

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,