THE ﷺ HINDU

Date:25/06/2006 URL: http://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/mag/2006/06/25/stories /2006062500160400.htm

Back Magazine

OPINION

The death of Rumi

TABISH KHAIR

The cultural impoverishment of educated Asian professionals in the West leads to some surprising, and sad, consequences.

Civilisational swings: Despite a rich heritage, the `East'' is caught in a catch-up game with the `West'. Photo: AP

THERE is something missing. I sit at the table surrounded by about a dozen distant relatives. They are mostly doctors and engineers and we are in the banquet room of a posh hotel in London, celebrating a wedding. Almost all the people in the room have lived in the "West" for decades — though they have lived in different countries, mostly England, the United States and Canada, but also occasionally Germany or Denmark.

The table is loaded with delicious Indo-Pakistani food. Conversation flows. It reminds me of many such occasions I have had in India or Denmark, with Muslims and Christians, with atheists and believers. And yet I keep feeling that there is something missing, at least on my table. It is not the food. Waiters keep us well plied with that.

It is only later that I manage to put my finger on the lack. The conversation on my table was different from what I am accustomed to in my circle of writers, artists and academics, Muslim or not.

The conversation embraced professional matters: salaries, jobs, prospects. This was not unusual or surprising. Academics love to complain about their jobs; writers worry about royalties. What was surprising was that whenever the conversation moved away

from professional matters, it got stuck in Islam.

The recurring topic

There were people of my parents' generation and people younger than me at my table. They came from at least four "Western" countries. They had seen many different things, for, they were educated and reasonably successful in their fields. They also shared a lot, as all of them belonged to a larger and culturally rich Indo-Pakistani Muslim community. But when they stopped talking jobs, they ended up talking religion.

Only one of them was politically religious and felt that Islam was under threat, and even he was frank in his admiration of what he called the "tolerant and decent Englishman". Most of the others only discussed religion in humane terms: one of them, for instance, narrated the common story about Prophet Mohammad and an old woman who would toss garbage on him every morning when he passed her house. His companions noted that he never protested. One day when the woman failed to throw garbage on him, he went into the house to discover the old woman lying ill and alone. He nursed her back to health.

I remembered this story from my childhood, and appreciated it. Many of the other stories were similar. They were religious, but not necessarily fundamentalist. And yet something disturbed me. I was shaken by the fact that in a group of a dozen educated Muslim professionals, the conversation stayed stuck in religious areas, quotations from sacred books and narratives of admirable actions by admired religious personalities.

Free-ranging conversations

I was not used to such insular conversation. For example, among the Muslims I knew in India, conversation could veer into religion on such collective occasions, but it was more likely to encompass local politics, social gossip and banter, fashion, (Bollywood) films, TV programmes, cricket, even literature at times. But since then I have remarked this tendency, especially among professional Muslims in the West, to end up talking religion.

Not all of this is due to the rise of political Islamism. In fact, the people I have in mind are not really Islamists, even though they might be religious. They are people with technical and professional education: rich enough in material terms, but sometimes greatly impoverished in cultural terms.

Some of this has to do with the kind of education they chose, or had forced upon them. In places like India, Pakistan or Egypt, you do not choose to study history or literature or film. You study those subjects only if you have no other choice. If you have the choice, you study medicine, engineering, computers or at least business management. The "muslim" world — and actually all of the "East" — is in a rush to catch up with the "West". And the "West" has long told us that our cultures and literatures are worthless — as Babington, later Lord, Macaulay put it in the recent 19th century, one shelf of a European library is worth more than all the literatures of India and Arabia. Our modernisers and conservatives share the realisation that the Maxim gun — and its later avatars — speaks much louder than any book can.

Colonial heritage

Hence, the desperation of the "East" to seek "modern" education — which means medicine, engineering, computers, management techniques. Who cares about handicraft and sculpture, paintings (yes, there are Muslim paintings) and literature, dance and drama? As long as we stay in our own cultural spaces — unless they are being blasted by the Taliban or U.S. marines — we still retain some sense of our complex and changing cultural heritages. But once such modern professionals move to the "West", they are confronted with a greater impoverishment. To their professional training is added the self-centredness of the "West", the fact that "non-Western" cultural heritages are even less visible here (especially in public discourse and basic education) than in their home spaces. They flail about for some identity to hold on to,

and the branch they often grasp is the branch that is thrust at them both by Islamic fundamentalism and dominant "Western" discourses — it is the straight and narrow branch of textual Islam, with its socio-historical leaves plucked and its cultural blossoms crushed almost out of existence.

If on the one hand, "Islamic fundamentalism" is the result of a certain kind of Islamic education (as among the Taliban) and a genuine, if at times exaggerated, perception of Western imperialism and double standards, on the other hand it is also a consequence of this sort of cultural impoverishment. This is part of the explanation why Abdel Bari Atwan, who interviewed Bin Laden in 1996 and stayed with him, had this to say in his recent book, **The Secret History of Al-Qaida**: "I found it remarkable that so many of the mujahidin possessed the very highest academic qualifications. There were doctors, engineers and teachers among them".

Not surprising

Remarkable perhaps, but given the uneven commerce between the West and the rest and the almost constant dismissal of non-Western cultures and heritages, not all that surprising. It is this factor that complicates and adds to the other main branch of Islamic fundamentalism — best typified by the Taliban, those students of Muslim *madrassas* who have a very different educational and class background from the doctors and engineers depicted above. Even here though, the West plays a part — for, *madrassas* are basically schools of theology that did not, unlike so many European "universities" in the 17th and 18th centuries, develop into places of secular learning as well. Partly due to European imperialism, so great a gulf was created between "secular-modern" and "traditional" branches of learning in Asia and Africa, that *madrassas* appear to have reduced the secular content of their syllabi, such as classical Greek philosophy, from the 18th century onwards. But then that is another story, and just as sad.

Tabish Khair is the author of The Bus Stopped, *published by Picador.*

© Copyright 2000 - 2009 The Hindu