

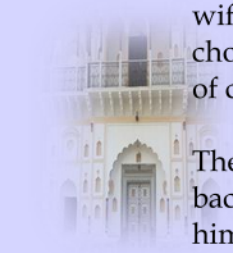


The daylight had faded away, inviting shades of a silvery blue twilight on the silhouettes of Imambara. Dimly lit stars began to twinkle and hide in the sky. A child and his mother sat on the steps of a masjid watching the stars, wondering about the charisma of 'Allah'. The whiff of saffron buried in steaming rice caught the child's attention.

"Ammi aap bhi hamare liyea biryani banaiyea naa…..". The mother turned her eyes towards him and kissed him softly on his forehead. *"Hum aap kae liyea zaroor biryani banayenge, aap ke abbaa ko bhi biryani bahut pasand hai....."*, she declared.

A sky-lantern appeared in the sky its tiny flame glowing in twilight, they both looked up. The boy smiled and hugged his mother.

Meanwhile, nine kilometers away in a 1895 haveli, an elite looking man sat at the head of a marble topped table. Sitting around the table were both his wives, his three young daughters, an old uncle, a film maker friend who was in town, a jolly looking neighbour with his attractive wife, and a visiting family friend who was a writer. Dinner was being served. It consisted of choicest Awadhi delicacies specially prepared by his bawarchi who was an undisputed master of culinary skills.



The boy and his mother began to walk back to their home nearby. Her husband would soon be back from work, he had been out in the city all day long and must be tired. She remembered him mentioning to her in the morning that he was attending to a small group of eleven foreign tourists from another country who had arrived in their city. It was his job to show them the sights of Lucknow and make them encounter the unique essence of its energy.

On a small terrace elsewhere, a flock of white pigeons rested inside a wooden box-like cage with their eyes shut in sleep, ready to take off into the skies the next morning at the command of their master. Downstairs, the master was occupied on his cell phone, negotiating his betting stakes for the next day. His young wife sat on the sofa, embroidering the collar of a kurta with colourful silk threads. Dimples appeared on her cheeks every time she smiled. Above the terace, a shooting star streaked through the dark sky.



The guests at the dinner table began to talk about the city and its deeper connection with artists, writers and film makers:

"Shatranj ke khiladi, which was directed by Satyajit Ray was shot in Lucknow. The film was based on a short story by Munshi Premchand, it was later subtitled in different languages and released globally".

"Awadh region has also inspired other films for the cinema industry". "Ganga Jamuna, Umrao Jaan were also shot in Lucknow", the film maker informed.

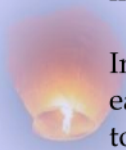
"Yes, we have something in the air of Awadh that attracts men and women of thought and renown", the host remarked proudly.

One of the daughters passed around the large dish of Nargisi Koftas. They began to speak about the erstwhile days of Awadh. Their conversation went on for a long time. Meanwhile the retinue of his loyal attendants began to clear the dinner table. One of them lit up the glass covered lamps along the wall. Dinner was over, it was time to celebrate the night.



There was a knock on the door, the little boy rushed to open it. His Abbaa was returning home after a long day in the city. Lucknow was his love, he adored its sounds, its aromas, its colours and its streets. During the day, he had proudly addressed his small tourist group: *"Our Lucknow city is different, you have to experience it once in your lifetime. It will stay in your heart for ever…..!"*.

The little boy took his hand and lead him to their balcony. *"Abbaa can you see those stars above the minarets, ammi told me they are a charisma of Allah……"*. The man did not answer, but he did know, Allah had been overly benevolent to grant their city a treasure of cultural wealth, which gave him his livelihood. Lucknow was his birth place, he had so much to share about it, one lifetime may not be enough. *"Aap dono aab andar aiye, humne khana laga diya hae"*, his wife called out.



In the wide open courtyard of his ancestral kothi, somewhere alongside the Gomti river at the eastern edge of the city, a newly wed couple was rejoicing. They released a fanush (sky lantern) together from their hands. It stalled briefly, then began to slowly rise into the dark sky radiating the glow of its camphor lamp. Soon it became a simmering speck in the city's night sky and flew away into the dark infinity.

At the haveli, the lamps were still alight. The night was still young, the neighbour was trying to recreate some verses from Asrarul Haq Majaz, his favourite Awadhi poet:

"Firdaus-e-husn-o-ishq hai daman-e-Lucknow, Aankhon mein bas rahee hai Rooh-e-Lucknow"
(Heaven of beauty and ardour is the environ of Lucknow, in my eyes lives the Soul of Lucknow)

"Mutrib bhi hai yea, sharab bhi, abr-e-bahaar bhi, har lamhe mein basar hai Jaan-e-Lucknow"
(My music, my alcohol, my cloud of spring too, in every moment lives the Spirit of Lucknow).



A black vintage car rolled into the wide gates of the haveli. The person who stepped out of the 1936 restored Mercedes-Benz Roadster also had aristocratic bearings. He was a Nawab. Dressed in a long kurta and churidar pajamas, he slowly walked up the stairs, leaving behind a trail of ittar scent. *"Adaab"* he greeted and joined them.

It was 10 am. The pigeons were circling in the sky, the couple was still blissfully asleep. The elite man was being served tea in a silver tray in his garden, resting next to him was a Doberman. The little boy was at school flipping through the pages of an illustrated history book, his mother was at a shop buying spices to prepare biryani for him. His father stood below the city's Rumi darwaza, narrating the history of Awadh to a curious audience of tourists.



Neel Thakur (Author)