

On The Wings of Memory



Ahmed. M

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**ECHOES FROM
PRE-INDEPENDENCE ERA**

Family Roots

Well, consider me, a member of an old stock of a traditional family—so called ‘Mashaiks’, a revered clerical sect in our parts, drawn to the shariah laws of Sunni faith and a free blend with heterogeneous devotional practices of the land, in continuity from our more accommodating ancestors. It has been the part of our family routine to visit the shrines of Sufis and saints, for spiritual succour as well as for mundane, and these the unbroken ritual practices, customs and beliefs observed down the ages.

I remember how an air of swagger ran in the family for their kinship with the old “Bijapur hagiography”—of wandering “dervishes” and “pirs”, who had landed years back in the “Adil-shahi” seat of power in Deccan under the patronage of the Turk conquerors to spread Islam among native idol-worshippers. As a progeny to the same lineage, we were held with respect among natives, the half caste ‘Deccani-Muslims’ for the pedigree of old immaculate sahibs, the unadulterated descendants from ancient sages of the old religious orders who presided over monasteries, offered benedictions and amulets for the suffering, breath incantations and bring cheer on their faces.

Let there be any festival, or feast, it was deemed sacrilege for them to touch delicacies prepared for the occasion without our consecrating it by prayers and offering a part of it as a dole.

It was common in those days to feed the prayerful ‘sahibs’ on occasions to make them sit in rows and they served food much after the custom common among officiating Brahmins in the town. Some of their practices smelled native beliefs and rituals and they earn blessings of the reverential priests at their feet—indigenous to the land and its customs since ages.

The indecipherable windy preaching of evangelical ‘moulvis’ stuck somewhere in their gullet, hence the ‘Tabligh’ diffusion among people, only for namesake and confined to the learned, brainy; otherwise, for the

naive, the man on the street, more digestible the popular beliefs, the time-tested rituals, in practice from their forebears since time immemorial.

“It is all the mischief played by our self styled holy men, the fake murshids who keep the mass of people in ignorance and fleece them for their own ends’ contested the magisterial Ulemas from seminaries. “What these fraudsters practice is certainly against the spirit of Islam—‘visiting shrines’ and prostrating at tombstones, a mere idolatry, a blasphemy against the dictates of our religion”.

But there were no takers of those upstart ‘moulvis’, their novelties, their outlandish injunctions going above their heads but certainly paid homage at the shrines, touched the feet of.. ‘pirs’ and ‘Fakirs’ for their benedictions, their blessings, a time tested tradition followed by multiple people since ages for no ordinary reason.

Such were the family conventions and taboos: womenfolk in utter segregation in head to foot “purdah” and men in their head-gears, especially those of green hue from monastic orders, the people of ‘Tariqa’ (against ‘Shariah laws’); they were esoteric in learning and above rendering extraneous practices of congregational namaz, a mere formality or a symbolism for commoners and called names to the hypocrisies and superficial practices of the ‘bearded community and their clever articulations’.

Hence the regular visits to the holy shrines and their communion with saints, was yet a part of our spiritual family routine. And it was not in vain, for our town of K, a hermitage (they called it a ‘mutt’) of fifty two saints whose patronage protected it from the evil spirits like sorceries, spells, curses, pestilences and calamities besides pacifying the raging Thungabhadra, Hundri, the two threatening rivers which devastated localities while in spate and submerged the huge swathe of population.

So steeped in age old beliefs, customs and rituals, we never called it heretical but a part of our family routine to observe feudal rituals, like prostrations in shrines, the burning of incense—the glowing censers, the murmuring incantations, the chants and benedictions amid laying wreaths of flowers on the tombstones of the saints: these up-lifters of the spirit and soul, filled the sanctum with aroma of rose petals, the attar, musk, hanging in the air, evoking awe and mystery, particularly among the women-folk,

the past-masters of tradition and custom, who prayed solemnly for the well-being of their children and prosperity and health of their family, in holy communion with these saints and divines.

The ritualistic visits to ‘dargahs’ on Thursdays and Fridays were like an excursion for young pleasure seekers like us, more inclined towards diversion than devotion. We looked forward anxiously for these trips to pilgrim centers with bullock cart loads of the family members, old, young, small, all jubilant, giggling, gagging, feeling the jerks of the wheel on the bumpy road all the way.

The river Tungabhadra, the boon and bane of the town comes gurgling from the hills of Bhadravati in the western ghats, satiating the lands it passes through, (loses its identity after a drift of fifteen kilometers from here, to merge with more expansive Krishna, a beloved mother to the cultivators, navigators) is dotted in the town with dargahs, temples on its luxurious verdant banks.

The shrine of our frequent sojourn was also our ancestral cemetery and scattered around the mausoleum are gravestones of our ancestors (and people of certain lineage are only allowed to bury in the vicinity of the sanctum), and it is the place where the footfalls of devotees still echo on Thursdays and Fridays in good number. It draws on the northern side a line across the territory of Nizams, crisscrossed by a railway track over a mile-long bridge. It gave a picturesque sight to the pilgrims, the whistling steam train as it trundled across the bridge, exhaled clouds of smoke and made a grinding sound, on the ear drums and forthright it slithered out of our eyes on its way to the city of Hyderabad, the ruling citadel of fabulous Nizams, once.



Ah, those glimpses of our childhood visits to shrines on the river bank under the hot blazing sun of summer, our juvenile pranks! how we frolicked on the burning sands of the river beds, sneaked devilishly into enclosures of water melon vineyards (cultivated on the sandy soil of river) stole away stony unripe fruits mellowing under the hot sun, broke it open and quenched our thirst in its half sweet, half acrid pulp. We took a dip in the waist deep back waters, drizzled and soaked one another with a splash

and back in the leafy compound of the shrine competed for the hot sizzling sweet rice made ready for the occasion after a benediction (in the clouds of 'oudh' chips sputtering on the charred wood vessel). A part of it was shared as charity to the begging bowls and a part to the ghostly looks, the penitentiaries (mostly women) kept in custody, in pigeonholes—those the demon-infested prisoners of evil spirits howling for their relief, their long dishevelled hairs, the uncut nails and sunken eyes speak their long standing suffering. They waited for the signal from their weird, kohl eyed exorcists who rejuvenate their sunken spirits and free them from their spells and let go after a stipulated period.

A lank scrawny girl, with her sunken cheeks, her bleeding teeth was kept afar from the mass of the 'chained prisoners'; she was reportedly bewitched, hypnotized by a detested spirit and received beatings from her exorcist every day and she cried like a lamb, the bubbles of froth streaming from her mouth, her eyes rolling back and forth; she emitted a foul smell, people avoided her for her offensive smell and in her tatters.

For how long these enchained wretches, the psychopaths waiting for their release: these prisoners supposedly under the spell of jinn, the witchcraft, or black magic, as they called it, especially women folk, their untwined long hairs flowing from their shoulders, submit to the dictates of the priests for propitiation, the victims of their own whims and fantasies! Some said two years—yet no liberation, some signalled three, with a long piercing sigh—all waiting for their hour when the evil spirit is expelled and permission granted for them to go home! God knows when!



If we believe chroniclers: the old Kurnool town or Kandanoor as they called it, lay on the Southern bank of the river Tungabhadra, a transit place, for greasing carts for the wayfarers on their way to southern parts of the peninsula or loading stones for the construction of temples in the temple town of Alampur on its west bank.

Early in the century, Alampur, a border town of the Nizam Province became the terminal point of the so called NSR or Nizam State Railways, and the passengers on their way to Kurnool, (the furthest town of Madras Presidency, adjoining the Nizam territory) de-board at the point and

traveled all the way on carts and crossed the intervening river on boats and there lay the sprawling town of Kurnool and its dusty bazaars.

Later the track extended and included Kurnool Town in the network of the Southern Railways with the erection of a mile long bridge over the river.

Kurnool, thus grew in leaps and bound and spread its tentacles in other parts of the south, linked them to the city of Hyderabad, the metropolis and thus to the other parts of peninsula by roads and railways.

Travelling from Kurnool, Alampur Road station is the first halt for the passengers and the train worms its way to Hyderabad, the domains of Nizams. And at a distance from the tiny station lies the historical town of temples, the Kashi of the South, the sangam of two mighty rivers—Tungabhadra and Krishna invite hordes of devotees from far off lands to take a dip in the holy waters and wash off their sins. It is supposed to be one of the 51 Shakti ‘peethas’ across India, each consecrated to a body part of Shiva’s first wife Sati.

There is a shrine of Sati or Jogulamba Devi, the consort of Siva, whose body parts, the local legend believes, fell at varied points and sanctified the land and Siva the lord carried them off: the vestiges still remain inviting devotees for their reverences.

One can see the Devi in a sitting posture—a bat, lizard, scorpion and a skull adorned in her hair. The historicity of these temples can be traced back to Chalukiya kings of sixth century.

Such being the multiplicity of temples and ‘heathen practices’, there is a story among Muslim iconoclasts who believe a certain Muslim wrestler with a pious rage took arms against the abominable practices of the land, and became a martyr plundering idols—thus earning the ire of the worshippers who retaliated by dismembering his head from his body with a stroke and it fell at a distance. Later his disciples buried the head and the body in their respective places of martyrdom and consecrated as holy relics and adored till the day by pilgrims both Muslims as well as Hindus. He was already canonized as a saint, his ‘Urs’ festival observed every year with a fanfare.



Pre Independence Era Over to the Princely State

Well, the life on the other side of the border, **the Nizam's dominion** was booming with quick buck for the skilled and nothing like the wily 'Madrasis' with English expertise on their side, always on the prowl to snatch bread from the undeserving and so my young ambitious father with his needed competence, a secondary school leaving certificate, a diploma in automobile engineering was on his wings to cross over the border and try his luck for better opportunities in the newly established department of Road Transport in Hyderabad state. It was a land of honey for qualified persons gifted with a flair for English.

He did not take immediate train for this. He took a different route, for he had been frequently on the river Krishna to visit his sister in Nizam's territory; this time with a motive to earn the good offices of his influential brother-in-law, a feudal landlord and get a local endorsement, a recommendation letter addressed to an eminent person in the city and through him made inroads and won a job, primarily an apprenticeship in his targeted field, the State transit network linked to the Nizam's State Railways and soon he sent his roots in the region and remained a part of it till his end.

He occupied an enviable place in the services of the monarch with all privileges of a well-placed official, enjoyed the fruits of his office. Coupled with honesty and hard work he was elevated to a bus depot manager of a local unit, a boss to his establishment.

His trials for the job was not that smooth as he expected—there were some hiccups to overcome, apart from the bias of not being a native, a 'mulki', he told my mother, till he was successful in climbing the first rung of the ladder as a probationer and lived a hard up life, in a solitary room, making food for himself and said it was all normal for an implacable person like

him—did he not bear the hardship in his student days? He read under a Street lamp post to save the lamp oil for lighting purposes in the house. He was raised by his step brothers and lived with his widow mother and a younger sister, not yet married and they were on the receiving end and allocated rationed food.

As the days went on, slowly the things picked up; he got a push in his upward movement for his workmanship. Having come in the good looks of his superiors for his honesty, he got bigger assignments.

And as a first step he was designated to set the stage for a new bus corridor at a strategic point on Hyderabad-Poona high-way, a provincial landscape, lacking means of public transport. And he descended on his mission with a crew of artisans and wagons of load and machinery on the site earmarked for the construction of a Bus Depot, a mile away from a populous Kasba, in a Tehsil revenue zone.

In this wilderness of no shed or any occupancy least any means of living except a hooting Muslim graveyard and nothing to cool his head except a ghost bus he drove in and the din of artisans, labour on the marked site, he ran his office—an awning where he stayed with his purblind old mother at his side, cooked his food, in the open air, aided by his workmen, fed his mother and looked after the work on apace—the story of his initial struggle, my mother never forgot to tell.

My grandmother, a widow having cleared her daughter's nuptial, followed her son on his feet, like a shadow willing to go to any place on the Earth but with her son, her only crutch in her old age and he was unmarried till then.

And soon a garage came in sight, a big hangar for sheltering buses and running on routes, he settled in a cabin with his mother but with a lacuna of a life partner soon to fill up after the dying wish of his old ailing mother. He fetched a bride from his native town K in the midst of his hurried life and added a new member willing to shoulder a conjugal life.

Within a year he begot his first child, a girl child and in this gain for a new born, lost his mother in an alien land. He laid her to rest in a nearby Muslim graveyard, the first member to be buried followed by others.

By the time the new bus complex became the focal point of transport, throbbing with life and came alive with floating passengers in the buzz of arising new shopping centers, hotels, guest houses, he was already a father of five children, three males and two female. There, the din of the traffic, the whirring buses and haze of smoke and dust and the young officer with skeleton staff caught on his feet attending emergency calls rarely throwing a glance at his new budding household. Those were the hectic days of his life, a new pulse of activity, besides recruiting labor staff from the local community who formed a beeline from early morning to engage them in jobs.

In his brief period of twelve years of service (he got so short a life span), he was destined not to be static, moved places in his regular shuffle of transfers but with a will to return to the place he pioneered and so preferred to live in his first settlement, his cherished Kasba.

And years later, he took a part of it as his last resting place beside his mother's. He kept a tryst with his life hardly for twelve years of his married life—a whiff of fresh air to the recollection of my back looking mother and his life abruptly cut short.

“It was not his dying age”, recapitulated my mother, “still young and hefty, apparently strong but inwardly frail, and whimsical about his health, an obsession for illness; he was a prey to many assumed disabilities, some his own creations, some he inherited from his family, the diabetic, by no means an indication of this sudden casualty and it happened before her eyes.

My mother was ill prepared for the eventuality and thought he was fussy, a hypochondriac, too much excitability for too little a wound, a cyst on his chest which to her notice, innocuous but it never got healed. And it was a fact he was crumbling from inside and my mother, not very serious about the silent killer.

And the vexed husband grumbled over her complacency: “I am not so much eager to live a longer life, my dear”, he reminded his wife “think about your children, what happens to them if I kick the bucket in the middle, not in our lands but elsewhere” so he raised the spectre of death to my inexperienced, naïve mother.

And the inevitable happened. He died in the Railway hospital near Secunderabad, possibly due to heart stroke, though the pointing fingers raised against the wrong diagnosis of doctors who poked bubonic plague injections, rampant in many parts of the country.



In his death, my father had left a team of dependents, (apart from his family), a bunch of young orphans, widows, some related to his blood and some from his wife's clan—all deriving their sustenance from this solitary monthly earner: his mother-in-law, my Nani, a widow and her grown up children: two maternal uncles and a spinster aunt, all had come to stay with him (after my maternal grandfather, my Nana closed his eyes) under his supervision and savoured his hospitality, as he famously enjoyed the bounties of a 'magnanimous ruler'.

My 'Phupu', my father's sister, a widow 'a pampered sister'—a dig from my mother, who made her house her headquarters with her children and thrived on her brother's filial love, had left her cold with jealousy hogging her husband's attention for her care, and she was equally contested by my phupu for the overwhelming presence of her members, her siblings, her mother crowding her brother's household to eat away his frail economy—a veiled mutual encounter, a rivalry common among womenfolk, vying for the whole hog attention of a single male person, my father.

My phupu, a widow often encamped with her children for seeking medical aid for her symptoms of tuberculosis, and a much needed nutritious food essential for recovery.

'And she made such frequent visits on some pretext, her illness a mask to hide her avarice to enjoy at the expense of her brother's economy' blamed my mother.

"We fed many mouths from our humble kitchen" remembered S.K, my elder brother "not any dainty repast but the routine serving of daal and chaval to a horde of boarders, sharing the same grub".

"For, how can", my mother rejoined "an officer, though well paid, subscribe to so many mouths? No question of enjoying any privilege or

special attention, due to the family members; we stood in the same row with others”.

“He had an audacity to include himself, as one among many, not any prerogative for his family.”

“A fatherless child himself, brought up by his step brothers, he knew what the curse of poverty was!. And he had words of sympathy for his impoverished relatives and shared their sorrows and their tales of woe with attention. In his death each one of them were left orphaned”.

But the single largest victim, obviously his widow, my mother to bear the burden of her broods on her frail shoulders, and a big mess created by the loss of an earning member in an alien land and their safety not assured as they were under the ravages of time. India got her independence.



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