

Pushkar Pull-kar

If you visit three pilgrim places do you get thrice the salvation?

Bachi Karkaria



We were but accidental pilgrims. We took a halt at Ajmer only because we wanted a break on the long drive from Jaipur to Jodhpur. This is how the dargah of Moinuddin Chishti and the ghats of Pushkar, in the next lakeside valley, got added to our itinerary. To these feted fonts of faith, Sanjay Singh, mine host at Badnor House, added a more modest but personal genuflection. "There is an old Parsi fire temple in our Ajmer. Perhaps

you'd like to visit it."

The secular Sanjay hooked us up with Iqbal Sah'b to enable easier passage into the dargah on a jam-packed Jummah. We met the imposing khadim, as agreed upon, at the 'second last flower shop at the entrance'. But we had already been transported into another plane as we traversed the mohalla lane inside Ajmer's Dilli Gate. It was lined with stalls selling gaudy enamel thals, ghee-laden sohan halwa, a glitter of bangles; frenzied qawwalis and Haj videos flowed from mini TV sets. Tongas completed the cameo. But a crocodile line of school-girls added a dash of mofussil chic, shades balanced atop demure headscarves.

Our towering escort ploughed a furrow through the intense crowd and into the sanctum. Propelled through the crush of people and the carpet of rose petals, we quickly offered our tray of flowers at the tomb as the khadim hurriedly blessed us with another easy passage; we caught the phrase 'mushkilein aasaan'.

If there was no time or space for prolonged reverence, it was compensated for by the collective force of faith. From emperor Akbar and Carla Bruni to this evening's diwan-i-aam of believers surging past under the rippling satin of their votive chaadars, the boon-bestowing powers of the 13th century dargah sharif were an indiscriminating magnet. The unbridled refrain of the Sufi singers watted up the electricity.

ERRATICA

Dusk had fallen by the time we could leave. Sitaram, our driver, sulked noticeably at the delayed departure to Pushkar. "You have missed

the evening aarti at the Jagpita mandir," he chastised us, adding sullenly that we might not even reach before the gates closed. Didn't we know that pilgrimages to all the four dhams would be of no avail if we didn't pay obeisance at India's only Brahma temple. Heathens though we were, we were not denied grace.

In fact, we were more blessed than Sitaram would understand. For, the empty hours were truly other-worldly in a place noted for its throngs at Kumbh and camel fair. We tiptoed past a lone couple chanting the inscribed invocation to Brahma. We sat in the silence, mantled this time in two millennia of belief. It was so different, and yet so intrinsically similar to our noisy epiphany of just an hour ago.

The spell would have continued at the lakeside ghats were it not for the pandas who materialised from the shadows to reel out the price list of salvation. Rs 1,200 for yourself, this much for two generations, and this hefty sum for a package getaway from the karmic cycle.

Our own agiari which we visited the next morning was cloaked in a sadder quietude. Only six Parsi families remain of the several hundred which had thronged to Ajmer, once the hub of the colonial railways, favoured employer of the community. Its lone priest had gone back to Mumbai to tend to his hospitalised wife. But the few ordained priests with lay jobs came in to strike the gong and tend the sacred fire during the five designated 'geh' or watches of the day. The rest of the time the fire temple is locked.

In all sacred zones, clamour and silence alike conceal their mysteries.

Alec Smart said: "What's the term for cricket scams involving starlets? 'Legs before wickets'."

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