Circles in the Arabian sand

An excellent travelogue that observes every aspect of the desert, from people to water issues

**K.C. VIJAYA KUMAR**

The Middle East holds sway in most Malayalee hearts. There is no denying the allure of crossing the Arabian Sea to reach Dubai, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and other destinations. If in the past it was all about hitching a ride on a ramshackle boat and muttering your prayers, modernity is all about flying out of Kerala’s four international airports.

Inevitably, the Arabian Peninsula finds reflection in books and movies emanating from God’s Own Country. In the film *Pathemari*, Mammootty portrayed the angst of a man, living in the United Arab Emirates and working tirelessly to gift a better life to his family back home.

Film critic Anna Vetticad wrote: “Mammootty has the ability to reach into our weeping bosoms, tear out our hearts and rip them to tiny, tiny shreds. This is precisely what he does in *Pathemari*.” There is also the critically acclaimed book *Goat Days* by Benyamin (originally *Aadu Jeevidham* in Malayalam).

To this splendid body of cultural reflections about the Middle East, add one more tome authored by V. Muzaffer Ahamed. *Camels in the Sky* is an excellent travelogue and its spirit has been adroitly captured through its translator P.J. Mathew.

**Resilient Bedouins**

Ahamed’s gaze is all-encompassing and his inferences are coated with compassion while he delves into the desert sands of Saudi Arabia and writes about history, the water wars among ancient tribes, the resilience of the nomadic Bedouins, the poetry and the camels. In an early chapter, he writes: “I, coming from a sliver of land nurtured by 42 perennial rivers and heavy rainfall, knew nothing of the true value of water.”

A Bedouin centenarian tells the author that he had witnessed just 50 rains across 100 years! It is not just the scarcity of water that tests people, the food pyramid hurts too.

There is a gut-wrenching passage that deals with a Nepali labourer swallowed by a python. The snake’s belly is slit open, but the labourer burnt by the reptile’s gastric juices, is no more.

Ahamed observes every texture in the desert be it the sandstorms, the tears of an inconsolable camel that just delivered a still born, the African women from Chad, who are rag-pickers in cities, withered plants that spring to life once it rains, or about, hold your breath, snow in the northern deserts! Old poems are quoted and there are these lines: “War inevitably crushes you. Like flour mill pounds grain.” Women’s valour is celebrated too, like the Bedouin wife, who kills a wolf and saves her husband.

*Camels in the Sky* is a fine read and makes us understand that there is more to Saudi Arabia than monarchy, petroleum reserves and a pilgrimage to Mecca.