

A recent visit to India has left me with some lovely experiences, impressions and memories - the beauty, the history, the poverty, and the people - will remain with me for a long time.

However, I was depressed that some issues affecting Canadian Muslims, such as the pervasive influence of rigid conservatism, are also present in India.

At the wondrously exquisite Taj Mahal, I was sitting in the courtyard of the adjacent mosque, pondering on what I was seeing and feeling. One of the things I noticed was how people were wandering in and out of the mosque. I had visited a number of “holy” sites, and had loved the intermingling of Hindus, Muslims and others at these places.

I heard some Arabic being spoken and saw three men searching for the mosque. When they saw me, I called out the Muslim greeting of Peace and told them the mosque was right behind us.

I used the Urdu/Farsi/Turkish term “namaz” for prayers, and they immediately corrected me by using the Arabic term of “salat.”

I am not the only non-Arab Muslim who is fed up with being told that only Arabic words are correct for all things Muslim. My ongoing argument is that Arabic also belongs to other Arabs, and that Islam, as a universal religion, is not limited to Arabia or Arabs or to the language of Arabic.

This correction by the Saudi men raised my hackles, and as I felt safe in India surrounded by Muslims and Hindus, I decided not to let it pass.

I told them that “namaz” was as valid as “salat,” and was used by many Muslims in many parts of the world; and showed the diversity within Islam.

There was some question about the direction of the mosque towards the Kaaba in Mecca. I said I was sure it was correct, and anyway as the world was almost round, all directions point to Kaaba.

Their response was that the Kaaba was “the centre of the universe.” I replied that it was for Muslims, but may not be seen as such for others. They insisted that the worldly Kaaba was only a reflection of the true one in the heavens with God. When I looked doubtful, they emphatically stated that all scientists –Muslims and others - have agreed that the Kaaba is the centre of the universe. I said “I don’t think so,” as we should differentiate between a matter of belief for us Muslims, and what may or may not be scientifically proven.

The discussion shifted to pluralistic India, and so I asked them if there are any churches in Saudi Arabia, as there are mosques in other parts of the world? Their response was there are no Christians therefore no need for churches. I reminded them that they have lots of foreign workers – Hindus and Christians - not living in the foreign compounds - who would like their places of worship. But they were getting annoyed and said what about Switzerland which was not allowing minarets. I said there are mosques in Switzerland but surely we need not be childish and play the game of who is more prejudiced?

As they entered the mosque, I was amused and curious about their reaction to the fact that non Muslims were wandering in and out of the mosque while others were praying! I am sure such tolerance would not happen in Saudi Arabia.

In another town, I walked by a group of women wearing the Saudi style long black over-garments. They looked at me, so I decided to have a conversation with them. They told me they were not Arabs but Indians, so I asked them politely why they were wearing these Saudi style clothes in India.

They said because it is “Islamic.” They had no answer as to why they thought this was so. I told them that their Indian clothes were just as Islamic and that surely they did not have to import other people’s clothes for Indians. As I left, I said the Indian/Afghan/Farsi farewell of “Khuda Hafiz,” and they immediately corrected me by saying the correct form was “Allah Hafiz” as the Muslim God was Allah.

Again, I could not let that pass - another weird importation from Saudi Arabia - and asked them who told them that God can only be called by one name, or that the word Allah was limited to Muslims, or that it cannot be used by Arab Christians. Surely they know that the Hindi word Bhagwan was another name for the same God?

I was getting rather heated and so my husband suggested I leave! .

Another example of the same narrow-mindedness occurred in Malaysia. It is one of the more tolerant Muslim majority countries, and yet recently some Muslims there objected to Christians using the word Allah.

Why would reasonable people get swayed with such irrational thinking that God is restricted by certain names and not to be called upon by other names? Is there a pantheon of Gods with Allah for Muslims only? I thought there is only One God and diverse people called God by different names!

We have to wonder how the Wahabi message is being spread; what is the appeal and how does one combat its far reaching influence?

Another similar issue between Canada and India is the discussion of the niqab [full covering] and voting.

Recently, the Supreme Court of India ruled that their Election Commission cannot issue voter identity cards to burqa clad women, rejecting the argument that religion prohibits women from lifting their veils. Some Indian Muslim scholars have urged women not to oppose the ruling, maintaining that the burqa/niqab is not mandated by the Quran. An editorial praised the decision and stated "Cultural practices of any community cannot be allowed to subvert the law of the land."

There is heated discussion on this issue in Canada.

To counterbalance all this, I had a very spiritual experience, when a new Hindu friend invited me to accompany her to a Muslim Sufi saint's tomb where a gathering was organized. It was a wonderful experience shared by Muslims, Hindus and Christians from Europe who respectfully listened to beautiful religious singing.

Back home, the spectre of "shariah" continues to be raised by Muslims and non Muslims. It is the rallying cry for those Muslims who want politics and religion integrated in an "Islamic state," and depressingly the subject has also become ripe for academics and research grants.

The debate continues!