

In Uzbekistan, It Feels Like Being At Home In Kashmir

By Sarwar Kashani

FERGANA (Uzbekistan); Uzbekistan and Kashmir appear like separated siblings living thousands of miles apart and still bearing striking similarities in more ways than one -- cultural, linguistic, architectural, culinary, music. And, yes, there is a chance that a security man may stop you and scan your phone for any pictures of sensitive places!

In fact, the commonalities are not completely surprising because Kashmir owes much of its cultural legacy to the Central Asian region, including the ancient Persian-speaking Transoxiana what now largely forms Uzbekistan -- a land of magnificent mosques, abounding non-vegetarian food and smiling faces of hospitable people with gold-capped teeth. And, despite being an Islamic country, liquor is freely available and there are plenty of beer gardens.

For a Kashmiri like me, the seemingly surreal sameness appeared something more than ro-



The 15th Century Ulug-Bek Madrasah in Registan Square in the heart of Samarkand. The complex also houses the 17th Century Tila-Kori Madrasah and the Sher-Dor Madrasah. - IANS

mantic nostalgia for hundreds of Syed families whose ancestors brought Islam, arts and crafts, architecture and language to Jammu and Kashmir and settled in different parts of the state in early 14th century. It was a nine-day experiential tourist trip covering nearly 60 per cent of the double landlocked nation, surrounded by

five landlocked countries in the heart of a mineral-rich region so coveted by China.

The journey connected up-close a group of 11 avid Indian travellers to Uzbek history, people and culture -- way beyond the textual look-up in history books or common folklore -- an experience of seeing is believing.

The commonalities between Uzbekistan and Kashmir seemed writ large almost everywhere.

Even in capital Tashkent, a metropolitan and an emerging world class city, similarities pop out in common conversations with locals. Everyday art, food and sign boards on shop fronts and streets appear talking to you in Kashmiri.

For example, kocha-si in Uzbek means street and in Kashmiri it is also kocha. Moyxona (xona pronounced as kha na) is a liquor bar. Hojatxona is public lavatory.

The suzani art of embroidery -- design motifs including the sun and moon disks, flowers, leaves and vines -- is prevalent at both places. Suzan is Persian for needle and suzandozi or needle work is one of the most famous handicrafts of Kashmir that traces its origin to Central Asia.

A round-shaped bread with thick curvature is girda both in Uzbekistan and Kashmir. Tilokari in Uzbek and tilakari in Kashmiri refer to gilding -- the art of applying fine gold leaf or powder to surfaces of wood, stone or metal for a thin coating of gold.

Most of the buildings -- old and modern -- in Uzbekistan predominantly use blue geometric patterns on glazed clay tiles to decorate walls and exterior. Though no longer used in Kashmir, such tiles were once famously made in the north Kashmir town of Sopore.

In Samarkand, one of the oldest cities in Central Asia and located on the Silk Road between China and the Mediterranean, glittering minarets, voluptuous domes and hypnotic mosaics remind one of the old shrines in Kashmir.

While having a lunch -- deep fried chicken legs after gulping down lagman, a hearty lamb soup with thick local noodles, flavoured with chives and black cumin -- a group of women in glittering velvet dresses, one of them celebrating her birthday, broke into dance to loud Uzbek music.

There was a magical drum-beating identical to the Kashmiri tumbaknaer, which is generally used by women during marriage celebrations.

Our guide Khursheed, an Uzbek, said the drumbeats may be from tumbak -- a Central Asian musical instrument -- struck by fingertips to produce harmonious rhythms.

Another Uzbek song was dominated by the rhythms of chang, identical to the Kashmiri santoor as the women kept moving in circles, shaking a leg or two.

Devotional worship at shrines and mosques also has a deep Uz-

bek-Kashmiri resemblance. Just outside Bukhara, the city of sufis, a group of a dozen men huddled around the grave of Bahauddin Naqshband -- a 14th Century Sufi saint and founder of Naqshbandi order, one of the most followed in Kashmir.

The men prayed and recited verses from the Quran. Outside the graveyard, a young priest read a prayer and many men and women sat around a mighty chinor -- the local name for the maple or chinari tree found abundantly in Kashmir 's gardens and roadsides.

As the overwhelming affinity between the two far off places seemed all rooted in history and the Silk Road, any modern similarity appeared missing.

Then came a fascinating, six-hour car-drive from Tashkent to Fergana -- on the only road link that connects the eastern fertile region with the rest of the country. The landscape, snow-capped mountain peaks, pine forests on either side of the over 400-km-long stretch seemed like a journey on the Srinagar-Jammu highway -- the only surface link that connects the Kashmir Valley with the rest of India.

But there was no military presence on the Tashkent-Fergana road until we came across a heavily-guarded bridge followed by a tunnel and many more bridges and tunnels on the strategic link.

Photography is prohibited near and inside these tunnels. We were travelling in five cars. A soldier signalled our driver to pull over and began saying something in Uzbek, angrily. The driver kept saying "no", "no".

The soldier asked about our cellphones. I had tucked it deep inside my backpack. He couldn't find it. Cellphones of two of my co-travellers and the driver were scanned and pictures they had clicked on the highway -- not of the tunnels and bridges though -- and some monuments in Samarkand were deleted.

There was the modern resemblance of otherwise culturally linked Kashmir and Uzbekistan.

There are some dissimilarities too. Many of the Uzbek cities, including Tashkent and Bukhara, resonate with a European influence, which Kashmir doesn't. There are lakeside beer gardens, liquor flows cheap in cafés next to most of the main tourist attractions. Conservative Kashmir does not offer that.

(Sarwar Kashani can be contacted at sarwar.k@ians.in. He was on an experiential trip to Uzbekistan themed around "the magic of the Silk Route" and organised by yatra.com)

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