



THE PERFECT COFFEE HOUSE

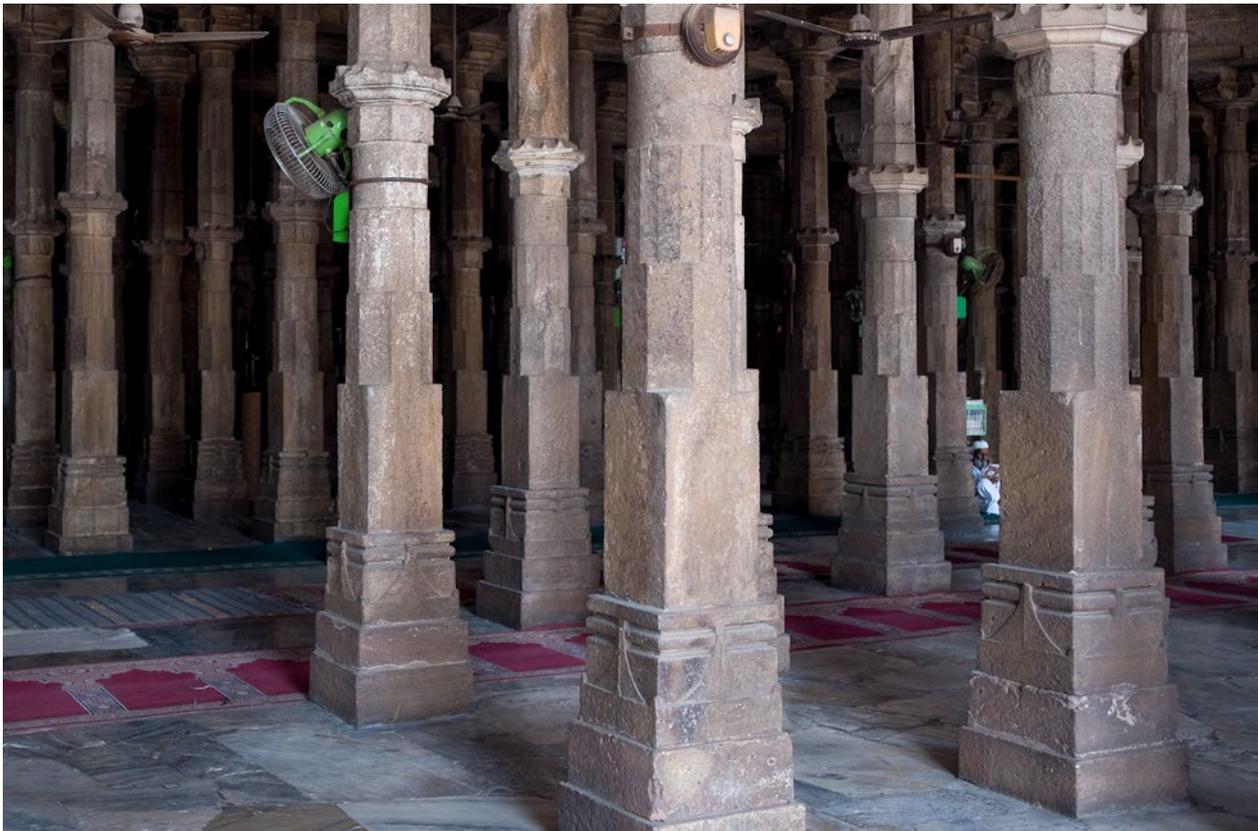
Sunday, 28 January, 2018 – Ahmedabad (India) Jama Masjid

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What I miss most during my travels through India are cafés: not because they offer good coffee (they rarely do), but because they are the place in which my existence is self-evident; no explanations are needed. Of course, this holds true also for a hotel room or an apartment. But unlike the four walls of the latter, behind which the world can sometimes disappear completely, the walls of a café are full of doors through which people stream in and out, as long as they adhere to the practices of the house. That means that in a café you are fully enclosed as well as protected – a combination that is otherwise to be found usually only in the womb of the mother. For anxious and somewhat contact-shy characters like me, cafés are therefore the ideal place to be. I sit oftentimes for hours in front of a long-emptied, near-desolate, dried-up cup and read, write, think

about myself, and occasionally completely forget where I am. This is naturally only possible in real coffee houses, where one is not constantly harassed by waiters to consume.

The perks a good coffee house provides are also offered by a mosque. I realised this when I entered the pillared forest of the Jama Masjid in the heart of the old city of Ahmedabad. Given that a Muslim has to pray several times a day, the opening hours of these mosques are in no way inferior to that of a café. And between prayer sessions, which demand conforming to rituals, you can sit, read, write, dream away, and forget where you actually are. Like the old man sitting on the floor in the middle of the mosque, leaning comfortably against a pillar. He seems completely absorbed in his reading, brushes his beard occasionally, scratches his



head, bores his ears, and clearly feels completely unobserved. We are almost alone in the sprawling hall. Only the caretaker, whose henna-dyed goatee gives him the look of a fashionable goat, scurries past now and again with a shovel, broom and kettle. Outside in the yard, a small boy walks quietly with his dragon through the morning sunlight. The noise of the traffic is distant, the voices of the birds are closer: the gurgling sing-song of the doves, the dry cawing of the crows, the long-drawn piping of the bigger birds of prey, most unsuited to the sounds of a city – the epicentre of which is the stinking mess-of-a-mound of slaughter-waste from the nearby meat market of the Muslims. I take my cue from the old man and lean against a column, take out a book and begin to read. My book is ensconced comfortably on the carpet. And no one bothers me. It appears that even as a non-Muslim I have the right of residence in this mosque. As the hours pass the old man stretches his limbs out more and more, eventually he is almost lying down, and I see him lowering his book more and more often: in sync with his drooping eyes, I assume, because I cannot see him properly from where I am sitting.

I notice that my head is on the verge of drooping, too, and sit up more upright. The man has

hopefully taken the necessary measures, I think and laugh, because I'm reading Hebel's story of the prudent dreamer, who ties slippers to his feet at night because he had once, in a dream, stepped onto a piece of broken glass and suffered terrible, albeit imaginary, pain. Perhaps the story would appeal to the old man – but then perhaps not, because Hebel speaks of Mohamed being «the prophet of lies» – which is indisputably why his book, *Schatzkästlein des Reihmischen Hausfreundes*, is still not compulsory reading in Koranic schools.

I now remember a scene I witnessed a few years earlier that had so surprised me. It was an oppressively sultry evening in Damascus, just before the outbreak of the war. I was at the Umayyad Mosque, one of the oldest, holiest pilgrim-sites of the Muslims, marvelling at the number of men happily sleeping on the rugs lining the cool interior of the magnificent structure. I so liked the idea of being able to enter a church to rest, to even have a siesta – especially as sleep is a state that allows the spirit, of even the most chaste disciple, to escape on some trip or the other and thereby evade the strangle-hold of religious authorities. For those who go to mosques regularly, the sight of sleeping humans may well be a banal matter, but for me

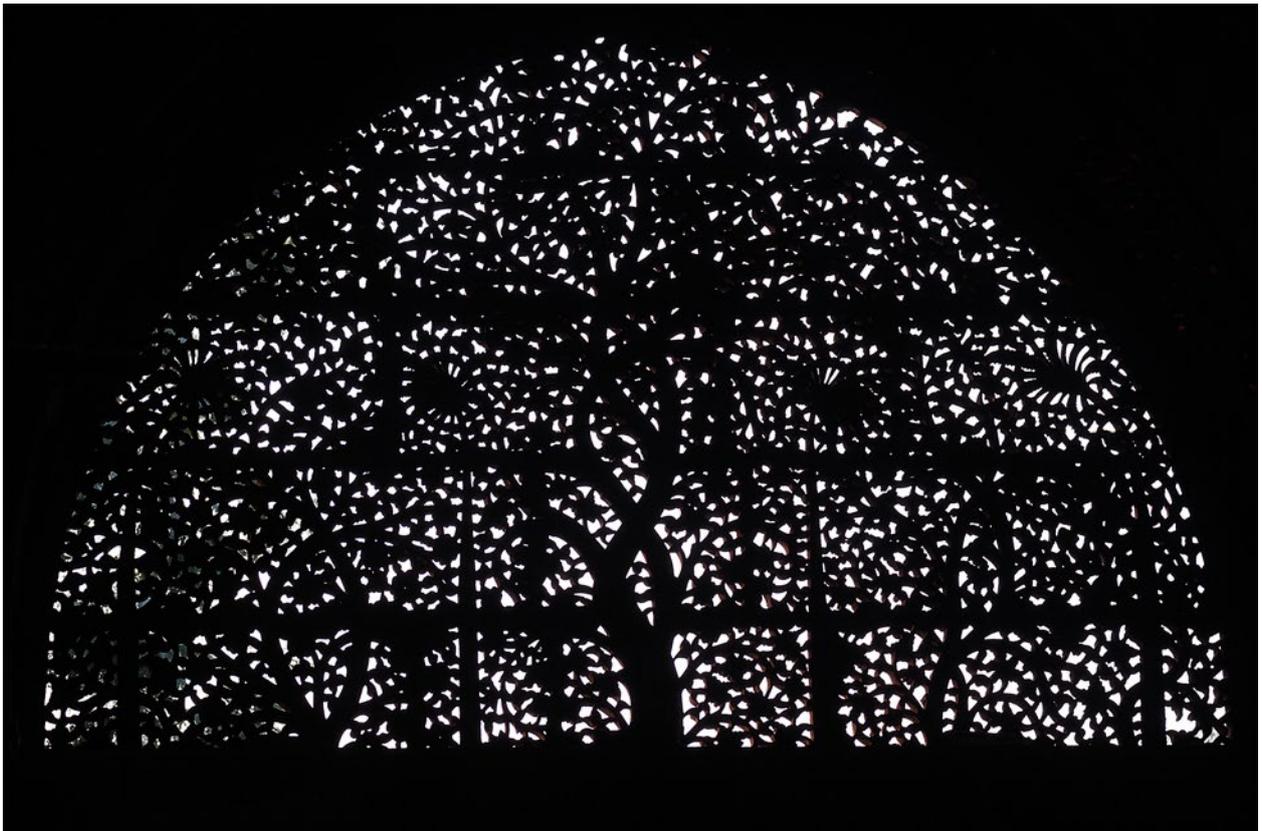


the sight of this mass camp was amazing – and the memory of it never fails to evoke that original sense of disbelief.

The old man has obviously realised that he is about to fall asleep and has stopped reading. He turns towards the mihrab, sits up on his knees, prays briefly, then gets up and leaves. I also scramble up from the floor and follow him into the courtyard that is now bathed in a dark orange light – as it is already evening. We exit the mosque precinct through the north gate and head towards the market. Strangely, the street is busy with only cycle-rickshaws and the trill of their bells sounds almost like a clock pealing or like a friendly caricature of the spiteful motor-horn that hurts your eardrums in regular Indian streets. We go over to the meat market and the old man stops in front of a stall that sells goat lung – it's precisely that stall whose owner had gruffly forbidden me a few hours earlier to take pictures of his ware. Now, however, the mutton-seller is quite transformed: he is exceedingly polite, almost subservient to his customer, who is clearly a respectable citizen. I take advantage of the situation and quickly shoot a photo. We then proceed through a large city gate with mighty wooden doors across a vast, completely deserted

place. And then we are suddenly back in front of a mosque. It looks very similar to the Jama Masjid, except that its façade is painted in different shades of blue, which makes it look highly elegant.

In a large basin the reflected light of the moon shimmers like a lead molding. We enter the interior to see a huge hall full of rugs, pillows, low tables, and armchairs. A soft, white light drifts in through the ornately carved windows, rather jalis (meshes), in which motifs such as an intricately curly tree, palms, flowers, and birds taking off or landing are perfectly arranged. Everywhere, people are lying around, not just men but also women and some children. Some are drinking coffee or tea, others are nibbling on sweets. Some are playing cards, while two old women are engrossed in a chess competition. There is talk, laughter, discussion and debate. In the corner, one man plucks on his double bass, next to him a fat woman wearing powerful headphones is dancing, looking blissfully lost. Between pots planted with banana stalks, four blond men are sitting, tapping on their notebooks, all concentration on their keys. I even see a couple cuddling on a couch, the picture of uninhibited intimacy – in India, that too. Different things seem to make space for each other here, elegantly pass-



ing each other. There is a small table still free at the back, with even a electricity plugpoint next to it. Surely, there is also internet in this wondrous place, which makes it perfect for me, simply perfect – if only there was no sudden and loud song drowning out everything. That probably comes from a mosque. At that moment it occurs to me that I had forgotten to take off my shoes. Terrified, I look around. Has anyone noticed?

«Mister, mister, you must leave, it's prayer time,» a voice quivers from above. I look up and see the caretaker's henna-hued goatee-beard wiggling over me. He shakes me by the shoulder, looking a bit upset: «Please, you are not allowed here, go now.» I pick up Hebel, which has slipped

to the floor, stuff the camera I am holding in my hand into my backpack, scabble up, and stagger in the direction of the courtyard – where the blazing mid-day sun welcomes me. I cannot see whether the old man is also among the faithful now gathered in large numbers in the pillared forest. At the northern gate, I put my shoes back on, pause for a moment to watch the boy whose dragon is shivering through the sky, and then bravely climb the few steps leading to the honking inferno of Gandhi Road. «In a cafe,» the thought flashes through my mind: «In a cafe that would never have happened to me. Only what?»

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.