



DISTANT THUNDER

Saree King Of America

SALEEM MUGHAL firmly believes that the success of a man is measured by the number of important people he knows, the number of societies and clubs he is a member of, and the number of globally significant projects he can claim to be working on at any given time. He often pronounces that, "All is fair in love and war." I worry about him.

We landed on this American campus on the same day. He started out as a petroleum engineer but shifted into industrial psychology and then did a special course in business administration. It was during that time that he met Sarah. He told her that her beauty had possessed his whole being and begged her permission to call her Sahira, of course explaining that it meant the magical siren. She being his professor's daughter, the romance was not an easy ride. But that was perhaps his first challenge in North America and he eventually won over Sarah's parents. He befriended their dogs and washed dishes after the Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners. He accompanied them to the church telling them how firmly he believed in the divinity of their Lord on the Cross. And in severe snow storms he appeared like a saint to shovel their driveway.

I was present at the church wedding of Sal and Sari. Till today I remember the scene I caused by refusing the champagne offered by the bride's father. "You are a disgusting mawlavi, but what can I do, you are a necessary evil for me. Then at least I will not see your bearded face for whole month..." He got the cheap laugh he expected and patronisingly hugged me in his euphoric state. That evening I performed the Nikah ceremony of brother Saleem Mughal and sister-in-Islam Sahira Oliver. For him Islam was an embarrassment to be suffered with intellectual apologies; for her it was an exotic world of "Aladin" that she could enter and leave at her American sweet will. Many pictures were taken in the shy and pious poses to be sent to the maharaja's poor mother back home. That was twenty five years ago.

Marrying Sarah Oliver considerably

eased his academic woes but much more important it got him the American citizenship, the essential first step in a long term plan. He took an active part in the state elections of 1964 as a campaigner for the re-election of Paul Oliver, his uncle-in-law. Congressman Oliver returned the favour by introducing Sal to the state chamber of commerce. They, of course, engaged him as a young consultant on international matters. His first venture was to invite a travelling exhibition of Indian textiles. For this he sent Sahira and her friend Parwati to India. The exhibition was a great success primarily because of the fashion show that went along with it. Five times every day, Sal would come on to the stage, dressed in an authentic Nehru outfit. He would put his two hands together, lift them to his forehead, closed his eyes and bow down to greet the crowds. He would deliver a short speech glorifying the timelessness of the Hindu civilisation. He would stress on the philosophy of love and peace that forms the foundation of both Hinduism and Christianity. Explaining the royal origins of his name, he would entertain the audience with a little self-deprecating humour. Perhaps even a joke about a talking elephant. They would love this reincarnate prince from the land far away. But what they had really come to see was Parwati and her mystical art of wrapping a saree to simultaneously conceal and reveal her beauty. She had come from India to study architecture but after this experience she transferred to film studies. She returned to become a movie actress in Bombay. Sal opened the Sahira-Parwati chain of Indian fabrics and in five years became a millionaire.

In 1975, during one of his winter trips to the French Riviera, he met a prince, brother of a sultan or an amir or perhaps even a king. It hardly matters. All we know is that Sal was too aware of his destiny to miss this historic opportunity. At that wonderfully soft moment when man is suspended between a state of drunken courage and guilt-ridden humility, Brother Saleem related the plight of Muslims in the West. "Allah gives abundance to his special believers so that those who are deprived can benefit from their generosity. And those who are generous are crowned

by the history as the real kings..." he was impressed with his ability to compose such timely aphorisms. The silky eloquence of the "Saree King of America" seemed to be having its effect. The prince kept shaking his head in approval at all the suggestions that ranged from Islamic universities, Islamic banks, hospitals, food chains and of course mosques in every major city with their doors open, awaiting the Americans to embrace Islam.

Brother Saleem became the prince's agent in North America. He had to extend his wardrobe to match the taste of his newly found friend. He kept a manicured beard and learnt the fine art of massaging a prayer bead while talking of projects and investments. With the skill of a seasoned actor he learnt to spice his language with just the right amount of religious phrases. For the first time he became aware of the sects and shades of Islam and, of course, he got himself categorised with the category of his prince. Sahira quite publically displayed her Islamic consciousness through ever new ways of tying a scarf on her head. She started to like being called sister Sahira.

The Indian fabric business was quietly transferred to a joint venture with Parwati and her family. The glamour of the movie industry made it into a world-wide business. So successful was the merger that the prince secretly invested in it. Bombay was one of their favourite city anyway. Now they started to own part of it.

The process that started with pious vows in that historic Riviera hotel led to millions of dollars of commissions for Brother Saleem. The plight of Muslims in the West did not change very much. The mosques that were built, photographed, published, praised and heralded as symbolic nods of Islamic presence in the West are now inhabited by lonely and paranoiac middle-aged men. The young people are barred from these places because someone has taught them to ask questions in the manner of Quran.

He still calls me the "mawlavi". I know he believes that I am a foolish idealist because I never accepted his invitations to join him. I just keep waiting for him to return to the innocent beginnings we had made together. When he does, I will be there. He is my twin brother and the only brother I have.