

The old man took Haji Sahib's hands in his deferentially and squinted at the sleeves which Kulsum had snipped neatly to equal length and then had meticulously sewn them up last afternoon. They now stopped at least three inches short of the palms.

“But how is it possible, huzoor? Clothes shrink uniformly. How can only the sleeves shrink? Look, here it comes down below your knees in the most becoming fashion. And no, it does not seem tight at the waist either.”

Haji Sahib was speechless. True, the sherwani had not altered in any other way. The length was correct, there seemed to be no discomfort anywhere else. The crowd of onlookers also nodded sympathetically to Idrees.

“Sometimes it happens, huzoor. The late Quazi Sahib, may Allah receive him in jannat, used to tell my dadajan that the arms of the holiest of the holy men sometimes grow in length overnight. That is the surest sign of spotting a true man of God. Why, it has happened only once in the last five hundred years, to Baba Peer Ali of Kujju. And who can be truer than you huzoor, with the most chaste thoughts and divine intentions? May my whole family perish if I am telling a lie. We washermen never deceive our gaahaks. We are true to our starch....”

The Burden*

Maninder Singh Kang

Translated from Punjabi by Swaraj Raj

Translator's Note

Punjabi writer Maninder Singh Kang's story Bhaar published in his anthology of short stories Bhet Waali Gull (Lokgeet Parkashan: Chandigarh, 2009) and rendered here as Burden deals with that phase in Punjab's contemporary history which many people would like to forget as a bad dream but cannot. The story deals with the dark period of militancy in Punjab in the eighties of the last century. It is a tragedy all Punjabis have been through and its reverberations showed their ruinous impact not only in the entire country but in many parts of the western hemisphere also. The daily occurrence of people being dragged out of buses and trains and being killed, bombs exploding in public places and places of worship, police reprisals against those who were allegedly the perpetrators of violence, inexplicable silence of political leadership indicative of their moral/ethical bankruptcy and the endless blame game, Operation Blue Star, the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's assassination followed by systematic massacre of the Sikhs in most parts of the country which was sought to be explained away by the metaphor of the earth trembling when a big tree falls, and a renewed wave of violence in Punjab surging on the anger of the Sikhs against the Delhi Durbar in the wake of the anti-Sikh riots; all this had left people utterly confused. In the chaos that reigned then nobody knew who worked for whom. There were many 'agencies', non-state actors, vigilante groups, dreaded police implants known infamously and euphemistically as 'police diyan billian' – police cats, numerous fratricidal factions of Sikh militants, and Akalis of several hues and colours. Caught in the cross fire, panic-stricken and brutalized people of Punjab spoke in hushed tones. In this violent environment of suspicion and espionage – nobody was sure who was snooping on whom – new vocabularies came into being, and many words which were already current acquired new connotations. This happened in response to the unprecedented atrocity and trauma which people underwent and witnessed. The new language which emerged was a language of circumlocution, indirection, dissembling and understatement. Perhaps it helped people in coming to terms with the extraordinary times. And perhaps it also helped them in evading facing the other of what it is to be human. The biggest casualty obviously was truth.

In his story, as it unfolds against the backdrop of the nightmare of militancy, Kang employs many expressions which had become a part of the common parlance at that time. Thus translation of a text which is as deeply rooted in its spatial-temporal matrix as Kang's story is, poses very unique problems of its own. For

example the words 'baba' and 'bhau' were already culturally loaded expressions. The word 'baba' is an honorific term used generally for the elderly, for those who are experts in their field and for religious authorities. In the sixties and seventies of the twentieth century the word 'baba' came to be associated, especially in the Malwa region, with educated scholars – teachers and students – who owed allegiance to communist ideology. But during the militancy period, the same word denoted militant also. Many new phrases were coined to denote the act of murdering someone. 'Gaddi charaubna', 'ardaasa sodbna', 'ticket kattna' and 'tor dena' etc were such expressions which became current. These expressions have still not passed completely into oblivion, but they are no longer spoken with the same frequency and their semantic range has also undergone a change.

Apart from this, Kang's idiom is multi-voiced; it carries with it the distinctive aroma of regional dialects. Kang confers on his characters a distinctive linguistic identity on the basis of the unique way in which they handle the resources of the dialects they speak. Kang's characters seem to struggle for words on many an occasion; this, in fact, is indicative of the author's struggle for a language which can convey all the brutality and savagery that marked this period. Going around these problems poses insurmountable difficulties for a translator.

The story itself, since it stands at some temporal distance from the period it depicts, seems to strive for a balance. Nobody comes out unscathed from Kang's pen, neither the militants and nor the state and those who worked for the state. Kang is unsparing in his criticism of all those who were directly or indirectly involved either in furthering militancy or curbing it. He looks dispassionately both at the heartless state which fuelled militancy and the militants who, despite their claims that they were fired by some lofty ideals, were no less demonic in their intent than the state against which they fought.

Kang's story is not without its share of problems though. Certain characters like Jassa, Ajaiba and Sital are thorough degenerates and seem to be beyond redemption. However, in striving for psychological realism, Kang seems to fall into the trap of offering psychological explanations for their motivations and in doing so he ends up humanizing them. Major thrust of Kang's story is anti-humanist but in humanizing characters like Jassa, Kang dilutes his stance and ends up supporting the claim that even the devil should be given his due; in other words, he ends up supporting the idea that whatever a person may do, he still remains human at heart. And this humanity is then used as a ruse for extenuating circumstances. Now this is an ideological position which, as Jyoti argues in his book *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (2009 Rpt. 2010), should be rejected. According to Jyoti, "One of the ways to practise the critique of ideology is to invent strategies for unmasking the hypocrisy of the "inner life" and its "sincere" emotions. The experience we have of our lives from within, the story we tell ourselves about ourselves in order to account for what we are doing, is thus a lie – the truth lies rather outside, in what we do" (40).

However, despite these issues of 'ideological humanization', Kang's story is remarkable for its candour in dealing with Punjab's tragedy and in removing some of the misconceptions about this dark period which stem from romanticization and valorization of various ideological positions in the popular imagination.

Swaraj Raj

When they called me, as it was my wont, I was lying supine on an old bed sheet spread on the floor. By now I had got used to sleeping on the floor though it was very difficult in the beginning. On the one hand repeated police beatings had made my bones utterly mushy and on the other, I had led a life of comfort. Because I was used to a life of comfort, I slept in a cot even during my days of hiding. Otherwise like others of my ilk I too would have been hiding in some sugarcane fields. But I had told the jathedars – group leaders – very clearly that I would be spending my nights in some *dera*¹. The jathedars were in great awe of my being educated and otherwise too, what objection could they have had? Rather I only did all their work and I enjoyed a better reputation as a junior jathedar.

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I was not aware at that time that owing to my fondness for sleeping in a cot, I would land in such a trouble that today I would have to rot in the stinking, half-*kutchha* hostel rooms of Arya School, lying unoccupied for years together.

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I was called the second time. It was difficult to feign not having heard it, because earlier whenever I was unable to get up because of my fractured bones, both Faqeeria and Channa havildar used to kick me in my flanks. Since then my mind has been in such horrible dread that now whenever a home guard or a C. R. P. F. man calls me, I immediately get up and answer.

Channa Natth, who had been recently promoted as head constable, stood outside. As it is, he was a butcher in administering third degree, but otherwise he was good to talk to.

"Come master, the Deputy wants to see you," said he and started looking towards me for my reaction.

“I have to take you with me,” he said again as he saw me standing there silently.

I quietly hung the bed sheet on a hook after shaking loose the dust and after closing the door behind me, I accompanied him.

I had been interrogated four times during these six months and on all these four occasions I was subjected to third degree for the whole of the week. On one occasion, I had almost died but the Bengali doctor from the C. R. P. F. saved me. Or else, by now, I too would have been inside the stomach of the Bhakra canal fish, because the Ropar and Tarn Taran Police were hand in glove with each other. The police had been showing me dead in the official papers for the last five months. Now even my relatives had been released. Gaddu, the policeman, had disclosed this to me.

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“Well, we’ll see now They may not start torturing me again, that would be the end of me. The body is already finished. The last time penicillin had saved me, but this time even penicillin would loosen my bowels!” Brooding over such thoughts, I was moving towards the interrogation cells with Channa Natth. Channa, walking in front of me, was quiet. Ahead of the two large grounds of the school, the deserted rooms were made to look like cellars by stacking sand bags around them. Interrogation of all the people was done there only or those who were to be reported as killed in police encounters were presented before the S. P. and, in the police parlance, they were ‘put on the wheels’ in the night. Except for me and Peetu Lambar, who belonged to the Babbar, all others had been killed in fake encounters before my eyes, and had reached Guru Maharaj’s abode. I had myself laid the corpses of Gurdip Singh Chakori, Manjit Singh Ghasitpuria, Lali Babbar, Tarsem Singh Guddi and Mahinder Singh alias Chakkar in trucks. How many more others there were who were killed in these last six months, I don’t even recall their number! Some of those who were put on wheels belonged to Batala area, and the others were from Ropar or Anandpur Sahib. There were two women, sisters they were, from Chamkaur Sahib area. The two were killed in encounters one by one. Their families might still be looking for

them in some police station in Chamkaur Sahib. Peetu Lambar had been let off because he had lost his sanity after being subjected to third degree. Now he keeps sitting outside Darbar Sahib, in Amritsar. This too was disclosed by Havildar Guddu.

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“It appears that it is my turn today! I should get ready for it.” Lost in these thoughts I had reached near the interrogation centre with Channa. There I stood propped against a pillar. None of us could go beyond these pillars without permission. There was a row of rooms beyond a corner a little ahead and no one was allowed to go there without the permission of the S. H. O. Even the policeman who were allowed to go there were those who were either well-known investigators or had been kept only for administering third degree. Both Ajaiba Shudayee and S. P. Sharma were crazy people and when a *bhai*² did not sing or when they were beside themselves with rage while torturing someone, they would vent their fury on some policeman as well. Therefore, nobody, including the S. H. O. and policemen, could go there without Deputy Ajaiba’s nod.

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Today also Sharma S. P. and Ajaiba Shudayee could be heard talking to each other. Havildar Faqeria was also there chewing and spitting tobacco. He was Ajaiba’s confidant.

My hair started standing on end. All my limbs began to ache. Faqeria used to come out of his room only when some bhai had to be subjected to third degree or a cold-blooded encounter was to be staged. Faqeria was one of those sponges could go on drinking twenty four hours in a day and how many men and women he had killed, that he himself would not be able to tell. Now they wanted to promote him as a Sub Inspector. Earlier, the Majitha police would hire him for extracting confessions from bhaus from Amritsar, but now he was permanently with the Amritsar Police. Sometimes his services were requisitioned by Jalandhar and Nabha police also. I had seen him getting into or coming out their vehicle on many an occasion...and if now, Faqeria was there, I was sure to be thrashed or even

“Has my turn come again today, brother?” with great trepidation I asked Channa Natth standing near me. As it is, he was already going to tell me.

“O no master! These preparations are for welcoming your old buddy Jassa Maruti. The Jalandhar Police had washed its hands off this sister fucker of a vermin and passed him on to the Tarn Taran Police. The Tarn Taran Police in turn said why they should kill this obnoxious thing....there is no reward on his head... then let the S. S. P. himself finish him....Now Sharma S. P. and Ajaiba have been given the duty to finish him.”

“Is it? Is Jassa still alive?” I was in a daze and asked him impulsively.

“Don’t you know? Look....You know his entire story,” Channa replied, as if chiding me.

“But....but it has been a month since he died. Surjit, the wireless operator had told me that my old friend had gone....Hadn’t Sital of Mehta Chowk tipped him? This is what I had heard,” said I.

“Which Sital oye? O bhau he too is our man. The intelligence people pay him the salary of an Inspector, although, he is supposedly an area commander of Bhindranwale Tigers. He it was who exposed the deeds of your your buddy Jassa. Otherwise, would anything have come to light?” It was as if Channa had hit me in the forehead with this baton of information.

If I had come to know a year ago that Sital too was working for the intelligence agencies, I would have been surprised a wee bit. I would not have been surprised much because during the last ten years I’d been in the hiding I had seen many people leading a dual life. A few of them I had killed with my own hands. Some had gone back to police. Some of their moles – black cats – had been killed by the police themselves... This very Jassa Maruti, about whom Channa had been talking, was once with Baba Bhindrawale. But when Baba Bhindranwale broke his and his chosen disciple Joginder P. T’s legs, he had again become S. S. P. Mustafa Alam’s cat. His guru P. T. had been killed inside the Golden Temple during Operation Blue Star. Jassa had spent the next five or six years as a

cat. Supporting a flowing beard at night, he had killed and even looted many *lalas* – Hindu businessmen, of Tarn Taran area. Even at that time too I had kept getting commands from the High Command that I should put Jassa cat to death. But every time our old friendship stood in my way to stop me from murdering him. During the day time Jassa moved around with the S. P. as a police cat with his mouser slung on his shoulder. And at night he looted people or even eliminated entire families in certain areas at the behest of the S. P. He then shared the spoils right from Chandigarh down to the S. P. City, S. P. (D) and S. P. O. (CID).... Sometimes he would meet me on the Tarn Taran Road, or at Babey Sahidin, where I passed off as a cook during the noontime everyday. Neither would he ever make a show of recognizing me, nor would I ever pretend to evade him. We passed by each other like strangers. If there was some threat to my life, he rather helped me by conveying this to the other cook “Tochi.

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I had done one or two things at his bidding. The big job I did on his instruction was Ruby cat’s....

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“O, why are you a bumping into the pillar again and again? Bhau where are you headed? Don’t know where on the earth are you lost? Are you in a trance?” Channa Natth distracted me.

“Oh...yes...no....I have been thinking about Jassa...When is he to be brought?” I asked him with mixed feelings of fear and disbelief.

“For one, they were asking that lover of his sister to render accounts. As much as thirty seven lakhs they’ve brought from his Ranjit Avenue kothi in Amritsar. Four and a half lakh rupees and two kilo gold has been unearthed from his Batala residence. And the currency found in policewoman Gindo’s locked house....such huge amount as cannot even be specified!” Channa said.

“Where is Gindo herself now?” I knew policewoman Gindo very well, therefore I asked him out of curiosity.

Channa first let out a volley of abuses and then spat and blurted, “This Maruti friend of yours had killed her a year ago by

setting her on fire after sprinkling diesel on her. It was during his interrogation that he confessed to Gindo's murder also along with that of many others. But after so many months where could the wretched woman's dead body be found? Even her ashes were not found" Channa was talking nonstop....

Gindo's beautiful supple body, fragrant like sandalwood, swam before my eyes. I trembled at the very thought of setting such shapely and robust body on fire. But the next moment this idea came to me that by now I had already seen so much that in the next seven lives even neither would I be able to witness such barbarity nor would so many murders be committed by my hands, then why should I tremble? The next thought brought to me the fact that this trembling proved that the heart was still beating inside me... that the wellsprings of humanity had not yet dried fully.

...A smile appeared spontaneously on my lips when I thought so gently about myself. I became oblivious even of Channa staring at my face.

"What is the matter? Why are you grinning?" said Channa, looking at my face.

"Oh no brother! Where's the grin? Well, remembering the old days lifts one's spirits...there's nothing else." I came back to myself, as it were.

Meanwhile I realized that I had been standing propped up against the pillar for quite sometime. I felt as if something was dragging me down...I heard a voice from within which said that having received repeated beatings my legs had lost all strength and the mind too was refusing to work.

"...If you allow me, brother, may I sit down on the floor? My legs have no strength in them now. I can't keep standing any more." I requested Natth very meekly.

"I say, so far I'm concerned, you can jolly well sit down. Go ahead, sit...sit down. But the moment you hear the Deputy's voice, stand up immediately. You know Ajaiba's nature," Natth cautioned me.

"...Can I forget Ajaiba? You stop worrying brother. The moment I am called, I would be seen standing at attention." Ajaiba's name only made a shiver run down my spine.

"Okay then, sit down here. I will send a cup of tea for you. I don't know when they will bring their sister's husband Jassa. It could be an hour, may be two or even three," said Channa.

I folded my hands in all humility and expressed my thanks with my eyes only. Later on I was surprised to see my folded hands. There was a time when there was a reward of fifty lakhs on my head. There was a time when the whole of the Punjab feared me. Today I was a beggar: "What I have come to be from what I was!" I kept looking at my folded hands for a long time.

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As I sat down with my back supported against the pillar, my mind turned towards Jassa Maruti. The past came alive before my eyes so naturally as if I were still living in the past.

Jassa Maruti had come into contact with the Sant at about the same time when I did. After doing B. Ed. in 1981, I had starting teaching in the Kalgidhar Khalsa School on the Tarn Taran road. It was a middle school being managed by the Shiromani Gurudwara Parbandhak Committee and the job was pensionable. I was a permanent employee and doing well. My marriage plans were afoot. A year or two passed in this way. One day I had to go to the Darbar Sahib, Amritsar, to meet the President of the School Committee. The offices of the Shiromani Committee were located next to Guru Nanak Niwas. I was asked to wait in a big veranda outside the Committee office. I had reached there at the appointed hour.

Those were the days of Sant Bhindrawale's ascendancy. From the Akal Guest House to Baba Atal Gurdwara, the disciples of the Sant could be seen moving carrying revolvers. Apart from this, armed Sikhs always remained stationed in Manji Sahib also. The Singhs of both the factions always remained on guard. The Akal Guest House had been in the possession of the Babbars and the Guru Ram Dass Serai and the roof of the langar – community kitchen, were occupied by the Sant's men. Both the factions abhorred each other no end. The Babbars had only twelve persons on their rolls and the thirteenth, their Chief, had fled to Germany.

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Quite some time passed as I sat there waiting. Tired of hanging around there, I came out of the office and went to the only tea shop opposite Gurdwara Baba Atal and ordered a cup of tea. Visible in the front on the roof tops of the tall old houses of Amritsar were the pickets of the C. R. P. F. men. The C. R. P. F. jawans too sometimes craned their necks out. They were not permitted to go beyond Gurdwara Baba Atal. They were allowed to go only up to the hotel opposite Guru Ram Das Serai. I was sipping tea and thinking about the tug-of-war going on between the militants and the police when somebody called me by my name. When I turned back I saw my B. Ed. classmate Joti Hundal standing there. Clad in a long shirt and pajamas, round turban and his mouser strap around his neck, he looked quite different from others. But I had recognized him in the first glance. Since we had met after a gap of about a year or two, he had a lot of things to tell me. Having been in the Sikh Students' Federation, he too had joined the Sant's group with many of his friends. The entire Sandhu group had accepted the Sant as their leader. The other group too was of the students only, but it was with Sant Longowal under Prof. Kandookadre. But they had hardly any weapons with them. Those who were with the Sant had more weapons in their possession.

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While talking to me, Hundal accompanied me up to the Shiromani Committee office. I told him that I had come to meet the President. The President of our school was very close to the Committee. He laughed at this and said, "Let me know if I can do anything for you. No one can even urinate without our orders." Laughing thus he moved towards Guru Nanak Niwas.

When I came in again, I saw that the President of the school had been observing me from a distance. I had nothing in my mind, not an iota of fear. I straightaway went to him and greeted him. But he seemed to be a bit upset. After accepting my greetings, he asked me bluntly, "How does he know you?"

I was unnerved a little by his attitude. But I told him firmly that he was my class mate in B.Ed. At first he kept quiet for a

couple of minutes or so, and then finally casting aside his dilemma, he said, "Master ji, what times are you living in? You also see everything. We are the real Akalis. The agencies know everything about us. But you are quite new to this place. By now nearly twenty eyes would have espied you talking to him. And all those twenty eyes would be of the C. I. D. or of the police sniffer dogs. Moreover, that Hundal, who you have been claiming to be your friend of the B. Ed days, the news about him that has come from Sant Longowal is that he is a constable in Punjab Police and has been planted here by the intelligence. And to cap it all the worst thing is that Sant Bhindranwale never considers Longowal ji's information to be true."

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My legs had then suddenly started trembling with fear. If today I have been able to withstand all the tortures it is because my mind is strong though the body is hollow from within. At that time, the body was strong but the mind was weak. Having heard about the intelligence and about how every second person was working for the C. I. D., I was scared and I stood speechless before the President. I was at a loss.

"You can go home now and be careful. I am apprehensive that this Hundal may not create trouble for you," the President sent me back with these words.

How could I have known then that every word of the President would prove to be correct? And one day this very Hundal and these very sniffer dogs of intelligence agencies would destroy my world completely?

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The same thing had happened. In about ten days I had started having the feeling that I was being shadowed. But I had not been able to trace the pursuers. Just a few days after this, Joti Hundal, accompanied by a hefty looking sardar, came to my house all of a sudden. My mother was at home. My younger brother and father had gone out for work. I had got scared on seeing them. But I welcomed them formally. They left just after five-seven minutes after having a cup of tea. While leaving they handed me

a gunny sack. In this twenty kilo capacity bag, there were only three big water melons. They must have weighed ten kilos. They said, “The Singhs had asked for water melons, but as the police are following us, we will come tomorrow or the day after to take back the melons.”

They left but even after keeping those melons I kept wondering why they had taken such risks in coming to my place for keeping here water melons which were worth only a trivial amount of two rupees or so. Suddenly an idea crossed my mind like lightening and I went into my room, bolted the door from inside and shook the three water melons. Every time I heard a clanging sound coming out from each one of them. Then I looked very carefully at the melons and found that all the three had been cut open in the middle and joined again. I took courage to open one of them. It had been emptied and dried up from inside, and bullets wrapped in wax paper were placed within it. Under the bullets were small pistols, all three of the same type, glistening and exactly similar...

I was frightened to the very bones. I could not sleep. I feared a police raid throughout the night. I prayed and prayed and finally the dawn arrived after a long painful night. I remained distracted in the school. I came back from the school fearing the worst. Mother asked me something but I replied something else. Father and brother also returned home in the evening but I did not feel like talking to them. We were only four of us in the family and if one of us had even a tooth ache the other three three could intuitively discern his pain in no time. The members of my family questioned me a little bit but I did not tell them anything. What could I tell them after all? Meanwhile the same hefty sardar showed up around eight thirty. He called me out after knocking on the door and told me to give him the bag containing water melons. I did hand over the bag to him but I told him firmly, “Tell Hundal not to put me through such a difficult trial again and he should never come to me again.” The hefty sardar kept staring at me in a very strange manner for a few seconds; he didn’t utter a word. And then he left quietly with the water melons.

Since that day till today, ‘Hundal curse’ has been visiting me. Much after this incident and after having been with the Sant for long, I had come to know that this very Hundal was chopping my roots. This too I had come to know only when at the instance of the Sant, this Jassa P.T. and that barbarian Inderjit had killed this policeman Hundal, stuffed his body in a gunny sack after hacking it into pieces and thrown the sack in the garden street. From there the police had taken away his dead body without any fuss.

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Three days after the Hundal and water melons incident, the police picked me up when I was on the way to school in the morning. I had just stepped out of the house and turned the street corner when five to seven well-built bulls of men clad in white clothes lifted me and threw me into a Canter. After starting the Canter they also got into the vehicle. They tied my hands and gagged my mouth. After ten minutes we were in the notorious C. I. A. staff rooms in Amritsar. The job of my interrogation had been entrusted to S. P. (D) Randhawa. He and his bullies tore the muscles of my legs. My head spun in pain, but I bore it with fortitude.

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“You tell us everything or else I will send you to Maal Mandi,” Randhawa warned me.

“When do I deny anything? Ask me anything you want to,” there was pain in my voice.

“Tell me then, since how long has this affair of water melons been going on?” Randhawa snapped.

I had understood that they knew about Joti Hundal and the watermelons. Since I was not guilty therefore I disclosed everything in detail. After listening to me, instead of calming down, Randhawa started abusing me.

‘Mother fucker.... You have still got a lot hidden in your belly. You will not spill it so easily. You will have to be shown the Maal Mandi.’

“Are you an S. P. or the tip of a penis? Who made you an investigator? If you know everything about Hundal and the water melons, then haven’t your sister fucking informers told you that I

have never ever hit a dog or a cat with a stick? What else have I ever done except teaching?" All this escaped my lips in anger. The fact is that I could not bear the obscenities.

After listening to my plain speaking, Randhawa and his cronies started kicking me. One of them broke my right leg with a long stick. I slumped writhing in pain. Then they started beating my soles with the sticks. I started abusing them, but I lost my consciousness after half a minute. When I came to, I was lying there only.

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By the evening my companions, my well wishers, had reached there. The prominent people of my neighbourhood were also with them. Randhawa took away my school President and told him, "You can take him away but we still have to extract quite a lot out of him."

Right from getting medicines from a doctor up to escorting me to my place, the President stood by me at every step. He gave me some money also from his own pocket before leaving. He reassured my mother and my gentle father also. He cheered up my younger brother too. But before going, he took me aside and said, "What have you decided about the future?"

"I do not grieve at having been thrashed; let them break my leg again. What pains me is that I've been beaten without any fault of mine," tears welled in my eyes.

"The inside story, my son, is that the government machinery is running a secret operation to encourage the youth to become militants. You have been beaten under the same policy. And as far as my knowledge of the situation tells me, you should go away somewhere for some time along with your family otherwise the Amritsar police will not let you live in peace. It is just to lure young boys from Gurdaspur and Amritsar into this vicious cycle of militancy that the entire police and all the agencies are making all out efforts. And if you continue to stay here, believe me, it will not be before long that.....now it is for you to decide..." the President insinuated and brought his talk to an end.

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The President had left, but where could we go? We could not think of anything. After some time I started moving about in a rickshaw. Everyone at home felt that things were normal. But a shadow lingered on.

Suddenly a bomb exploded inside the Shivala Temple in Amritsar. I was in the school. The President came to the school suddenly and advised me not to stay at home that night. What he said was like an order for me. I went with my colleague to his village Chabba that night. I had sent home a message that I would return the next day. How could I have known at that time....?

The next day when I reached the school, I came to know that the police had taken my mother to the police station. Neither my father nor my brother was at home then. They were still at their work. When they returned from the lathe factory, the frightened neighbours told them that my wailing mother had been taken to the police station by plain clothes policemen. Even this could also not be found out as to which district the police was from.

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Greatly distraught, the three of us, my father and my brother and I appeared before the S. S. P. Meena. He directed us again to go to Randhawa. When we again went to Randhawa, he made the three of us sit in the dark cells of the Ram Bagh Police station. We remained there throughout the night. We had no cot, no bed, and not a morsel of food in our stomachs. Nobody asked us if we needed a cot, food or any other thing. Along with us, there were many other gloomy, seemingly woebegone village faces. All were silent.

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Randhawa and D. I. G. Shukla came there at around five in the morning. I knew Shukla since my arrest the last time. The moment they came they called us out and pushed us into interrogation chambers. Shukla and Randhawa were sitting in the chairs and their butchers of policemen stood ready before them. A new comer would be terribly scared, but we were dealing with them for the second time.

“What is to be done with these people, sir?” Inspector Tony asked both of them.

“Recommendations for you, you sister fuckers, reach us before you do. What do we say to you now?” said Randhawa.

“Are these people President Manchanda’s men?” Shukla asked Randhawa.

“Yes sir. They are Manchanda’s men. The same one of the Longowal group...” replied Randhawa.

“Send the sister fuckers away...” I don’t know what came into his mind then, for without any rhyme or reason he stood up clenching his teeth and started pulling my father’s beard while uttering like a mad man, “You dog, put a leash on your sons”

Following him, Randhawa also kicked us twice or thrice. I endured all this for some time. Then a small steel bucket came into my hand, which had been kept there perhaps to wash the floor or to urinate. I picked it up and flung it at Randhawa’s back. My younger brother, emboldened by my action, pounced upon Shukla who was beating my father. Then all the butchers assaulted us and kept kicking and beating us with sticks and belts till we did not lose consciousness. Shukla told them while leaving...

“Throw out the mother fuckers after they regain consciousness. And now you will die craving to see your mother’s face...”

*

Since that day till today.....

My father has passed away. Today even the memory of his face has become hazy. Shinty, a lathe worker had seen my brother for the last time about two years ago in Nanakmata in U. P. He had a photographer’s shop in some village where he was living with a needy girl.

*

And mother? The memory of her face had not become blurred even during these ten years.

But I could never see my mother again. All three of us kept pining to see her. But she had perhaps mingled with the five elements.

The whirring sound of the canter’s engine distracted me. I had returned from the long years gone by. The canter carrying Jassa Maruti had reached. I stood at attention immediately. In the meantime I had seen Sharma and Ajaiba coming out. They moved towards the Canter without looking at me. In their eyes, not only I but all other human-born were merely insects. Having lived among these butchers I had begun to believe that God had filled their minds with rusted iron in place of any feelings. I was standing there in silence. Channa, Faqeria and Shinda, the policeman, had also come near the canter.

“Oye you! what’s your name? Come here you, your sister’s pimp! Go and join the boys and take this corpse to your cell. We will finish his work tomorrow,” Ajaiba had seen me by then.

With a deadpan face, I ran straight to the canter like a trained animal and started helping policemen remove what looked like a corpse, a corpse which we once used to call by the name Jassa Maruti.

But Jassa Maruti! Where was Jassa Maruti? It was just a corpse. I used to grieve at times when I looked at myself in the bathroom mirror, but on seeing Jassa I was, as if, wrenched from inside. His right eye which had turned black was shut and a part of the forehead just above it was broken and had sunk deep. It was as if someone had crushed a ripe water melon! There were blood stains on his clothes and feet. And while helping him, out my eyes had got drawn towards his arms.

“Where is his right hand?” In a daze I was searching for his right hand but in place of a hand, a bandaged stump with congealed blood on it was mocking me.

“Put him in the master’s room. Do you have the blankets you require?” Sharma asked me.

“Yes sir, yes sir,” I replied mechanically.

With the help of the three policemen, we laid Jassa in my room. Despite being in such a terrible shape, Jassa was fully conscious. He even tried to talk a little bit during this period. The policemen went away after laying him down. I sat down on the floor near him. He was lying on my floor-bed. I sat there for

some time. Then I noticed that he was looking at me very intently. He had recognized me and wanted to say something.

“Jasseya, I am master, your old buddy master Karam. Have you recognized me?” I said trying to start a dialogue.

“Leave aside my recognizing you. When I came to know from the policeman Shinda about your being here, I myself asked for your company. I don’t know if I’ll live for one or two more nights. I have been requesting Sharma the S. P. for many days that they should allow me to be with you during the final moments of my life. And it was with great difficulty that he could be persuaded to be merciful. But where’s the mercy in his heart! For the sake of your company, I disclosed to him about the first floor room of Jeet Springs Co. My two lakh rupees in cash have been lying there for about a year. The lock on the door is mine, my elder brother. Two lakh rupees has this first meeting with you cost me” Jassa was speaking in a high-spirited tone. I did not believe at first that with so many broken bones one could speak so firmly and loudly! Then I remembered Baghela. Every limb of his body Gill had got broken in front of his own eyes, but the thunder in his voice was intact till his last breath.

*

“Look at your plight brother? What have you got done to yourself? You were in the right place – a Sub Inspector and that too with the Punjab Police. Where was the need for you to flaunt your madness here? Hadn’t you already paraded enough of it in 1984 and thereafter? What more was left to be done?” This is all I could say with a heavy heart.

“Big brother,” he said after a long silence

“Yes?” I sat, having been transformed into a question mark.

“It is a very long story. If destiny has extended my life by a night or so, I will tell you something before I die. But I have to seek a favour from you, and don’t say no to me. This is what I’ve come to you for. Not only two lakh rupees, I would have given everything else also to Sharma. I will leave a lot for you before breathing my last. But please accept this request of mine which I am going to make.” He was an enigma to me.

“Do I need to shove the money into my asshole Jasseya? Just tell me, brother, do I need the currency notes to make a bonfire with? As per the official records, I’m already dead. I don’t have anybody to call my own outside the jail, neither a wife nor mother-father. I don’t know if my brother is alive or not. Even if he is, he is as good as dead. You tell me about yourself.” I blurted it, as if, out of world-weariness.

“Yes! You are right, big brother, yes,” said he in a deeply agonized voice. Then a very long brooding silence descended on us. We both had become very pensive.

*

Whether my mother had been killed by the police or she was alive, we three were undone by this dilemma. My father took to bed. At times my younger brother and I cooked food, ran after doctors sometimes, and attended to our jobs now and again. Then we engaged a maid servant. This separation from my mother was unbearable to my father. After a while, the tidings that reached me were not auspicious. Sharma had killed my mother. Though, deep within, I still don’t believe it, but truth cannot be falsified. The police had started harassing me and my younger brother time and again since that very day. Whenever there was a bomb explosion in the grain market, *satta bazaar*³ or outside the temples, I and my brother would be locked up in the police station for a night or two. Sick of all this, we sent my younger brother to U. P. to our relatives. A sizeable number of people belonging to our carpenter community lived there. I remained in a quandary for about a month after getting the news of my mother’s death. Then having steeled my heart, I resigned my job and on Joti Hundal’s recommendation, I joined the Sant’s followers. My only request was that I should be given a weapon to kill S. P. Sharma. But Joti Hundal had held me back by citing paucity of weapons. Besides this, the Sant had already given his personal weapon to Baba Rode for killing Sharma.

I was hanging about there as a volunteer. The news of my having reached the Harmandar Sahib and joining the Sant had spread like wild fire. The same police, which earlier harassed us

no end, now did not look towards my house any more. My father was living peacefully. He went to his work, but he worked just about as much as he needed to earn his living.

*

Jasa Maruti had met me there for the first time. He was an old companion of the militant P.T. of Putlighar. He had an old house in the streets near Khalsa College. His father belonged to the village Ghanpur situated at the back of the University. The poor *jatt* had migrated from the village in good old days to settle in the Guru Nanak colony near the Khalsa College. Jassa was his only child born to him quite late in his life. Born with a streak of wildness in him, he had fallen into the company of smugglers and pugnacious bhaus. He had become friends with P. T. at that time only. P. T. also had similar ideas. Finally both of them had taken up shelter with the Sant. Fed up with P. T.'s shenanigans, the Sant had him laid up for a month on the roof of the langar hall after getting his legs broken by Baba Bara Singh. At that time Jassa had escaped the Sant's wrath by lying to him but Jassa was not liked by Baba Manochahal. He and Baba Bara had suggested to the Sant on many occasions to do away with Jassa but before this could be accomplished, he had run off from there and taken shelter in Guru Nanak Niwas. It was at about this time that the Operation Blue Star had started. Having got the wind of the impending Operation Blue Star from the Babbars and Gurcharan *lamma* – the tall one, who was Sant Longowal's follower, Jassa had already escaped through the garden street towards Tarn Taran via Paragdas Chowk five days before the Operation. P.T. and his companions had died fighting the army in the *parikarma*⁴ of the Golden Temple and in Baba Sri Chand *Akbara*⁵.

*

I myself was also outside the *parikarma* area during those days. The Singhs had assigned me the duty of killing Joti Hundal, but I had declined. Then he was killed by Jassa and P.T. and Inder, the brute. The Singhs had understood my sole overriding desire to kill S. P. Sharma and they sent me to the Patti area. Sharma too was working in Tarn Taran area at that time.

*

“What are you thinking big brother?” Jassa, who was lying down, asked me suddenly.

“Nothing, I just remembered the old days,” said I.

“Do you remember Bhau that I had seen you for the first time at a function in the B.Ed. Khalsa College. You had sung a Mukesh song and your class had rendered a Qawwali.”

My memories came back to me. A smile appeared on my face.

“How come you were there?” I asked him.

“I was brother an idler and loafer number one. I used to gatecrash at each function of the college. For one, my house was very close to the college. Secondly, I have studied in the Khalsa School. So it wasn't difficult for me,” said Jassa.

*

Suddenly there was commotion outside. My attention was drawn towards it. The evening had set in and it was getting dark. I came out after hearing the noise. Nothing was visible from there. But I could get to know only this much that Ajaiba and Faqeeria were having an argument with each other. Faqeeria had no fear of any one. I stood there for a few moments. Meanwhile Shoki, the cook, happened to be passing near me. I asked him in a very low voice what the whole thing was all about.

“Bhau, Faqeeria and Jaiba have quarreled. Jaiba offered Faqeeria ten thousand rupees and a box of whisky to kill Jassa and throw his dead body towards the Mandi, where they had been disposing of dead bodies in the past too. But Faqeeria rather started abusing him and said that he would not kill his old friend Jassa.”

“And then,” I asked him further.

“Then, Ajaiba said that the mother fucker had killed many policemen despite himself being a policeman, where was the hitch in killing such a vermin? To which Faqeeria replied, ‘Have I myself killed fewer men? That means you will kill me also tomorrow?’”

“What will they do now?” I asked him. I knew that Shoki would be in the know of everything. As it is, experience had taught me that secrets are known either to cooks, servants or drivers.

“Then?”

“Well brother, now Channa Nathh and havildar Kirpal are ready to give him a ticket for the next world. Ajaiba has promised the same ten thousand and the box of whisky to them.”

“When?” I asked him point blank.

“Tomorrow in the afternoon,” Shoki replied and left.

*

I returned to my room. Jassa asked me the reason for the all the hubbub outside. In very clear words and in a very cool manner I replied, “Be prepared for tomorrow afternoon. The time has arrived.”

After a long silence he said, “Then what was this noise?”

“Faqeria had refused,” said I.

“Who else now?” With his eyes fixed on me, he asked me candidly.

“Channa and Kirpal,” after disclosing this to him, I fell silent. He also did not say anything. After lying on his back for a while, he said, “help me turn on my side.”

I got up and helped him turn on his side. All of sudden I remembered his severed hand.

“Where’s your right hand?”

“Thanedar Cheema chopped it off a week back,” he revealed..

“I had killed his son near Raiyya towards Jharoo Nangal. At the time of his retirement Cheema had got his son recruited as havildar in the police. He was on duty in the police post there. I knew when the two or three of them came out at night. They were two and I killed both of them.” He then narrated the rest of the story also.

“Then?” I asked him.

“Then Cheema came to know of all this after a year. Ajaib disclosed this to him just a week ago. He wanted my custody from Ajaiba. Five lakh rupees is what he offered to Ajaiba for allowing him to hack me into pieces. Ajaiba looked at the five lakhs and said, ‘Should we give this gold mine to you for five lakhs? You can thrash him as much as you like. But we’ll kill him ourselves.’”

“Is it so?” I responded. Nothing surprised me then because for many years I had myself worked with the meanest monsters. Hence I took it easy.

*

“And then?”

“This entire corporeal frame has been battered again by Cheema that lover of his daughter. While going away after torturing me, he found a sickle somewhere and chopped off my hand. The bastard was bent upon slicing head off, but it was Ajaiba and Nirmal who had stopped him.” He said.

After a long silence, he started speaking again.

“I am worried neither about my impending death tomorrow afternoon and nor about this hand. There’s something else which is troubling me, my brother. I will tell you that also before I go, certainly I will. And I have to seek something from you.”

*

“Do you remember I had saved you from Ruby Cat?” He said after a while.

The entire story came back to my mind. Ruby Cat was a policeman but he had become the Jathedar of Baba Shahidan Gurdwara at Chatiwind. I had also taken shelter there as a volunteer. Ruby came to know of it and he reported it to the police station B. Division. Jassa was also posted there. He immediately sent a word to Tochi the cook through his tout and Tochi hid me away. In the evening after it had got dark, I and Jassa strangulated Ruby to death with a towel when he was walking unworriedly near the Secretary Garden toward Bhagtanwala. After carrying his body to a sewage nullah we buried it in it very securely. Neither the police have been able to lay their hands on a trace of Ruby’s till date nor have I ever confessed to his murder during any of my police remands.

“Yes, it was all because of your kindness that I escaped death by a whisker,” I said to him with heart-felt gratitude.

A little later I dozed off. But Jassa didn’t sleep a wink.

*

After P. T.’s death, there was no stopping Jassa. The Sant and his companions had died fighting inside the Golden Temple. Jassa

did not establish contact with Jinda, Ginder, Baba Manochahal or Sukh who had escaped from there. On the other hand, the police and the army were looking for all hard-core extremists. Jassa had become Mustafa Ali's cat with the help of Jaswinder, a police cat from Chheharta. After a little while he joined the police as a constable on the recommendation of the notorious police cat Sokha Kala. We kept getting all these news. Manochahal and Gurjant were fuming at not having killed Jassa earlier. On his part, Jassa knew all about the militant hideouts and their ways. He killed many well-known militants, got promotions and rose to the level of a thanedar. He had become utterly ruthless in the company of Inderjit who was a beast. As it is, he himself had been wild and ruthless since his childhood. After he joined hands with Sokha Kala, such cruelty had made its way into his heart as is to be found in butchers, the insane and the wild beasts gone berserk. Sokha Kala had lost his life at the hands of Bhupi Jogpuria, in his own house in Amritsar, but he had helped Jassa have good connections. The Governments in Delhi needed people like Jassa to fuel extremism. He had come to be known as 'useful person' to all the state agencies.

*

"Why did the Khalsa Liberation Force people kill Inderjit the beast?" It was the last quarter of the night when I asked Jassa, who was continuously awake. In fact, both of us had not slept.

"Well, in fact, it so happened that we were to kill a tout from the Varpal area there and then only after catching him. When we were about to shoot him, Inder the beast said, 'Let's have some fun' and he told Jathedar Kashmir Thattha⁶ of Liberation Force to leave and added that they would kill the tout on the other side of the canal. They handed over the tout to us and left. There was a young Singh by the name Partap Singh with them. He stayed with us. Inder the beast and I together gagged the tout's mouth and cut him to pieces on the river bank. Whilst we were hacking his limbs, he was squirming in pain. We took immense pleasure in killing him. Partap was scared to see all this and that very night he fled to Kashmir Thattha. We fired a burst

of AK 47 on him to prevent him from reaching Thattha. But he escaped and narrated the whole story to Thattha. I had a gut feeling of looming danger therefore I didn't go to Baba Bhindrawala's durbar again after this incident. But how could mad Inder be sensible? He went to the *parikarma* and from there he was picked up by Thattha and his cronies. He was taken to Guru Ram Das Serai where he was hacked to pieces after which his dead body was burnt with petrol somewhere in a deserted area on the Tarn Taran road." Jassa disclosed the entire story.

*

"But, brother, why did you kill Gindo, the policewoman?" I asked him hesitantly.

"She wasn't my wife. She was just like a kept woman. But she had become too meddlesome. Whenever I went to her house in a drunken state, she nagged me. She lived alone. The day I didn't get someone to kill, I would go mad with rage and spill my own blood by stabbing my hands or banged my head against the walls. She used to get sick of all this. One day she was unwittingly fired at by me in utter fury. I took her dead body to the Mandi area in my government jeep, and set it on fire after sprinkling diesel on it. In the same way I had set on fire two lady teachers of Tarn Taran in the past. There was lot of hue and cry in the papers at that time, but after sometime everyone had become silent on their own." Jassa was opening up, layer by layer.

"Brother...you had a wife and a child also. That woman your father had married you to when you were very young? Don't you ever meet them?" I drew his attention towards his past

"Brother, I had left them in 1981 only. I was barely nineteen or twenty at that time. I left her in such a way that after going to her parental village she too didn't look back toward me. My son was born there only," he almost broke down.

"Do you remember them sometime?"

"No." His face hardened once again.

*

When Barnala Government was formed in Punjab and then fell in 1987, I was given general amnesty for a few months. I and

many of my companions had come out of our hideouts in the fields and surrendered our weapons. My father had passed away about that time only. I stayed at home during these days. Some of my companions had been recruited as bus conductors by the Barnala Government, and some were inducted into the Electricity Board. Some were given mini buses. It was about two months after my father's death that the Barnala Government fell. I too had taken a loan of about twenty thousand rupees, but I did not feel like starting any business. My brother had settled permanently in U. P. The Barnala Government had barely fallen, when the police started making rounds once again. The same old vicious cycle! In the end when nothing availed, I went underground once again. This time I had joined the Painta group. They had permanent hideouts and new weapons. Occasionally I kept hearing about Jassa and he about me but nothing moved me to the quick in those days. Once, at Dhand Kasel, Jassa and I had come across each other. I was going alone on a motor cycle. Jassa stood there at a police picket. The police stopped me and started questioning me. Jassa had three stars on his uniform. We both recognized each other but none of us uttered a word. Then he gesticulated to them and said, "Let him go boys."

I too had left quietly.

*

The day was about to break when Jassa asked for water. I gave water and made him lie down again. Suddenly he said, "Master I am very sad at your mother's death."

"Leave it now," said I. But something had taken me by the throat at this sudden mention of my mother.

"I have made one mistake, master. I have worked for about a year with your culprit Sharma, the S. P. Those were the days of your ascendancy in Punjab. I could have disclosed his route to you if I had wanted. But what do I say now? I was then obsessed with money and that's what undid me." He was unfolding himself fully.

"Leave it now. Forget about it."

I did not want to listen to all this and about Sharma. I put a stop to the discussion.

*

Channa and Kirpal arrived when the sun had risen after an hour. Kirpal had come from his home but Channa used to sleep there only. This Arya Samaj School was very big, but for years it had been lying closed. A Punjab Police torture centre and a C. I. D. wing were situated here. The rear hall was with the CRPF. But it did not interfere in the working of the Punjab Police at all. Channa and many other police personnel like him used to sleep there in the vacant rooms.

"Well, are you ready?" Channa asked Jassa who was lying very calmly. Kirpal was totally silent. It was Kirpal's habit that he kept quiet when he had to torture or put someone to death. His very looks were fear-inspiring. When I had been brought here after my arrest from Chabba on the information provided by Babbu, the tout, it was Kirpal only who had tortured me the most.

"I am ready. When are you going to issue me my ticket?" Jassa was undaunted.

"In the afternoon," Kirpal said and then both of them left.

"Brother, my time has arrived. I need your help. It wasn't for nothing that I sought your company by paying two lakh rupees to Sharma," Jassa said the moment both of them left.

"Go ahead, tell me what help do you need?" I said very earnestly.

"Brother, Channa Natth and Kirpal, both of them are quite okay with you. You tell them to kill me by running a truck over my chest. I do not want to die of a bullet." He said to me in determinedly.

My mouth remained agape in surprise. I had never expected that Jassa would seek such a death. Ultimately, this is what escaped my lips.

"What on earth are you talking buddy?"

"I am prepared to give you anything you ask for. Even now, I have about one and a half lakh hidden somewhere. I will tell the hiding place to Channa Natth and Kirpal. My brother you just bring them around to the idea that they should kill me by running a truck over my chest. That's it." He had come begging to me.

I couldn't think of anything. At last, I asked him rather harshly, "Are you mad buddy? Okay you just tell me, can death be had by begging like this?"

He was moving time and again as he lay there and he started forcing me to go to Channa and Kirpal to talk to them. I got up and went to Channa in his room. After listening to everything, Channa started laughing loudly like a mad man and said, "The lover of his sister is now asking for an easy death! Despite himself being a policeman earlier, he has been secretly killing our brothers in police. And now he is scared. Ajaiba has issued to us a very strict order for him. He has given us a steel noose he has himself got prepared. We will put the steel noose around his neck here itself and then drag him to the Mandi while he is groaning in pain and kill him there. We won't let him breathe for half an hour or so and we won't let him die either. You go and inform him."

*

I came back and told Jassa everything. He fell silent. I too remained quiet for sometime. At last, I said, "Brother, why do you seek such a death?"

He looked at me and said, "I knew you would pose this question to me. I will also tell you before I go. I have very little time with me now. I want to unburden myself. You are the first and last person to whom I'll reveal this secret before I die."

"Help me take a turn on my side." He said before starting again. I helped him turn on his side. Then I positioned myself close to his face with my back pressed against the wall. Now I was fully prepared to listen to him with full concentration.

"It is like this, big brother, that I have introspected a lot during these months. I have tried to understand my temperament and my . . . and my life from a very close angle." He was unable to find the right words.

"Brother, you just carry on," I egged him on.

"It happened like this brother. Countless people did I kill after joining the police. At the instance of the agencies I killed journalists. I killed officers. I killed teachers. I killed patwaris. I killed dancers, singers and eunuchs. Was there anything that I didn't

do? After committing a murder I would place there a chit sometimes in the name of Manochahal, sometimes in Budh Singhwala's Liberation Force, or in the name of the Babbars. We had all the letter heads with us. How could the Sikhs get to know that all those who were looting and killing people were police dogs? People thought that the extremists had done the job whereas most of these incidents were the doings of the force which I and Sokha had raised."

I was silent. During these months I had come to know everything about how the Delhi government was itself making us terrorists and how it was then eliminating us. But today, I liked listening to all this from Jassa's mouth.

*

"I killed, my brother, many people in your name as well by throwing letter heads bearing your name. The Jansanghis who went for a morning walk near the Company Bagh in Amritsar and were killed there were actually killed by me. I had thrown there a slip in your and Master Karam Singh's name. The ten *lalas* from Tarn Taran who were done to death after dragging them out of the bus were also killed by me. And these murders were also imputed to you." He was unwrapping himself.

"Now leave these old things, brother," said I.

"No! It is necessary to tell them to you. These things are connected with what I've to tell you next." He picked up the thread.

"The next thing my brother is that right since my early childhood, I have been very hardhearted. It was as if a piece of rusted iron had been placed in my chest in place of a heart. My mother had died early, and perhaps I became so cruel because of her absence. Later on I had come into contact the beasts like Inder. The animal within me kept growing with every passing day. Every day I and my companions were able to find someone or the other to kill. When we thrashed the victim we did so with great sadistic pleasure. This Faqeeria is my old buddy. He and I must have killed perhaps more than a hundred persons. We were very famous. Pus kept oozing out of Faqeeria's leprotic feet. In

the Nabha jail where militants charged under the TADA were kept, Faqeeria used to rub his bandaged suppurating feet for a long time against boys' feet." He drew a long breath and said.

"Then, what happened next?" I showed interest.

"I will tell you." He drew long breaths.

"It happened like this, brother that I and my companions came to know that before his death Baba Bijalwal had left his seventy lakh rupees with the transporter Bajwa who lived about a mile away from Batala on the Fatehgarh Churiyan Road. At that time I was on duty at the police post on the road leading to Achal Batala. I, ASI Gurmukh Singh and two constables of our gang, Tilku and Ram Singh, made a plan to settle accounts with that Bajwa in the night. Our informer had revealed that the money was still in his house and had not been invested or deposited anywhere else. We explained everything to the S. S. P. Batala and after deciding how the booty was to be shared we went there and knocked on Bajwa's door in the middle of the night. He did not open the door initially. We had posted six home guards towards the back wall so that no one could flee from there. In the meantime, the four of us got the doors opened after repeated knockings. The transporter, his wife and his two or three year old daughter were the only ones at home. The rest of the family was perhaps in the other house, I am not sure."

"Well master, if ever I saw somebody who was a tough nut to crack, it was Bajwa. We broke all his bones in that deserted house without caring for his shrieks, but he gave us no wind of money. Finally, when nothing availed, we killed his wife. He became rather all the more audacious. He said, "Now you can have my dick. I won't give you anything. The one for whom I did everything, you've killed her. Master, he just went on abusing us." He drew another long breath.

"Then master I don't know how my mind was turned by his abuses. Beside myself with anger, I held his two or two and a half year old daughter by her legs and hit her violently on the floor, just like a cloth being washed is struck on the ground. That child, dangling in my hands, looked at me intently for the last

time and . . . and then her broken skull, blown into smithereens lay scattered on the ground."

I was stunned to hear this.

Jassa also kept quiet for a long time. He kept looking at me. Ultimately, he said, "I knew you'd be stunned to hear this. If you allow me, may I continue?"

"But . . . but what happened to her father?" This is all I could say.

"He passed out on seeing his daughter die. Finally Gurmukh shot him dead in the courtyard itself and we all returned empty handed from there. We reported the matter to the S. S. P. In the morning he called the press and attributed the incident to the militants' internal strife."

"Then?"

"Then what brother! We just forgot about it. But hardly a week after this, whenever I tried to go to sleep fully drunk someone would come to me every night at around one thirty, awaken me and frighten me. I saw it when I closed my eyes and I saw it when I opened my eyes."

"What did you see?" I asked.

"Well brother, I kept seeing the apparition of that two or two and a half year old girl. In one hand she had khaki uniform and fragments of her broken and crushed skull in the other. Every night I would get up terrified. I could not sleep at night and had no peace during the day. I had gone as if half insane. Those at Amritsar and also at Tarn Taran, the police chiefs, would ask me what had gone wrong with me, why my face was ashen. They offered that if Batala did not suit me, I could go to them. But what could I say to them? I started drinking more heavily, but still where was the peace of mind? When nothing worked, I went to the Gahlru Shah Pir of Chatiwind. Without asking me anything, he told me that a girl was bringing death on me. I silently abused him a million times and returned. If someone should ask that rascal, 'what could death do to me? Give me sleep for one night rather.'" He stopped.

"What did you do then?" I did not want him to stop. To me there was something fundamentally eerie about these things.

Despite having seen such horrible hues and shades of life, all that Jassa had told me and his own behaviour had, as if, paralyzed me.

“What happened then was that I thought that she was seeking some sacrifice from me by showing the police uniform to me. When pushed to the wall, what will a person not do? I had already lost my mental balance. Every night I went out in mufti and kept a watch on the homes of the policemen known to me, even if they were from the home guards. Whenever I got an opportunity, I killed a policeman, or a home guard jawan. And believe me, for a day or two, the apparition of that girl would not visit me. But on the third day she would show up again. Ultimately, I started absenting myself from duty and wandered frenziedly from one district to another.” He said.

I was silent. He himself started again: “My madness had got greatly aggravated. I had good contacts. I would find out which policeman went home daily and from which police station, and which one was on leave. I just went on killing people whenever I got the chance. Things came to such a pass that I killed even my old friends Tilku and Gurmukh. Only Ram Sunh escaped from my clutches. It led to a great hue and cry in the police circles; everybody was curious to know who it was who was secretly killing police jawans in this way.”

“But weren’t you caught brother?” I asked.

“How the hell could I have been caught? Nobody even suspected me. During the day I behaved like a mad man in the police station. Everybody thought that I was looking either for some extremist or someone who had provided shelter to an extremist. And the needle of suspicion never pointed towards me. It was because of the wretched betrayal by Sital Sunh of Liberation Force from Mehta Chowk that I was caught.” He said.

“How did Sital entrap you?” I asked him.

“Actually master, I had gone to kill a home guard one night towards Dhoolke. I had definite information that he went to his village at night on his cycle. When I was about to kill him, he said, ‘Who is it?’ And in response to his challenge I blurted, ‘Where will

you go now. I am Sital, your sister’s husband’. I killed him, but in my drunken state I could not see that there was another cyclist following him. He was perhaps a milkman, who was related to Sital in some way. Well the next morning he informed Sital that a home guard jawan of his village was killed in his name in the night while he (Sital) had no news about it. And Sital was an under cover agent of the Punjab police. I had mentioned his name for no good reason. He immediately approached the S. P. and also set the C. I. D. on my trail. And the C. I. D. didn’t let a week pass when they nabbed me and took me to Ajaiba. At first it was the Jalandhar Police which carried me off because the S. S. P. with whom I had worked had gone to Jalandhar. He again handed me over to Ajaiba. I might perhaps have killed nearly forty five or fifty policemen.” With a long breath he ended his story.

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“But what do you want now?” I asked him.

“I only want, my brother, that a big truck should be run over me,” he reiterated.

“This can’t be done at all,” I told him, fed up with all this.

“Why can’t it be done? Baghela was also killed by Ajaiba’s men by crushing his head under a truck,” he divulged to me as if it were new information.

“Oye that was Gill’s order,” I told him the truth.

“But, my brother, I myself want to be killed by being run over by a truck. Then why should anybody have an objection?” He demanded like a child.

“But my friend, why do you want to get involved in all this trouble? What’s the inside story?” I was sick of it.

“Now listen to me and decide for yourself.” He said. After drawing a long breath he resumed, “Ever since I have been arrested by the police and am being tortured, I have felt no pain, no ache whatever. I’ve just one pain, day and night. For the last one month or so, whenever I close my eyes, it is as if that little girl jumps up and sits on my chest. And she, who would weigh hardly ten or twelve kilos, her weight begins to increase. And sitting on my chest, she starts weighing, as if, many quintals and tonnes. She

goes on laughing and goes on increasing her weight. I open my eyes so many times, twist and turn, but she refuses to get off.”

I was silent.

He made an effort to touch my feet with his left hand. I was startled. Then like a beggar he stretched his left hand towards me and said, “Brother, very little time is left now. I don’t want to go with this burden on my mind. For God’s sake, tell Channa to run a truck over my chest. Perhaps it is in this way that I may be able to get rid of the burden of that little girl.”

*Maninder Singh Kang, “Bhaar”. *Bhet Wali Gall*. Lokgeet Prakashan, Chandigarh (2009).

Notes

1. The word *dera* usually refers to the abode of a saintly person where he lives with his followers. In this sense it is like a seminary or a cloister. However, in its secular connotations it means lodging or a place to stay.

2. The word *bhau* literally means ‘brother’. However, during the heyday of militancy in Punjab, Sikh militants, especially in the Amritsar and Gurdaspur regions, were euphemistically known as *bhau* and *babey* elsewhere. The word *babey* is the plural of *baba* which means an old man.

3. *Satta bazaar* refers to a financial market place where people gather for speculative trading or for all kinds of betting and gambling in stocks.

4. Circumambulatory passages around the sanctum in a temple or a Gurudwara.

5. The Punjabi word *akbara* means: (1) an arena for a wrestling bout, and (2) a monastery or an assemblage of some religious sects. There are many *akharas* in and around Amritsar, in particular in the vicinity of the Golden Temple, in the second sense of the term.

6. The pronunciation of the word *thattba* is *tbʔppha* as per IPA symbols.

Potato Plus

Excerpted from the forthcoming book *The Now Moment: Conversations with Sobhan Qadri* by Amarjit Chandan

Translated from the original in Punjabi (*Hun-Khin: Sobhan Qadri Naal Bachan Bilas*) by Rajesh Kumar Sharma

C: A newly emerged poet said to me that Qadri writes poems like puzzles, which she cannot comprehend.

Q: In Vancouver, someone asked me: “Why do you create such difficult art?” I gave him this example – when the man living in caves made an axe, he drew a kind of leaf opposite the axe-bearer. It was some other hunger in him, one that preceded what they call culture. When the axe was not performing its function of cutting something down and was hung on a wall, it provided aesthetic pleasure. That is how it begins. He did not know anything; he had just found a new hunger, an inner one. And so that man in Vancouver said: Well, I can now see the sharp side of the axe, but about the other side you have again created a puzzle.

That woman poet, I believe, would be able to comprehend someone else’s poetry. She ought to see, first, whether she really understands it. Suppose you understand potato. If I make something other than potato, you will say you do not understand it. If the artists did only what the market understands, we would still be living in stone or metal age. The ‘bastards’ have made progress. They have given things which the father does not comprehend. Father means tradition. That tradition goes only so far as the potato. The moment something new is made, they fail to understand it. There is nothing anxious about it. The maker of the motor car was insulted and harassed. They said: How can anything move without horses. Galileo did not give potatoes. These are the benefits of not un-