Village Flute

An Islamic Legacy of Harmony

ANDREW EAGLE



The small eatery, Sumon Chotpoti, has no space for a kitchen. The establishment on Kalibari Road in Jhalakathi occupies a ground floor room barely big enough for its few tables and chairs. That leaves proprietor Shonkor Chandra, 67, standing on the roadside of an afternoon, surrounded by his ingredients.

Chandra, a Hindu, makes up for the lack of space by being organised. Various chotpoti elements are neatly arranged in plastic bowls and baskets of purple, red and blue – chillies, boiled egg, onions. He knows the value of combination. He's expert in entertaining his fellow townsfolk.

Unlike chotpoti, society is made of people and flavoured by ideas rather than tamarind and spices. While Chandra might not find room for a kitchen he is lucky. In Jhalakathi's society there is no shortage of space. Contemporary Jhalakathi District is one of the most communally harmonious in the country – and local people deservedly take pride from that.

"We just took tea together," says Muslim Anisur Rahman, proprietor of Siam Motors, referring to a Hindu friend. "We are neighbours. We live in one place. We are often guests at Hindu weddings. There's no disturbance in Jhalakathi."

"There are no problems here," agrees Hindu Nirmal Mandal, 50, who's been running the Sun Studio photography store for 25 years.

"We are not Hindus and Muslims," says Chandra, "but people. You do your religion and I do mine. What does it matter? Jhalakathi is a bit good in this way."

While a connoisseur might detect the various elements in Chandra's chotpoti, the factors which produce an enlightened Jhalakathi are not so obvious. Yet on the wall of Sumon Chotpoti are a number of small stickers that hold a clue to at least part of the reason.

On them is written, "Oh Muslim boys, in which hadith have you found that your prestige will decline if you work?" It is to be assumed that for Chandra the mantra for constructive activity applies in equal measure to those of other faiths – yet more telling is that those are the words of the late Islamic theologian Maulana Md. Azizur Rahman Nesarabadi.

Regarded as a saint and commonly referred to as Quaid Saheb Hujur, his shrine is at the expansive Nesarabadi Islamic Complex by the Bashanda River not far from town. His son Md Khalilur Rahman Nesarabadi is the current Principal of the large madrassa there and responsible for the more than forty organisations under the Nesarabadi umbrella.

"He was the mirror of Islam," says his son, "He believed Islam was not only for Muslims but for everybody." Indeed, Quaid Saheb Hujur's contribution to Jhalakathi is well-regarded by all religious communities. Both Mandal and Chandra have visited his shrine – Chandra is a regular.

Born in 1911, by all accounts Quaid Saheb Hujur lived a simple life. According to his son, he believed it sinful to save money and never had a bank account or his own home. Khalilur remembers on one occasion when his family was in a particularly bad financial state, his father received cheques for substantial amounts from the Islamic Foundation of Bangladesh as proceeds from books he had written. The son took the cheques to his father hoping it could alleviate the family's difficulties.

"My life is for Allah," Quaid Saheb Hujur told him, "My writing is not for earning money. This money is for the welfare of the people."

Quaid Saheb Hujur believed in an Islam of leading by example and constructive engagement. In 1960 he founded an institution to provide media-