

I Chapter 9

God's Exclusive Domain?

To one who moves from country to country, for whatever reason, the new milieu that each time he finds himself in is likely to make him feel queasy about the surprises that might be sprung on him. Saudi Arabia was the last of my sojourns. Having been forewarned about the not too friendly social setting that I might have to cope with there, my feeling of disquiet was that much keener. Yet, since teaching was my bread and butter and I had been twiddling my thumbs for some time, apprehensions about what lay ahead had to be set aside to plump for what was on offer. With a wish and a prayer, I did indeed take the plunge in the August of 1984. Three month's before that, I had been arbitrarily given the brush-off by SWAPO of Namibia (South West Africa Peoples' Union), which was in *de facto* control of the United Nations Institute for Namibia in Lusaka, Zambia, where I had been teaching English since March 1977 as a UN employee. And this, mark you, happened after they had promoted me to a higher UN professional rank, from P2 to P3, with its attendant perks and benefits in recognition of my loyalty to my work. I had faithfully served the UNIN for seven long years!

Anything I might have seen or heard until my arrival in Saudi Arabia was to pale in comparison with the mind-boggling battery of sights and sounds that assailed my senses on the day I arrived there. My wife Ammu was with me. We were passing through Riyadh's King Khaled International Airport in Saudi Arabia, with its striking, sand-coloured Moorish architecture and its severe Saracenic arches. It was early August. After we disembarked, we were first led through pleasantly attar-scented passages to the immigration desks. The desks were manned by unsmiling, Khaki-clad men, mostly bearded and not particularly the most pleasant of the species. Then it was to the Customs, where our baggage was opened and gone over, if you like, with an unsparing toothcomb by more men in uniform. We were taken aback by their brusque manner especially towards foreigners. Most of the arrivals, mark you, could only have come to the kingdom at their invitation to help run their country. You repack your rummaged personal belongings with helpless rage, the pervasive fragrance notwithstanding. The churlishness with which all these minions of the state treat anyone who is not dressed in a thobe and a headgear in the manner of an Arab is not lost on the new arrival.

The unforgiving sun that unrelentingly burns their land would also seem to have branded its harsh imprint on its dwellers, sparing almost no one. The unmistakable body language that accompanied every guttural speech-sound they spewed out, interspersed with glottal stop after glottal stop that sounded more like gargling without water, only served to confirm my apprehensions. Could this be, one wonders, an instance of geographical determinism, the desert having struck such dissonance in them? That would be food for thought for a social anthropologist. I dare say that geography in particular is a major factor that determines social behaviour. I may venture to add in retrospect that Saudis have a veiled distrust of non-Arabs, towards whom their approach often borders on the

rude. To paraphrase the American philosopher and social writer Eric Hoffer, such rudeness could well be an instance of the weak man's imitation of strength.

And over the next ten years, every time I was out and about in the Kingdom, I would feel the same nameless unease I had felt at the airport arrivals that first time. I came to observe the average Saudi's glacial standoffishness as if to erect an unseen wall between the *ibnaa'a albalad*, the sons of the soil, and the foreigners, *al ajaanib* or *al agraab*, in local parlance, especially if he is not part of the greater Ummah. It was an off-putting setting that would sorely test any one's threshold of patience.

True, as I said before, I had gone there of my own volition after I was offered a teaching position at the King Saud University in Riyadh. I had earlier been interviewed by Dr. Jasser A. Al-Jasser at the Saudi Arabian Embassy situated in Belgravia, London. I went there and bided my turn to be called in for the interview. I cannot say I was not nervous. From the moment I entered his office, he lost no time in putting me at ease before interviewing me. He conducted the interview as to the manner born. With his open, friendly face, his well-groomed hands, his impeccable manners, his chaste diction and easy-going informality, one could then be forgiven for having for a brief moment wished that his countrymen would perhaps be cast in a similar mould to give one reassurance. The country could not have made a better choice when he was later appointed the Cultural Attaché for Saudi Arabia at their embassy in Ottawa, Canada.

The cliché that appearances, however, could be deceptive was later to be proved right beyond the shadow of a doubt. That the cliché had not lost any of its expressive force was what those minions of the state at the airport were inevitably able to demonstrate later. For the first few weeks after our arrival, we were on probation, in a manner of speaking, to determine whether we would make the grade in coping with the new environment and the strangeness of the people around us. No doubt, in this frosty setting, it was only natural that we were filled with nostalgia for the soothing monsoons, the fruit-laden tropical trees, the twittering birds and the luxuriant greenery bursting around us and the familiarity of our own home in the rural ambience we had left behind.

Most of all we would miss our own sort, the people of our community we could rub shoulders with without fear of being rebuffed. But, as time goes on and hopes stretch thin, you begin to wonder whether it is worth the effort to hope for something more congenial to evolve any time soon. Instead, would it not be sensible to make do with whatever is on offer, such as they are, especially if you are no longer young and kicking and time is running out on you. So with a sigh of resignation you settle for it, remembering the words of Peter Marshall, who was Eisenhower's White House Chaplain: "If you do not get what you like, you had better start liking what you get" or words to that effect.

The Saudi Arab stereotype wears his suspicion of a non-native on his sleeve and keeps his distance, unless of course he has to deal with you as an official, when he is more likely to be stiff in manner and frugal of speech. There is a saying in Malayalam that goes like this: '*Andiyodu adukumbozhe maangaayude puliyariyu*. Freely translated it means, '*It is only when you get closer to its stone that you realise how sour a mango can get*'. With the exception of the academics and the student fraternity, the Great Unwashed

generally dealt with strangers with more than a hint of distaste and hence their inclination to keep their distance. Call that a defence mechanism if you like. If they learn, however, that the foreigner is a fellow-Muslim and one of the Sunni persuasion, they may lighten up, somewhat, as he is perceived as part of the greater Ummah. *Alhamdulillah!* Even then the gap has only been narrowed, but not fully bridged.

I had arrived in Riyadh to teach at the Centre for English Language and Translation (later renamed the Institute of Languages and Translation) of the King Saud University. Another newly-appointed teacher, the very English Peter Armitage hailing as I recall from that romantic city of Bath, had also arrived by the same flight from London as we had. Soon enough it turns out he was a chess aficionado who was determined to add new converts to his pastime. This was perhaps his way of trying to find relief from the tedium that a cheerless country like Saudi Arabia was likely to generate. And, until his marriage to an American teacher at the women's college in Riyadh some years later, he would be a regular visitor to our place carrying with him his chessboard and chessmen in the fond hope that he could induct us into that venerable fraternity of chess aficionados. In good time he realised that it would be an exercise in futility and his visits tapered off, but never once had he lost his Anglo-Saxon cool to show his understandable exasperation. Resignation was all he would show, shrugging his shoulders. We remained friends until we left Saudi Arabia in 1994. But I am jumping ahead of my narrative.

We were met at the airport by a King Saud University functionary and driven to the university guest house on University Street not far from the cramped old university campus located between An-Nasiriyah and Al-Malaz quarters of Riyadh. The campus had been moved to Dirayyah on the outskirts of the city just a year earlier. The new campus, beautifully laid out all of nine-square kilometers, is where I taught for the next ten years. As you enter the university through the main entrance, you walk into a sun-filled, high-roofed atrium that has a certain friendly ambience that one would, however, soon be disabused of when one moves on to the sterner atmosphere beyond, especially of the administrative offices. One had to go there every now and then, for this or that. The university is only a short distance away from the erstwhile mud-walled capital Ad-Dirayyah of the ruling House of Saud on the high ground above Wadi Hanifah, some ten kilometers or so as the crow flies to the north-west of downtown Al-Bathaah in Riyadh. It is now preserved as a valuable part of their national heritage.

We were put up at the guest house for a week before we were shifted to a university apartment in the inner city, cheek by jowl with the National Hospital in Al-Malaz, on As-Sitteen (the Sixteenth) Street, one of the main arteries of Riyadh. The National Hospital was a privately-run hospital which catered to the medical needs of the city's swanky rich. A familiar sight in the evenings was the gleaming row of expensive limousines, mostly Rolls Royces and Cadillacs, Mercedes Benzes and BMW's drawn up in chauffeured splendour, no less, in front of the hospital after having disgorged their occupants.

Emerging from their cars, the Saudi Arabian men, one noticed, nearly always reeked of expensive cologne. They were invariably dressed in their dazzling white, ankle-length *thobes* and the red and white checkered, or more often the pure white, head cloths held tightly in place over their heads with what looked like a length of black whipcord wound

twice round the crown and sometimes tasseled at its end. By the way, when unwound, the same black ‘whipcord’, it was rumoured, would double as a handy whip in a scrap.

These ‘nabobs’, on getting out from their limousines, would be seen to shuffle along with their women bringing up the rear. The women were always covered head to foot in billowing black silk *hijaabs* hiding their body-hugging *jilbaabs* (gowns), which only an unbidden rush of wind might embarrassingly reveal. With black gloves often covering their hands and black *niquaabs* masking their faces, but not their ceaselessly roving eyes, they ambled splay-footed into and out of the hospital.

To one unaccustomed to the way Saudis by and large carried themselves, this was a sight to behold. I remember a friend and colleague of mine at the university, an Afro-American by name Dan Thomas, saying how he could determine what part of the world a person hailed from by merely watching his gait. Was this like the old bunkum of judging a person’s character by examining the bumps on top of his head? Or, by reading palms as fortune-tellers do to dupe the credulous, those naïve enough to believe in their mumbo-jumbo or reading tea leaves in a cup? I remember Dan Thomas ribbing me by saying that my gait was hard to place country-wise, but was more like the ‘rolling gait of a sailor just back on shore leave’ or words to that effect.

Dan Thomas was an easy-going, handsome young man who had converted to Islam as a reaction to the White Anglo Saxon Protestants’ disdainful attitude towards black Americans carried over from that of the old slave-owning Confederates of the South. Yet, his outlook on life was far removed from the *Salafi* injunctions of the Islamic Way. Unlike many an expatriate Muslim in Saudi Arabia, he was not given to currying favour with Saudis by dressing like them or growing a beard as prescribed by Islamic tradition or for that matter praying dutifully five times a day in response to the muezzin’s persistent call. I don’t recall ever having seen him going into or coming out of a prayer facility- of which there were many in every college at the university, apart from the University’s main mosque itself. Nor do I recall ever having observed him fasting during Ramadan. In fact, he was quite casual in his ways and would cock a snook at their social prohibitions and could not see eye to eye with the Kingdom’s martinet *Muttawwayyiin* or moral police.

There were other American colleagues too at the university. There was the young Gary Schmucker, a hefty six-footer, a Mormon –a ‘latter-day saint’- and an easy-going young bachelor from Salt Lake City. He was certainly not as insular as some of his compatriots. He knew a great deal about the world beyond the USA and especially about India. For instance, we learned how well-informed he was about the Syrian Christians of Kerala. Their culinary concoctions seemed to be of great interest to him, in particular. He was a gourmand and his ample waistline stood open witness to it. He was no stickler for formalities, and did not expect others to stand on ceremonies either. Occasionally, he would drop in unannounced at our place and happily partake of the food on offer. He was no stranger to the hot and spicy *meen karri*, the trade-mark fiery-red fish curry the Syrian Christians of Travancore often cook with red chilli powder and assorted spices. He would savour it without showing any signs of having had his tongue scalded by its sharp sting. The secret of doing it, he revealed, was to keep your lips closed while chewing lest you let air into the mouth. This unthinking intake of air is what spurs a chemical reaction in

the mouth that burns the tongue, he would add. You live and learn, don't you? And, even for inveterate hot foodies such as me, this later proved to be a boon that saved me from having to have quaffs of water between hot mouthfuls to cool the tongue. His studio-apartment in downtown Batha was a favourite meeting place for informal get-togethers for his young colleagues, and sometimes for older ones like us.

In contrast, there was the not so young Dr. Bob Reising, our Director of Studies from 1985 until 1986, when he returned to Duke University from where he had been on a sabbatical. He was soft-spoken and mild-mannered and could make friends easily with all manner of people, but his knowledge of the world outside of the USA was somewhat unflattering. I remember the occasion when on my first telling him that I was working in Zambia before coming to Riyadh, he asked me what part of India Zambia was in. Bob and I became family friends and during his short tenure in Riyadh many were the times we socialized. Before his return he was kind enough to give me a testimonial, in which, among other things, he wrote: “.....As a person, Mr. John is equally noteworthy. Always pleasant, he is friendly without being presumptuous, independent without being aloof. His maturity and stability- in a setting that makes heavy demands on everyone's composure- are clearly commendable.... Still another advantage worthy of note is Mr. John's wife, Achamma, an intelligent, charming woman. She can always be counted on to provide admirable support for Mr. John.”

Another colleague, Robert J. Oughton, just as mild-mannered and soft-spoken as Bob Reising, was also an American, but one who was uncharacteristically unpushy for an American. We would often cross our paths along the corridors of the university on our way to the classes and briefly exchange pleasantries and that was as far as our social contacts went. It therefore came as a pleasant surprise to me when one day, quite out of the blue, he turned up at my office and after some small talk presented me with a signed copy of the book ‘*Man of the House*’, the memoirs of one of America's top-ranking Democrats, onetime Speaker Tip O'Neill from Cambridge, Massachusetts, where, we are told, the closest he ever got to Harvard University was a summer job mowing the lawn! The gift of the book was a simple, unaffected gesture of friendliness from Bob, which I treasure to this day.

Of all the Americans on the faculty, Joe Wilkins was the one you would readily take to. Since he was said to have a Mexican bloodline on the distaff side, his skin tone was a shade darker than that of a ‘pale face’. Or perhaps, it might have been his not infrequent visits to the beaches of Goa that gave him that well-tanned look. When he smiled, his eyes pleasantly crinkled up at the corners on meeting his friends, which was often. He was a chronic bachelor, whose rumoured sexual leanings were said to put heterosexuals on their guard. Doubts about his sexual orientation, however, proved to be inconsequential when one came to realise that he was a man for all seasons.

He was excellent company. He was a widely-travelled, man of the world. If you believed that style is the man, then Joe was the man; his sartorial taste was impeccable. As a good conversationalist, he could hold his own in any company. Apart from English, he spoke Spanish with equal facility. His choice of words was always felicitous. He was a raconteur *par excellence*. Many were the tales of his travels he would regale his audiences with. Like his compatriot Gary, he too enjoyed the culinary concoctions my

wife Ammu conjured up. Unlike Gary, though, he seemed to prefer the veggies, especially the spinach and beans relishes she cooked with grated coconut and sautéed with hardly a hint of oil. He preferred that to the oilier version that most Keralites liked. He was a good host too. As a bachelor, he often entertained his friends in restaurants and seldom in his own digs.

I remember him most of all for the weekly radio programme he compered for the Saudi Broadcasting Service, in which he would interview people, one on one, from different walks of life. Once, I too was roped in. At the pre-recording session, as my interlocutor, he asked me questions of a personal nature among other things. At one point he wanted to know what my philosophy of life was, since I was no longer ‘a spring chicken’ as he put it. And on the spur of the moment, I quoted Robert Browning from “*Rabbi Ben Ezra*” and said, “*Grow old along with me/ The best is yet to be/ The last of life/ For which the first was made*”. Since any reference to the Jew was anathema to the Saudis, he wasn’t sure whether anything written by a Jew and that a Rabbi would be broadcast, however unexceptional its purport might appear to be. He feared that the official censors might blank it out and said as much. Regardless of his apprehensions, he did record it. In the event, it went on the air ‘uncensored’. Saudis can be discerning too.

Then there was Dick Coolidge, half-name sake and a cousin many times removed of the erstwhile US president Calvin Coolidge. He was pre-maturely bald, which gave his handsome face a scholarly slant. He was a man of few words and, since my social skills were not particularly well-honed either, it suited me right down to the ground to form a close friendship with him. He was married to a Pilipino belle and they had daughter, a sweet little girl. We discovered that our common interest was the card game of Bridge, weekly sessions of which were held in Riyadh for the three-score or so enthusiasts, cutting across nationalities, to gather at one venue or the other tucked away discreetly for privacy.

This was one of the very few pastimes that helped us relax in an otherwise hidebound milieu that frowned upon every form of ‘irreligious’ diversion. Also, that these sessions were jointly organized by the Brits and the Yanks might well have made the ubiquitous moral police think better of barging in while our sessions were on. The Saudis may be xenophobic, but they would think twice before trifling with anything to do with a white, especially if he was in some way attached to one of the foreign embassies.

A rare opportunity for those without diplomatic immunity to enjoy a tippie in Riyadh without fear of being laid by the heels was offered at the cocktail parties that the foreign diplomats held for special invitees on festive occasions, where alcohol invariably flowed. It was the lookout of the invitees, though, to make sure that they bore no ‘telltale’ signs at the time they left the venue after the party, lest they got into trouble with those ubiquitous guardians of Saudi morality. If perchance a Saudi was among the invited, which was not always, he would first ascertain that there were no other Saudis around before he made a beeline to the bar.

For the lesser mortals who wanted to indulge, but could not hope to get invited to such sundowners, there was always the ‘instant’ moonshine that one could come by clandestinely if one knew the right contacts. Interestingly, it was called ‘Siddiqui’ in

Riyadh presumably eponymous with the one who had originally distilled that ‘poison’ in Riyadh. I may add that it was no mean substitute for the authentic *eau de vie* of whatever label. It was rumoured that quite a few ordinary Saudis of Riyadh too were quite fond of it and quietly patronized its illicit sources. The well-to-do Saudis had the more branded varieties for a tipple privately brought in from Bahrain. Incidentally, the country’s claustrophobic social codes compelled their royals, who wished to be thought of as role models in Saudi Arabia, to seek their pleasures elsewhere in Monaco or in London.

Of all our Malayalee friends in Riyadh, for sheer conviviality none could match my colleague at the University, the pocket-sized Prof. A. M. Mathew and his gracious wife Bridget. Mathew taught Mathematics to an all-male student body at the Engineering College. At one time, he had also taught the subject at the women’s section of the University in a different campus altogether. He had taught the subject with the help of CCTV without being able to teach the girls face to face. They could see him, though. He would say it was like ‘the blind leading the sighted’.

In an otherwise dull city *vis-à-vis* the social scene, Mathew and Bridget provided some cheerthrough the frequent social evenings they arranged at their residence. As the doyen of the Indian community in Riyadh, by virtue of his having been there longer than anyone else, he made it a point to make contact with new arrivals in Riyadh and break the ice with them. When they at his invitation would pitch up at his doorstep, they were invariably welcomed with his trademark smile, his face all lit up. And when Mathew laughed, and that heartily, especially when he was in the company of his friends, he liked to chortle loud and long, often followed by a kind of hail-fellow-well-met banter. Bridget was more restrained in her show of warmth, but was still the perfect hostess.

And their guests came from a cross-section of the Indian Diaspora. Not for them the subdued clannish Malayalee get-togethers. Drinks and animated conversation flowed, and at least once as I recall, a *gazal* was sung by one of the lady guests. The socializing was followed by a meaty repast. I have often wondered how the Mathews managed to serve alcoholic drinks, which without fail generated such geniality and camaraderie. At an educated guess, their embassy friends might well have been their source. After the party, how their guests negotiated their exits safely was their own lookout.

Among our other Malayalee friends, there was Mohan, who worked for the City Bank as a senior officer. He and his wife Miriam along with their school-going children Vikram and Yohan were put up in a villa at the enclosed City Bank compound with its high boundary walls that was thankfully hidden away from prying eyes. A bond that linked us was a long-standing connection between Ammu’s and Mohan’s families; Mohan’s paternal aunt had been married to Ammu’s paternal uncle Thomas Cherian, a clergyman. Mohan was a man of few words, but Miriam, a petite lady, was as chirpy as she was chatty. They did a lot of entertaining and the spread was always exotic, thanks in part to the live-in Ethiopian maid they had. Many were the times we made social calls to their place. I enjoyed these visits for the opportunity it also gave me to play tennis at the covered courts that their compound boasted of. Tennis was another form of recreation that helped me bear up the trying evenings in Riyadh. The University campus too had several tennis courts, which were well-patronized by the faculty and the students.

The mention of tennis brings back memories of another Malayalee, Abraham Mathew aka Moni, who was married to Gulshan, a Punjabi lady. They had two children. He was the CEO of Reeman Travel Agency in Riyadh. Our two families would frequently break bread with each other. He would often join me for a game of tennis at the university courts. He was also a frequent visitor to the City Bank courts. He played the game fairly well. But I would remember him most of all for his being a ladies' man; or, at least for his thinking that he was one, to put it delicately. He would always be seen trying to chat them up whenever he happened to meet them, often at a party.

Ousep Mathan, a financial consultant with a local bank, the Al-Rajhi Bank, I think it was, was another Malayalee gentleman we had struck up a friendship with. Sadly, he is no more. I remember him most of all for forecasting that the Indian Rupee would continue to fall relentlessly against the American Dollar. Thirty years ago it had fallen to around thirty Rupees to the Dollar. Now, thirty years later, we are witnessing a free fall with another thirty added. Ousep's wife, Vanaja, hailing from Andhra Pradesh, is a wonderfully warm woman whom we have kept in touch with to this day. She lives in Bangalore.

And then there was Anath Bandhu Kapila who hailed from Hoshiarpur in Punjab. His Sanskrit first names loosely meant 'a friend of the abandoned'. True to his name, as a devout Hindu, he helped the poor in India at the instance of his Guru back home, who was his friend, philosopher and guide. He was no bigot unlike a doctor friend of his –I forget his name- who was one of the regular invitees to his residence for social evenings. Once, we happened to be sitting next to each other and chatting about this and that. When the conversation veered round to the Muslim presence in India, out of the blue, I heard the said gentleman saying *sotto voce* that the lot of them should be packed off to Saudi Arabia! I couldn't believe my ears!

As an amateur numerologist, Bandhu would claim to find magic meaning in birthdays and forecast the future of anyone who cared to listen. I remember his telling us that if our daughter Bina didn't find a husband before she was 25, it would take some doing later on. He had added that our relationship with her would be a disturbing one. I made light of it then. Now, still waiting vainly to see her hitched up, I am painfully reminded of Goldsmith's line, 'Those who came to scoff remained to pray'. *Touché!*

Anath was a man of more than average height and of ample girth, but was surprisingly full of zip while playing games like badminton or tennis. Unlike 'Kapila' the sage of mythical fame, whose wrath burnt to ashes King Saraka's arrogant children, this Kapila could hardly hurt a fly. He like his wife Uma was avowedly vegetarian, bordering on the vegan. Uma was from Saharanpur. She was a pleasant-mannered, pleasant-faced lady, if rather buxom. Uma taught at the women's wing of the University. Bandhu, that is how his friends addressed him, was an extrovert who made friends easily. Although he was a Stevonian, having been educated at the exclusive St. Stephen's college of Delhi, he did not give himself airs. He came from a privileged family, many of whose members were high-ranking civil servants, but he had no qualms about taking up any kind of work however beneath themselves it might appear to be to the salaried classes.

His wanderlust led him to Germany where he worked as a cab driver to pay his way through college while studying German. Often were the times when I would see him, in his greasy overalls, tinkering with his jalopy, an American gas-guzzler of indeterminate age, to keep it road worthy. Not for him the luxury of the workshop. He and I had shared an office at the University before I could get one allotted in my name. We would often visit each other socially. He and his wife were good company and Uma was an eager hostess like Ammu. They also left Riyadh the year we did, and we met up again some years later in Mclean, Virginia, not far from Washington D.C. during one of our visits to the U.S. I remember his taking us out for a spin, despite the rain, to the military museum and then to the Lincoln Memorial in Washington. We were out of luck with seeing the cherry blossom trees there in full bloom, though. He then treated us to a sumptuous lunch at the ubiquitous Woodlands vegetarian restaurant.

Anwar Ali Khan was another colleague with whom we struck up a close relationship, especially during the latter part of our sojourn in Riyadh. We were neighbours, upstairs and downstairs sharing the same villa. This was the last of the four residences we had occupied in Riyadh. Anwar hailed from Kadapa in Andhra Pradesh, as also his petite wife Sophia. Anwar was quite laidback in his approach to life. Even when Sophia at one time had to be hospitalized for closing a septal defect of the heart, he soldiered on managing his home and their two young boys Asraar and Abraar without any visible signs of anxiety. Just before Sophia left for the hospital, my wife went down to their place and asked if they would object to her offering a word of prayer for Sophia's quick recovery. They eagerly said, "No". And when a day or two later we visited her at the hospital, I remember Anwar excitedly telling Ammu, 'Madam, your prayers have been answered!'

Some time later, when he along with his family came up to our place to join us for a party that we were hosting for Ammu's sixtieth birthday, quite unexpectedly, he made as if to touch Ammu's feet. She had gone to the front door to usher Anwar and Sofia in. On seeing Anwar bend down to touch her feet, she precipitately backtracked, incomprehension writ large on her face. It hadn't occurred to her that he was trying to show respect to an elder in the customary Indian fashion. But, she could only retreat as far as the opposite end of the room, at which point she threw her hands in the air and gave up. The whole scene was hilarious. We all had a hearty laugh. His attitude to Indian customs and rituals was open-minded and relaxed. One could say he was a syncretic Muslim, although some might argue that syncretism and Islam were mutually exclusive.

Having had opportunities to rub shoulders with many enlightened Muslims since my student days, I was able to see that as individuals many of them were quite capable of separating their religion from their social practices. And they never endorsed the identity politics that many an Islamic republic subscribed to as does Pakistan for example, or, for that matter, Saudi Arabia itself. Dr Kamal Shaheen, my Egyptian friend and colleague, was one who despised identity politics. He was a debonair gentleman whose *savoir faire* earned him a wide circle of friends.

In 1989, Salman Rushdie's book '*The Satanic Verses*' that supposedly lampooned the Prophet was stirring up a hornet's nest, which led to its proscription throughout the Islamic world. And fearfully trying to pre-empt unrest, elsewhere too in countries with significant Islamic minorities the book was likewise banned, like India I might add.

Uncharacteristically, the incident saw the Sunnis for once making common cause with the Shias throughout the world. That notwithstanding, even after Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa that put a price on the author's head was issued, it was Kamal, I think, who had flirted with danger by being bold enough to smuggle a Xeroxed copy of this book into Saudi Arabia on his return from leave in Britain. It then did its backdoor rounds among his friends. He must have felt that there could be no excuse for trying to deny others the right to read it for themselves and draw their own inferences.

How this could have gone undetected in a country where virtually everyone, let alone the locals, is under the scanner came as a surprise to me. You see, the Orwellian prognostication of the 'Big Brother' watching you was no more a fantasy in Saudi Arabia. And, thereby hangs a tale. In the evening classes held at the university for new learners of Arabic, which I also attended, I made the acquaintance of an Iranian working at the Iranian embassy in Riyadh. His name escapes me now. Was it Mohsin? His English passed muster, which he was always trying to polish up with a little bit of help from others. He appeared to be a decent sort and we made friends easily. It was thus that he sent me an official invitation to their Independence Day party at his embassy.

It was sent in my college address, but it did not find a place on the letters board from where the faculty would normally pick up their mail. I was soon to learn that it had been intercepted and passed on to the afore-mentioned Dr. Jasser A. Al-Jasser, the Dean of the Institute of Languages and Translation. He sent for me, showed me the invitation and gently asked me what possible connection I might have had with the Iranian embassy. When I explained that it was from an Iranian classmate at the evening classes, he handed me the letter, but not before admonishing me against attending the party for my own sake. Much against my better judgement, I reluctantly sent in my apologies. When I look back on that incident, I cannot help but feel that his word of caution was a pre-emptive restraint to save me from the predicament of being hauled up and grilled or worse by the state intelligence agency, the *Mukhaabaraat* or whatever it was called. You see, Iran and Saudi Arabia had never been on the friendliest of terms.

In a country that frowned upon anything that even remotely put one in mind of the more delicate pleasures of life like music or cinema or theatre, leave alone a sundowner, the Malayalees generally made do with low-profile social activities like picnics. They were often held in a secluded spot, usually a date-palm grove, owned by an incurious Saudi who also happened to be someone's *kafeel* or sponsor. Or they had quiet get-togethers at one or the other of the expatriate homes over the Saudi weekend, generally on a Friday. Such social inter-action provided the emotional crutches that sustained the lives of the expatriates who would otherwise have found their day-to-day lives in Saudi Arabia somewhat hobbled by the halter of the kill-joy morals with which everyone was notionally tethered in Saudi Arabia.

At the picnics, the ladies would be the conveyor belt that continually kept offering the indispensable munchies for the picnickers to tuck in. In between, when they could squeeze in some free time, they would also join in as the men and children played parlour games. The hardier men would often opt for a game of volleyball or badminton on an improvised court. As for the get-togethers indoors, they had to make sure, though, that

such parties were not too noisy to attract unwelcome attention from strait-laced Saudis in the neighbourhood. Looking for any other form of relaxation was to cry for the moon. The local TV fare on offer in the evenings, except for an Egyptian sitcom or two or the customary newscast, was for the most part predicated on the promotion of Islam.

Interestingly, I remember a Saudi student of mine once taking me to his place ostensibly to give me a break from the obvious tedium of life in Riyadh. On reaching there, I found a group of men sitting around a TV set and a cassette player in the living room and watching a video cassette showing a lively Indian cinematic dance by half-clad girls. They invited me to join them. It was rather passé for my taste, but I went through the motions lest I offended them. The point is, the State may decree that any attempt at amusing oneself thus is not only *haraam* (un-Islamic) but therefore also *mamnua'a* (forbidden), yet apparently the locals seem to know how to pass round it.

A much older student in his early thirties, Abdul Rahman as I recall, newly married and of independent means, invited us to his villa. We were promptly ushered in on our reaching his place, but just as promptly he led Ammu to an interconnecting door and motioned her to go into an adjoining room presumably to join his young bride.

Unfortunately, as I was to learn later, the young thing did not know a word of English. Ammu remembers how they spent a good part of the evening unable to communicate with each other except through tentative sign language. And all the while, Ammu also had been going bonkers trying hard to master the art of hulling the roasted pumpkin seeds that was on offer, before popping them into her mouth. She could only look on in amazement as her hostess did the seed-popping with practised ease.

And to her immense relief, when later the young thing served her dinner in the sequestered part of the villa, Ammu was glad that the 'dialogue of the deaf' and the seed-popping had come to an end. Meanwhile, Abdul and I had been sitting in the living room in splendid isolation, chatting. We then ate our dinner, which had earlier been brought for us and handed over through the half-opened connecting door by a pair of beautiful hands, with the face of the owner dutifully hidden behind the door half ajar. I could not get even a fleeting glimpse of the face that fed us to satisfy my curiosity. The food was delicious.

Saudi citizens are a curious racial mix. There are the genuine denizens of the country hailing from the various Bedouin tribes of the Arabian Peninsula. Then, there are the descendants of the African slaves that the locals had owned, but have since been emancipated and amalgamated. There are also the migrants whose ancestral roots can be traced back to other parts of the Islamic world, especially the eastern Mediterranean.

The social habits of the latter showed a marked difference from those of the denizens of the desert. They were more liberal in interpreting their social mores. One such was Suleiman Al-Ibrahim whose genealogy I was told could be traced back to the Levant. Having had his antecedents founded in milder climes, one could surmise his family was less inclined to go the whole hog and follow the sanctimonious Saudi way in their social habits. I had become acquainted with him through my brother-in-law Jacob with whom he had business connections at that time. Ammu and I were their guests more than once. His wife and college-going daughter would invariably join us in their living

room to socialize with us and also at the dining table, their faces fully uncovered. Of course, their hair would be fully covered as a concession to the tradition-bound pan-Islamic dress code. The lady of the house was certainly a wonderful cook. Her culinary offerings were always done to a turn, Arabic yet with a Levantine dash added to it, I venture to say.

Then, there were the Lebanese eateries for dining out, one of the small mercies one had to be thankful for in Saudi Arabia. My cousin on my mother's side, Gobi Albert, an automobile engineer, who was an old Saudi hand having worked there for many, many years, knew the right restaurants to go to and what fare each one specialized in. He was a chronic bachelor and a great foodie, whose regular habit of eating out had led him to explore the by lanes of Riyadh to discover the right places to go to. And he spoke Arabic like a native, having lived in Baghdad for a good many years.

Many were the times when he would play host to us at his place or invite us out for dinner over the weekend. Strange as it may seem, not all eateries encouraged a mixed clientele, even members of a family. Some of the restaurants were simply all male. Even a Saudi with his wife in tandem could not go into one of those. There were also the wayside kiosks that served Shawarma, Dolma, Kibbe, Baba Ganoush and what have you for those who felt peckish when they were out and about. I don't recall ever having seen women on their own patronizing such takeaways.

Women and men in Saudi Arabia remain highly segregated and are restricted in how they are allowed to mix in public. Also, Saudi women are never seen outside their homes without being shrouded in their *hijaabs* and *niqaabs*. In reality, the face was not required to be covered in the *hijaab* in the days of the Prophet; it was only much later, in the fourth century or so after the Prophet, that it was included in the *hijaab* under the regressive male chauvinist interpretation of the Islamic text in defiance of the Prophet's own injunction, "...the best man among you is he who treats well the female members of his family and a bad man among you is he who misbehaves with the female members of his family". (As told by Bukhari) In fact, his first wife Khadijah, a businesswoman, was held in high regard in her society. She could employ men to be her agents in doing business on her behalf with distant places like AsShamms, present day Syria. Before she chose him to be her husband, Mohammed himself was one such employee.

Measured by that yardstick, the present-day Saudis will not measure up; but, it will be less than fair to my erstwhile hosts if I fail to admit that, unlike in India -*mera bhaarat mahaan*- where women are often savaged on the streets in one way or the other with impunity and killed lest their victims lived to tell the tale, we hardly ever hear of women being molested or raped or murdered in Saudi Arabia. Could this be because the criminal justice system in Saudi Arabia is avowedly retributive especially for cases such as rape - read, beheading- and intended to deter others from being tempted?

Or, does this connote a *hijaab* connection? The girl child is adored and lavished upon in Saudi Arabia and is allowed to enjoy the sartorial freedom that children enjoy elsewhere in the free world until the 'prison house' of maidenhood descends on her. But by all accounts this was not so in the Prophet's days. It was only a small section of Muslims that had, and that too under the pretext of the Islamic veil or *hijaab*, "first deprived their

women of their basic and fundamental rights”, as Dr. Mahmood Alam Siddiqui, of the Centre for Arabic and African Studies, JNU, New Delhi, wrote in the Open Page of *The Hindu* on Sunday July 8, 2012, “including the right to education and the selection of a husband by free will and usurped their liberties and rights.....In fact the society of the Prophet was a combined society in which men and women were partners in their routine works on the field, on the battlefield, offering prayers together in a mosque, acquiring education...” Hence it was Man who had turned the oppressor, not Islam, he contends. Women have since the 4th Century Hijra, been kept in subjugation and in their black ‘shrouds’. Saudi men who feel strongly about extending equal rights to their womenfolk are as rare as snowflakes in summer, but even they dare not defy the theocracy that would brook no dissent.

Strangely, when the well-to-do Saudi women would leave for their frequent holidays abroad, especially the nubile of the tribe would cast off their ‘camouflage’ with alacrity and, lo and behold, heave a sigh of high-bosomed relief in their jeans and tops clutching their skins, with their accompanying male folk looking on indulgently. And yet to think that earlier in the day they had cravenly conveyed their womenfolk to the airport fully ‘covered’! The ‘double standards’ are not lost on the discerning onlooker.

Even expatriate women in Saudi Arabia, when they are out and about, are enjoined to wear what is called an *abaaya*, an ankle length, loose, black robe to cover them with, from shoulders down to their ankles, but they are generally exempted from the injunction of having to cover their faces. If, however, an expatriate woman unwittingly revealed any part of her leg above the ankle in public, howsoever accidental it might be, she could be in trouble! She could get the cane on the exposed flesh from those road-prowling bullies! Mercifully, the saree-clad South Asians, as also those dressed in a Pakistani Salvaar-Kammis outfit, are spared such humiliation. But, if one of them were in the town of Buraida and its environs in the heartland of the Nejd region she would be seen with even her face uncovered only at her own peril.

These moral policemen stand apart for their role as the official guardians of Wahabbi morality that allows no room for non-conformity to the local customs and beliefs. Wherever people throng, be it a public building, or a crowded street or a market, one cannot escape their baleful presence. They would stick out like a sore thumb wherever they are! It would seem they are stubbornly indifferent to the way they appear in public. They choose to dress carelessly and wear an unkempt beard as though they are not interested in such worldly frippery as to making themselves presentable in public. For instance, the jaunty whipcord that forms a part of the Saudi headgear is also missing from their habiliments. They are also given to hitching up their pantaloons and indifferently exposing their legs a good many inches above the ankles. They projected themselves as a caricature of the Saudi man in the street.

It was only during the First Gulf War that they were tactfully reined in from doing their loathsome work in the presence of the Americans, since there was a large squad of women among the American military personnel stationed across the Kingdom at that time ostensibly to defend the Kingdom against the hordes of Iraq’s Saddam Hussein, who, it was put about, had cast his covetous eyes also on Saudi Arabia’s oil wealth along with that of Kuwait and would soon send his forces into Saudi Arabia as well. The truth is that

it was the American armed forces that had first rolled into Iraq from Saudi soil allegedly in response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. And that was not done with any altruistic motives, either. Primarily, it was to make sure that the Kuwaiti oil continued to come on stream to the Americans. Tactically, it was also meant to spread Saddam's forces thin by their having to fight on two fronts.

The American intention was also to draw the Saudis into a war that was in the first place not of their making. Funnily, the very thought that a war on their soil might be imminent scared the living daylights out of many a Saudi. The well-heeled Saudi city dwellers in their droves made haste to leave their high-walled villas in the cities and headed out in their caravans and four-wheel drives to the desert for the relative safety of their farm houses in their date-palm groves or their well-appointed tents. For a few days, all flights out of the country were suspended for fear that Iraqi missiles might make air travel hazardous. Schools and colleges were closed indefinitely. As was customary, vacation was the time when the expatriates in the university faculty used to leave the country *en masse* for their well-earned rest and recuperation. And, in this instance, the bookings that they had earlier made, suddenly stood cancelled. I remember no seats were available for love or money for a few anxious days until the alleged danger blew over.

This also brings to mind how, when Saddam Hussein's forces invaded Kuwait on the 2nd of August 1990, thousands of rich Kuwaitis including their royals, under cover of darkness, fled from their country in disorderly haste having left everything behind and sought refuge in Saudi Arabia. They were received with open arms and put up in the hundreds of custom-built apartments which were lying vacant in Riyadh at the time. Apparently, these had earlier been built to be gifted to the nomadic Arabs to resettle them in an attempt at social engineering. Being the wanderers that they preferred to remain, the story is, they had turned up their noses at the offer. Was it their self-esteem or their preference for their time-tested mode of life that made them decline the offer? Either way, this came in conveniently handy to accommodate the Kuwaiti refugees. In the event, the Saudi hospitality was received with such bad grace!

To my knowledge, the arrogance of the average Saudi is nothing when compared to that of the average Kuwaiti even when he is far away from his own bailiwick. During the Gulf War, those who sought refuge in Saudi Arabia might have been expected to behave, if not with gratitude, at least with ordinary decencies. But no! They made an unbearable nuisance of themselves by their demanding ways in their dealings with others, especially the working classes. For instance, if they went shopping at a supermarket, they would expect the expatriate shop-floor assistants to leave their posts and wait on them hand and foot, carry their shopping baskets or push their trolleys while they moved from bay to bay picking up stuff more often than not at a snail's pace

Sometimes, even the Saudis had to bear the brunt of their insolence. My wife Ammu remembers an occasion at a Riyadh supermarket checkout-bay when a Saudi who was just behind a Kuwaiti in the queue generously offered to pay for the Kuwaiti refugee's purchases. The man turned livid and barely managed to stop short of turning upon his would-be benefactor, but not before letting loose what sounded like a string of swear words in Arabic. Before behaving the way he did, he could have at least thought of how safe he was from the Scuds that were flattening his country even as he spoke.

Talking of Scuds, Iraq had launched a few scud missiles towards Saudi Arabia as well. Two of them that had managed to evade the American anti-missile missile ‘Patriot’ had hit Riyadh. Apart from slightly damaging a building façade or two in the city, thankfully they did not cause any human casualties. It was also rumoured that Saddam might use chemical weapons, and so gas masks were distributed by some consulates, just in case. And people were also told to leave their homes at short notice and head towards the nearest civil station, should air-raid warning siren be sounded at any time. Strangely, not many of the expatriates in the city were privy to this arrangement. On one occasion we too heard the siren and witnessed the ensuing hubbub around us, but were at a loss not knowing what to do. It was only the next day that we learned why the Saudis in our Dirayyah neighbourhood had left their homes in disorderly haste honking their horns and drove away from their homes hell-for-leather. They had zeroed in on the local fire station. In passing, I may mention that two gas masks were issued to us. It is still with us, unused, as a souvenir of the ‘war’ on Saudi soil that never was!

A sizable number of the drivers who were seen driving the Army trucks along the highways and byways of Saudi Arabia at all times, night or day, were American women, mostly dressed in their casuals. And, there was the danger that they would create an awkward dilemma for the guardians of Islamic morality. It was for that reason that the religious police had been discreetly reined in and ‘grounded’ as I said before. After the Gulf War, when most of the Americans had left the Kingdom, these ‘defenders of the faith’ crawled out of the woodwork and were back on their old beats with a vengeance.

Of particular joy to them was their habit of barging into bachelor accommodation, without so much as a ‘by your leave’ to surprise Muslims who did a bunk at prayer times. In that hunt, if non-Muslims happened to cross their paths, they regarded that as a bonus. That was how a Christian compatriot of ours, an agricultural specialist by name George Varghese –to his friends he was merely Raju- was one day apprehended at prayer time for no better reason than that they found a Bible – a Malayalam Bible at that- by his bedside in his digs and was charged with, of all things, trying to proselytize the Saudis! And that in Malayalam, if you please! The hidebound Muslim clergy of Saudi Arabia, it has to be said, are faith-haunted by their mortal fear of losing their captive audience who might conceivably be tempted to plump for a more liberal way of life.

Raju was convicted by a religious court and was ‘awarded’ 180 lashes ‘of the best’. And here comes the best part. Overflowing as their hearts were with the ‘milk of human kindness’, they were to administer the whipping staggered over three ‘easy instalments’ of sixty each at fortnightly intervals lest the full dose at one go might do him in. After he would get his full quota, he was to be deported. Isn’t it amusing that even unregenerate sadists have their own uncertainties? A twinge of embedded conscience would well have involuntarily disturbed them in spite of their professed unctuousness, perhaps? In the event, Raju’s employer, who was an uncommonly decent sort, managed to get him out of the country, with the connivance of a senior Police-officer friend of his, but not before Raju had borne his first lot of sixty lashes. Just a few days before his departure, I remember our calling on him and seeing him squirming with excruciating pain, hardly able to sit or lie down, plastered as he was with salve to heal the angry welts that knotted his bloodied back and behind.

Unlike this kind Saudi gentleman, many Saudi employers were not half-way humane when it came to dealing with their workers. The workers often fared no better than serfs at the hands of these exploiters. Especially in the case of their workers in the labour force, they conveniently turned a deaf ear to the ‘still, small voice’ of fair-mindedness that for ever enjoins Muslims to be kind to their workers. For instance, those who arrived in the kingdom on what are cryptically called ‘group visas’ are then farmed out by their sponsors to different parts of the country to work as virtual slaves in animal farms or date groves without being paid even the pittance they had been promised, for months on end or, for that matter, fed enough to keep body and soul together. A recent Malayalam book titled “*Aadu Jeevithum*”, by one Benyamin and translated into English as “Goat Days”, describes in detail the sub-human conditions in which the likes of them are kept. Ironically, it is the sponsors’ agents in ‘catchment’ areas like India or Bangladesh or Pakistan or the Philippines or wherever who unscrupulously aid and abet these cruel men in keeping their own compatriots in such bondage.

Even a worker who manages to sign a personal contract in his own country, one on one, with the terms of service including the pay-packet mutually agreed upon, finds on his arrival in Saudi Arabia that this has been rendered invalid. He then has no option but to sign another contract for much lower wages and has to surrender his travel documents to their ‘liege lords’, their employers. Incidentally, as for surrendering travel documents, they make no exception to anyone. Even professionals like doctors or accountants or university teachers on contract had to do it.

It is not as if the Saudis from the lower strata of their society fare much better than these foreign workers. In the cities of Saudi Arabia with its fabled riches, it is paradoxical that there are ghettos where the poor and the dispossessed among them live in penury. For instance, if you move from the obscenely rich up-market areas of Riyadh further south past Al-Badia’h to the Al-Suwaidi Quarter you will see how relatively deprived the residents there are. It is paradoxical that there is penury among so much plenty. Curiously, a sizable number of them are the descendants of the African slaves they once had owned. And come Ramadan season, when Muslims are bid to give Zakaat for the relief of the *Fakirs* and *Miskins* (Read, the poor), these indigent men and women from the ghettos of Riyadh fan out to other parts of the city in the hope of receiving alms. It is not as if the country does not have enough for everyone’s need, but it is just that poverty must exist to satiate man’s greed. The police try to make sure that these ghettos are not easily accessible to those foreigners who want to satisfy their stealthy urge to be curious. Try hard as they might, the Saudi Arabs could not have easily shrugged off the history of their past that was linked with slavery, notwithstanding their time-honoured tradition of the emancipated role-model Bilal, the Prophet’s man Friday and close friend. But then, the Prophet was a man before his time.

Then there was the case of the Filipino, a ‘born-again’ Christian by name Oswaldo Magdangal, a member of the “Jesus is Lord Fellowship” based in Manila. But for the timely intervention of their president Fidel Ramos, he, according to unconfirmed rumours, was to be executed on 25th December, 1992 ostensibly for ‘having preached the Christian faith’ in Saudi Arabia. Could he have chosen to do it, one wonders, in his own native tongue Tagalog or was it in English, which would have in any case cut no ice with

the commonality in Saudi Arabia? In a letter, President Ramos had appealed to Saudi Arabia's King Fahad to suspend the sentence in these words "I wish to make a personal appeal to your royal highness to spare Oswaldo Magdangal from execution. As you know, 25 December is observed as a day of peace and forgiveness. I believe the significance of the season will not be missed by your majesty." Incidentally, Ramos wasn't sure precisely how to address the Guardian of the Two Holy Mosques, so he addressed the king first as 'your royal highness' and then threw in 'your majesty' for good measure as an honorific title just in case. Interestingly, Ramos was perhaps unaware that a few years earlier the king had given up the imposing title of '*Jalaalat Al Malik*' (His Majesty) to embrace the less imposing, more duty-driven and honorific-free appellation of '*Khaadimein Sheriffein* (the Guardian of the two Holy Mosques). In the event, whether it was by commutation or not, Oswaldo was deported along with Renato Posedio, another Filipino, who was in the same dire straits as his compatriot.

Interestingly, from what I had seen of Filipino Christians in Saudi Arabia, they were generally given to cocking a snook at the average Saudi's faith-based sensitivities by wearing their Christian credentials on their sleeves, as it were. Once on my return to Saudi Arabia, I remember observing a Filipino standing in front of me in the queue at the Airport immigration counter, cutting a dash with his silver chain at the end of which there was a pretty large cross peeping out of his open collar. He also cockily flaunted his brief case with the legend 'Jesus Saves' boldly emblazoned on it, as though to say, 'I defy you!' something that no Malayalee would dare do. Like Falstaff, with his mental suppleness of discretion being the better part of valour, the average Malayalee would desist from even a hint of defiance of Saudi diktats! For all we know, Oswaldo might have been testing the waters of Saudi intolerance and might well have paid for it with his life but for Fidel Ramos' timely intercession on his behalf!

Along with Ramos' letter, the Philippines government had also instructed the Philippine Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, the very Muslim Ibrahim Rasul, to help secure Magdangal's release by personally appealing to the king. What Ramos had not known was that the earlier cited Filipino, Renato Posedio, had also been incarcerated with Oswaldo for the same 'crime'. If the Saudi king deigned to reply to this appeal, it was certainly not put up in the public domain considering how byzantine Saudi Arabian powers-that-be could be.

There was, however, a proxy in the person of one Abdulmohsin H. Mosallam, the Deputy Editor-in-Chief of the local newspaper '*The Arab News*' to respond to it through his newspaper on the day of Christmas, of all days. It was a tiresomely woven web of sophistry intended to obfuscate the reader even as he let loose a barely-veiled tirade against Ramos. And what else could one expect from one of the Salafi apologists of Saudi Arabia? And all because Ramos had made an appeal to spare a human life! Can one expect anything else from a man blinkered by his tunnel vision? Inter alia, Abdulmohsin claims that Islam reserves special treatment for those non-Muslims who are under its protection and have entered into a covenant with an Islamic government in accordance with the principle enunciated in the Quran i.e. 'Unto you your religion, and unto me my religion'.

True, in the days of the Prophet, the Christians and Jews, who were regarded as People of the Book or *Ahl ul-Kitaab*, were allowed to worship in accordance with their beliefs. Muslims of yore might well have entertained unsavoury stereotypes among people of other faiths, but as a religious people the early Muslims had chosen to protect the others from harm because they understood how the others could be just as religious though in their own ways. In *Sura XXIX –Verse 46* (*Sura Ankaboot* , or the Spider) of the Quran we read, “And dispute ye not with the People of the Book, unless it be in a way that is better, save with such of them as do wrong, But say, “We believe in the revelation that has come down to us and to you. Our God and your God is one”. (“*Quuluu amanaa billathi unzila ilainaa wa unzila ilaikum walhunaa walhukum waahidun*”. And hence, leave them alone to worship as they like.

Such ‘protected’ people were known in the days that followed the Prophet as *Dhimmi* or *Ahl ud-Dhimma*Whoever persecutes a *Dhimmi* or usurps or takes work from him beyond his capacity or took something from him with evil intention, I (the Prophet) shall argue against him on the Day of Resurrection.....What transpired later on, however, was that the divine edict revealed through the Prophet came to be more honoured in the breach than in its observance and, in course of time, these non-Muslim subjects living in a Muslim caliphate were expected to wear special dress and pay the *Jizya*, a head tax for not professing the true faith, that is, *Deen ul-Haneef*.

One can hardly forget how in a similar fashion every Jew in Nazi Germany was compelled to wear his identity for all to see in order to tell them apart from the Teutonic peoples. The Jews were given a wide berth by these *Herrenvolk* whose fodder the Jews were soon to become in the Holocaust. And those very German and East European Jews who survived the holocaust, known as the Ashkenazim, now transplanted to the land that they had appropriated for themselves from its traditional inhabitants -paradoxically with the connivance of their erstwhile tormentors in Europe and later in America- harass the hapless Palestinians and deny them their birthright to live in their own ancestral land! The native Sephardim, the urbane and the more cultured Jews of the Middle East and the Mediterranean, can only look on helplessly even as the likes of Benjamin Netanyahu and his ilk continue with their dastardly acts of murder and pillage. For them, it is quite kosher to bomb Palestinians.

With their ancestral lands largely stolen to make way for new Jewish settlements, the helpless Palestinians have been relegated to their miserable ‘reservations’ in Gaza and the West Bank, with the Americans and Britons winking at it, and with the witless international community falling between two stools. The Palestinians have thus been emasculated and reduced to the largely dispossessed state they find themselves in now. It has to be said that the *Dhimmi* of old were much better treated and certainly not subjected to such ignominy at the hands of their rulers. Even in apartheid South Africa under the Boers things were not half as bad for the indigenous Africans.

Over the years, however, the *Dhimmi* came to have only reduced rights and lived on sufferance under Muslim rule. Abdulmohsin, the above-cited correspondent, coyly equates the *Dhimmi* of yore who lived as a ‘covenanted’ people in medieval caliphates with the expatriates in Saudi Arabia, who as foreign nationals are not bound to be ‘covenanted’ with the Saudi King or to swear fealty to him. After more such

gobbledygook, he concludes that even if the whole world turns into an ocean of polytheism and atheism, (only) the Creator of Man should be worshipped in (the) one island of Monotheism –the Holy Land of Arabia. Thus, it is not intolerance, as people generally tend to believe, but it is a policy to provide the true faith in the Oneness of Allah with one permanent place of its own. Allah’s exclusive preserve, would you say?

It is as though worshipping God of all mankind, the Creator of Man is the inalienable monopoly of Muslims to the exclusion of others in Saudi Arabia! Others who wish to worship God on that soil would invite the ire of the powers-that-be! It is as if the invisible, ineffable, supramundane God Universal, or *Rabbilalamein* as Muslims themselves would regard Him, has been corralled in the Saudi backyard, to be worshipped as their own exclusive Allah. It is not as if they are unaware that the Arabic word ‘Allah’ which meant ‘God’ had been in use by the other first language speakers of Arabic in West Asia, i.e. first the Semitic Jews and later the Semitic Christians, centuries before the Semitic Muslims arrogated the term to themselves. ‘In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth’, we read in the book of Genesis. In the Arabic Bible, it reads, “*Fil bada’i halaq Allahu asSamwaat walArdh*. Allah had been the common appellation for God for the Jews and the Christians of the Middle East long before Islam was conceived. After the advent of Islam, by the accretion of absolutist interpretations of dogma over time, Islam has commandeered *Allah* as their exclusive, inalienable deity, reflecting the dangerous nature of a closed belief system.

Could that have been the reason why anyone of a different religious persuasion who brought his sacred books into the Kingdom with no intention other than to read them and draw spiritual strength from them would see them trampled upon by the factotums at the Customs? I have been witness to how even decorative wall hangings such as the Indian *Kathakali* (a South Indian classical dance form) masks, or sketches of such classical dancers, being trashed at the customs. Could that have been the reason why a person who brought such harmless kitsch into the Kingdom ran the risk of being harassed by these guardians of Islam? Christians in that country have had to worship God on the run as it were shifting from one meeting place to another, constantly looking over their shoulders and praying that they wouldn’t be apprehended by the obnoxious Muttawwayyiin? Likewise, the Gospel according to John in the Bible tells us how Christ’s ‘disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews’.

From what I had learned through the expatriate grapevine, except for the Roman Catholics, the Malayalee Christians of Riyadh cutting across denominations ranging from the Orthodox and the Episcopal to the Pentecostal, would discreetly meet for worship every Friday in small, inter-denominational groups, but never at the same venue for long. You see, Sunday was working day in Saudi Arabia. Ammu and I had joined a group led by one George Mathai who worked as an accountant for Exxon Saudi Arabia. His wife was a cousin of mine. Incidentally, he was a bit of a stuffed shirt who could not see eye to eye with anyone who might have a different take on matters of faith. We would also get together for Bible study with our close friends Mathan and Gigi and James and Leela and Tony and Jaisy, making sure we never met at the same place two times running.

There were also prayer groups of mixed nationalities. Ammu and I remember attending one such group on a few occasions. But, their practice of bear-hugging one another on

arrival put me off as I was not particularly enamoured of the touchy-feely stuff in public. Every time, a fellow believer in that mixed group eagerly approached me all agog, I would stretch my right hand out as far as it would reach to stop him or her from getting any closer. Of course, I would not fail to compensate with a large smile.

It was not as though the Christian expatriates in Saudi Arabia who met in prayer groups were deliberately daring the powers-that-be. It was just that the need for spiritual sustenance became that much sharper especially when one is denied a secure milieu that is congenial to one's accustomed way of worship. Even those who had not been regular churchgoers or practising Christians back home, interestingly, would suddenly discover a hitherto unfelt inward urge to worship communally, despite the risk of being caught worshipping a supposedly 'different god' by the religious police.

I can vouch from my own experience that even the university precincts were not altogether free from the presence of these pesky patrolmen. On my very first day there, at around noontime, I heard what I was to learn later was the muezzin's call for the *Dhuhr* (noon)prayers. I had been at that moment waiting patiently at the university library to pick up a membership card. I could see people all around me, springing up as one from their seats and then heading in one direction or the other. On a reflex, I made as though to get up and then looked around. Puzzled, I decided to sit back to see what came next. By then, even the library assistants had also made their exits.

Just then a bearded young Arab charged into the library, ran his eyes all around, which came to settle on me sitting there in bemused isolation. Seeing a bearded man, he might well have mistaken me for a fellow-believer. He came straight at me, gave me a stern look and in a stentorian voice bellowed, "*Ssalaa'h!*" meaning 'prayer' even as he pointed his angry finger in the direction of what I was to learn later was the nearest mosque. I casually looked away and ignored him. He gave me a none-too-friendly sidelong stare, but probably unsure if he should lock horns with a much older person, he exited the room hastily perhaps hunting for more quarry.

The next encounter was in the classroom not long after I had started teaching. It was early days yet for me to feel comfortable about exchanging banter with the students. Until that day I had not revealed anything about my antecedents except to tell the students my name as also where I came from. I could sense that they wanted to know more, but were hampered by their lack of communicative skills in English to draw it out of me. On the day in question, when in the course of the lesson the term 'parentage' came up, inadvertently, I let slip the word that my mother, a Christian, hailed from Mesopotamia

Then out of the blue, a scruffy-looking student, whom I had earlier suspected was the odd one out in that class, stood up and with venom in his words blurted out, "We hate Christians!" There was an instant hush in the class and, even before I could react, the class to a man had asked him to sit down. That respite saved me from making a knee-jerk riposte. Instead, it gave me time to ponder before I said, "If I were given to expressing similar sentiments about people of other faiths, I wouldn't be standing here teaching you" or words to that effect. The class looked shamefaced, which went to show that even the uncompromising sectarians that the students generally were would, in spite of themselves, betray involuntary decencies. They tendered an apology on his behalf. When

the culprit thus found that he was momentarily isolated, he must have felt sufficiently chastened to look sheepish. He slowly sat down. Realization that he should have been a little more circumspect in expressing his prejudice appeared to have dawned on him. I left the classroom with my faith in myself fully restored.

A year went by since then and I had by that time started attending evening classes to learn Arabic formally. When you learn a new language, it is often the pithy *bons mots* that stick in your mind and are likely to be used to show off the little that you know. I was in another class, and there too there was a misfit, an unkempt hulk who was certainly not the most intelligent of that lot. I would often wonder how the likes of him could indeed have made the grade to be in a university classroom. Was he a plant?

He was clearly like fish out of water in a class that was more than passing active in its interactive dynamic. If he was asked a question, he would either squirm in his seat or keep mum or mutter something cryptic in colloquial Arabic, which latter often caused a titter to go round the class. I surmised it was but a kind of defensive ploy to cover his academic inadequacies. That this would exasperate me no end was but natural, but each time I would desist from an instinctive put-down considering how unprofessional that would be. Instead, I would merely smile at him and then turn to another student.

But, magnanimity, as they say, has its own limits. One day, even as the customary titter was doing the rounds, I looked up at the ceiling and, raising my voice a decibel or two, said completely deadpan in Arabic, “*Kabeer ul-Jismi walaakin Qaleel ul-Aaqli*”, that is, ‘Big of body but small of brain’. The rest of the class caught on and instinctively guffawed before they could rein themselves in so as not to cause a fellow Arab further embarrassment. I had a curious feeling of *schadenfreude* when I saw his compatriots apparently relishing my repartee, even if only for an unguarded moment. It is a common human failing that even the best among us would derive some secret pleasure, perhaps mixed with a twinge of guilt, at someone else’s discomfiture.

Which reminds me of an occasion when my repartee almost fell like water off a duck’s back, as this particular ‘duck’ wasn’t quite quick on the uptake, as they say. This was a handsome young Saudi from the upper crust modishly dressed in a dazzling-white outfit, his tasseled *guthra* or head-dress included, which set him apart from the typical man-in-the-street in his red-and-white chequered headgear. It was still early days for me at the university. Locating a lecture theatre was not always easy because of the distances one often had to cover along the seemingly unending walkways connecting colleges and then descending into warrens of crisscrossing pre-fabricated passages, one passage hardly looking any different from the others. It was thus that I ended up in the wrong place to be brought face to face with unfamiliar faces, on the day in question.

I had walked straight to the podium before I turned round and realised a tad too late that I was in the wrong class. And, before I could retrace my steps, the aforesaid ‘duck’, who was comfortably ensconced in the back row, drawled out in Arabic, “*Ya Rafeeqi*” which, I was to learn only later, was a condescending way a city slicker addressed a country bumpkin he regarded as socially beneath him. Although I did not know its import then, I guessed from the tone of his voice, the arrogant smirk on his face and his body-language to go with it that his crack could not have been very complimentary. And when one or

two of his classmates sniggered with him, I was no more in doubt. That having got my monkey up, almost as a reflex I gave tongue to my testiness in Malayalam even as I was walking out of the class, but not before I saw his mouth snap open like a box unsprung, his face lost in translation. He looked confused. All I could think of in defence of my unprofessional response was, ‘Well, he asked for it, didn’t he?’

Ammu too had had her share of such scrapes with the watchdogs of Saudi morality. On one occasion, after we had made a social call on our friends Joseph and Kumari in the Haara quarter of the city, even as Ammu was stepping into our car parked outside, a car went by, and its occupant, a young Saudi barely out of his teens, suddenly stepped hard on his brakes and screeched to a stop. Then he did a double-take to draw alongside our car and signalled to Ammu to cover her head. She shot a sideways glance at him, crinkled her face, narrowed her eyes and, with a dismissive thrust of her chin in his direction, rasped out, most unladylike, ‘*Podaa*’ in Malayalam which meant, ‘Get lost!’ Her grimaced annoyance was not lost on him, but he might have thought better of trying conclusions with a determined woman much older than him and sped off as fast as he came. I heaved a sigh of relief, for it was most unusual that a prototype of his calling should beat a hasty retreat and not let his writ run. I could not help but marvel at my wife’s devil-may-care insouciance. What can I say? As we in India would say, “She is that way only.”

Then there was the time she was accosted by one of them at a supermarket, this time an elderly man, who motioned to her to cover her head. She raised her head, arched her eyebrows and merely confronted him, eyeball to eyeball, derision writ large on her face. To my surprise, he blinked first and then stalked off without another word. I was certainly impressed again by her nonchalance, which made him look out of his depth.

One could go on and on in this vein about Arabia – or Saudi Arabia, as it is currently named after the Al Sauds, the family of its founder the Late King Abdul-Aziz Bin Abdurrahman Al Saud. He had conquered almost all the Bedouin tribes of the Arabian Peninsula by the year 1932. If he could not conquer them, he entered into entente with them and eventually cajoled them into being a part of his version of greater Arabia. No doubt, he was a great warrior and a shrewd leader. His successors have since then been treating the country as their private fief and its people almost as their retainers. They derive their family’s legitimacy from the compliant religious orthodoxy that exists in a symbiotic relationship with the Al Sauds.

And the said clergy are to a man dyed-in-the-wool Salafists who egg on Sunni Muslims of the world to regard others, like for instance the Shia Muslims, the Jews, the Christians and the Hindus, as *kaffirs*. They just stop short of naming them as *waajib ulQatal* (deserving of death), as they know that it would not go down well, in this day and age, with the international community. To the credulous new converts to Islam elsewhere in the world, it is a coded invitation to go out and look for potential game to hunt. Accordingly the Sunni youth, especially those who cop out of schools and have fallen by the wayside, may be tantalized by the foolish hope held out to them of having comely maidens to dally with in the hereafter. Some even turn into suicide bombers in countries like Afghanistan and Pakistan, killing innocents by the hundreds; with mindless, random violence. The Saudi clergy, mostly wearing hennaed beards, regularly appear on the state TV as

preaching zealots, projecting a picture of haloed piety. They are so convinced of their own moral superiority that they are simply unequipped to proffer reciprocal recognition of comparable worth to other religious faiths. The fundamental unity of all religions is not part of their mindset, although the Prophet himself had recognized that in his days.

One has to concede, however, that the Islamists are no more fundamentalist in their outlook than the rabidly anti-Islamic modern-day Christian Zionists of the Bible belt, mostly members of the lily-white, latter-day crusaders or of the diehard elements of the Tea Party, a splinter group of the Republican Party, a throwback to the redneck slave-owners of the old Confederacy. Going further back in time, how can one forget the Christian terrorists like the Inquisitors of 13th century Spain who tortured, crucified or burnt at the stake thousands falsely accused of heresy or the Conquistadors like Hernan Cortes of the 16th century who conquered and terrorized Mexico, Central America and Peru?

Again, the Islamists are no more exclusivist than the present-day, urbanized Indian Saffron Brigades, metamorphosed by the obscurantist, home-grown ideology of Hindutwa that has of late begun to infect India's body-politic. They are notorious for doing others in for their religious beliefs or social mores. That these vigilantes could get away with their organized ugliness is a reflection of the breakdown of law and order in India. Maybe the forces of law and order conveniently connive at it, for all we know. We know how, of late, youths celebrating Valentine's Day or patronizing a dance bar have suffered grievous bodily harm at the hands of these goons with the policemen looking on. They thrive on hatred and violence. They have nothing else to them.

How can one forget 1983 and the 3000 Muslims massacred in Nellie, Assam or the Bombay riots or the post-Godhra pogrom of over 2000 Muslims in Gujarat or the systematic carnage of well over 3000 Sikhs in Delhi or the mayhem in Khandamaal where for a change the Christians were fair game to this band of ruffians 'as flies to wanton boys'? And do you remember Graham Stein, the Christian missionary, and his children who along with their father had been burnt to cinder?

Let me hasten to add that the vast majority of Hindus, who hold fast to the precept of *Sanatana Dharma* or eternal harmony, share a rational world view devoid of the sectarian leanings that this pseudo-religionist minority thrives on. The true Hindu, no doubt, devoutly observes all the rituals of his inherited faith, but he also shows *Sarva matha Sama bhaavana*, or a readiness to reconcile with religious beliefs other than his own, and is therefore known for his tolerance and acceptance of others purely as human beings. His outlook on life is humanistic and is primarily concerned with the welfare of man and not so much with this or that religious dogma. He, therefore, stands apart for his abhorrence of such dastardly acts of the saffron-hordes on defenseless people.

The said fringe elements in Indian society would give the Al Qaeda affiliates, the Taliban Neanderthals of Afghanistan and the Laskar-e-Toiba of Pakistan a run for their money in their proclivity to slaughter innocents, not to mention their favourite sport of savaging the female of the species who are reluctant to acquiesce to their arcane ideology. The Shiv Sena in Maharashtra, the Shree Ram Sene in Karnataka as also its doppelganger the Hindu Jagaran Vedike, and the Khap Panchayats of North India, to name but a few, are

all birds of a feather in terms of their intolerance. Interestingly these male chauvinistic outfits are seduced, for want of anything else to do, by the chance to kick people's head in, especially if their targets are defenseless women. It is also a lucrative career option for the unemployed among them. Bounty hunters more like!

These bogus vendors of morality always hunt in packs, but if bravely confronted, the chances are they would have second thoughts. They can find safety only as a horde and act as pawns remote-controlled by their invisible masters, or, having gathered enough Dutch courage, act more like a swarm of troglodytes causing witless violence.

Let me hasten to add that the tendency to kill or maim people or destroy public property with impunity is not a sectarian monopoly in India, but has also insidiously infected all sections of our society including the so-called secular political parties. Just think of the mayhem that the Marxists of India are notorious for creating, with impunity! Making comparisons may be invidious, but it helps the observer to gain insights into the inner workings of Indian political parties, whether left or right.

Shamefully, even Indian National Congressmen, the professed custodians of liberal Indian political culture and others of a similar outlook, for reasons of self preservation, have of late embarrassingly compromised with violence of any kind or fearfully looked the other way. Remember how belatedly our leaders reacted to the gang rape of a paramedical student in a Delhi bus not long ago? Have we as a nation become so irresolute that our elected leaders can hardly say, 'boo to a goose', especially when it comes to confronting gender violence? Or, maybe, like the male chauvinists that these tradition-bound Indians generally are, they are genetically wired to see their women as being unworthy of attention? The sad truth is that too many of our leaders have learned to find safety in silence or stand as mute witnesses to the rampages, the vandalisms, the pogroms and in particular crimes against women without showing concern.

Be that as it may, one has to set this predilection on the part of the Indian politicians to take misogyny for granted against the reality that gender justice across the board all around the globe continues to be under siege. Sarah Elizabeth Webb, a correspondent writing in the Hindu newspaper of 2 December, 2012, asks, "Is the gender oppression in India any worse than it is in the US or does it take a different form?" Her answer is, "Unfortunately, gender violence is still a norm – perhaps even an accepted norm in the United States.During our adolescent years, we are taught to not get raped rather than focusing on teaching men not to rape. most politicians turn a blind eye to the issue, reminding women to be grateful of (sic) the rights that they have been given. ...The oppression of women in the US is ever pervasive, but has simply taken on a new role; one that is potentially subtler.... It wears a new mask, one where women have the right to vote, but not the right to control their own bodies. It teaches women that the violence committed against them is their fault..."

True, the Saudis have a patently medieval attitude towards their women. In Saudi Arabia, as I suppose in many other places, a woman's right to bodily integrity ceases when she is married, but, at least, from what little I could observe, Saudi women of the upper crust fared somewhat better owing, no doubt, to the cross-cultural exposure that they along with their spouses have had during their frequent travels abroad. By all accounts, their

wives, whether one wife or more, were well looked after. And so were their children. But although the love and care they lavished upon their girl children might at first seem endearing, the discerning would soon realise that it was only this early phase in their lives that served to put a gloss on the patriarchy that would descend on them by and by, which as the girls grew up would incrementally limit their freedom.

If we flash back some thirty six years to that tragic event, you would recall how Princess Masha'el Bint Fahad, a nineteen year old member of the royal family was put to death by shooting on 15th July, 1977 in the privacy of a royal palace in the city of Jeddah for the 'sin' of having fallen in love with a commoner by the name of Khaled al-Sha'er Mulhallal. As one might have guessed, the young man too met the same fate, only it was much more excruciating. He was not shot, but was beheaded in public, and strangely not by a professional executioner. It was done by a ham-handed prince who, in his blind rage, had to strike several times before the victim's head could be severed. Not many have forgotten how the Saudi government banned the film, *'The Death of a Princess'*, which by the way spilled the beans to the outside world. No doubt, there are liberal-minded Saudis among the educated classes who would certainly love to see their women fully emancipated socially, politically and economically. But they remain hesitant about acting on it for fear of being labelled as apostates.

Saudi Arabia has restrictions that keep women away from physical activities, including sport. This was not so in the days of Prophet Mohammed who had in fact encouraged women to acquire such skills as swimming, riding and archery. In fact women, like Aisha the Prophet's favourite wife, had proved their mettle even on the battlefield as auxiliaries. What is obtaining now shows up the depths to which the Saudis have sunk since those days to become a blatantly stifling society for women. Saudi Arabia, for instance, is the only country in the world in which women are not allowed to drive.

And, yet, I was to learn that the Bedouin women of the desert most of whom have had no formal education, living as they are away from the relative sophistication of the urban areas, are known to drive about expertly within their own backyard unchecked, where the long arm of the law seldom reaches. When it comes to economic necessities, as pragmatists, the pastoral Saudis know where their bread is buttered.

The urbanized women of the upper crust, unlike their poorer rural cousins, can avail themselves of educational opportunities as a privilege quietly offered to them in schools and colleges built exclusively for them. The latest is the world's largest University campus built for women in Riyadh, the Princess Nora Bint Abdulrahman University, where it is understood they encourage women to research in cutting-edge technologies without infringing the Wahabbi segregation norms.

They are perhaps wising up to the fact that oil will not last for ever and that, for survival, a modern industrial information economy cannot be ignored. Or, is this also a sequel to the snow-balling, collective male guilt that is thrusting at their male chauvinistic vitals? It could therefore be a belated attempt to smooth the ruffled feathers of their increasingly restive women who feel relatively deprived in a milieu that is, in any case, not at ease with itself.

Is it not therefore ironical that Al-Quaeda affiliates like the bearded Taliban, as also the 'Boko Haram' of Nigeria, egged on by the Saudi-spawned Wahabbi doctrine and clandestinely sustained by Saudi money, would shoot to kill any girl whose only 'crime' is to have aspired to gain a good education as girls do in free societies? Remember the hapless girl Malala Yousufzai from Waziristan? Saudi Double standards, would you say? With the humungous amounts of Petro-dollars at their disposal to disburse towards realising a global Ummah of the Sunni variety that they have envisioned, the Salafi Saudis have appointed themselves as the international arbiters of an Islamic code of conduct to divest the women the world over of their human rights either to acquire a skill in order to become economically independent or to choose their life partners and live without being led, all of which the democracies of the world have been increasingly extending to their own women.

There are many things beyond the pale for Saudi women. For instance, they may ride their cars, no doubt with their blinds discreetly drawn, yet, as I said before, cannot drive one. It is not as if they had not occasionally tried, for the sheer heck of it, to be at the wheels of their own cars. I remember an occasion in the late eighties of the last century when some of the more venturesome among the high-society ladies of Riyadh, after taking over control of their cars from their chauffeurs, defiantly went for a leisurely spin in a convoy in the hope that their numbers would discourage the police from stopping them. No such luck! They were soon stopped and arrested by the police, who hauled them up before a Sharia court and only let them off after their shame-faced husbands had been given a good dressing-down and bound over for good conduct *in lieu* of their wives!

Serves the men right, you are tempted to say, tongue firmly in your cheek, for having secretly colluded with their women in helping them to acquire driving skills locally! Or maybe they struck a bargain with their women to help them learn driving in far-away America or Europe where the Wahabbi writ for women did not run. Anyway, human nature being what it is, I hope that the Saudi women would continue to push the boundaries of patriarchal acceptability. Are there telltale signs of that now?

Saudi Arabia's announcement not long ago that it would allow women to compete in the 2012 Olympic Games did come as a total surprise. Hot on the heels of that piece of news came the revelation that the Kingdom would induct women into the police force. Well, well! Wonders would never cease in Allah's wonderland. Letting women participate in the Olympics may give the impression that the conservative kingdom has finally seen the light, but it was more likely that they had had their arm twisted by the IOC, to fall in line with the Olympic Charter that regards gender discrimination as incompatible with its mission.

It remains to be seen whether this change is a half-hearted attempt to yield to international pressure, or whether they are willing to stop holding their women back and let them run and jump and throw or be judokas, dressed for sport like other women competitors, and not all covered up for fear that their 'revealing' exertions might conceivably stir male loins. And, as for female cops, if their women continue to be barred from driving, how would these cops cruise the streets? With a male partner at the wheel, perhaps and with their faces uncovered? But, wouldn't that go against the regressive restrictions on women against being seen in unrelated male company?

Interestingly, in August of 2012, a brief article had appeared in the Guardian newspaper in which a certain Caroline Davies wrote and I quote, “A women-only industrial city dedicated to female workers is to be constructed in Saudi Arabia to provide a working environment that is in line with the kingdom’s strict customs... to be built in the Eastern Province city of Hofuf...The aim is to allow more women to work and achieve greater financial independence, but to maintain the gender segregation...” But, wouldn’t you say that financial independence for women in Saudi society and the reactionary practice of gender segregation are mutually exclusive?

If, however, this project becomes a reality, one hopes that these women would, at least while at work, be free to discard their hijab and niqab, even if it is only on sufferance, and be disencumbered from the ‘cabined and cribbed’ existence that they have in the suffocating habiliments they are enshrouded in when they are out and about. If that freedom were stretched to its logical conclusion, one might somewhat facetiously be tempted to quip that they could even dare to be transmuted into the modern-day counterparts of the Amazons of old, the warrior women of the Greek myth, to be their own ‘masters’. One may prognosticate that such a role reversal might even prompt the more insouciant among them to impose some feminist restrictions on the Saudi male of the species. That is, if, in the first place, they can ever manage to circumvent the Wahabbi Segregation theology. It is a catch-22 situation.

The question is, won’t these women need their men anyway? Judging by what is obtaining in the Saudi business world where one notices that they are past masters at managing money, these city quarters would more likely be more money-spinning, ‘day-spend’ centres from which these women would dutifully return with their own hard-earned Riyals to render themselves, money and all, unto the bosom of their men folk.

Yes, an Islamic society by and large is a male-dominated, patriarchal society in which the women, with their Pavlovian conditioning, would seem to make a virtue of their externally-imposed restrictions. I recall attending a World Islamic meet held at Alexandra Palace, Ally Pally for short, in North London some years ago. There were several seminars held there, spread over a week, at one of which I heard highly educated Muslim women, their heads elegantly covered with chic scarves, but faces fully uncovered for all to see, one after the other holding forth about their dress code being an expression of their Islamic identity. These women, all of them from the more westernized parts of the Arab world, were dressed in modish, ankle-length caftans with full sleeves- discreetly figure-hugging, no less- and not in the burlesque of black burqas that the orthodox Muslim women projected themselves. The irony of their sartorial allowances to high fashion, set against the Saudi ‘caricature’, was not lost on the more discerning male observers there. Time and again, having had occasion to observe the alacrity with which especially the younger of the Saudi female of the species cast off their ‘covers’ on leaving Saudi shores, I felt that this claim of ‘Islamic identity’ was only a fig leaf intended to hide their lack of freedom in their own backyard to choose how they lived.

This is not to say that the Saudi men, in contrast to the women, enjoy the freedoms that men as a whole enjoy elsewhere in the free world. Not by a long chalk! Democracy, as the western world understands it, is anathema to them. Saudi Arabia is a highly regimented society in which the Big Brother is always watching the populace. The men

watch the women and the State watches both the men and the women. If it is not the *Al Muttawwayiin*, it is the *AsShurtha alBoolees*.

There is no nice way of putting this, but Saudi Arabian society is a society that a visitor feels an instant apprehension about, especially if he is young and extroverted. The Saudis, or at least those Saudis who have chosen the austere path, seem to disown pleasure of any kind. As I said before, theatres and cinemas are *haraam* (forbidden) in that country. There are no pubs or casinos, heaven forbid, for one to unwind after a hard day's work. But, of course, for those crypto-indulgers of *aqua vitae* among the upper-crust Saudis, whose number as I heard it on the local grapevine is not particularly small by any reckoning, there is Bahrain beckoning them with open arms across the Causeway or Lebanon further afield. For the not so well-off tipplers, the locally brewed moonshine affectionately known as 'Siddiqui' is available on the quiet.

For the youth, in particular, who might be itching to let their hair down and shake a leg, it is a sobering thought that music and dancing are frowned upon. My daughter Bina (who happened to be invited to a Saudi wedding through the good offices of the Saudi acquaintance of mine I mentioned earlier, (Suleiman Al Ibrahim the MD of Al-Andalus Trading Company) tells me that Saudi women, on the other hand, spontaneously sing and dance to their hearts' content with joyous abandon in the privacy of their own seraglios, sequestered from the prying eyes of men. To Bina, they appeared like spirits unbound, having shed their shackles even if only for the nonce.

On the other hand, if men dance, as they occasionally do and that formally, and never spontaneously, its tempo is always soporific and the accompanying song, with its tedious refrain, sounds monotonously querulous. And as they sing, more often than not, the men flourish their drawn swords reflecting their sword-in-hand mindset. The *Arda'a* dance so typical of the Nejd region is one such. As for hoping to see men and women dance together, you might as well whistle for it!

There are scarcely any outlets for Saudi youth to stir things up, unless of course the local soccer team wins a match and then all hell breaks loose as a flag-waving horde of frenetic young men come out helter-skelter in their cars and clog the streets to find long-sought relief from their quotidian restraints. They honk their horns and let off crackers, but the warmth and *joie de vivre* of people in liberal societies celebrating an event in a laidback manner, without having to look over their shoulders, is missing in Saudi Arabia. To the young brought up in liberal societies, Saudi Arabia is the last place to seek work in. If they are, however, compelled to, it would be because they have exhausted other options.

While you are in Saudi Arabia, which is in reality an Orwellian society, one cannot escape the pervading presence of *AsShurtha*, the police, wherever you turn, let alone the pesky moral police. Times without number, along the highways and byways, you are flagged down by cops to check your papers or to give you the once-over. If you think this will not happen at all to you, perish the thought!

On one occasion I saw in my rearview mirror a traffic cop, who was cruising along in his petrol car, suddenly pulling up as he came abreast of my car from behind and signalling me with a peremptory wave of his arm to follow him even as he moved off. I had at that

moment only just got back into my car and was about to drive off from the kerb when this happened. I was puzzled but I knew it would be unwise to ignore him, so I followed suit with resignation. And even as we drove along I noticed how he would repeat this routine with a few more car drivers as well. Soon there was a convoy of cars; all of them for a reason I could not fathom at the time, were white.

We must have driven for miles before I realised that we were on the outskirts of the city. Then suddenly to our left a huge yard filled with cars came into view. The cop at that point slowed down and indicated that he was turning into the yard. I followed as did the others and what do I see but a vast collection of white Toyota Corona cars identical to mine parked higgledy-piggledy in that vast expanse. Only then did I learn that earlier that day a white Toyota Corona was involved in a hit and run incident and the police had been ordered to ground all Toyota Coronas to track down the culprit.

This they could not possibly have completed in a hurry. For no apparent reason, we were compelled to kick our heels for some time before they asked us to report back after two or three days. We were left to our own devices to find our own way back to the city. I returned after cooling my heels for two days to collect my car. To my great relief I was given a ‘clean chit’, which, I was cautioned, I should carry with me for the following two weeks or so whenever I was out and about in my car lest I be hauled up again to go through the whole rigmarole a second time. Luckily, I was spared that ordeal.

In all my ten years of driving in Saudi Arabia only once did I have a brush with the police, if it could be called that. Wishing I could get away with it, I had just parked my car in a no-parking zone, with the engine still running, to zip across the pavement and buy a can of Coca-Cola. I got out, bought the coke and shot back in a jiffy, only to find that the car had vanished as if into thin air. I looked around, clueless. Then, as if from nowhere, a cop materialized before me and with a smirk on his face thumbed in the direction in which the car had been hauled away. In Riyadh, the Police usually outsource the business of carting away offending cars to hauliers. Fortunately, I was able to track down my car to a haulage yard not far from where I had parked it. I paid a 100 Riyals to get it released from them and drove off heaving a sigh of relief, believing that I had heard the last of it.

Sadly, I had reckoned without the all-embracing reach of the Kingdom’s Main Frame Computer which stored information about every instance of violation of the country’s laws, however trivial, and by whom. Information about a car that was involved in breaking a law could be retrieved from the said database at the click of a button, when the car’s license plate number was fed into the search engine as happened in my case. An expatriate who wanted to travel out of the Kingdom, whether on vacation or otherwise, would have to get an exit-re-entry visa stamped on his passport before he could leave, but, as I was soon to learn, not before the big-brother computer had cleared him of any malfeasance.

After the aforesaid incident, when it was time for me to go on vacation I had as was customary applied for such a visa, only to be told by the university administration that I hadn’t paid the fine for a traffic violation in my name. That at once rang a bell but I feigned surprise, whereupon they asked me to check with the *Muroor* or the traffic

department at *Al Murabba*. I went there and dutifully paid the fine before I could get my passport stamped to exit the country and then re-enter it after my vacation. This was also the case when I finally bade farewell to Saudi Arabia, on an exit-only visa.

No matter where you move, you take your own pre-conceptions, or call it attitude, with you and that is what makes it either miserable or wonderful. I have so far been going on with my less than complimentary, and on the face of it ungracious, views about Saudi Arabia, but I would be less than true to myself if I fail to add that, regardless of my negative perceptions, as a whole my tenure as a teacher at the university itself was not without its compensations.

In the first instance, had I been working in India in the August of 1984, I would be pushing at an age when I would have been bound by law to retire from active service and be put out to pasture. Besides, I was at a loose end at that time. Needless to say, obtaining a job in Saudi Arabia had given me a new lease of professional life. And, five years later, when I turned sixty, the normal retiring age in Saudi Arabia, I received this memo from Dr. Abdullah H. Homeidan, the Dean, which read: "I am pleased to inform you that a request has been made for an exceptional renewal of contract for colleagues over the age of sixty. You are among those whose contracts have been renewed for another year, 1414/1415 Hijra"...A year earlier, I had been awarded a salary hike of 30% by the said Dean with the words, "In recognition of your continued co-operation and in appreciation of your effort and achievement, I am delighted to let you know that your salary will be increased by 30% effective the beginning of the new contract 1413/1414Hijra. I take this opportunity to congratulate you and look forward to an even more active role in improving all aspects of academic life in our Institute." This was indeed very flattering. In pecuniary terms, this was a godsend. And, finally, just before I left Saudi Arabia for good, I was awarded a long-service medal with a citation in Arabic, a rare honour that I cherish to this day.

My tenure in Saudi Arabia had lasted for ten years! Professionally, on the whole, those were productive years, during which, even if I say so myself, I was able to awaken the interest of a sizable number of my students in getting to grips with what was to them a foreign language, with a strange orthography and grammar. Besides, the physical problem of adapting to an opposite direction of movement in reading and writing the language could only have added to the challenges they faced. To them, it was almost as if a language had been stood on its head. Besides, what with the students being a pampered lot with everything offered to them gratis and topped up with a handsome amount as pocket money to splurge, their motivation to learn anything, let alone a foreign language, was not very strong to the say the least. Quite a few of them were too lackadaisical to take interest in upgrading their competence in English. Yet, an appreciable number persevered to get to grips with its intricacies. Some of them did manage to do remarkably well overcoming the negative syntactical and grammatical transfers from their mother tongue. Despite their casual attitude towards their studies, the students were by and large quite disciplined in the way they conducted themselves at the university. Student militancy and unrest so common in Kerala were unheard of in Saudi Arabia.

When some of the more religious-minded students I taught felt they knew me well enough to be more forthcoming with me, they wished that I would embrace Islam. They

were sure that I would make a good Muslim. They would come to my office with tracts, pamphlets, booklets, VHS cassettes and what have you on the merits of Islam *vis-à-vis* other religions. And their gambit would be, “We are not comfortable with our communicative competence in English to talk about Islam, but these materials would do the talking for us” My stock answer to every one of them would be, “Show me one person among you who lives by the precepts of your religion and is a role model for me to emulate and I will then become a Muslim”. That put them off trying to proselytize me. Incidentally, a lot of the stuff they brought me had been the creation of one Ahmed Deedat of South Africa. A product of Anglophone South Africa, he would often hold forth in English on Saudi TV comparing the Quran and the Bible, which latter he was quite well-read in. He would profusely quote verses from the Bible at every opportunity he had to try conclusions with Christian missionaries. He rather enjoyed making disparaging remarks about the Christian dogma. I recall the title of one of his concoctions, and it was titled, ‘Crucifixion or Crucifiction?’ There were other titles too, all of which revealed this proclivity for making facetious remarks about the Christian beliefs.

My Saudi colleagues and superiors at the university, the likes of Dr. Jasser Al-Jasser and Dr. Abdullah Homeidan, were all extremely refined human beings who treated their expatriate colleagues with a great deal of respect. They were persons of impeccable integrity. They were never stingy in giving praise where it was due.

One could not say the same thing about the administrative officers of the university. Our approaches for their assistance often ended in a fine kettle of fish thanks mainly to the language barrier. Of all those officials I had to deal with at the administrative section of the university, however, there was one person whose name I remember and that, for a reason. That person was Abdullah Rashid. I remember him because, unlike the other men there who did not seem to encourage friendliness, Abdullah Rashid was always approachable. Ever polite and cheerful, he would process your request promptly without raising silly objections that many a Saudi bureaucrat found joy in raising to delay granting your legitimate requests promptly. Unlike most others in his office, he spoke chaste English without the hint of a Saudi accent. He was always soft-spoken. On my resigning from my job at the age of sixty-five, I remember his asking me why I could not have continued with my work at the University. It was he who made sure that my entitlements by way of gratuity and leave pay were promptly externalized in good time before I left the country for good and all.

Notwithstanding my long drawn out moral indignation about the socio-religious dispensation we had to cope with in Saudi Arabia and of the equally horrifying situations obtaining elsewhere *vis-à-vis* the historical antecedents of intolerant Christians as well, I cannot but end on a more pleasant note. That concerns the milieu I worked in as a teacher.

I must confess that there was uniqueness about the quality time I spent with the university faculty, which was a subtle mix of the enlightened Saudi and the worldly-wise international. It set the tone for the brilliant academic work that went on there. Of course the Saudi ingredient, it goes without saying, was the main driving force. The Saudi academicians were for the most part a highly educated, highly motivated and highly

distinguished presence that gave the place an authenticity that compared favourably with the citadels of learning elsewhere. My stint there also offered me a rare opportunity to rub shoulders with the faculty drawn from different parts of the world, which I thoroughly enjoyed. It to some extent made up for my suffering the ennui of the social life outside the walls of the campus. They were, to mention a few names, Eddie Martin of Ireland, Adamou Waleleh of Ethiopia, Basil Kangbere of Ghana, John Buck of the US and many more the likes of which I had already drawn thumbnail sketches of, all passersby in time, but each in his own way leaving a lasting impression on me.

I have been writing desultorily so far and it is a pity that I do not know how to round it off smoothly. If you have read this far, but have found that it lacked cohesion, I hope you my readers will have regardless taken it in the stride. I shall not ask you to bear with me more. Therefore I will not write anything more.