Delhi by Heart is a passionate rendition of a great city’s story steeped in history and rich traditions of religion, literature, music and cuisine. By all standards it figures as an excellent first book by Raza Rumi who seems immersed in, and equally perturbed by, the violence and mindless massacre of Partition, as the book unfolds. His Apa’s unfulfilled longing to roam the streets of her Amritsar, and the charred remains of burnt houses in the Shah Alam area of Lahore when she returns after the wave of riots has subsided, paint a heart-wrenching scene befitting any good movie on 1947. Raza Rumi writes from the heart.

At times he sounds like a traumatized adult who is baffled and confused at the raison d’être that forcibly detached him from his history, his cultural ‘half’ when he sets out to find many unanswered questions and does find some of them.

His quest starts from the dargah of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya in Delhi wherefrom emanates an absorbing and highly readable account of Delhi. The dramatis personae of Rumi’s excellent work include historical figures like Amir Khusrau, Nizamuddin Auliya and Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib, to name but a few and the contemporary characters of Delhi like Qurat-ul-Ain Haider, Saadia Dehlvi, Khushwant Singh and many others.

Delhi, at times, comes across as an answer to the queries of Pakistanis and Indians of Rumi’s generation about the rationale of creating an iron curtain of hatred and animosity on both sides of the Radcliffe Line. At other times, it feels as if the author is urging his readers not to be consumed by the flames of gratuitous hatred fanned on a minute’s notice by zealots, of which variety there is no shortage in both Pakistan and India. He mirrors Faiz Ahmad Faiz’s yeh dagh dagh ujala... when he laments on being personally shut out from what became the Union of India in 1947 while almost ruing his Hindu forefathers’ decision to embrace Islam six centuries ago at the hands of an ascetic when the family was en route to Varanasi for a holy pilgrimage.

Later in the book Rumi shakes off the baggage of Partition and swiftly moves on to unearth the dialectics of Sufism through the influence of Hazrat Nizamuddin, and especially Amir Khusrau on Sufi Islam by way of music. Unlike the almost uniform mimetic philosophy of Shia Islam in whichever society it exists be it South Asia, Persia or the Arab world, Sufi Islam, especially the Chishti Silsila, Rumi tells us, relies heavily on the co-mingling of Islamic teachings with the indigenous Hindu customs, beliefs and practices. Thus a very tolerant, non-violent, humane and almost romantic creed is born.

Rumi’s visits to Balli Maran, the mohalla where Mirza Ghalib used to reside, are movingly described in the book. The genius of Ghalib is aptly described through his poetry but his letters in the aftermath of the Civil War of 1857 show the agony felt by the sensitive Asadullah, shedding enough light on the destruction wreaked on Delhi by the British.

One of my arguments about the book being a must read is mainly...
based on the vast historical, cultural and religious canvas it paints so beautifully, making it one of the best contemporary works on Delhi. It is not an episodic history of the city but more of an in-depth and well-researched one with a keen eye but interspersed with the writer’s observations on his numerous sojourns to Delhi. A bit like an A-grade documentary where, in order to create a profound and lasting impact on the viewer, the presenter frequently goes back into history to recreate the events he is narrating.

Apart from being frustrated at the rigid and destructive views of a large majority of Pakistanis on India who dismissively refuse to treat India outside the prism of the Kashmir dispute, he seems equally perturbed by similar unforgiving and ‘brainwashed’ views held by Indian Muslims in particular. His exasperation palpable, he pleads that heritage and cultures, languages and civilizations can be shared beyond national boundaries. Why is there an exclusivism and hankering after final solutions when nationalisms encounter each other?

Rumi’s exasperation with puritanical politics on both sides often finds refuge in the Sufi dargahs of Hazrat Nizamuddin of Delhi and Data Ali Hajvery of Lahore, however distant their message of love, tolerance and inclusion might seem in today’s politics of nuclear brinkmanship. Stubborn denials of our Hindu past and the latest phenomenon of Hindutva in India frantically attempting to erase from memory anything sounding less ‘Hindu’ including the mention of beef eating in religious scriptures and Muhammad Ali Jinnah’s acceptance of Cabinet Mission proposals are a few examples of the path of self-destruction both sides have trodden for decades with hardly any visible change in sight.

It is difficult to predict how much ice Rumi’s book will melt in the short to medium term as far as relations between India and Pakistan are concerned. But history tells us that sane voices always get drowned out in the cacophony of nationalist hyperbole and hate-fuelled gibberish. Having said that, although being a drop of love and peaceful co-existence in an ocean of false nationalistic pride, voices like Rumi’s need to be cherished and listened to in order to celebrate and enrich the shared cultural past of Pakistan and India.

The writer is a Lahore-based lawyer.