

MUSINGS

Full Circle

ANDREW EAGLE

How innocently I met Islam! It was through a humble kind of "How do you do?" proffered to a handful of Rajasthan mosques; among the first there, I had stepped inside and removed my shoes early.

I was twenty and twenty-one both: before and after a devastating winter's night in the foggy village of Ranapur when the Jains, at their astonishing fifteenth-century temple, unwittingly ushered in an Australian's twenty-first year. Among 1444 marble pillars the walls so thickly decorated that night, a sound to uplift, giddily gift the spirit to crisp air. I felt incredibly fortunate then.

The Jain priest sat with us after the service and had probably spoken of his religion, though the exact words are lost for me now. What remains is a temple echo from a time overlaid with novel sensation, a period of thought explosion when all seemed draped in wonder. So it shall be: a first trip to India.

I'd never heard of Jainism before we reached Delhi. Islam wasn't much more than a word. To be factual, it's logical that my very first mosque was in that city. Certainly we visited the Jame Masjid. Perhaps a week later we left our shoes at the gate of the Ajmeer Sharif, too.

The Jame Masjid is vast. It earns its name as the world-reflecting mosque. The Ajmeer Sharif bustled. It was crowded and very reverent. The looks of some pilgrims brought discomfort: a feeling of intruding on someone else's sacred. We didn't linger.

Despite our curiosity it wasn't those grander sites that brought intimacy with this other religion. It was the little mosques abutting Rajasthan's highways, the everyday mosques of mud brick in long-forgotten villages and small towns where the average-everybody prayed. Usually we stood at the gate, asking in English and with body language to whoever was available if it would be alright if we looked inside.

At some we were permitted to climb a minaret to take photographs of Thar Desert landscapes. In most we'd sit some minutes on whatever mats they had, outside prayer time, just to take in a room of simple decoration. It was the architecture and the design of its *mihrab*. As much as a temple could address the soul with sound, I learnt, a mosque could do the same with silence. One's religion didn't alter much: those rural villages were holy spaces. The peace would be unlearned.

A lot has changed since then. I don't have to tell you. A younger mind can parcel complexity and happily experience one aspect of anything at a time. At an older age it's a panorama of inseparable pros and cons that more often fosters a stew of ideas, histories, politics, opinions and prejudices. It becomes difficult to anatomize, more trying to put aside the baggage of self.

The world changed. At home in



Sydney, to be sure, anti-Muslim bigotry was well established before I reached Rajasthan. But then, not six years later September 11 happened. We are all witnesses to the hysteria, ignorance and heightened prejudice unleashed. He lived through the subsequent inexcusable violence wrought in Islam's name. We learnt of the miserable sacrifices to be made for this thing called security, and saw the failed and surprisingly amateurish decisions of key western politicians: decisions of dire, long-lived repercussion. There's been a lot of public noise about Islam. It couldn't be further removed from that precious meditative silence.

Yet in that same year, 2001, Yann Martel published his book, *The Life of*



Pi. On its pages he constructed stronger towers, as though he knew what the world would need. "Hindus, in their capacity for love," he wrote, "are indeed far less Christians, just as Muslims, in the way they see God in everything, are barded Hindus, and Christians, in their devotion to God, are hat wearing Muslims."

He could almost have been writing about my first trip to India, the innumerable temples, mosques and *gurdwaras*; there were one or two churches too, though oddly they often lay behind padlocked gates unless it was a Sunday.

It's funny how such divergent paths led to a similar destination! So many expressions there are of a most fundamental human value, that of hope. Still, among them the peacefulness of the Rajasthan mosques was unique.

Far and wide, I have to say, I never found it again. I saw the patterned mosaics of Iranian mosques and in Arabia I sat in elegant and chic structures. I visited mosques in unusual destinations like Asmara and the one in Turkish Nicosia, built long ago on the remnants of a cathedral, thanks to the medieval upheavals of the crusades. All were nice to visit; none invoked that precise ambience.

Indeed, village mosques in Bangladesh are perhaps the most similar, unsurprisingly, but perhaps there's something in the clean lines and sparseness of a desert landscape, something that lives more readily in lighter, drier air. Or perhaps it's as simple as that I saw Rajasthan first. Whatever it was, as years rolled on, it



was a silence almost forgotten, and from a time when silence needed no caveat.

In the middle of the fifteenth century, Uzbek Sufi saint and-general Khan Jahan Ali arrived in the Bagherhat region, riding on the backs of two crocodiles who became his first disciples, so it is said. I'm glad he did. From the Sundarban jungle, he carved out the wealthy city then-called Khalifabad and adorned it with mosques and monuments that would stand the test of time.

The most famous of courses is the Shaat Gombuj Masjid, the Sixty Domes Mosque which actually has sixty pillars and more than seventy domes. I'd seen photos of the world heritage site on numerous occasions but took my time to go there. I'm not sure why. If I'd known what I'd find, surely I would've reached Bagherhat sooner.

The day was clear and hot, the sky unimpeachably bright. It was a weekday, without crowds. The grounds were picture-perfect manicured, overseen by ancient and enormous rain trees in their grand wisdom, in neat brick circles. In the large tank at the back, lotus leaves congregated, hinting a promise of color and depth in some other season. And of course, centre-stage was the mosque reaching out in a dignified display of symmetry and craftsmanship.

I am fortunate, really. I've seen quite a few historical sites in Bangladesh but rarely have I come across anything as presentable and clean as Shaat Gombuj.

Inside, it was cool and soundless. There was a surprising amount of light given the absence of windows. Two gentlemen sat in quiet contemplation.



One engaged in basic chat.

Upon reflection, one realizes that the forest of stone pillars is not unlike the layout of the Ranakpur Jain temple, built as it happens in the same century. Aside from the primary *mihrab* of interesting stonework, there is the intricacy of terracotta design to admire in the several secondary *mihrabs* placed in the Bengal specialty, apparently, incorporated no doubt to broaden sanctity and to overcome notions of hierarchy.

For quite some years I can't have granted more than the most fleeting thoughts to Rajasthan. Yet inside Shaat Gombuj, unexpectedly, faded memories resurfaced. Among those pillars and in that space I was transported to a time before the drums of life marched me to war, as inevitably they do. For some few moments I lived again in an age when discovered ruled, a time of joy, with all the complexity of intervening years dissolved. In the mosque I was younger. Surprised at having come full circle, I found the chance again, to greet Islam for a first time. It was with a renewed curiosity, an unanticipated kind of "How do you do?" that I felt the singular essence of peace that should be all of that we need.

Andrew Eagle is an occasional contributor to the Star Literature Page.

POETRY



For the Mayor of Metropolitan Millions

MANZUR ALAM

O Mayor! My Mayor!
Whitman's Captain beckons you. *The North remembers you for no Game of Thrones.*

The dusty pavements return through the crack of night, trailing their way to a waiting retreat of Banani.

You lie there now, hushed inside the cosmopolitan panic of a falling, human frame. Unsolicited souls gather to never let you go.

The artist in you coursed along for decades from the box of magic to chambers and beyond. When you turned around to a call from the past, you unmade the commerce paradox, and composed an epic written in acts of no foul play.

Saat Rasta remembers you; the denizens of open air chant your thankful hymns at sunlit crossroads of Gabtoli; waste and garbage finally find a place in their mattered universe.

while we, a baffled crowd, sigh a breath of appreciation yet dawdle in apprehension.

Will the monstrous billboards rise from filthy ashes once more? Will the evils of allotted development darken the skies of my beloved Dhaka?

O the mayor of vibrant hearts! O the heart of metropolitan millions! What did you hum into the ear of silent walls when your last breath

was fading into the midnight perfume? An unfinished tale? A silent god of treasured treasuring?

Time will go by, leaving us with the flickers of an endless train of dreams bursting through your blazing eyes!

Manzur Alam is an Assistant Professor of English at East West University. He is passionate about reading and writing poetry.



Epiphany

T. S. MARIN

I woke up in the morning. There was a smell of death. There was a goodbye due for years. There were promises of returning. But you will never lose me. Because I will never be yours. The rains wept and the flower wove. And there were smells of lie. Cowardice, betrayal. And melancholy. I woke up. Because I know when someone is dying. I smell death.

T. S. Marin is obsessed with collecting and reading books. She also teaches English at Primasia University and is the Sub Editor of Star Literature and the Reviews pages of The Daily Star.

FICTION

A Game of Light and Darkness

ZARRIN M. ALI

Charulata Akhter was an ordinary, braided, floral salwar kameez-wearing nineteen-year-old from the Shundarganj village of Rangpur. The middle of three siblings and the only female in the family in the appropriate state of mind to run the family, all the typical responsibilities had come down on her shoulders. Her mother, a mentally unstable woman, led her unfortunate life in one corner of the family's mud-brick cottage with only a few bumblebees for company. Jalaluddin, Charulata's elder brother, was fighting a battle of survival with his father while working in a small shop. Money was in short supply. Charulata, thinned down by the struggles of a meagre life and the agonizing pains of hunger, would leave a fistful of rice for her younger sister instead of devouring it herself, like a fearless soldier in war.

In this battle of life, any hint of a way out was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. So was the one when Jalaluddin's friend, Kamal, proposed to her. Kamal had offered to take her to Dhaka city. He promised her a well-paid job in one of the city's garment factories. Maintaining a family of five with no money in hand was proving burdensome to the resilient young girl. What options did she have other than to agree, even if it meant staying away from home and not hearing her mother's silver-tongued voice, a person whom society had labeled as worthy only of disdain.

With regular intervals of about an hour, many women climbed out the back of the van. In what seemed like days on end, she sensed something was wrong. She would take lungfuls of air and scream 'Kamal Bhai!' but no one would answer. Occasionally, a young boy, whom she seemed like the power of starvation in his abdomen, was forcing him to do so, would come in and supply them with a jug of water and grains of puffed rice. She was hungry. Hunger was something she had dealt with before, but this was a different experience. This was an abyss in her stomach; this time.

Charulata woke up one night with a start. She realized that they had been all transported to another room. A gigantic room with nothing but grey mosaic surfacing the ceiling, walls and the floor with a tiny fan at the centre, featuring three wings. The wings reminded her of freedom; the twilight aftermaths of the time when she would skip across the golden mustard fields and bathe in the glorious sunshine of a hazy sun. Each day someone would come in and drag away one of the women. The screeching as the person's body created friction with the grim floor and the screams of the frightened women amounted to torture. And then once again she heard the shouts of 'Kamal Bhai!'

The girls dismounted the bus and were told to climb on the back of a bright white pick-up truck. She saw a glimpse of what she thought was the outskirts of bustling, jostling Dhaka city. Then darkness engulfed her. With regular intervals of about an hour, many women climbed out the back of the van. In what seemed like days on end, she sensed something was wrong. She would take lungfuls of air and scream 'Kamal Bhai!' but no one would answer. Occasionally, a young boy, whom she seemed like the power of starvation in his abdomen, was forcing him to do so, would come in and supply them with a jug of water and grains of puffed rice. She was hungry. Hunger was something she had dealt with before, but this was a different experience. This was an abyss in her stomach; this time.

unable to get her emotions out. She gave thunderous screams, knowing very well that there was no one to hear her, not even God. Any moment now Bokul was going to start screaming as the tyrannical beasts approached her. The treachery of the man knew no bounds. And then—all of a sudden—a brilliant thought frisked across her mind. She grabbed her chiffon *dupatta* dangling from her neck and looked up at the fan. This was the chance of a new life, an opportunity to escape the brutality that was otherwise inevitable. What would happen if she succeeded in carrying out her plan? Would it mean freedom? Would she be soaring over the highest cloud, or swimming in the deepest ocean? Could she fulfill her mother's wishes without being ridiculed by society? Could she rise above the crimes plaguing society and inferring their lives? Would women like her be able to live a fearless life without perverted stars from men? And with that thought, her mind full of mirth, she tied a knot on one of the fan's wings with her *dupatta*. She could not wait to see the next chapter of her life unfold. With endless hope and desire, she let it coil around her neck till it became a venomous snake slinking its prey. She soon felt herself sinking into darkness.

Where was the fluorescent light to save her? Zarrin M. Ali is a student of Class VIII, Sunbeams School.