



SHORT STORY: S S MEHDI

Self-Immolation

Who can forget the turbulent times of early 1990's? There are phases in a nation's life when its leaders take decisions of far-reaching consequences. Only posterity will be able to pass verdict on the soundness of the decisions. The BJP was spearheading the Ram Temple movement in U.P., and at the same time sharing power with VP Singh at the centre. All political players were biding their time to make a punch. Prime Minister VP Singh stunned the nation one August evening by announcing the implementation of Mandal Commission Recommendations. The Government of India reserved 27 percent jobs for various assorted backward castes in all central government services. It pushed up the reserved quota to 49.5 percent. All remaining general caste people had to compete for half of the jobs now, thereby making it immensely tough for them to get jobs on merit. There was anger and frustration all over the country. The Mandal Report was so sudden that Chaudhry Devi Lal and LK Advani too were taken by surprise. The political grapevine said that it was to disturb Ch. Devi Lal's backward support and disrupt LK Advani's attempted Hindu consolidation through Ram Temple movement. Young people were furious. There was a spontaneous anti-reservation stir in the whole

of north India. U.P., Bihar, Rajasthan, Delhi, Haryana were leading. Haryana was the worst affected. Thousands of students and others joined the protests which immediately turned violent. Protesters moved around destroying government property like buses, trains, offices, banks, rail lines and all that came their way. A new genre of protest was invented with terrible emotional effect. It was self-immolation. Somebody would sprinkle petrol or kerosene on himself and light it up. The sight of a human body in flames infuriated the masses. It led to more violence and destruction. There was frenzy in the youth. The whole nation was divided between anti-quota and pro-quota groups. There was turmoil brewing in city after city.

Anjali and Shabnam sat in their class of political science. It was a humid and sultry August morning of the year 1990. Prof. Madhu Gupta was speaking on Fundamental Rights of the citizens as enshrined in the Indian Constitution. The class wanted a lively discussion on them especially on the Right to Equality.

‘So, students, our constitution guarantees the right to equality to each and every citizen of India, regardless of his religion, gender, caste, colour or race. What counts is his ability alone’.

There were sniggering sounds from the class. The teacher’s mention of the right to equality made a little jarring sound in the background of what Prime Minister V.P.Singh had announced a few days ago. The announcement of the implementation of the Mandal Commission Recommendation had come as a bombshell to the nation. Twenty seven percent government jobs were now to be reserved for the backward castes. With fifteen percent quota for scheduled castes and 7.5 for scheduled tribes, it pushed it up to 49.5 %. The remaining section of people had to complete for 50.5% jobs only.

Sonia raised her hand and stood up. ‘Ma’am, what do you mean by right to equality? Some people will get special quotas. Where is that equality then?’

Rajan got up and joined, ‘Ma’am, let the section 19(1) Equality be scrapped and torn off. Don’t you think it is glaring injustice?’

There was a chorus of voices almost all disagreeing with the lecturer. Prof. Madhu also found it difficult to explain the issue. Rajat Shukla, a very bright student of the class, got up and said, 'Ma'am, even 22% quota was unjust enough and now this almost half of the cake is reserved for some only because they come from a particular caste. Where is merit gone then?'

Shabnam khan joined the chorus of protesting noises. 'Ma'am what kind of equality is it? Our Constitution talks of equality and destroys it at the same time. Equality can't be partial. Either all are equally treated or not at all.'

Prof. Madhu felt embarrassed. Almost 80% class was angry. The remaining 20% sat nervous and upset. Prof. Madhu tried to explain, 'Look dears, there can be no absolute equality for that matter. Our constitution makers had to provide relief to those who had been victims of grave inequality for centuries. When you are weak, you are given a tonic.'

'No, No, ma'am, this is a different issue. Here you are carving a piece of cake and giving to someone. Your 'tonic analogy' makes sense if those people are given financial assistance or free coaching type of help.' Suresh Aggarwal quipped.

The professor found it difficult to defend the constitutional provision of social justice. She thought of a stronger analogy to push her point.

'Ok, students. Just think if some of you have their leg clamped and are asked to compete a race with those who have all limbs free, do you think it's fair?'

There was a murmur of disagreement again.

'Ma'am, this is a wrong analogy again. If my leg is tied, will you lift me in your arms and put me on the finishing line and declare me the winner? What about those who are straining their nerves to reach the line?'

Ma'am, give coaching, free entrance cards, free books or anything you want. But this idea of quotas is obnoxious to us.'

Prof. Madhu herself failed to understand the fairness of the quota system. But she had to teach her pupils what the constitution said about it. She was dealing with a post graduate class. Most students were very intelligent and well-informed. One student, named, Ashutosh Bhatnagar stood up and said, 'Ok ma'am, our constitution makers provided for a quota for Dalits and tribals at the same time. They also said that it was only for 10 years. Then it was to be reviewed. Did our parliamentarians dare to review it? No, it became a political card to play at polls. The Congress nurtured a vote bank of its beneficiaries and won elections.

The class was nearing its end at 11 AM. Prof. Madhu tried to wrap up the discussion inconclusively. Mean while, there were loud noises that seemed to approach nearer S.D.P.G. College Palwal. The students became restless and started looking out of the windows to see what it was. A peon came and said something to Prof. Madhu. She turned to the class and told them to be careful. A big procession was near the college. She knew it could be unruly. Girls were advised to assemble in the Girls' room for safety. Soon, there was all mess in the campus. The protest was joined by many students now, who started breaking chairs, tables, doors and all that came their way. They were shouting slogans against reservation and also against Prime Minister V.P.Singh.

The city of Palwal was flooded with mobs armed and furious. The strange thing was that most people in the mob had nothing to do with the government jobs. News started to pour in . There were violent protests in Delhi, U.P. Haryana, Rajasthan and Bihar. The South was not affected. Haryana was worst-affected. People were confused and shaken as the reservation announcement came all of a sudden. It was a hot topic of discussion everywhere.

Advocate Rakesh Saini was at the court when the news spread about public fury against the quota. He looked for Amit Yadav and friends to be together in case of the protest turning anti-backward castes. Advocate Ashok Chauhan was talking excitedly with his colleagues in the open shacks of the District courts.

‘Sumitji, V.P.Singh has destroyed the country. Even Mrs. Indira Gandhi kept the Mandal Report in the cold storage. Why did this guy bring it out now? He is not even full Prime Minister. He heads a disorganized coalition.’

‘Chauhan Saheb, it’s so easy to see the purpose. Choudhary Devilal and L.K.Advani are making his life difficult. V.P.Singh has got over backward castes in one stroke of his pen. He has taken away Chaudhary Devilal’s backward support base and weakened Advani’s Hindutva votebank. Anti-quota agitations will throw India into a caste war. You see it has united caste Hindus against Dalits and backwards. There might be straight mob clashes if it continues.’

‘What about Advani’s Rathyatra of October? The whole picture seems to have changed.’

‘Yes for the time being. But these politicians are wily. They are adept at chess.’

‘Actually, the Mandal report doesn’t come for a genuine concern for the backward castes. V.P.Singh has played a political trick to weaken Devilal and beat the Kamandal card of L.K.Advani.’

Palwal city wore a deserted look in the afternoon after violent incidents of the day. All schools and colleges were ordered closed. But curfew was not imposed.

A strange system of self-immolation started in Delhi and elsewhere. A couple of young boys sprayed petrol on themselves and set themselves on fire. These acts had the potential of causing large scale violence and disruption in North India.

Ritik Jain , a student of 12th class , left his home the next morning. He was to carry a tiffin for his father who had a shop in the market. Pankaj, his classmate joined him in the way.

‘Ritik, when will you be free from home?’

‘I am free all the time. School is closed.’ Pankaj said.

'Lets enjoy ourselves. I have seen Gagan cinema is running a wonderful sexy film. We can go there just now. Give the tiffin to your father quickly?'

Ritik assured him to be back soon. On the way back from his father's shop, he saw a big crowd at Minargate swelling every minute. They were carrying V.P.Singh's effigy. Ritik got curious to see what was happening. In the jostling, he was stuck in the middle of the crowd.

Pankaj came rushing to Ritik's home. Ritik's mother was eating her breakfast and watching news on T.V. She was perturbed at seeing video footage of young boys running in a cloud of fire and then all hell break loose. Immolation was a terribly provocative act. It was leading to a frenzy of violence in cities and towns.

'Auntie, what do I hear auntie?' Pankaj gasped.

'Tell me what?'

'They say Ritik burnt himself up in anti-quota fury?'

Shivani Jain, Ritik's mother, failed to get the meaning of the spoken words. She was shocked by the mere face of Ritik's friend Pankaj and the name Ritik uttered by him.

'Tell me what is the matter?'

'Auntie, they are saying Ritik sprinkled kerosene on his body and burnt himself dead.'

Shivani lost her balance and lay on the cot nearby. She could not utter a word. There was a big crowd of relatives and neighbours in the house.

Ritik's father also rushed home. Ritik's burnt corpse was whisked away by the police to Faridabad for post-mortem. Rioting spread to the bus stand and NH2 very soon. The mobs were venting their fury on government buses, banks, railway stations and offices. The protesters were furious at V.P.Singh who led to the deaths of innocent boys.

At Ritik's home, everybody was asking the same question. Ritik's father Girija Prasad rubbed his hands in utter disbelief.

'Ritik can't have done it. Oh, no, not at all. He came to me peacefully, handed me my tiffin. He asked for a 100 rupee note for a film. I gave him the money. He left. He doesn't even know what reservation is. How can he do it then?'

Deepak also said the same thing. Some people who also watched the immolation from their house windows or shops were stunned. Raj Singh, one of the eye witnesses spoke,

'Yes, I saw the crowd break off backward and a figure in flames and no one trying to save him.' No one had seen Ritik with a kerosene can. Nor did anybody see him dousing himself with kerosene and lighting fire.

The afternoon news bulletin announced that Ritik Jain had committed self-immolation?

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Curfew

Nazia was sweeping the kitchen. It was about 7 in the morning. She had to prepare the wood-dust grate to make breakfast for the family. It was May 21, 1991. It was a polling day in Meerut for elections to Lok Sabha and also for U.P. assembly. The polling was scheduled to begin at 7. The atmosphere was heavy with rumours of an impending communal clash. For Meerut it was nothing new though. The city had been famous for national solidarity in 1857, and now notorious for communal disunity. The two predominant communities would occasionally clash over ridiculous issues and spill a lot of blood on the streets. A fight between a Muslim rickshaw puller and a Hindu passenger would turn into a big riot.

People were talking in whispers and wild rumours were spinning around about a sudden attack on Muslims somewhere. In Hindu areas, the fears were of a Congress party conspiracy of triggering a riot to consolidate minority votes. Even small school-going children talked of big things like riots, booth capturing and such political stuff. Nazia's younger brother who worked as a trainee doctor was getting ready for Dr. Mathur's clinic at Begum Bridge. Her father was apprehensive of things turning ugly. Weather was also relentless with scorching sun overhead. Could people still be on roads to fight? He mused.

Nazia heard a tap on the door. She drew the latch. Kaiser, a 17 year old family relative stood there. He worked at a garage owned by Lala Moolchand. Nazia asked him, 'O stupid, why are you so early today?' Baji, our Lala is so miserly that he will not close work even for a day. But, I'm sure the garage will close early today and I'll be back to eat lunch with you people here.

'Don't be late. Who is going with you?

'Pankaj the boy who works with me at the garage.'

Ok, take care.'

Nazia's younger brother Aijaz and Kaiser left the house together, but on different routes for work. Dr. Mathur's clinic and Lala Moolchands garage were open even on polling day. They didn't care for who would win nor for the 'Negotiable Instruments Act' which enjoined on employers to shut on the polling day.

This was a closely contested election. Assembly elections had always been very tough and polarised fights in the old city. Hindu-Muslim ratio in the city was 60-40. Consolidation of the Muslim vote would help a Muslim candidate only if Hindu vote remained fragmented. So the strategy of the Muslim candidate of the Congress was to rally around Muslim vote in such a way as it might not lead to a backlash. The Congress still enjoyed a clout in the Dalit constituency. A Muslim-Dalit combination would jeopardise B.J.P.'s chances.

Nazia's father was retired police officer. He had a knack of discerning the city's political pulse. He was fond of chitchat with all manners of people especially the working class. He was politically neutral. He blamed all political parties for the mess they were creating in the city where Hindus and Muslims had been living cheek by jowl for centuries. There are mixed neighbourhoods. Social relations are intense. There can be no wedding in a Hindu family without Muslim neighbours playing a prominent role. Hindu neighbours manage the whole vegetarian feast in a Muslim wedding. Holi, Diwali, Eid and Dushehra are celebrated peacefully with cross community participation. So the common people wondered as to how there could be a riot in which Hindu and Muslim mobs were cutting each other's heads.

Nazia's father returned from the market at about 11 am, visibly upset and glum. He spoke rather loudly. 'Hey, Nazia, where is Aijaz?' 'To the clinic as usual. She said. 'Don't you know there is something wrong in the air? I've heard the Congress is pushing an aggressive polling campaign. Dalits are supporting the Congress candidate Zafar Islam. It's created panic in the BJP rank and file.' 'Babu, why do you worry about who wins? I'm cooking rice and chicken curry in lunch. Aijaz and Kaiser should be back in time for lunch.'

At the same time, many rumours were doing rounds in the market. There were police jeeps whizzing past in riot gear. Mulayam Singh Yadav was the CM. Rajiv Gandhi had been killed at Sriperambudur in a bomb explosion a few days ago. Mid-term polls for Lok Sabha were also being held along with assembly. Master Islamuddin, a neighbour, called at the door to exchange news and views with Nazia's father. 'Kotwal sahib, tell something what's up now? Zafar Islam seems to have an edge over Mohan Shukla of the BJP. These clever Congressmen have succeeded in weaning the Dalits away from the BJP.' 'Master sahib, this is what worries me most.' 'You policemen always look for evil, violence and fighting. All are busy in polling today. the city has been turned into a fortress by RAF, CRPF and other forces. Besides, Mulla Mulayam is there.' Master sahib chuckled.

Polling time had scope for great fun for children. Most people were off-work. Schools were shut. Children played cricket, flew kites and ran around on the roads. All motorised vehicles were laid off on orders the mighty Election Commission. Some more fun loving youngmen thronged the cinema houses which ran exotic A films. There was no issue of Hindu-Muslim identity in such a situation. People of all communities moved and chatted all around. No one was aware what evil was germinating somewhere. Two teenage boys came running into the house. Aslam said, 'Kotwal chacha, I'm just coming from the market. Hindus and Muslims are asking their women to rush home as it wasn't safe outside. Anything might happen. The Congress people are saying that the BJP has brought a Bombay goon to scare away Muslims from the polling booths. Chach I've seen some goons brandishing pistols and daggers around. Suresh, his friend, cut in and said, 'Yes chacha, things are dangerous. My uncle says the Congress Muslims are trying to create trouble because they think the BJP is winning. They want to cancel the election. The elders dismissed them with a warning not to venture out. Suresh and Aslam went upstairs and started the radio to listen to film songs.

'Kotwal sahib, what do you think of these rumours?

'Master sahib, the present scenario is a photo-finish situation for a full-fledged riot. Mulayam Singh is branded a Muslim appeaser. Dalit-Muslim combine is too formidable for the BJP here. And look, the BJP is set to be winning all over U.P. so their morale is high.' 'But New Delhi is still with the Janata Dal. Mulayam Singh controls Lucknow.'

'The situation is not that simple. Babri-Ramjanambhoomi issue has polarised U.P. you know Mulayam had ordered firing on Karsevaks when they attempted to attack Babri mosque in October 1990. The BJP calls him a Hindu-baiter out to appease Muslims for votes.' Master sahib didn't comprehend the complexities of politics. To him, CM's orders to DM and SSP are un-defiable injunctions. The retired police officer knew how the system worked. Master sahib understood the theory and he needed more elaboration on ground reality. I know if the DM doesn't want a riot, there can be no riot. The entire police force is bound to obey him.' 'OK, true as the law goes. But the law is a prostitute which can be used or abused or thrown aside suiting the whims and interests of the powers. Society too thinks and believes on communal lines. Didn't you hear Suresh believes the Congress is wrong while Aslam thinks the BJP is conspiring for a riot. The political campaign has the potential of brainwashing people's minds.'

Just then, some boys came running with the news that about 20 or more Muslim men were stabbed to death at Nigar cinema. There were also attacks on Muslims at some polling booths. Master sahib's hands shook in tension. He had great faith in the Election Commission, the Supreme Court, the RPF, the CRPF and Mulayam Singh. There were also reports of Muslim mobs organising to attack Hindus who come their way anywhere. The cry was for revenge before police reinforcements overwhelm them. The whole city was plunged into violence. Kotwal saheb's face fell. What he feared has come to happen. He was worried more about his personal concerns now. His younger son was outside. He made a frantic phone call to Aijaz's clinic to tell him to stay back at Dr. Mathur's home until the mess cleared up. Meerut streets turned into death traps in times of rioting. Evil men with pistols and daggers roamed free on the streets killing the weak and unprotected to score numbers. It was no religious frenzy. It was pure crime fed on liquor and money and planned by political players. Common

citizens were nowhere seen in this dance of death. They had rushed indoors and ensured the safety of their near and dear ones. Muslims were hiding Hindus and Hindus doing the same for Muslims for humanity's sake.

The engineered riot now got its own momentum. It was spreading to the whole city. People were taken unawares. There were lines of hindu women, burka-clad muslim women, old men and young were standing in the same lines jostling, joking, and talking together about the nefarious acts of politicians of all hues. Rumours were flying thick and fast. Relatives and friends were rushing to polling booths to escort their people home. The complexion of the city had completely changed in a few hours. Satya Prakash who had an embroidery shop at Budhanagate dashed to Jain Dharamshala near Nigar and caught her aunt by the arm. He was shaking with fear.

'Throw away your voter slip. Just run home with me. People are talking that a Hindu gang has killed a score of Muslims watching a movie in Nigar cinema.'

'Well, but Satya, let me just cast my vote now that I 'm so near my turn.'

'Chachi, you must know a Muslim mob is gathering nearby. They'll kill all of us. Just run away from here for your life.'

Chachi didn't understand how urgent the situation was. She was, probably, one of the millions of Indians who just fail to understand how someone could kill you for no reason or logic.'

In the meantime, the din and noise of the cries of 'Nara-e-takbir, Allahu akbar' rose from Khairnagar side. There was an equal answer from Budhanagate. 'Har har mahadev, Jai Bhawani'. Rent the air. Both noises merged in a horrible din. Both enforced each other. Battlelines had been drawn. The real perpetrators of violence had quietly withdrawn and had, probably, slunk out of the city borders. The situation was tailor-made to spin out of control into a full-fledged communal riot.

Some Muslim goons caught a Hindu family going in a car on Delhi road. The car occupants pretended to be Muslims but the sign of 'Om' on the dashboard gave them away. Two male members of the family were stabbed to death in front of their family. Every part of the old city had turned in to war fronts.

Ajmal Mian, a haleem-biryani vendor on S urajkund Road was pushing his cart fast towards Shahpirgate area for safety. But luck ran out for him. Two boys on bike wearing 'Jai shri Ram' bands on their foreheads came from behind, pumped two bullets into him and drove away. He fell and bled to death. He had served delicious haleem-biryani to hundreds of his Hindu customers for about ten years. They affectionately called him 'chacha haleem'. Chacha haleem also jokingly teased them, 'You're half brothers to me. You're half Muslims as you eat meat, buffalo meat.'

On the other corner of the street was a small shop of Pandit Raghav who made tasty jalebi-potato-kachauri in the morning. Half of his customers were Muslims whose women hadn't made a breakfast for years as their menfolk would fetch steaming jalebi kachauri home. Raghav was a popular name in the Shahpirgate Muslim neighbourhood. Raghav had shut shop and fled to the safety of his Hindu locality.

The first acts of violence took place around 11 am and it was now past two. Polling booths were deserted. The officials on polling duty had fled for safety. Voters had also run away to their areas. The roads and roundabouts were now left for sporadic slogan shouting mobs surging menacingly and withdrawing cautiously in face of counter attacks. There was no police in sight. It was still relatively calm at Ghantaghar in the old city. Aftab Khan, Ali Mian and Sanjay stood on the roadside and gave their own comments on what was happening in the city. Aftab Khan, a lawyer at the District Courts, made his own observation. 'Look friends, I knew it was waiting to happen. The Congress fielded a Muslim with Dalit support. It would finish BJP in the city seat. They are otherwise emerging very strong in the whole state. How will they ignore Meerut city seat?' Sanjay opined, 'Aftab bhai, you always bring strange logic. I say this is all your Mulayam's doing. He wants Muslims to shift from Congress to SP. This is why

there is no police to control rioting. Where are the forces, so many on poll duty?' ali Mian was not amused by Sanjay's line of argument. 'Sanjay bhai, you people are so charmed by BJP's propaganda that you never blame them for anything. The facts are there for all to see. Don't you see the BJP ran most vicious anti-Muslim campaign in the elections? They wanted to consolidate Hindu votes. They partly succeeded. But they failed to wean away Dalits from the Congress. Muslim-Dalit combine could also dent BJP's Brahmin vote. It upset their calculations.' Sanjay looked in disbelief. 'OK, but who started the riot? Whose government is it?' Aftab Mian spoke a bit indignantly now. 'It's your BJP who hired professional criminals to attack Muslims at Nigar cinema. It was to trigger a communal clash all over the city. The aim was to spoil polling. The Election Commission will countermand polling and order a repoll later. The BJP will surely win then.'

Nazia had cooked a delicious dish of chicken curry and rice. It was a holiday. Aijaz will return for lunch. Kaiser also would come early as he said. She drew some chicken curry in a bowl, went upstairs to call Savitri chachi across the wall to give it for Brahm uncle who was very fond of non-veg. savitri chachi won't even let the bowl touch her clothes so she would carry a tray to put the bowl there. She would accuse her Muslim neighbours in a banter, 'You people spoil our men by making them taste 'mans'. Nazia waited for Kaiser. He was very late. Aijaz was not coming for lunch as he had been advised to stay back at Dr Mathur's home. City roads were not safe at all. There were reports of one or two human corpses lying here and there near the gutters. The injured had reached the hospital somehow.

In homes, people were philosophizing now over human nature, God's mercy, democracy, politics and riots and such diverse stuff. The older ones talked of the blunder that partition was. The younger ones spoke of more urgent things as to how to defend their localities from attacking mobs. Dr. Saleem Rizvi lived in Shastrinagar colony of Meerut which had come up in mid 70's. A few educated Muslims had ventured out into this 'mixed area'. It too was falling into the same pattern. Sectors were being branded on communal lines. Dr Saleem was a doctor by profession and very well-

informed person politically. His wife, Mehrunnissan, taught political science at a local post graduate college. Dr Saleem was too busy with patients in normal times. He was very eloquent in abnormal times such as now. He was obviously upset at things now.

‘Begum, this is why I always say that my Abbu made a big mistake in staying back in India. I was old enough those days to get the logic of my other relatives who migrated to Pakistan. They are rich and safe in Karachi, Lahore and elsewhere. Here you see they are sitting ducks for Hindu goons and also the police. There are hundreds of troops in the city today but not a single bullet was fired to protect us. Not a single shot. The BJP destroyed the polls to a design. They are set to form the government soon. So why lose Meerut city? Get a re-poll later.’

Mehrunnissan felt the agony and pain in her old husband’s voice. But she didn’t agree with his point of view.

‘Just be a little patient doctor sahib. Migration to that side of the border could have been the solution for our personal problem. But what about 4-5 crore Muslims in India at that time? Could all of them go? Jinnah was the biggest culprit for our plight here. He got mad for Pakistan. Some kind of federal India would have suited us here. You know Muslims had over 35 percent share in the British Indian army and dominated police in Punjab, NWFP, Bengal and other areas of their influence. Jinnah got Pakistan for himself. He became its president. He never bothered about what would happen to Muslim minorities in Hindu-dominated India. It was only because of Nehru-Gandhi leadership that the constitution made Muslims equal citizens in the country. Any thing could have happened in that virulently anti-Muslim environment. Now this kind of rioting is inherent in the dynamics of Indian electoral politics.’ Her perfection in her subject was speaking here.

‘Begum, it’s ok. Jinnah did what he did. What can be done now? When the curtain falls today, dozens of Muslim boys will be missing. Many will have been mercilessly thrashed by the security forces. Hundreds of others will be arrested and dumped in jails. Mulayam Singh seems to be losing and so on the way-out. The top

brass of the police are not taking his orders. The lower ranks are either in league with the BJP or just indifferent. They know who the future masters are. Don't you know what's happening in Hashimpura custodial murder case? Nothing.' Mehrunnissan heard him in rapt attention. She had some other options for the community's survival.

'Doctor sahib, forget Jinnah. The clock of history can't be turned back. That chapter is long closed. Just think why communal politics is playing out here.'

'Because these BJP people are against Muslims.' The doctor remarked.

Mehrunnissan groped pointedly now. 'Are they against our religion, its practices, celebration of religious festivals or other such things?'

Doctor sahib was ruminating. He couldn't say yes, as he too had no such complaint. The majority of his patients were Hindus who loved him. They stood in reverence outside his clinic if he was saying his namaz in the clinic lobby. They respected him more for that as he looked to be a pious Muslim. They believed that religious piety, honesty and commitment were the same things in real life.

Mehrunnissan continued, 'You see religion as such has got nothing to do with riots. These politicians will get anybody killed no matter what his religion is. Hindus can kill Hindus and Muslims are killing Muslims. Killing is the most secular business in democratic India. Trust me it's the same in Pakistan. Look at the electoral dynamics here. The Congress had created a formidable Brahmin-Muslim-Dalit vote bank who kept the party in power for long. Clever Congress leaders kept Muslims in fear of RSS-Jan Sangh-BJP. The latter always tried to break this vote bank. Now they find time is ripe. The whole Babri-Ramjanambhoomi issue is a tool to breach the bank. The day Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi allowed Shilanyas at Ayadhya in November 1989, Muslims fled like frightened pigeons from the Congress nests. They realized the Congress couldn't protect them anymore. The BJP succeeded in their strategy at long last.'

Doctor sahib showed annoyance. 'I don't understand what you mean. You confuse me more. The BJP doesn't speak against Dalits who are also Congress supporters. Then why are we singled out? Why?'

'My dear doctor sahib, because they hope Dalits may vote for them any time. But Muslims have vowed to defeat the BJP at all costs. Why shouldn't Muslims diversify their electoral potential? They shouldn't declare any political party an untouchable. Let all parties hope to get Muslim votes. No party then will openly take an anti-Muslim stand. It's as simple as that. Whenever RSS-BJP outfits sent friendly gestures to us, your 'secular' friends got panicky and raised the old RSS bogey. It happened in 1980 and 1989 again. The Hindutva lobby returned to their old line in frustration. Please don't forget Hindus outnumber us by 4-1. There may be 25-30 crore Muslims here of course the size of the whole US population but there are 100 crore Hindus still reducing us to a minority. It's a simply game of numbers. Let me be more clear. Muslims should also start voting for BJP also. Of course it will hurt their self esteem and ego because the BJP has been seen as a Muslim baiter spouting venom for years. Politics is a game of compromises. Hindus reconciled with Muslim rule of over 700 years. Why can't we show a little resilience? We have tried a number of parties. Take the Congress. Most worst riots took place in their rule. Moradabad, Bhiwandi, Aligarh, Meerut, Bhagalpur and Surat etc. and what is Mulayam government doing today? He can't do better even if he wants. The entire lower rank government machinery gets divided on communal lines. So why trust them? Play your own politics. Damn this silly talk of 'Muslim ittehad'. If 30 Muslims unite, 70 Hindus will do the same. Make new alignments and move ahead.' The political scientist in Mehrunnissan was becoming eloquent.

Her eloquence was abruptly cut short by a loud noise of shrill wailing of police jeep sirens and some stern announcement on the loudspeakers.

It was past 5 now. The whole city was fear-stricken. Frightened women and children peeped from the windows. The fortunate ones among the citizens were safely in homes while some unfortunate ones were either dead or injured or in jails.

Loudspeakers mounted on police jeeps sternly warned people that curfew had been imposed and anyone venturing out would be shot at sight. The city was descending into the eerie silence of the graveyard. Many people wished to ask the officer blaring commands as to where he had been when innocent citizens were being killed on roads in broad daylight! Probably the killers could kill no more. So the police arrived now.

Nazia also heard the sirens and the announcement of curfew. She was assured of Aijaz's safety as he was in the house of Dr Mathur in a posh Hindu locality, safer than Khairnagar. She was perturbed about Kaiser. The city was under curfew. There was information that there would be a restricted one hour relaxation around 8 pm for stranded people to return home. Nazia was pinning her hopes on this relaxation. She sent some children in the neighbourhood to get some news about Kaiser from somewhere. It was getting dark. There were some possibilities. All minds ran on them. If he was safe at Lala Moolchand's garage or Deepak's home, he would rush home in the short curfew lifting. Another possibility was that he may have been picked up by the police. No one talked of the other possibilities as they frightened them. Kaiser's elder brother also arrived from work and sat silent on a chair brooding on the fate of his orphaned younger brother. Their parents had long died. The two brothers lived in a rented room and earned their living by sheer hard work.

Frantic calls were being made from land phones to people who could know something about Kaiser. He was fond of movies. Nigar cinema was running a popular film. Could he have been there after his return from the garage? God forbid!

No one in Nazia's family ate anything. Chicken curry and rice turned cold in the cooker. The whole family was deeply attached to Kaiser. He was jolly and well-behaved. He was a brother to Nazia. There were strong family ties from the time of his dead mother. Meanwhile there were noises in the street. People were excitedly talking about things. Then came the police announcement of one hour curfew lifting. A new ray of hope arose about Kaiser's safe home coming. Kotwal sahib, Nazia's father, paces restlessly in the courtyard. Nazia's mother looked expectantly to the door. The face of Kaiser's elder brother also lit up with hope. Curfew relaxation was the time when

people separated from families rushed back home into tearful yet joyous embraces of their near and dear ones.

The city roads returned to life again but in a paralyzed mode. Only those shops selling foodstuff were allowed to open. Riot police were patrolling the streets. There were reports of a large number of Muslims having been picked up and dumped in Abdullahpur jail. A few missing boys reunited with their families. People were briskly buying things. Rumours were flying fast and thick. Curfew cut was nearing end. Some of Kaiser's friends were talking about him in rushed tones. Kaiser was nowhere in sight. Soon police jeeps announced the end of curfew cut and ordered people to rush indoors. All neighbours walked home with weary legs. Nobody said a word. Kotwal sahib said that someone contact Lala Moolchand or Deepak to know his whereabouts. But no one could move out. Land phone was the only channel of communication. Lights had come out. Doors were tightly shut. Aijaz had safely come home from Dr Mathur's. All sat huddled talking desperately about Kaiser's fate. They prayed Kaiser might have been picked up by the police rather than fallen to a mob. Aijaz could tell something as both went together up to a point in the morning.

'Where did you leave him in the morning?' Nazia asked.

'It was at Khairnagar roundabout. He went towards Budhanagate and I to Begumpul. He told me he would take Deepak from his house and then go to the garage. He was happy and said that they would see a film in the evening. Savitri chichi also joined the conversation. She had been a close friend of Kaiser's now dead mother. 'Nazia I know Kaiser is missing. Hare Ram! May he be safe! Why doesn't kotwal chach call up some one in the police and ask him to inquire about the boy?' Nazia said,' Abbu is silent. He is not speaking anything. He is fearing the worst perhaps.' Savitri chachi also talked about a couple of Hindu boys also missing. People sat quiet like dumb characters in a mute show.

Night was eerie. The silence was intermittently broken by wailing of dogs or some gunshots followed by cries of 'Allahu akbar...and Har har mahadev...'

sound of police vehicles. Hardly anyone slept the whole night. Time doesn't stop. Morning came. Nazia's mother felt too weak to say anything. Kotwal sahib was all dismay. It was 8 of a May morning. Sun was scorching. No one dared to utter the word 'Kaiser'. Human psychology behaves very strangely in terrible times. You wish to be silent about something you dread. Speech is saved zealously for some other time. Questions seem waste of energy as there are no answers. Answers would burst out of Time. The intervening period is best used in silent prayer and patience.

There was shocked silence in the home of Savitri chichi. Aijaz went upstairs to say something to her but didn't. savitri chichi sat before her family deity in a small altar in her home, visibly sobbing and praying for Kaiser's safe return. Kaiser was like her own son.

Police announced a short relaxation in curfew at 5 pm. People felt like prisoners in their own homes. Reports of sporadic stabbings and gunfire were pouring in. Nazia's family and neighbours had ominous forebodings. No one talked. Nazia saw her father quietly put his ID card in his pocket and walk out at the stroke of 5 of May 22. He also called out Master sahib two other neighbours to go to the local police station of Delhigate.

The police station was buzzing with frenetic activity. Kotwal sahib was sitting before the inspector in his office. His phone was continually ringing. Policemen were collecting arms for night patrol duties. The situation was, officially, 'under control', but it was not true. The terror and violence once unleashed was taking its natural path.

Al course human brain is not a machine which can be switched on and off at will. Its emotions and urges ebb and flow in their own way.

'Yes sir, how can I help you?' The inspector was to the point.

'Look, Bhimsingh sahib, we're in great distress. Our boy named Kaiser aged 17 years left home yesterday in the morning for his work place. He hasn't returned yet. We

triedto...’ ‘Sorry sir’, the tension wary officer cut him short. He had got the import and was just professional.

‘Ok, we’ll file a missing report formally. But please just go in. the SI has got some photos of the dead and injured. Take a look there.’

Kotwal sahib had worked in the police for 40 years. He knew the possibility in a missing case. He went in, legs heavy, heart pounding and nervous tension growing. He was over 70 now. He had seen all manners of photos, real corpses, mutilated in accidents or violence. But now his courage was leaving him. Other neighbours outstepped him and stood around the photos, over 150 there spread on a big brown table in the clerical room of the police station. Kaiser’s brother had failed to muster nerves to come here. Kotwal sahib sat down on a chair trying to look away from the photos on the table. Master Islamuddin and others were taking a look. Some faces were charred beyond recognition. The policemen said that a chemical was used to burn up the face to destroy the deceased’s identity. Reasons weren’t known even to the police. Master saheb’s tracing finger slowed down on one photo. One side of the face was burnt. The other side threw a little , just a little likeness to Kaiser. Clothes didn’t give any idea. Master sahib spotted one bandaged small finger of his left hand. The bandage looked white. Kotwal sahib asked Master sahib to use police phone to call home and ask Salman, Kaiser’s elder brother.

The phone rang at home. Nazia picked it up with quivering hands. Salman stood mute and motionless.

‘Hello, what’s up uncle?’

‘Nazia, was Kaiser wearing some bandage on his small finger of left hand?’

Nazia was trying to think. Salman said that he was. He had injured his finger while fixing the bonnet of a car. Salman’s legs were shaking now. His mouth was too dry to speak more.

The inspector looked inquiringly. Kotwal sahib spoke not a word.

'Very sad indeed, sir. What was to you?'

'He was like my own son.'

'You see this madness. In one single day, 45 dead, and over 150 injured. Many missing. This is just a figure to people sitting in Lucknow, to the media and all.'

'But Singh sahib, 195 families destroyed not one time but for every day until they all die.' Kotwal sahib was trying to control himself.

'Now the legal point you know sir. His guardians are allowed to take a look at his corpse in the Mortuary. They can't take possession of the dead body. The dead bodies will be buried or cremated as per the religious status under police supervision. Please come tomorrow and complete some legal formalities. These papers will be required for compensation claims and such matters.' The inspector advised.

'Thank you sir.' Kotwal sahib and other neighbours walked homeward. It was getting dark. Sirens blared for re-imposition of curfew. There was a crowd of neighbours at the street end anxiously waiting for news. They saw the downcast faces of Kotwal sahib and others and realized what happened. Salman was not one of the crowd. He lay on a cot in the room trying to brace his nerves to hear the ultimate explosion. People quietly went inside. There was complete silence. No one asked a question. Savitri chachi also joined the mute mourners. The men sat dumb on cots and chairs. A police jeep whizzed past the street telling people to shut doors for the night.

At the same time, there came the sound of some muffled sobs from inside the room. One male voice could be discerned. It was Salman. The others were Nazia, her old mother and Savitri chachi.

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