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Sufi singers of Nagore

The word Sufi brings up images and sounds of whirling dervishes in swirling robes; the husky, yearning *qawwali* of *Abida Parveen*; *spiritual couplets* by Rumi... These are images from faraway lands - Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Afghanistan and Pakistan. And most people are surprised when I tell them that there's a 450-year-old Sufi culture flourishing at Nagore in Tamil Nadu.

Ironically, I hear about this through an Englishman, Simon Broughton, who has emailed me his published story on this.

I decide to head down to Nagore.

The road to Nagore follows the coastline south and goes through the scenic ECR (East Coast Road) through tiny villages with thatched huts and verdant paddy fields. The sun sinks over the horizon when we reach Nagore.

While we wait for the Sufi singers, Syed Meeran, my guide for the evening, shows me around the shrine. The Nagore Dargah, which covers an area of five acres, is built over the tomb of Shahul Hamid, a Sufi saint. The *dargah's* facade has been painted with a gaudy mix of white, pink, green and gold. There are five minarets, and the tallest of them, Syed tells me, was built by the Maratha ruler of Thanjavur, Pratap Singh.

He says that more than half the devotees of the Sufi saint are people of other religions and the land where the *dargah* is situated was donated by the Hindu king Achutappa Nayak after Shahul Hamid cured the king of physical affliction.

The stage

Inside, the *dargah* is a maze of alleyways with tiny shops selling amulets, trinkets, white crocheted *topis*, holy books etc. Syed takes us to the area where the Sufi singers perform every morning and evening, and we sit down on the floor opposite a raised platform. Around 10 minutes later, two men dressed in white and sporting green turbans and large beads around their necks emerge from one of the alleyways.

They settle down on the raised platform and start tapping out a rhythm from a tambourine-like instrument that, Syed says, is the *daira*. There are different tones that come out of it - a bass tone from the centre and lighter tones from the edges, which when combined with the jangling sounds of the cymbals, make it seem as if there is more than one instrument playing.

They clear their throats and start singing. I'm taken by surprise at the strength and clarity of their voices. To my ears, brought up on Western music, it sounds a bit raw without chords or harmonies and with only a percussion instrument as accompaniment.

It takes a while for the music to sink in, but in a short while, the people seated around are soaking in the music and swaying to the beats. One of the songs is about the Sufi saint Shahul Hamid and the purity of his life, and another is about the Ajmer and Chishti shrines in Rajasthan.

The lyrics of most of these songs are in Tamil, and Syed tells me that some of the melodies are derived from Tamil film songs of the 60s. There is no Sufi genre like *qawwali* or *kafi* that describes the music I'm listening to. It's unique to Nagore. Syed informs me that the duo has performed at Sufi shrines present across India and even to audiences in Malaysia and Israel.

The singers take a break and Syed introduces them to me as Abdul Gani and Haja Maideen. I ask them how they pursued this career and Abdul Gani says, "There were three of us. The eldest amongst us, Saburmaideen Babha Sabeer, who passed away in 2012, decided early in life to dedicate his life to the Sufi path of god, vowing to give up everything else in his sole pursuit of the divine. The two of us were boys at the time and we joined him, and we've been doing this for the last 40 years."

Do they have an alternate source of income? Haja Maideen says with a smile, "We sing as a means to connect with god. That is the intent. We are asked to play at weddings and engagements, and we also get alms from devotees when we perform at the *dargah* every day. That is just about enough for us to get by, but all the money in the world can't compensate for the peace of mind we get by singing."

Blissful renditions

I settle down on the floor while the duo starts singing again. One line is sung by one of the singers and then repeated by both of them in unison. Over a period of time, the effect of this call and repeat, combined with the beat, is intoxicating and calming. There is the scent of flowers and incense as another day at the *dargah* winds down to the music.

I ask Syed what Sufism stands for and he quotes Rumi: "We Sufis believe that all existence and religions are one and are manifestations of the same divine reality. What is important is not the empty rituals of the mosque, church, synagogue or temple, but the striving to understand that divinity can be reached through the gateway of the human heart: that we all can find paradise within us if we know where to look." He points to the singers and says, "That's exactly why Abdul and Haja sing. It's their means to search for god."

Abdul Gani and Haja Maideen have their eyes closed. I see the muscles and veins on their neck and forehead straining as their voices soar in unison. I see ecstasy on their faces. They are singing their heart and soul out, but it takes a while for me to realise that they aren't singing for me or for the audience. Abdul Gani and Haja Maideen were knocking on heaven's door, and going by what I've seen and heard, I've reason to believe that they've got a bit of their foot in that door.