

Victory Dance

Rinchin

*How much does it take for a victory march to turn into a demolition squad?
Now that we've turned mass killings into sport.*

“...Ab badla hoga!”

“Salle unki to...”

Every where people preparing to close by afternoon.

“Aaj to hum jeetenge...”

“Murge katenge

“Unke to bachche bhi khelna bhool jayenge ...”

The plans continue. The boys are preparing for the big match

On the other side of the truck, Rafique continues with the oiling job, wiping grease off his face, he squints at his watch. He wants to take a break, but then someone might just try to include him in the conversation. No, better to just carry on. He reaches for the jug on the stool near the garage door.

On the streets the saffron flags were up, equal in number to the Indian tricolor, symbols of a nation united in sport? Rafique spits water onto the ground before resuming work.

“Just let this day pass. Nothing will happen, just let India win...but what if the victory roused further enthusiasm what if the sudden intoxication, aggression of victory goes on to...”, he shuddered. “And if they loose, won't that be an excuse to look for someone to blame?”

He shook his head. He was taking this fear too far. A train passed on the tracks behind the garage. He felt the tremors. It must be the afternoon Inter-City.

What had the doctor in the govt. hospital told him, Paranoia?

“Forget all that, it's in the past, the city is back to normal, we are all at peace, now there are normal relations between the two communities”, he had said and leaned back on his chair, sitting comfortably, looking at Rafique sitting on the edge of the patients stool.

“We Indians have always had a big heart, we go on in spite of everything. A large united country”, he had continued.

To something that Rafique had mumbled, he said sharply, “What will you get by remembering the past again and again. If you all don't give another reason for the heat to rise then why should any thing happen again? Bhagwan sab theek hi karta hai, what happens, happens for a reason.”

Rafique had merely nodded. He didn't trust his voice, to speak. Picking up his prescription, he had left. On the bus Rafique had felt like he needed to rinse his mouth, to spit out the bitter taste of swallowed anger and humiliation.

It's getting on to be 2:30, another hour and a half more here, then home. He slides back under the truck. The boys on the other side of the truck are also in a rush to wind up. It's ok to miss an hour of the match so as to get full wages. But that one-hour is all they are ready to sacrifice for money. After all this was a show of patriotism right? Lots of laughter and ... hope. "We will win today!"

"Har Har Mahadev."

"Let the slaughter begin. Har ball pe one down."

Back in the basti the boys who had taken a whole day off from work or those who didn't have work to go to, had been busy. The beer bottles (English) had been stacked for later in the night, the flags were up, painted faces, saffron bandanas and the party was ready to begin.

4:30 and Rafique is walking home. Every shop with a television had collected its little crowd. Customers lingering in the hope of a wicket. On the street he avoids making eye contact, concentrating on getting to the end of the street, one left turn and then to safety.... Or as much safety that a ghetto could provide. Exactly a year since they had moved to Char mohhalla, a year since the already divided city had been divided again through fear and death. To him the locality seemed like a tandoor, fear scorched onto minds and souls, leaving either listless ash or smoldering embers that had just enough heat to slowly burn the keeper. Every one had moved here, from Newspaper editors to bank managers, a police officer too was getting his house constructed here, for after his retirement. The way real estate prices had gone up. Having to pay double to buy cheap land here in this place. And most of them had to sell their old properties either at half the price or simply abandon them. Rafique had heard that some of the roadside shops had got taken over without any payment, swapped for smaller inside shops. No negotiation, no deal. Take it or leave it!

Taking whatever little was offered wasn't a compromise for many families like Rafiques, it was total surrender. What else was there to do? When his *phuphi's* family had returned to their village from the camp, they had had to buy back their cots and ladder from their neighbors, things that had been looted from their house after the family had fled.

She had told them this with tears, and a harsh laugh. "*Par ab kya karenge inke saath hi jena hai, ek gaanv mein.*"

Rafique's family had faced no such problem with their possessions. Everything that they owned had been burnt to ashes or looted by strangers. No chance of buying anything back, even if it was an heirloom.

The past month had been tense, the hundred unsaid words and simmering emotions, taking the gentle March days, towards the sweltering April afternoons. The anniversary of a carnage!

And this year there is this cricket. Rafique never really knows how to react, when India loses, he feels diffident in criticizing. Who knows what *toofan* a few careless words could kick up. Though of course the rest of the boys with saffron Indian bandanas could curse the team down to their forefathers. A right they had earned by birth.

In the morning when the boys had taken their break, Bhagesh, in his usual role of newsreader, had read out pieces from the newspaper, borrowed from Hari Bhai's tea stall. There was a news item about how a mob raided some cricketer's house, was it Kaif, Zaheer, Dravid, or Ganguli?, and painted it black. This was after the team had lost the previous match

"Salle unki to ..."

"Par yeh sahi nahi kiya ..."

"Kyon who kharab khelenge to log to naraz honge na, aur"

The entire Indian team had come out and appealed, for people to stop this madness. Players were humans like them after all. They didn't deserve to have their families threatened when they played for the country, so far away from home. The appeals had worked. The players families were safe now.

Rafique had listened to the discussions but kept quiet. He usually tried to keep away from all this at the garage, mastering the art of living like a shadow, always there, but never in anyone's eye. He must be getting good at it because it was almost like he wasn't there. Or maybe these days no one bothered to lower their voices any more, while making any anti Muslim comment. He was slowly becoming a reflection of the others, a mirror that throws back your own image. Same not different. A body that the gaze cannot hold. Glass doesn't burn as well as flesh!

It had been difficult to get this job and he just wanted to keep it. He had lost two jobs. The first went after they had to flee their house and locality, overnight. He had gone back as soon as the city showed the first signs of normalcy, to be told that he had been replaced.

"How many days could we wait, we too had to cut our losses and get back to business." the Seth had said, "and now it's too dangerous keeping you all. You should look for a job there in your mohalla, most of your people's garages have moved there, there will be work, lots of work for you all."

None of the garages in his area could hire him. Already reeling from losses, most were now functioning as small family units. Sons and brothers, who had lost jobs elsewhere, had joined in. Every one had stomachs to feed.

Finally he did manage a job not at a garage, but at a sports shop, earning half of what he got as a trained mechanic. Working as a menial help. In the three months that he had been employed there, twice he had been overcome with panic while at the shop, he had gone completely numb, unable to stand or respond. The owner had sent him home. For two days he had lain in bed, not getting up. Third day his father had taken him to the hospital. Fifth day he returned to work. The young Seth had been sympathetic, but he did not own the shop, his father did and he had been harsh.

"Last chance, if you take any more leave, you can stay home. It's on my boy's insistence that I am taking the risk of even keeping you."

But then there were other days when Rafique just couldn't get himself to go to work. The Seth had been furious.

"How can we tolerate this", he had bellowed.

Rafique had said nothing. When he had finally looked up, the Seth had shrieked “Don’t look at me with your accusing eyes. And what good will it do, to only blame others? Acting like we are all conspiring against you to keep you out of a job.”

He looked around the shop at the other two employees, his look aligning them with him and away from Rafique.

“Whatever one’s religion, one has to work hard. You people are always looking for concessions. If you shirk work, of course we will throw you out”.

The two other employees had by now flanked the Seth on both sides, as he continued, “And what is your excuse? - that you don’t have energy? Even we saw the bad times in the city, I’m not using trauma as an excuse am I. You all are young boys. You all should be honest and hard working, not sly and whining.”

He got up and walked out of the shop leaving Rafique staring at the tiles.

The Seth had given Rafique his salary for the days he had come for work. Cutting money for all the days he had been absent. He was a fair man.

His third job was at this garage. He had been lucky. In the past four months he had never mentioned his problems, nor talked of the past year. Never asked for a favor. He was good at this work and was appreciated. That’s how he wanted to keep it.

As he enters his galli, Rafique can hear snatches from the various TVs and radios, all the voices making a strange collage. He doesn’t know what’s in his head and what he is hearing.

“today the nation is swept by another frenzy”, an electronic voice is saying

“Ek junoon sa phir chaya hai sab pe.”

“It’s a time of passion and festivity.”

And Rafique is scared, again!

Once at home Rafique’s father has given instructions to everyone to stay indoors. Taufique, his brother is sitting sullenly inside, angry for not having been allowed to go and watch TV at Shahid’s house. Since the Cup has begun all his friends in the mohhalla have been gathering at any one house to watch the match together, forcing the mother of that house to feed them all. But today his father’s voice had been firm.

“Don’t create a fuss, just let today pass, from tomorrow do what you like. See the match together, eat together, do whatever you want. And is this match the end or what? There are other India matches yet to happen, isn’t it! Bas chup chap yeh din nikal jane do, phir kal se match dekhna. Abhi India aur australia ka bhi to match hoga na!” His father says all this without once shifting his eyes from the screen. Following every ball.

Rafique ignores the TV and goes into the backyard. With water from the big drum he washes his face, feet. He throws water over his hair combing his fingers through it. It glistens in the sun. Finally he lifts the mug and pours water into his mouth moves it around and spits it into the drain. He moves towards the kitchen to eat.

Put to bat first, Pakistan played well. With each run they made, a hush would fall over the settlement. At the mouth of the galli, Rashid bhai’s tricolor flutters over his paan shop tentatively, like it’s scared that some one would catch it out as an imposter.

At the garage Bhagesh had read out to the boys another piece of news - some of the big city mandals had organized special prayers for today. Pure ghee poured over holy fires, chanting for victory.

Fire cleanses.

Annihilates the undesirable.

India was batting now, Sachin thundering today, so were the drums on TV and on the streets. With each over, the batting was getting better and the revelry on the streets louder. 10:30 and India had won. Crackers burst through the city, filling the air with triumphant smoke and burnt gunpowder smell. More than joyful they sounded vengeful - the happy arrogance of victory. Someone inside the mohalla also burst a few crackers and then some more, the boys were laughing outside. He could make out Sameer's voice over the others, a cracking 13-year-old voice, shrill with excitement.

"Kya last over tha. Inshaallah ab to hum cup jeetenge."

Rafique smiles, there was a time he had loved cricket.

The drums are getting louder, closer and the slogans, "Hindustan hamara hai, Pakistan ki to...Bharat Mata Ki Jai."

Suddenly Taufique starts to cry. What memories did the drums, the sloganeering and the torches recreate? Ammi calms him, pats his back, "It's a victory- march *buddhu*, they are celebrating the win. They are happy, we all are. Chal chupp ho ja. Come sleep with me."

A year back death and hate had danced to the beat of these drums. These cries had spurred every hateful thrust of swords and penises, every throw of burning bottles, every body set afire. They had danced again to these same drums, shouted the same slogans, for the victory march, when votes were reaped and blood and hate and given a good yield.

There is a another burst of crackers, Rafique feels suffocated, moves towards the door. On the way he picks up the packet he had brought home from work.

"Where are you going?" his fathers voice is sharp.

"...Nowhere... Just out", Rafique calls back.

"Are you mad can't you hear them. All drunk and just looking for an excuse?"

"I know, I know its ok I'm only at the door."

Rafique stands near his gate, the drums are closer now, from inside the basti more crackers.

"Making sure we are heard celebrating too," Rafique thinks.

His head is throbbing with the drums, he takes out some crackers from the packet in his hand and lights them at the door. For victory and to the unity of this great country!

Standing straight, looking towards the road, he brings out from his shirt pocket a half-empty pouch of gutka. Head flung back, he pours the contents into his mouth, giving the packet a sharp flick with his finger. He chews for a while then spits out the brown juice, on the *mogra* bush near the gate. He has picked up this habit only in the past few months. It changes the taste in his mouth. The empty packet winks with the breeze, its statuary warning small enough for no one to see.