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A Sunday's journey

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The drive to Manghopir is a journey in itself. On a Sunday morning, my brothers and I drove off for a pilgrimage. Zulfikar, my brother, had managed to rustle up a friend for the early morning adventure and we sat in the car listening to fusion Qawwali music, which just happened to be on our Uncle's tape deck auspiciously marking the occasion, and gazed out our windows discovering parts of Karachi we had seldom seen before. We drove past an eerily silent Saddar, down Agha Khan III road where the old tram depot used to run, past Pak Colony where marble stores merged into the more familiar vegetable stalls, over by Easton studios where the heyday of Pakistani cinema was founded, and on to Benares.

Named for the Bihari migrants that settled in the area after Partition, Benares forms a gateway to Orangi town, one of Karachi's largest squatter settlements. We got lost in Benares just before 11am and drove around the area with our window rolled down asking for directions. On one hand Benares looks like the rest of the city, in that most of it is dug up -- there is construction happening everywhere and there are clunks of broken rock on every sidewalk and every intersection -- and like the rest of Karachi, the area's heavy congestion can feel almost suffocating. The congestion of city life gets to the residents of Benares too; we saw a pedestrian try to slap a bus driver through his open door -- the bus drove on and the pedestrian stood on the road and fumed for a couple of minutes before getting back to work. On the other hand, Benares is the perhaps the city's largest stocked textile area and that very fact breathes life into the roads and avenues of the neighbourhood. The swathes of fabric hanging from store fronts and wooden carts coloured the neighbourhood bright pink, green, and yellow. There's even a bit of the West in this Northern hamlet of Karachi -- one fabric seller hung t shirts from his ceiling that were all different shades and colours but all read 'Jesus is my homeboy'. The colours of Benares also manifest themselves in a political manner too, tricolour flags hang from houses and rooftops and posters of political chieftains are plastered next to posters of Indian film stars, mostly Shahrukh Khan.

After some men on bicycles set us on the right track we left Benares and travelled the short distance to Manghopir. As you get closer to the shrine the roads begin to be covered in white dust and there's a fog of smoke in the atmosphere; everything in your path becomes powdered white courtesy of the large marble and limestone manufactories and quarries that pave the way to one of Pakistan's most unique landmarks. We knew we were close when we spotted the Young Manghopir Football Club -- a small pistachio green structure that had a black and white football painted around its entrance to assert the seriousness of their craft -- outside which sat three malangs dressed in bright orange and green shalwar kameez wearing beaded necklace upon beaded necklace and carrying red and golden flags set on sticks.

Manghopir is not only one of the oldest Sufi shrines in Karachi -- around 700 years old -- it is also the site of sulphur springs said to cure mysterious skin ailments and is home to 150 celebrated crocodiles who the devotees of Pir Mangho believe are their Saint's disciples. Legend goes that Pir Mangho was a Hindu dacoit who repented from his errant life by embracing Islam and became a student of a local pir, Baba Farid. The myth of the crocodiles is less clear -- some believe they were a gift to Pir Mangho from his teacher Baba Farid or even from Lal Shahbaz Qalandar, while others believe that the crocodiles were born out of the Saint's head lice -- like all legends the weaving of fact and fiction makes it impossible to disassociate the fantastical from this place of worship.

We got out of our car and walked into the sheltered shade of the mini bazaar that welcomes visitors. As we made our way to the cold-water spring where the crocodiles hold court, we passed stalls selling bangles, fruit, mugs, dolls, and spray-painted gold vases along with the standard devotional offerings of Quraanic scripture to be given at Pir Mangho's mazaar. I had told Mir Ali, our two and a half year old brother that he was going to see crocodiles and he had refused to believe me throughout our drive. As we entered the narrow green gate that led directly to the crocodile spring and stepped onto their turf Mir Ali's eyes widened and he started to repeatedly whisper 'uh oh'.

The crocodiles were everywhere. Floating in the electric green algae and moss filled water, idly wandering around their small sandy beach, resting in the shade in a pack of three -- all of them seemingly asleep with their eyes shut, but with their mouths worryingly wide open.

"Come closer" insisted their guardian, a Sheedi man named Ghulam Haider, "They don't eat people, just chickens, cows, goats, and sometimes camels -- so long as it's halal meat" he reassured us. The Sheedis make up one of Pakistan's smallest ethnic communities, they came to the subcontinent from Africa centuries ago and it's believed that they were brought to the region from Zanzibar as slaves though many Sheedis maintain that they descend from warriors. It is the Sheedis, who live mainly in Sindh and Balochistan, who take care of Manghopir. They believe that no devotee of Pir Mangho can be harmed by the crocodiles -- a fact Ghulam Haider could have added to his initial reassurance: they don't eat people, unless they're not devotees, of course -- and are charged with protecting the venerated reptiles, a task which culminates in a yearly festival every May where the Sheedis blend their Afro-Asian cultures and spend two days celebrating and praying for the Saint. A march towards the crocodile spring is led by the songs of elder Sidi women, who sing in a mixture of Balochi and a Swahili dialects, and are carried forward by drumbeats and dancing until an offering of sacrificed goat is given to the eldest of the crocodiles, Mor Sahib who is said to be over 100 years old. Once the meat has been accepted by Mor Sahib it is taken as a tiding that the coming year will pass in peace.

We gave Ghulam Haider our own offering and scuttled back as he tapped the largest looking reptile I've ever seen on the nose with his walking stick. When the crocodile obediently opened his jaw, Ghulam Haider lovingly placed the meat in its mouth. When the crocodile had finished inhaling the kilo of meat we'd brought for him, Ghulam Haider knelt down and pet him on the head as if he was a kitten. Everyone but Zulfikar made the appropriate noises of fear and Mir Ali who had not stopped saying 'uh oh' since we arrived said the next one with slightly more urgency.

If the central tenet of Sufi theology is personal experience entwined with a love for the divine that serves to project purity of heart and soul out into the universe, then the plurality of cultures and interaction at Manghopir is as true a manifestation of those goals as I'd ever seen. We spent some more time observing the crocodiles before heading to the fabled sulphur springs, where there are separate bathing areas for men and women pilgrims, and then on to say a prayer at Pir Mangho's mazaar. We left the sandy island of Manghopir feeling a little more connected to our city and ourselves. How long had I lived in Karachi and not visited one of our most fascinating landmarks? It was only an hour away; I couldn't possibly carry on being as lazy as I had been in the past. I promised myself I wouldn't and dreamt up future Sunday journeys as we drove back home, fusion Qawwali pop music blaring in the otherwise silent car.