



FRISKING AROUND WITH THE DOG OF GOD

Sunday, January 14, 2018 – Aizawl (India) Khatla North Kohhran

23.722392,92.717556

I'm too early. The main hall is already quite crowded, but there's space in the wings. Where I sit down, the benches are empty. The Khatla North Kohhran has little in common with churches as we know them in Europe. It's more like a tenement with shops and a garage on the ground floor and offices, classrooms and a large meeting-room adorned with brocade curtains with a white cross hanging in the centre. The pulpit is reminiscent of the seat of a judge. The wooden benches, however, look just like those in the rural churches in France or Italy. Only the board to kneel on is missing – that's because Presbyterians believe that only the mind kneels before God. As such, they pray standing up or sitting down. Soon, gentlemen in suits and ties holding big notebooks swarm into different corners of the room. They are not members of the choir, as I sus-

pect, but donation collectors. The name of every person who gives a donation is recorded in writing; only my money flutters unregistered into the lap of the shrine. In any case, my outfit makes me unfit to adorn the register lines – considering that the rest of the people here are toggled up in the poshest of clothes, in their Sunday best.

I am not sure if the service has already started. An elderly lady utters a few quiet words into a microphone – and everyone closes their eyes. Seems as if the preliminaries are in progress. There is still a crowd between the stairs and the foyer, though, while some extraneous noise is jarring its way into the sanctum of God.

Then, almost as if their entry has been choreographed, about thirty young ladies rush into the church and make their way purposefully towards



the corner in which I am seated. Clearly, all generations have their assigned place in here; only I have foolishly perched myself on the bank of the clever virgins. I make myself shrink as much as I can but I am rapidly encircled, hemmed in on all sides; once again I find myself in a situation from which I can probably not free myself without resorting to coarse measures. For once that does not bother me overmuch – because, hey, how often in life are you engulfed by a bevy of nubile nymphets giggling away in Sabbath gaeity, freshly showered, dressed in their best clothes, and smelling fabulous?

I am suddenly seized by a sense of fear: that my skin might just reveal the aroma of the spicy dog-gut I had eaten the night before. What will my entourage of sweet-smelling roses say when they learn that I have nonchalantly taken pleasure in the body and blood of my best friend? I calm down with the thought that every lamb of God will ultimately be slaughtered and the realisation that I am definitely not the only one in the shrine who had consumed *Ui* yesterday – after all, dog meat is on perennial offer in the markets of the city.

Those who eat dog meat are those who savage the sacred border between the kingdom of animals you caress and the kingdom of animals you slaugh-

ter. Absurd as this distinction is, it is an iron law in many societies. I know – and admire – many people who have such an intimate relationship with their four-legged friends that they actually consider the latter to be the better beings. But then: If you are not supposed to eat an ordinary being, how much worse is it when you dig your teeth into the better being?

Again, there is a bustle in the crowd. Men are now squeezing their way through the rows and handing out notes bearing the stamp of the Presbyterian Church of Mizoram. Clearly, the church council, the chieftains, are being elected. The young ladies are prepared for the event: picking up pens, laying prayer books on knees clad in silk stockings or wrapped in embroidered sarongs or decorated with velcro-studs; laying down the chits and noting down a series of names without any ado. I am excluded from the vote, naturally. My neighbour on the left looks through her large designer glasses at my empty hands. I shrug. She beams at me as if I have paid her the nicest compliment of her life. Unfortunately, she looks just like the young model striking a pose with a spaniel in the giant placard in front of the church, promoting a groomer with a peculiar name that I cannot remember just then.



I realise I am something of a sham – which does not make me feel entirely at home in a church (even if things are very different here). I allow the arguments for and against the consumption of dog meat flit like pinballs through my mind, but I'm not really troubled by the question. I'm playing around with my 'guilty conscience' as if it is a game that will keep me occupied until the service comes to an end – which is likely to take a while in a place such as this one, where even the youth stream unit-edly into the church.

I had actually wanted to make an excursion into the countryside today. But the hotel staff had informed me that no driver would be available before twelve noon because «all the drivers in church» in the morning. So I had decided to attend the service, in anticipation of hearing some singing. Songs, however, have been absent so far – a lacuna that has led my brain to gnaw half-heartedly on the matter of eating dog.

If I were required to present my case on feasting on dog with factual arguments it would be simple. I

have no ambivalent feelings about being a carnivore. Not even while sitting in church. I am a meat eater. And if you can eat one type of meat, namely animal, you can eat another type – any type. If you eat the Lamb of God, the ox, and the donkey, which were witnesses at the birth of Christ, why on earth should you spare the dog of God in your cuisine?

The notes are collected again, and a real pastor in a gray uniform marches up to the microphone. Suddenly everyone jumps up, singing a short song that all of them seem to know by heart. Then they lower their heads and pray: from the rhythm it can only be the Lord's Prayer. It seems to me that the service is starting only now. But as soon as «Amen» has been uttered, everyone starts to stampede towards the exit. «Finish?» I ask my neighbour. «Yes, finish,» she answers merrily, again beaming at me in exactly the fashion the woman with the spaniel in the placard does. At that instant, I remember the name of the dog grooming parlour: «Mercy».

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaran.

