



When I was growing up in India, there was a big Hindu-Muslim divide. The Muslims living in our community were mostly poor and backward with a few exceptions. Despite all that, I grew friendship with Ayaz Ahmad, a Muslim boy. Ayaz was very well-mannered and good at studies. You may say that he was different from the mold.

Ayaz's mother was the first cousin of Ayaz's father. As a matter of fact, his father's second wife was her mother's own sister. For me that was incestual and shocking, but my parents told me later that that kind of marriage was permissible in Islam. I didn't know that Islam allowed men to have four wives either. In fact, Ayaz himself had a crush on his uncle's daughter.

Ayaz and I attended the same intermediate college and later graduated from the same engineering school. We remained good

friends despite our religious and cultural dissimilarities. Later I moved to the United States and lost all contacts with Ayaz.

A few years later I visited my hometown in India and tried to locate Ayaz. Our common friends didn't know where Ayaz was. I never cared to know where Ayaz lived, but I was

curious to know his whereabouts. I suddenly remembered that one of my class friends Anamullah, another Muslim boy had a cobbler shop in downtown Ranchi (my hometown in India). So, I went to see Anamullah in his shop. Anamullah was really happy to see me and gave me a hearty hug. Anamullah didn't keep in touch with Ayaz but told me that Ayaz committed suicide a few years back. The rumor was that Ayaz wanted to marry his cousin but she was already in love with someone else and got married to that other guy.

Ayaz's circumstances and death put a deep impact on my mind. I couldn't stop thinking about Ayaz and his mild mannerism for months. Later I forgot about Ayaz until today when he suddenly resurfaced from some corner of my cerebellum.

Many a time I look back fondly on past friendships and wish I could return in time to relive those moments. I don't know why these memories are so powerful. What is it about old friends that makes them so

unique? And when I think back on old friendships, I am reminded of how those connections shaped my life.

Imran, another Muslim boy and I lived in the same dorm during our high school years. Imran came from a poor family and had a meek personality. We became good friends. I don't exactly remember the circumstances but we had a serious fight one day. I beat him up badly. Imran told me that I beat him because he was poor and weak. That brought tears to my eyes. I apologized to Imran and asked him not to say such things again. We remained friends for many years after that.

Recently a Muslim businessman, Shafi in India has become a good friend of mine. On my visit to my home state Bihar last November, he took care of my transportation and accompanied me like a

shadow. I really don't know why he is so much attached to me. When I got sick in India, he brought a doctor to my hotel room and bought medicines for me. He also bought my return ticket to the U.S. (of course, I paid him back) and came to see me off at the airport.

Some times I wonder if Hobbes was correct in describing basic human nature which states, " the state of nature is characterized by the war of every man against every man, a constant and violent condition of competition in which each individual has a natural right to everything, regardless of the interests of others. Existence in the state of nature is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." I think it depends upon one's life's experience.