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FOREWORD

When the idea of this book took birth, Khansaab asked me what I thought and felt. It was a question which I could answer immediately. I stated bluntly what I had to say – perhaps taking a leaf out from his own unique style of functioning (which also got him into trouble occasionally).

I was pleasantly surprised to find that we instantly stood on common ground regarding what this book was *not*. It was not about knowing when, at what time, and in which district he was born, and recording all such biographical details of his life. It was not an ego-pampering exercise, gloating on past glories and feats. It *was* about sharing with the reader the key situations he faced in his career, how he handled them, his relationship with his team, the setbacks he faced, and the lessons life taught him as a policeman. It was about sharing his experiences, with the hope of providing invaluable pointers and lessons in the journey of our lives. It was about discovering the truth in Aldous Huxley's famous words: "Experience is not what happens to you; it is what you do with what happens to you."

Being associated with books primarily in the genre of self-development, I thought that in a book of this nature would lie a fascinating story. A story of a policeman whose job profile involved walking the tightrope of life over the precipice of death. What's more, Khansaab was notorious for not being an armchair warrior, and not sporting the bravery of being out of range! Needless to say, the book would, by default, have the tempo of an action-packed thriller, for he

was known for his modus operandi of going right into the lion's den in order to capture the lion, as it were.

The task was to make the book relevant today, and always. There is a lot we all can learn from policemen. Most of us take it for granted that we will return home each evening from a day's work at the office, whereas in the policing profession such an assumption could well be a fatal fallacy. What's more, what would our levels of stress at work be, compared with those faced by policemen, especially when they are entangled in life-threatening situations, for the common good and not their own personal gain, and are not even adequately compensated while they're at it! Shrunyu Suzuki said that "life is like stepping onto a boat that is about to sail out to sea and sink," and this is perhaps amplified to a very high degree in the policing profession.

So walk with him and his team down alleys filled with terror, celebrate with them when they win their little victories, and be by their side when the chips are down. What this book will certainly do is make you be more thankful to God when you return home safe and sound every evening, to your family and loved ones. We also hope this book will make you spare a thought for the policeman, in whose shoes you are not.

Gautam Sachdeva
November 2004

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Trite though it may sound, this book would not have been written but for the nagging insistence of my wife Mahjabeen, who has more faith in my abilities than I do. It would not have become a tangible reality without the persistence of my friend Gautam, who had the conviction to fashion it in the form of a book. It certainly would not have been coherent and readable without the writing skills of Shailaja, who gave sense and sanity to my ramblings, or Gregory, who did a fine job with the editing and final touches.

Perhaps the major motivating factor was my egoistical yearning to leave behind a memoir of my modest achievements which my sons Mansoor and Zaheer, my daughter Alisha, and my grandson Mikhail would read time and again, and remember me with affection and pride.

I am deeply indebted to my former Police Commissioners S. Ramamurthy and S. K. Bapat, whose leadership and guidance spurred me to perform feats beyond my calibre.

MIDNIGHT'S RAY OF LIGHT

I had just fallen asleep when the phone rang, strident, insistent. Pushing away the dense curtains of post-party grogginess, I switched on the bedside lamp and lifted the receiver. "Khan, is that you?" Even as I mumbled "Yes?" my mind sprang alive to say that this must be the voice of the newly appointed Police Commissioner of Mumbai. It was.

"Khan, intense rioting has broken out in Behrampada (a sensitive, strife-prone minority-dominated area of the city). The local police are finding it impossible to control the situation. Would you please go there? Now?"

Oh, no! my body screamed. After all, we had just wound up a night of revelry, to celebrate my promotion to the post of Inspector General, Maharashtra State Reserve Police Force. Obviously, this should have signalled the end of my nerve-racking twenty-hour 'days' as Additional Commissioner of Police, North Mumbai, and gifted me some time to loosen up a bit, to come to terms with this 'kick' upstairs (meaning, more of pushing files rather than rushing headlong into trouble-spots; but more of that later). Most of all, I was looking forward to a little leisure, some snappy tennis, some much-needed shut-eye... and now, this?

But of course, in a metropolis that never sleeps, a cop can almost never shed his uniform. Besides, as my rapidly-waking memory reminded me, I had given my word to the new commissioner that I would provide any assistance that he might need in order to slide

smoothly into his tough harness, at least until the communal riots that had begun in December were over. Yet, I confess my slightly-befuddled brain did voice a weak *Why me?* There were at least four other officers of my rank who could have been sent instead, and let's face it – I had downed a few at my party. But, almost immediately, my rapid-action reflex came on – the reflex that becomes almost the second skin of every responsible individual caught in the crossfire of a demanding moment and unwilling limbs. "I'll be there," I heard myself say.

*Life is something that happens when you can't
get to sleep.*

Fran Lebowitz

It was in the early hours of February 2, 1993. For over two months now, the simmering communal friction between the two major communities of this mega-city had been erupting sporadically. Just a couple of hours ago, I had felt relieved to think that I was off that uneasy saddle, that my portfolio would no longer include facing unruly mobs, using tear gas, or firing to disperse miscreants. Yet right now, I was hastily buttoning my uniform and rolling down the window to make the breeze clear the remaining mists in my head, as I tore across the city sitting beside the sub-inspector (who was my usual official escort) in his stripped jeep, while my band of five armed policemen sat behind, but facing outwards, as is the normal practice (a practice initiated by the British army while battling the IRA).

You see, it is much better to take the jeep's hood off and position your back-up men in this manner, because you then have a direct view of what is happening around you and can take swift retaliatory action – when a grenade is flung at you for example. Actually, I did not even have my own car that evening. But then, that's life – ever ready to spring a surprise when you least expect it. Keeps the adrenaline in peak flow, though!

When we reached the police station under whose jurisdiction this trouble-spot was, we found the deputy commissioner of the zone and his band of officers still trying to figure out how to curb the heated exchange of stones, burning rags, and missiles taking place between the inflamed residents of a Housing Board colony and the population of the shanty town spread out before them. Let me tell you, when a senior officer and his men choose to ask for reinforcements instead of jumping into the fray, it can mean two things – either they are scared to risk their own lives, or they do not have sufficient rapport, and therefore the courage, to interact directly with the citizens within their jurisdiction.

The local municipal corporator was also at the police station. He recognised and greeted me. “The crowd assembled within the slum colony is extremely hostile and agitated. They are feeling helpless because their opponents have an added advantage,” he said. This was because the area they occupied was low-lying, whereas the angry mob, pelting them with its mindless fury, was operating from the terraces of the six and seven-storey high buildings that faced the slum.

Not wanting to waste a single moment, I asked, “Can we go in there and see what can be done?” “Yes, but you will have to come alone,” was his unexpected reply. Now, I was familiar with this suburb, as it had been within my area of surveillance earlier. Besides, when the riots began, I was still in the hot-seat and on the move continuously, so I had a fair idea of the layout of the land too. Some of the by-lanes in there are actually narrower than the overflowing gutters around them. So there is no way you can zip through it in your secure vehicle. That is why, when a less adventurous officer hears that people are killing each other in a cramped quarter like this one, he often yields to the temptation to sit back, thinking, *Rather them than me*. For, once you step into the heartland of such areas, anything can happen – the local goons may surround, overpower and assault you without provocation. Frankly, it was an ugly place to be caught in a sticky situation like this one. I knew that too.

My earlier portfolio had helped me to understand the fabric of society in this riot-prone zone intimately, and some of them even knew me. Being prepared, or doing some homework in advance, always gives you an edge while playing tough games. My wireless had also given me enough information *en route*, on the potential gravity of the situation. Fully aware therefore, that a conventional strategy would never work in this hypersensitive zone, I had even begun formulating a quick plan of action. But, it was a plan that included my band of six officers. I had certainly not foreseen that I would be asked to go in there, alone!

Apparently, the frustrated residents had lost all faith in the ability of the 'saviours in uniform' to protect them. In fact, that was a major reason why the riots were so prolonged. Today too, their grouse seemed valid, because the terraces of the buildings from where the slum dwellers were being attacked had not yet been cleared by the police force. In fact, when the black gates of the makeshift shanty town finally loomed before us, we found that the residents had actually locked them from within to fortify themselves from the troublemakers outside, while someone had cut off the power supply. That again caught my preparedness on the wrong foot, for I was not carrying my flashlight. Life never thinks twice before posing awkward surprises....

Darkness and silence can either be embalming friends or sinister foes. It is all a matter of timing. Right now, the total blackout only served to multiply nameless fears and magnify the unease shrouding the entire area. On one side of those forbidding gates were terrace-loads of inflamed rioters, and on the other, random clutches of their enraged targets pooled together defensively with whatever weapon they could lay their hands upon – *lathis*, rods, hockey sticks, and the pet accessory of the rioter, the indigenous 'Molotov cocktail', fashioned by filling the odd bottle with petrol and inserting a wick. One simply could not let this go on. Without a second thought, accompanied only by the corporator and two of his men, I decided to go in to try and defuse the situation.

Have you ever got lost in a maze in the middle of a pitch-dark night, where the sound of your own footfall makes your heart leap? Where you can sense, but not see the red-hot anger brewing in the shadows surrounding you? I had patrolled through this mind-spinning web a number of times in daylight, but on that blacked-out night, if the local corporator and his men had suddenly abandoned me at any point in that tangled skein of narrow lanes, I know that I could not have found my way back.

So there I was, at 3 a.m. in this trouble-spot, trying to understand what provokes normal people (the collective consciousness, if I may call it so), to go berserk every now and then and invite prolonged misery upon themselves and their loved ones.

We have met the enemy, and it is us.

Walt Kelly

For the next hour and a half, I just walked in the torchlight provided by the corporator's two escorts, through those dark and deafeningly silent pathways, piecing together the jigsaw of helplessness, hostility, mistrust, protest and hatred, all simmering within those tense huddles of humanity. When I went towards the first group, half a dozen others joined me. "*Khansaab aa gaye*" ("Mr. Khan is here"), I heard someone whisper. The people had bunched together, to feel safer in numbers. They were angry, very angry, to begin with. Had I entered with my uniformed force, I am sure they would have pounced on us first, and then rushed into the buildings outside, igniting a major conflagration.

That is why I had agreed to go in without my men. Once you accept an assignment like this, you have to find a speedy way to dissolve the tension, ignoring any possible danger to yourself. So, firmly quashing the misgivings sprouting within, I deliberately kept my voice low and urged them to go home, to desist from taking the law into their own hands. I had to pacify their injured sentiments,

assure them repeatedly that I would punish anyone who stoned them without provocation. As I mentioned earlier, this is a cramped colony where, most of the time, the built-up area happily eats into the street, so you just cannot navigate through it on wheels. The plus side of this coin being that when you move around on foot, you brush shoulders with the residents, you mingle, you have a finger on their pulse, you are right there, if and when a crisis occurs. Like now.

Perhaps that is why some of the locals who came forward to speak with me that night seemed to believe that I would give them a fair hearing. We knew most of the people there were ill-educated, and operated in the shadier walks of life with scant respect for the law. But that still did not justify a sudden onslaught on their homes and families.

Yes, of course, there are two sides to every coin, and communal rivalry is not an issue that can be solved overnight, because the wounds run deep and the scars take ever so long to heal. When dealing with a student or a labour riot, one has to keep the bigger picture, the long-term view in mind, because one does not want to antagonise these sections in the long run. But the situation is not the same when a no-holds-barred communal riot is on. At such times, all the formal training and procedures taught at police stations during riot drills just fly out the window! Try telling people bent upon slaughtering one another that an assembly of five or more persons is prohibited under Section 144!

At such trying moments the first method the police may opt for is a *lathi-charge*. When that fails to impact, tear gas is sprayed to disperse the unruly crowd. If the violence still continues unabated, that is when we pick out the leaders and fire, to hit only if we must, and then, only below the waist.

In every incident triggering off inter-communal violence, there is always one party that has the upper hand. I saw that here, the trump card was obviously in the hands of the attackers crowding the rooftops outside the slum. So if this carnage had to be arrested, *they* had to be stopped. Now.

The slum dwellers were pacified to some extent when I assured them that I would crack down on their attackers personally and agreed to halt retaliatory action.

As soon as I returned to the local police station, I sent a posse of policemen to clear out the terraces. Fast. Yes, the scuffle between the law-breaker and enforcer is part of the daily diet of every policeman on the beat, so some ugly scenes were inevitable, but finally, the troublemakers were rounded up, and by about 6.30 a.m., peace had been restored, at least for the time being. Of course, there was an outcry about the 'brutality' exercised by me (in apprehending persons armed with burning rags and stones, and missiles!), but that, as always, is part of the game. Both the opponents in every war, however big or small, are always convinced that *they* are the ones who are being wronged, right?

Any position that bestows upon you the mixed blessing of power over, and responsibility for a group of dissimilar people, is forever throwing up challenges like the one I faced that night. Situations when your world turns into a huge dormant volcano which can erupt with disastrous and far-reaching consequences, if your 'quick-think' does not help you take the right decision in the nick of time. What one needs (and I know I had) at moments like this, is total confidence in oneself, the firm conviction that one is fully equipped, both physically and mentally, to tackle the challenge thrown up by life. Fortunately, I have always felt like that, so I did not have to work towards major changes in personality to suit my job. Plus, having the ability to win the trust of the disturbed, often volatile people you are dealing with, definitely gives you a greater edge. Once you have succeeded in convincing any agitated group that you are on their side, they will automatically listen to you, quieten down, and give in to your request (not a command mind you!).

What also boosted my strength was the knowledge that, if the violence got further out of hand, I could have asked my men to intervene, act tough, and ensure compliance immediately. In any emergency, when your team hears you say, "I'm going ahead, follow

me if necessary,” it will never fail you; that’s for sure. I had realised as I went up the ladder, that often, it is the lack of quality leadership that makes many an operation flounder. You will notice that a subordinate will always jump up to obey orders if he knows you are willing to share his peril, rather than trying to remote-control him while nursing a cup of tea!

I must warn you at this point however, that one must be on guard against one’s confidence taking an upswing and turning into brashness, because that can spell trouble. This happens very often when you are the leader of the pack and feel you have an image to live up to. This headiness can even delude you into believing that you are infallible. Such notions can be lethal, especially in a profession like mine where you often deal with hardcore criminals or have to make hasty, un-premeditated moves in a crisis. For instance, I once actually ran over some hastily-flung wooden planks, to get across a distance of several metres between two high-rise terraces in order to nab some criminals. When a television crew wanted to reconstruct the scene for a shoot on the following day, I just could not repeat my ‘stunt’, because by then I had realised what a stupid and risky move I had made in the heat of the moment.

Again, a successful top gun in almost any field has to have a lot of tact and, in recent years, political contact as well. So if your sure-footedness comes into conflict with the wishes of your seniors or of politicians at a certain level, you are asking for problems. Like I did, at times. But then, all that mattered to me was my credibility with the public and my subordinates, period.

When we finally packed up, after that ‘long day’s night’, it was almost 6.30 a.m. But the pink of the dawn streaking across the Mumbai sky was pale in comparison with the warm after-glow that suffused our hearts when we saw the relieved faces of the children, the old people, and all the bewildered residents of that slum colony. A major bloodbath had been averted, because prompt action had met the need of the hour. The positive force that works towards the good of the maximum number, had once again triumphed over the

negativity that keeps surfacing in all walks of life. Like a constant challenge, it can pop-up anytime, anywhere, to tease you, test you, tempt you to drop your guard, lose your objectivity and composure, and yield to the pressure, the flaming impulse of the moment.

When this midnight drama had begun, I had been on a temporary high, thanks to my party, and had, honestly, felt cross and reluctant to shift from my cool and soft bed into the heat of action. But now, I knew I would not have liked it any other way.