortable with the growing power of the Arabs and the arm-twisting methods they were adopting to collect debts, Salar Jung I, who began serving as the Diwan or Prime Minister to the Nizam in 1853 began a process of reformation and control. Gradually, the Arabs were disciplined. Among his other measures of far-reaching impact was the establishment of a court exclusively to settle disputes among the Arabs, and their frictions with other ethnic groups. It was called Qaza't-e- Uroob. Some three decades later the Qaza't was merged into the regular judicial system.

## HOME AND THE WORLD

Pragya Moirangthem

**E**ven before the euphoria over my 'good result' in the Class X Board Examination had died down, I was in for another shock – a surprise, you could say. My parents, relatives and teachers all agreed that I needed to go to Delhi for further studies. 'The schools over there are excellent!' Moreover, the students I would be competing with – 'top-class', they argued. The year was 2007. The exam results were not even a week old yet. For us, living in the faraway Northeast, Delhi was like a dream, a mythical journey you only read about. It was scary, too, having read about things that happen in a big city. But once over in that big city, I told myself, I would be smarter and wiser of the world. Another reason for me to get there was to study humanities, a stream no longer preferred by the bright ambitious students. Chasing a big dream, I flew to Delhi in the first week of June – 48 degrees Celsius, the flight attendant had announced.

I got admission in Delhi Public School, Mathura Road. For the first time in my life, I experienced undisturbed education. Back home, there had been times when schools, colleges, and other educational institutions would remain closed for months on end – two, sometimes three or more – because of the unrest in Manipur. The National Highways, meant to be a lifeline for the rest of the country, often turned into venues for protests and public meetings to air grievances. Even when there were no major issues convulsing the state, bandhs would still be called on the flimsiest grounds. This phenomenon had remained unchanged as far as I could remember. Violent deaths, rapes, kidnappings, lootings, shootouts by either unidentified mercenaries or the security forces – this had become part of our landscape. With fear and insecurity stalking our lives, bandhs and blockades became instruments of protests against the government of the day. To the school going children and young adults, all this meant only one thing – an unending holiday. Tests and exams were magically cancelled or postponed. We were used to such a paralysis of life and often had a cynical desire for more bandhs and strikes. Our longing for more bandhs in Manipur turned into a keen wait in Delhi for Fridays, for the weekend to begin.

But Delhi was certainly no Shangri-La; coming here for studies did not mean an end to all problems. We had already heard harrowing stories of racial and regional discriminations, a kind of centre-margin complex to which we, from the Northeast, have been subjected in varying degrees. One day – this was when I was in the 11<sup>th</sup> standard – my friend (also from Manipur) and I experienced an unacceptable taunt in our own class. We had a free period that day, so there was no teacher in the classroom. Most of my classmates were not present in the class; there were only a few of us. Suddenly, I heard someone say ‘Chinese’. I turned towards the guy’s desk. He was with two or three friends. Our eyes met in uneasy silence, but he turned to his friends and started to talk. I told my friend about it, and we decided to ignore instead of retaliating.

After a while, the bell rang and that guy got up with his bag, since we had our elective subject and he had a class in another room. But before he left, he came to our desk and gibed, ‘Where exactly did you guys say you are from?? Jojopur?? What was that??’ My friend said, ‘Manipur.’ He replied, ‘Ah... Manipur. I remember now.’ He smirked and added, ‘Did you guys come from China?’ Then he left. I was infuriated and ran after him and called him back into the classroom. I was about to slap him, but my friend stopped me and it ended with me saying, ‘You, son of a bitch!’ At that very moment, the teacher came in and the guy got out of the classroom fast. This was one of the first instances of racial mockery I had encountered in my life.

A year later, when I was in 12<sup>th</sup> standard, I went through a similar experience. Our school canteen was always very crowded. Buying food from there was a battle. That day, I was standing inside the canteen, waiting for my friend, who had gone to buy lunch. One boy came up to me and told me that he wanted to stand exactly at the spot I was standing. It was not as if he didn’t have a place to stand, but I didn’t say anything and moved aside. Then I saw him guffawing with his friends, all of whom were staring at me scornfully. He faced the other way and started talking animatedly. As he talked, he moved away from the spot. I took the chance and went back to the place I was standing initially. Almost immediately, the guy came up to me and told me to move again. Furious, I replied, ‘Do you mind? Mind your own business.’ He turned away silently. Later that day, I told my class teacher about this incident, but all she could do was lend me a sympathetic ear.

When I started going to college, I experienced more of these incidents. I was not satisfied with my BA 2<sup>nd</sup>-year results, and I applied for re-evaluation. It was the last date for submitting the re-evaluation forms. I had to take a seal from the Section Officer of our college. When I went inside, he told me to come after an hour. Since I was dangerously short on time, I asked him if he could kindly stamp the seal. He unleashed a verbal attack I did not expect. ‘Did you not understand what I just told you? Do you not speak or understand English?’ But he did stamp the applications of some other students. I was shocked, but I said sorry and waited for an hour. I would have forgotten the matter had another incident not had happened a couple of years later, after I passed out of college. I needed a bona fide certificate so I went and submitted an application to the same Section Officer. He asked me to collect the certificate the next day. When I went the next day, I was told that my certificate was not made because apparently my application could not be found. I asked for the file that contained such applications and searched for mine, which I had submitted the day before. I found all the other applications except mine. The Section Officer asked me to write another application and told me to come and collect the certificate the next

day. I requested him to provide the certificate the same day, but he refused. Then I talked to the principal about what had happened. She intervened and I got my certificate.

Often, I have had to fight with rickshaw-wallahs and auto drivers for they would always ask me for more money, much more than the normal fare. A friend recounted an interesting incident. An auto driver, who had argued with him about the fare just before reaching the destination, suddenly fell silent and apologized when he told the man he was an army officer. Although a lie, it shut him up. He was staying at his cousin's place in the defence quarters of Vasant Kunj. While I was in Delhi, there were many instances of people targeting us with racial slurs – 'Chinese', 'bahadur', 'Nepali', 'chinky'. Sometimes, you could hear them whisper 'From Chandni Chowk to China'. Often, people would ask me if Manipur was part of Assam, if it was in Nepal, or if it was a different country altogether.

## THE EVENING WARMTH AND KILLER NIGHT

Jagmohan Singh Raina

**I**n Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown*, the Booker winner's 2005 novel set in Kashmir, the idyllic life in the Valley nestles in the cohesive values of Kashmiriyat, which is an extension of cultural pluralism. In the fictitious village of Pachigam, not far from Srinagar, both Hindus and Muslims pursue interests like music and cuisine. The protagonist, Shalimar, is an innocent boy, the trapeze player of the village troupe, and Bhoomi, his love, its radiant star dancer. This idyll gets shattered with the arrival of Iron Mullah, the preacher of hate and harbinger of turbulence in the Valley. As you have already noticed, the name of every major character is symbolic, conveying a full set of meanings.

If Kashmir is Paradise on Earth, it is as much for the snow-crested mountain peaks, lakes and orchards as for Kashmiriyat, which in a sense provides a cultural parameter putting pluralism above the religious divide. The long spell of violence, strife, and disruption of normal life and the environs of hate that stand for the once bucolic Kashmir is a clear consequence of the decline of Kashmiriyat. That a large number of people, mostly from the minority groups, had to leave the Kashmir Valley was – more than anything else – an indicator of the rejection of the social ethos that has evolved over centuries under many influences. 'The Sufistic sensibilities dramatised in *Shalimar*,' literary critic Madeline Clements writes in the *Independent*, London, 'seem to resemble those of the author's Kashmiri grandfather, also a doctor.' For Rushdie, turmoil in Kashmir, forcible deportation of minorities by the recalcitrant elements, and excesses by the security forces mean the death of an ideal.

My family has been living in Srinagar since the time Kashmir was part of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's kingdom. Though almost the entire population of Kashmiri Pandits had left the Valley by 1990, we

somehow stayed put defying all odds. As someone who has lived his entire life in Kashmir, I am convinced that the present phase of disturbances will go away, reinstating the pluralism of Kashmiriyat. If you travel to the past of Kashmir, this diversity of culture and convergence of influences will be visible.

With Alexander the Great's Indian campaign, after his conquest of Persia, began a long phase of cultural and demographic interaction between the Kashmir region and the Greeks. The coins preserved in the museum in Srinagar are those of Philip of Macedon, Alexander the Great, Alexander II of Macedon, and Diodotus. The ambitious Macedonian set foot on the Indian territory chasing his dream of conquering the 'known world'. As it always happened in the olden times, small detachments of the army stayed back if they found the climes hospitable and settled down in the new land. The Greeks, fatigued by the long campaign, were no exception. This happened more than 2,000 years ago.

Closer to our times, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, who presided over a flourishing Sikh kingdom from his capital in Lahore, annexed Kashmir in 1819, and this beautiful region remained under his rule till 1846. With his defeat in the first Anglo-Sikh War, Gulab Singh became the new ruler of Kashmir with British consent under the Treaty of Amritsar.

Though no legends specifically connect the Sikh tradition to Kashmir, their significant presence in the Valley could be ascribed to the region being part of Ranjit Singh's kingdom. Despite the long spell of disturbances, which flared up for the first time in the early 90s, Sikhs still live in good numbers in the districts of Srinagar, Budgam, Baramulla, Anantnag, Pulwama, Jammu, Udhampur, Kathua, Rajouri and Poonch. They live side by side with others and despite persistent violence and disruptions, have not left what they consider their home. The old social fabric of the region sustained by the ethos of Kashmiriyat has been badly dented since the eruption of violence in the early 1990s. The Jammu and Kashmir government noted in 2010 that not more than 3,500 Kashmiri Pandits still lived in Srinagar.

Violence spawns violence, intolerance provokes intolerance. Even if a part of the excesses by the security forces reported by sections of the media is true, Kashmir, once the holiday destination for the whole of India and many other parts of the world, has already turned into a ghoulish nightmare.

Since the outbreak of disturbances in 1989, Kashmir, as Rushdie remarked, has been a 'paradise postponed'. Frisking, cordoning, and search operations by the security forces have become a regular feature of life here. In retaliation, the *boys* have indulged in grenade attacks, unleashed suicide squads targeting army camps, surprising police posts with a burst of fire. An estimated 10,000 people, mostly young men, have reportedly 'disappeared'. Rough estimates point out that around one lakh people have so far died in the 28 years of violence in Kashmir. The graph of disturbances might have come down in the past decade or so, but it is alive and kicking. While it was an urban phenomenon 20 years ago, the spectre of violence has now spread to the countryside. Infiltration bids have been more frequent and daredevilish, as the boys attempt to sneak into this side of the state from Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK), armed and trained. This has resulted in casualties on both sides. Hundreds of hotheads, Pakistani army men, and Indian soldiers have been killed in the process.

As an activist, I am busy doing whatever is within my means to bring together the communities so Kashmir can become what it once was – a celebration of pluralism, like back when the troupe from Pachigam performed in the evening with both Shalimar and Bhoomi as its leading lights. I know the best way to restore the old cohesion is a social dialogue.

Violence has seriously dented the tourist inflow to the Valley. The once-robust rush of tourists from all around the world has now turned into a mere trickle. Thousands of people in Kashmir depended on tourism for their livelihood. Now, most of them are jobless. The ponywallahs in Gulmarg endlessly wait for riders, but there are none. With most of the countries issuing advisories to their peoples not to visit Kashmir, virtually no foreign tourists arrive here for a holiday in the enchanting Valley. The foreign tourists who intended to visit Kashmir instead go to Ladakh. The shrivelling of the tourist traffic has dealt a severe blow to the economy of Kashmir. People associated with the tourism sector are now in a precarious condition. And it requires no specialized knowledge to see the link between unemployment and defiance.

## **ENIGMA OF ARRIVAL AND EXIT**

Navras Aafreedi

**Dr Navras Aafreedi**, an Indo-Judaic scholar, teaches at the Presidency University, Kolkata. He specializes in the history of small communities of foreign origin in India. In a pioneering attempt, he has sought to bring the studies of Judaic traditions closer to Islamic scholarship in the subcontinent by writing about this subject in Urdu. Through his work, Aafreedi has sought to establish a correlation between the two cultures – Judaic and Arab. He has been a Visiting Fellow at Tel Aviv University, Woolf Institute, Cambridge and the University of Sydney.

Excerpts:

**What piqued your interest in the Indian Jewry? Historians research about minorities and their interest goes as far as the Parsis. But to research about Jews in India needs a special kind of drive...**

There were three factors that drove me to research about Jews in India:

(a) My mixed background, which generated in me an interest in interfaith relations and made me curious about micro-minorities. My non-conformist Hindu mother comes from a Sikh-Hindu parentage and my absolutely secular, non-religious father comes from a Muslim family. I was raised without any religion in a very eclectic environment, with respect for all religions but reverence for none.

(b) The fact that Jews find frequent mention in the Muslim discourse in my hometown, Lucknow, a major centre of Muslim scholarship, and that the mention is generally negative in nature in spite of the absence of Jews in the city. The only Jews there are a few American and Israeli Jewish converts to Hinduism who settled in Lucknow because that is where their spiritual guru Poonjaji, reverentially called Papaji by them, lived, and a Jewish writer from Gujarat, Sheela Rohekar, the only one in Hin-

di, married to a Kayastha Hindu writer settled in Lucknow. This antipathy towards Jews despite their absence intrigued me.

(c) The third factor was an age-old tradition among certain tribes of Pashtuns/Pakhtuns/Pathans, including the one my father comes from, the Afridi tribe, of descent from the lost tribes of Israel. It stimulated me to try to corroborate the authenticity of this tradition.

**Can you elaborate how historically the number of Jews living in India has changed over the past few centuries? What has been the highest number and what has been the lowest?**

According to the 1921 Census, the Jewish population in India stood at 22,000, which rose to 22,923 in 1931. However, the number came down to 22,480 when the Census was conducted in 1941. The total population of India at that time was 389,000,000. Ten years later, in 1951 the Jewish population in India was estimated to be 26,781, which dropped to 18,533 by 1961 and to 5,825 by 1971. The highest their number ever reached in India was around 1950, when it was estimated to be around 30,000 out of a total population of 350,000,000. The number increased also because Jews from Nazi Europe and Burma (now Myanmar) found refuge in India during the Second World War. Since 1971, the Jewish population in India has more or less been constant. Although estimates vary from 3,000 to 10,000, the most reliable is 5,000, 85 per cent of whom are residents of the state of Maharashtra, where they were recognized as a religious minority only in 2016.

# MAJNU KA TILA: A TIBETAN TOWN IN EXILE

Ankita Anand

**F**or most of us, Majnu Ka Tila means a plate of mouth-watering momos and a bowl of thukpa served at a sparse, cheap Tibetan restaurant on the bank of the Yamuna. Indeed, the place is now identified with the Tibetan community in Delhi that has been living here since 1960, when they fled their homeland across the Himalayas following the uprising against the Chinese rule a year earlier.

Since then, the people of Tibet have been coming to India, many of them finding their way to Delhi. Soon after their first arrival, the Government of India allotted them the area of Majnu Ka Tila in north Delhi. The place has since become an attractive tourist spot and a regular adda for the students from the adjacent North Campus, Delhi University. Along with cafés, shops, a Tibetan school, and a monastery, it also has a clinic called Men Tsee Khang, where patients – many of them Indian – go to get Tibetan medicines. Incense smoke wafts through the air as one crosses the busy courtyard of the monastery and passes by the walls mapping the Dalai Lama's travels through newspaper clippings.

In 1964, the Tibetan Welfare Office was set up in Delhi to address the needs and concerns of the refugees who had crossed over the Himalayas to live in India.

When I go to this office in Majnu Ka Tila to know more, a perplexed Lekyi Dorjee Tsangla, the welfare officer, looks up from his files and tries his best to answer my questions: 'You can ask me in Hindi. My English is not so good, and I can only manage broken Hindi.' Tsangla is not from Delhi and looks back

wistfully on his previous posting in Arunachal Pradesh, a place he knew much better than Delhi, where he got transferred in 2009. In his official capacity, he acts as the link between the Tibetans in Delhi and the Tibetan government in exile. 'If a big religious ceremony is to be held, I receive instructions from the government about how it should be organized and pass them on to the people. After it is concluded, I have to prepare a report and send it back to the government.'

It is from this office that scholarships are awarded to the Tibetan students, both government-funded ones and others. 'If someone wants to put up a shop and an agreement has to be made about space, they come to me. If a family is trying to get their child admitted in a school and don't know how to go about it, they approach the welfare office. We also certify nurses so they can get jobs in private hospitals and clinics, as without citizenship they can't work in the government organizations.'

The issue of citizenship, of course, is one that keeps cropping up, because a citizen identification card becomes a mandatory document to avail of many of the services in town. Tsangla talks of how the Election Commission keeps promising Tibetans their citizenship, while the Ministry of Home Affairs maintains that no such rule has been framed yet. 'There was a 2014 circular saying they would get regulation. Some people who arrived in 1962 have ration cards while most others do not, though electricity and water supply have been there.' So far, says Tsangla, there has not been a tussle over resources with neighbours either.

For Tibetans, the proof of identity to their own government is a 'green card', which serves as the basic identity document. A fee of `60 has to be paid for it every year, and if a Tibetan national does not have a green card, they must apply for one at the welfare office.

Children get scholarships from nursery to the twelfth standard to study in the Tibetan Children's Village (TCV) school, but expenses overall have been on the rise. 'After passing out, if they do not get seats in colleges, they directly get into jobs like call centres or hotels,' Tsangla says.

There are a lot of small businesses run by Tibetans in Majnu Ka Tila. They also get loans up to `1 lakh from the Tibetan government to start their venture. The interest rate is one per cent and the loan has to be repaid in three months.

But running cafés and selling woollens are not all that Tibetans in Delhi do. Tashi Tsering came to Delhi from Dharamsala. When asked if he has faced any discrimination in Delhi, he responds in the negative. 'A lot depends on the individual. For example, if you get into a taxi and start talking to the driver, he will do the same. And if you sit quietly and give him tough looks, he will act in a similar manner. Our cultures are different, and in the beginning, misunderstanding might be there when people look at each other curiously. You should take this in a positive light.' He admits that at times people are deliberately insulting. Once when he was in Noida with a group of friends, a guy tried to bully him. Tashi and his friends did not react and then another guy, the first one's friend, came and apologized on his behalf.

Compared to other places, Tashi finds people in Delhi relatively more open-minded. 'We had gone to Uttarakhand on a trip and some local people came and started asking us questions about who we were, where we come from. They kept following us.'

But while looking for work in the field of web development or digital marketing, Tashi did not have to face any hassles because of his origin. 'You have to be good at your work so nobody can point a finger at you.' Sometimes, even working with Tibetans could have challenges. Tashi gets projects from monasteries in India, and some of the senior monks he has to deal with are often not flexible with their requirements, themselves not being well versed with technology and its limitations.

Tashi's aim is to ultimately have his own start-up, a gaming company that targets mobile users, for which he finds India a fertile ground. If it doesn't work here, Tibet and the US would be his other options. 'India is a free country, and you can have your own business. And I don't need to earn billions. Just enough to survive decently and make time for family and friends.'