

The Anchor of Ever-Evolving Lucknow

My taxi stops in front of a massive palace located in the middle of Lucknow. A wizened kurta clad guard asks me if I want to meet Sarkar. I nodded my agreement and he gently ushers me in. Soon I find myself in a drawing room filled with hundreds of books and pictures that probably carry as much history as Mahmudabad Palace.

My interviewee is Ali Khan Mahmudabad, who is a member of Samajwadi Party, a professor of History and Political Science at Ashoka University, a columnist, a poet and also the Prince of Mahmudabad. He grew up in the region of Awadh till the age of eleven before moving to England. After spending several years in different parts of the world, including Syria and America, he currently resides in Lucknow and is always found shuttling between his homes in Delhi, Kaiserbagh and Mahmudabad.

The first thing I asked him – my curiosity as a person who doesn't like the concept of settling down – was whether moving

to different places, but always returning to Lucknow made Lucknow a constant in his life. He generously broke out into an Iranian nazm 'Reeshe dar Khakam' written by Fereydoon Moshiri. Moshiri was once asked why doesn't he leave Iran after the 1979 revolution and move to Seattle, USA. In reply he wrote a poem.

*Man eenjah reesheh dar khaakam
Man eenjah aashiq-e een khaak agar aloodah ya paakam.
Man eenjah ta nafas baaqeest memoonan
Man az eenjah che meekhaham nemidoonam.*

I am a root intertwined with the soil
I love this earth whether I am pure or impure.
I shall remain here until my last breath
And what I want from it in return? I do not know.

"What I mean to say is," Ali tells me, "is that we live in a highly globalized world now. So it's natural that travel is easier. Work can now span places or countries. But my roots are here. The tree grows branches which grow in every direction." He feels that Lucknow is an anchor in his life.

Of all things that help him make sense of the world, language is what he holds dearest. He uses language to understand the complexities of the ever-changing world and indeed to understand differences in communities and people. For a person who has returned home after several years, when I asked him what he feels about the change in the city, he replied that the language of this place has undergone severe changes. When he was growing up, people used Urdu proverbs

and poetry as part of everyday conversation. While Urdu is still spoken today in some parts of the city, there is now an illusion of Urdu having remained. 'But language too must change with context.'

He sometimes wonders what it would have been like to grow up in a time when the language of this place wasn't held hostage by politics. There are very few Lucknow wallahs in the city. Only a very small population of the city belongs to Lucknow, because almost everyone else has migrated to the city and the city has altered with the influx of new people.

Languages do not belong to communities, religions or countries but in India the politics of language has taken a toll on the Urdu spoken locally.

Ali believes that the rich complexity and nuance of the past is disappearing because only the superficial aspect of the past being kept alive. When questions to do with the past came up, I had to ask him the earliest memories associated with Lucknow. He took some time to respond. He was unable to narrow it down to one particular memory, but shared the general sense of what it felt like then.

When he finally remembers, he breaks into a smile. He didn't go out much out of his home and this palace was a universe of its own. He was blissfully unaware of what was going on outside. He remembers Lucknow as being quiet, "something that I don't believe it is today, and also laid back, which I think still exists in this city." He also remembers that a lot of interesting people used to come to meet his father, Raja Mahmudabad.

Today the palace, like the language and indeed the culture is suffering from an air of neglect. Changing times have

brought their own challenges, but it is interesting that despite this, Ali is doing his best to maintain and adapt the past to suit the present. In fact the entire library at the palace is now being digitized. Rekhta is an organization that is working to digitise Urdu Books. The rare manuscripts are being digitised with the help of the British Library. Change is inevitable and not something that we can control, but our response to it is something that we can control to make the transition easier.

At this point, I asked what he would define home as. We have all grown up with the concept of home as being four walls filled with people we know or a city or where our parents are. I felt curious to ask someone who has been constantly travelling away from this definition of home as to what home means for him. For him home is very much in Mahmudabad and Lucknow. They are his anchors. However he also said that he felt at home at different places like Cambridge and Damascus because of the metaphysical connection that he had with these places. But at the end of the day, it is this region of Awadh that he would call his home. Home is, however, a illusive concept. He adds, "It is not a static thing. Home is not a building or a certain place, but it is a confluence of a lot of influences. And I suppose, the influences that have shaped me have come from here, from people who are associated with this area." Interestingly, he places importance on travelling away from home because you only discover what home means once you travel away from it.

He fondly recalls a Portuguese wedding where there was a song that talked about the city of Coimbra and how the city is always at its most beautiful when a person is leaving it. In a sense this shows that we can only learn of the beauty of home

when we are away from it. Like ideas shouldn't be fixed, one should not remain too static, because we tend to develop such a strong sense of nostalgia that we get the urge to recreate the past. He uses a Portuguese word called Saudade, which means a profound longing for something that is absent.

If we don't travel, we will fail to understand the changes in the world and how we too must adapt. In fact we might want to recreate the past and that is dangerous. "The danger in becoming too anchored to one place is that it is constrained by the nostalgia for that which you perceive has been lost. And then there comes a desire to reconstruct blindly" says Ali. Selectively using a few aspects of the past to rebuild it can be dangerous because no matter what the context of the past has fundamentally changed and so things become anachronistic. At one level he believes that Lucknow has become a caricature of itself as many people try to make fit into their preconceived notions of what it was.

He adds that this is not only an injustice to Lucknow and her people but also to the future of this beautiful city. I do find myself agreeing with him that there is a lot more to Lucknow than just its culture and that by reducing it to a singular identity we create a unidimensional picture, utterly lacking in depth and completely uninspiring. Lucknow is not just its glorious past or its famous cuisine or its laidback lifestyle or even its much talked about *tehzeeb*. It is instead a kaleidoscope of cultures, people and their lives which are ever changing so much so that it is quite impossible to try to define it.

The Raja Mahmudabad Library at Lucknow is currently being digitized in partnership with the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library in order to preserve the historical

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documents present at this library. For his part, Ali is trying to merge the old world beauty of this little corner from his childhood with the brash, fast paced world of today as seamlessly as possible without losing its essence.

As he says about Mahmudabad on their Instagram page: Born in the 16th century, adapting to the 21st!