



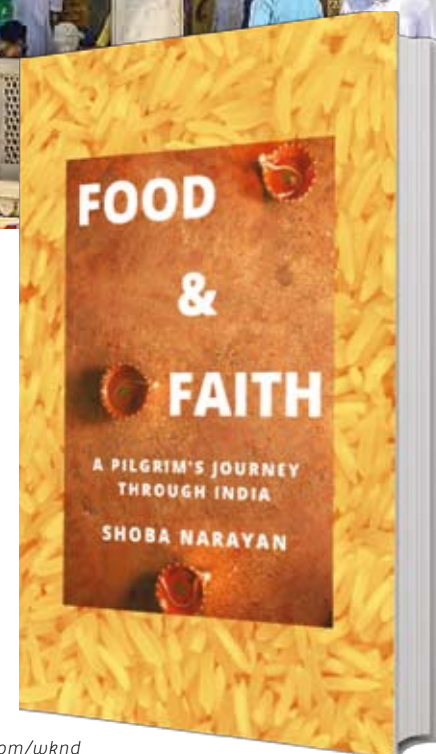
Where faith meets mysticism

I am standing outside the main shrine of the Ajmer Sharif *dargah* listening to a spirited group of *qawali* singers perform. Their voices are entreating; their eyes sincere, rising to search for the divine.

They sit cross-legged and pray, using their hands to express the strength of their feelings. They aspire towards rapture, to forget the self. They seek oneness with God – a quest worth undertaking; the only quest worth undertaking for some people.

Jalāl ad-Din Muhammad Rūmī is perhaps Sufism's most famous poet, thanks to numerous translations and Turkish writer, Elif Shafak's novel, *The Forty Rules of Love*. The novel tells the story of how Rumi became the student of Shams Tabrizi, a Persian Sufi *derwish*, or saint. When Rumi died, his son, Sultan Walad, founded the splendid Mevlevi order. They have been dancing ever since.

Like the bhakti cult, the philosophy behind Sufism is the idea of *tawhid*, a complex Persian word that symbol-



SHOBA NARAYAN'S *FOOD AND FAITH: A PILGRIM'S JOURNEY THROUGH INDIA* IS A TRIBUTE TO THE COUNTRY'S SYNCRETIC CULTURE

ises the primal root; the foundation from which we all spring from.

Sufism believes that we have become cut off from this primal connection to God. All human action – the whirling, the singing, the poetry – is an expression of the devotee's longing to return to this root, to restore the connection. Therefore, the annual Urs, officially the death

anniversary of a Sufi saint, is celebrated joyfully as a wedding anniversary. The logic is that death reconnected the saint's soul with its primal root, with God.

The word Urs, comes from the Arabic word *uroos*, and it means 'wedding'. When a saint dies, as Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti did in Ajmer, he has achieved *wisaa* or the ultimate union with the beloved. Realise that

they don't say "union with God".

Instead, they view God as their beloved. It is the distinctive beauty of this dargah. It is not just open to people of all faiths; it welcomes them. If you have a wish that you want fulfilled; a prayer that must reach God; an offering of thanks that you want to give, you are welcome here. And people do. They come from the four corners of the world, carrying baskets heavy with flowers – a ring of roses interspersed with marigolds – an aesthetic that is distinct to Indian places of worship. Multicoloured flowers put together in an artistic way. The heavy scent of red roses fills the air.

Devotees bring nuts and fruits. They carry blankets and shawls to place on top of the tombstone. They tie strings with objects on a stick that extends across the empty cauldrons where food is cooked.

The hanging objects offer clues to human frailties and wishes. There is a metal house, a cradle, a hand, a comb – each symbolising a desire for a job, marriage, children, or wealth. People throw money and rice grains into the empty cauldron. At the side of the cauldrons are metal containers filled with sacred food that has been cooked early this morning. The *kes-aria bhat*, as it is called, is orange and follows the usual recipe of broken wheat, sugar, ghee, and dried fruits, all stirred together for hours before distributing to the faithful. It is vegetarian, although legend has it that Emperor Shah Jahan mixed the meat of a Nilgai-deer that he had shot while hunting with the vegetarian food.

The *dargah's* link with the Mughal emperors is close and spans generations. It was Emperor Akbar, who ordered the first giant cauldron built. It is called *Badi Degh* (or Big Cauldron) and can cook a whopping amount of food.

Akbar pledged to come to Ajmer on foot if he won the battle of Chittorgarh in modern-day Rajasthan in India. When he won, he kept his promise and distributed food from the big cauldron. Some say that the big cauldron cooks 125 'mounds' of rice, a number that is hard to fathom. Let's just say that food from the big cauldron can feed about 15,000 people.

Not to be outdone, Akbar's son, Jahangir ordered the construction of the smaller cauldron, called *Choti Degh* (or small cauldron).

He ordered that this food be distributed to 5,000 people, taking the first offering himself, after which his queen, Noor Jahan, and the other women of his harem followed suit. This kind of largesse was typical of the empire-building Mughals. Today, moguls of a different sort – from hedge fund managers to business magnates – pay money to the *dargah* to have food cooked and distributed. Typically, this happens during the Urs every day or to mark a special occasion.

Ajmer at the time was a great amalgam of many faiths. It was the pleasure resort of emperor Shah Jahan – a far cry from the dusty and gray town that it has become today. Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti set up his spiritual order using Ajmer as base. He became known as Garib Nawaz for the compassion with which he treated poor people. He spread Sufism throughout North India, gained many disciples and, most importantly, established the Chishti order that continues to this day. His real achievement was to make his faith accessible to all. **W**

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