

English version of Punjabi novel **Tahteesh** (written by Mitter Sain Meet)

I

The chief minister was caught between the devil and the deep sea. As soon as he was sworn in, he handed out a largesse of public offices to all and sundry.

The impatient politicians suddenly recollected their love of friends, supporters and relatives. Who knows when they may have to go door to door begging for votes as they had to do this time?

Some one thought of opening a school in his area to please his voters, some other thought of a hospital, and yet another was dreaming about a grain market. Whatever department a minister himself held, he immediately made announcements regarding that department. In matters regarding other departments bargains were struck with each other. If Gyaniji wanted a school in his area, he would have to sanction a hospital in Jathedar's village; if Khalsa ji needed a grain market, he would have to give a grant for a dharamshala for Harijans in Diwanaji's constituency.

There was a race between the ministers to lay as many foundation stones as possible. Many times, three or four ministers would arrive in the same area on the same day.

On one hand were the ministers' entourages travelling from village to village, and on the other, frequent criminal incidents were being reported from all sides. The police everywhere was over worked.

Those good days when minister came occasionally to their areas were gone. The people also waited for the leaders for hours under hot sun. These days it was very difficult for the police to handle agitated crowds, to disperse processions, and to protect ministers from stone throwers. The militants had issued threats to all the ministers. Any smallest oversight could lead to tragic consequences, and they would be thrown out of jobs.

The security arrangements these days were so tight that even before a minister left Chandigarh, wireless messages would be flashed all over. The entire staff of a police station would be out on duty, putting up barricades, searching, guarding and arresting criminal elements. It was often only the munshi and a sentry at the entrance of the police station who would be left in the thana.

If one minister is expected, things could be handled easily; if two are expected, you manage the show by asking for extra force from the neighbouring areas. But if four ministers descend on the area and each one of them is touring ten villages, where would the limited numbers of men be posted? They do not even know whose house in which village would they be visit! There is also no guarantee that they would not stay overnight in the house of a worthless man.

It was one such unfortunate day for the police force of this town.

Two ministers were touring in their jurisdiction since last night. Two more were about to arrive before daybreak. Half of the force was camping in the villages. The rest was at the rest house to welcome, those expected to arrive soon.

There were only two persons in the practically abandoned police station: the munshi, who sat at the table in the courtyard, and the sentry standing at the front door of the station.

A man of medium height, the sentry had very sad eyes. There was an official order requiring the sentry to keep the 303 rifle on his shoulder as he paraded up and down at the front door. But he had put the butt of the gun on the floor. Let the official order go to hell! What difference does it make if the butt is on the ground or on his shoulder? Why suffer unnecessarily by carrying twenty kilos of weight on your shoulder? The sentry did not approve of this order.

The sentry's eyes would again and again go to the watch on his left wrist. When they moved from there, he would gaze at the crowd thronging the bazaar, stretching from the thana to the railway station. He was looking for the 'lalas', who had been gone for two hours now.

Strange thoughts were coming to the sentry.

The chief minister belongs to this town. He has won the election from this town. His fort-like bungalow is in the town. From the sweeper woman cleaning the place, to the rickshaw puller of the town, everyone is proud of being the chief minister's man. Anyone can go mad and sit on a 'dharna' outside the chief minister's bungalow.

The chief minister has no time to attend to the problems of the town. The Delhi government does not leave him any time. He has therefore, delegated many of his powers to his associates. It is up to them to look into these problems in whatever way they can – good or bad. The higher officers have orders to follow their instructions.

The Akalis have no base in the town. That is the reason why they were not needed to solve the problems of the town.

All the work of the town was looked after by the chief minister's former munshi, Sadanand. As soon as the chief minister was sworn in, Sadanand had moved from the court premises to the chief minister's bungalow. Most of the work that needed attention was his responsibility.

Apparently, the sentry was in no direct danger from Sadanand. For fifteen years, he and Sadanand had hobnobbed in the court. He had himself got many things done through the munshi. Sharing of earnings is still in place. The munshi would brush aside a trivial complaint, but if the matter is serious, he would not even forgive it.

The people, the sentry had just scolded, were not insignificant. They must have immediately gone to the munshi. The sentry was worried.

Mukhtiar was now regretting his arrogant behavior and stupidity. He knew fully well that there were four ministers touring in the area. It was not the way it had been earlier, that no one bothered. These days, even if someone happens to lose a calf,

he gets the minister to ring up the police station, before coming there himself. These days the ministers, don't seem to have any other work. It could be a tape recorder worth fifty rupees or a thirty years old bicycle which may have been stolen, the minister immediately signs the application and sends it to the Inspector General.

The officers too seemed panicked. They just wanted to save themselves even at the cost of their subordinates. They did not want to annoy neither the ministers, nor their close political allies. They would transfer you even at the smallest complaint. Once you were sidelined, it took you years to get back to a good police station.

If the people who had come to file a report, were been scolded by him, it was not his fault. He had been on duty since the morning on an empty stomach. His pockets were empty. He had drunk three glasses of lassi, but this had not helped him get over his hangover of last night. He had downed two jugs of liquor and that also of the worst kind. Mukhtiar thought that the men were a good catch. He would be able to exhort some money from them to make up for what he had spent on lassi and the cardamom.

How was he to know that those fools would not even understand the implication of his scolding?

Mukhtiar had thought that he would first take his fee, the way any other sentry does. Only then would he take them to the clerk of the thana, and thus win him over. This would soften the munshi, who is always ready to pounce upon him.

Those who headed for the thana without an intermediary or a guarantor, were poison to the sentry. His eyes flashed with anger.

'Where are you headed, sir?' He had accosted the seths walking into the thana without any greetings. From their agitated looks he could guess that they were neither leaders, not any credible persons. They were only supplicants.

To support his rude behavior, he hitched his gun on to his shoulder. He also shook the iron chain which was fastened to the trigger guard of his gun on one side, and to his belt on the other. With this he wanted to remind the seths the black days they were living in. Looting of police stations was a common occurrence these days. Who knows who may barge into the thana to attack and loot? They needed the permission of the sentry to come in. The seths had been guilty of this disrespect. It was his duty to scold them for this negligence.

'We want to meet the sardar'... explained their leader, whose eyes were swollen as he had not slept the whole night.

'Am I standing here for nothing? You tell me first what work you have with sardar.' He could not digest the idea of someone directly meeting the Sardar. One has to go through proper channel. Sentry was the first stage. He had to show his importance.

'Ji, my nephew, Bunty has not returned from school since yesterday... we want to file a report...' Suraj, Bunty's uncle, said with a choked voice.

The sentry observed all three of them keenly. The young man, who had spoken was lean and thin. He was dressed in white kurta pajama. It appeared that he had no

time to change his clothes. They were dirty and the sleeves were stained as he was wiping with them his tears again and again. There were signs of fatigue on his sad face.

There was hardly any difference between the other two. Both had paunches, thick necks with heavy gold chains around them. Diamond rings on their fingers. A shadow of sadness lurked in their eyes, but they did not look tired. It seemed as if they had just got up a few hours ago. One of them was wearing kurta pajama, with chappals on his feet, while the other was in a trouser suit with shoes on his feet. Their clean clothes and energetic looks showed that they had not made much effort to look for the child.

Looking at the gold that these men were wearing, Mukhtiar had made up his mind to ask for a big fee. He hoped to get his way by being a little strict.

‘First, you give birth to so many ...the children roam around the streets like pigs... how can the police look after everyone?’ He asked harshly, resting the gun again on the floor.

‘No, no, that’s not the case... he is the only child of my widowed sister.. Lalaji himself used to escort the child to school... and bring him back as well. God knows what went wrong yesterday...’ Suraj, had not eaten anything, since yesterday, and could barely stand. He felt nauseous and weak. Afraid of falling down, he sat down on the bricks lying nearby. Clutching his head with both hands he retched.

‘And then you slept the whole night? By now they would have taken the child to Delhi or even beyond... where would the police look for him... as if we don’t have any other work?’ Even now, he had no intention of giving up.

‘We have not slept, we have been up all night... thoroughly searched the neighbourhood, puddles and ponds... cinemas... station... buses... trains..., we could not find him anywhere. We have been to all our acquaintance and friends.’ The seth clad in kurta pajama was now irritated. He continued when he saw Suraj drooping.

‘Right... right...’ Sensing the seth’s annoyance, the sentry softened a bit, without letting it affect his frown.

From the despair on their faces, the sentry had made a shrewd guess that they were kind hearted men. They were upset by the loss of the child, and were ready to do anything to recover him. There was, however, one problem, and that was they were not familiar with the rules and procedures of the police. They needed a credible person with them, a person who could shed crocodile tears for the applicant, and behind the scene, try to get money for the police.

They were respectable people. They needed proper guidance. Had they been experienced, they would have handed twenty or fifty rupees to the sentry by now, and walked in.

It was with great difficulty that someone had walked into the thana. The matter was very sensitive - matter of a lost child. Mukhtiar too had to bring up his children. No one will come here to extend an invitation of a wedding. They come only with

news of some death or similar thing. The police must snatch whatever it can even from the coffin of the dead!

One can't demand fee. Even if one is that shameless, the question of how much to ask is tricky. It is better if they get a credible person, who could tell them how much to pay. Not any ordinary credible person, but credible, as per the terminology of police, so that there is no risk.

'Do you know what a report is? An agitated person cannot register a report... it needs a balanced mind to file a report. If you write any nonsense, then the prosecutor damns you on one side and the judge sets the accused free at the first hearing. The report is written by keeping all rules and regulations in mind... better for you if you bring some credible person (C.P.)... a person who can testify against extremists also. Paunchy seths like you often fail as witnesses. Higher officers start questioning us... why did the accused go free? Get some C.P. ... who would testify and also file a report as well...'

The sentry also pointed towards the shops outside the thana, where there was always a crowd of so-called C.P.s lurking about.

As it is, there was a network of these C.P.s in each village and each lane. You find them at each step. The police does not need to do anything, to create and train a C.P. Welcome the person who comes, ask him about the welfare of his children and his crops. Offer him a drink. Take him to your quarter for lunch. Give him his share of the old fees and prepare for the new one. Without a credible person, it becomes difficult for the police to assess the capacity of the party which has come to the thana. If you ask for fifty from someone who can only pay five, and five from the one who can pay fifty, then there is always the risk of someone complaining against you! If the C.P. accompanies them, he makes it clear right at the beginning, how much can be extracted.

These C.P.s go from home to home, trying to smell out fights and squabbles. If they are free, they stand at public places; and if they see anyone going towards the thana, they tag along.

As long as people keep fighting, the C.P.s will have a good time. They are treated as sons-in-law all over! And the money they bring is good.

If anyone needs a C.P., there are plenty of 'ready-made' C.P.s thronging the tea shops and typists across the road from the police station.

If someone walks into the thana, escaping the eagle eye of the CPs across the road, then it is the sentry's duty to send them to the petition writer or the typist on the pretext of getting the petition typed. If the well-educated person comes with a written application, then it is the munshi's duty to send them to the shop by asking them to go across and get some tea. There, the CPs themselves catch him. Either while typing or making tea, they get the measure of the applicants. And while, talking to them, take the matter into their hands.

The sentry was doing his duty by talking about the CPs. This was for the benefit of all.

‘I am the managing director of the thread mill and Bhai sahib, here, is the pradhan of the flour mills owners’ union.’ The gentleman in kurta pajama, who was introducing implied that they too were credible persons.

As he heard about their social status, the sentry thought over it. He had been on this duty for the last fifteen days. There was no C.P. who had escaped his eyes. A C.P. also visits the thana a few times in a day to establish his own credentials. The seths had not come to the thana even once.

‘It seems that you are leaders of income tax or sales tax offices. I have never seen you in the thana,’ the sentry remarked in a milder tone.

‘God save us from thanas and hospitals. We have so far never stepped into a thana’. The pradhan wanted to wrap up the matter. He felt his sarcastic comment would make the sentry stop his tirade.

‘Then you must know that every organization has its own rules and procedure. You go and get Guptaji from the gun-house that is just opposite the thana... or get the pradhan of the Vyopar mandal... if you don’t find anyone else, then get Pandha the petition writer. If he is not there, then fetch Pahalwan of the dhaba.. There has to be someone who can put his thumb print on the report.’

‘All right, we shall see..’ and with this they walked away with bent heads towards the bazaar.

He had mentioned Pandha’s and Gupta’s names just for the sake of numbers. His real purpose could be served if they go to Pahalwan of the dhaba.

Pahalwan was no stranger to him. He was Mukhtiar’s guru, as also his uncle and guardian.

When they came here, uprooted from Pakistan, Mukhtiar was just five years old. His father and Pahelwan would go from village to village, selling vegetables. During summer they would sell kulfī as well; and while coming back, they would carry basketful of grains and eggs.

When the new bus depot came up, they set up a hand cart kitchen, selling fresh hot paranthas. Thus they completed a decade working from the cart; the municipal committee then allotted them a shop. Slowly, their dhaba became a great success. Most of the police parties after their rounds, would stop there for tea to shed their weariness.

Mukhtiar would initially carry loads of vegetables, wash utensils at the cart kitchen and then, when the hotel was set up, took on the job of cooking vegetables and meat. He would also go to school, off and on. He learnt to read and write Punjabi.

When he became friendly with police men, thanedar Banta Singh got them a shop in front of the thana. Both sides needed each other: the police needed an honest man to hold money for them and the Pahalwan needed a client who would give him a handsome amount. Things went on like this and soon they prospered a lot.

Before he left, Banta Singh did him another favour. Though Mukhtiar was not very tall, but he got him enlisted in the force.

His father had died years ago. Now, Pahalwan was his guardian. Through his recommendation he got Mukhtiar posted at the sub-judge's court. Pahalwan opened a hotel on the premises of the court.

Who bothers about the policemen in the thanas, whereas in the sub-judge's court there are many advantages. One comes to see high officers and also learn to catch big fish.

And it happened the same way. The experience of frying paranthas, tasty vegetables and spicy meat, got him many perks. Whichever officer got accustomed to his cooking, forgot frequenting big restaurants. Mukhtiar would get transferred, but officers would themselves get his transfer cancelled. He did not have to beg them.

Having spent fifteen years in the court he had forgotten that he was just an ordinary constable. He had come to think of himself as a judge. The staff at the thana had started calling him 'mini judge'. He had quite a hold on the court. He could present a challan for investigation against anyone he wanted; if he didn't like it, he would refuse to do so. The judges also did not turn down his request. They were aware that he worked hard the whole day long. If he earned a little money, it does not make any difference to them. No thanedar could dare to go directly to the judge bypassing him.

But now he had realized his position, when more than half of the police officers were annoyed with him. With many of them the quarrel had become very acrimonious. They all were now taking their revenge on him, even since he had been posted to the thana.

His biggest enemy was the SHO. Those days he would always try to please him. Whenever Mukhtiar had the occasion to go to the police station, he would be given a royal treatment. He was not tired of calling Mukhtiar his nephew. Off and on, he had also offered him a drink. But when Mukhtiar was posted here as a subordinate, he had ordered the munshi to give him the hardest duty. Reason? Rancour! Once, in a fit of pique, Mukhtiar had extracted twenty rupees from the inspector. The inspector had tried his best to make him understand that it was the last day for presenting the challan. The accused was a notorious extremist. If the challan was not presented, then he would get bail and an enquiry would be instituted against the inspector. But Mukhtiar had been adamant. No challan could be presented without the fee. Inspectors earn thousands in ten days. If he were to shell out a few out of his own pocket, what harm would that do? The people working in the sub-judge's court are not big farm owners. They somehow make both ends meet.

Since that day, the inspector had harboured a grudge against him. The moment he had come to the thana, he was put on guard's duty.

The munshi was worse than him. He started behaving in an arbitrary way. He had often made it clear to him. The munshi had lost two years' of service due to the complaints by Mukhtiar on a couple of occasions. Had he not been punished on the basis of these complaints, he would have become a thanedar by now.

So many cases are discharged. Whosoever put ten, twenty on Mukhtiar's hand, his paper he would be suppressed. If he did not get the money, he would get the public

prosecutor to present a report. Many times, one is short of money, he can't pay bribe. Mukhtiar had taken advantage of such situations to humiliate the munshi. Now, with great difficulty Mukhtiar was at his mercy. He had to avenge himself!

The duty of a guard is the hardest in the thana. Mukhtiar sometimes had the day duty, and at times, he was on the night shift. He dare not even sit for a moment. Once he had sent for a bench from Pahalwan's shop, and the inspector had showered abuses on him. Twenty thanas had been looted. If the sentry is careless even for a moment, anything may happen!

The night guard has the freedom to close his eyes for a couple of hours. Doesn't the munshi sleep? Many night sentries sleep and get up only in the morning. People retreat to the safety of their homes, afraid of any untoward incident. A curfew like situation prevailed by six in the evening. Who would come to the thana to file reports under these conditions? If anyone were to come, he could always wake up the sentry. But no such freedom was given to Mukhtiar. He would be checked, time and again. It seemed as if the whole thana was hell bent upon catching him. And the moment they catch him, they would humiliate him!

The sentry had deliberately taken Pahalwan's name. If he could come in as a C.P. Mukhtiar's life would be easy. He was adept at extracting a fat fee. Once the inspector gets a good commission, perhaps, his anger may abate.

But, even this gamble looked like failing.

It was over two hours since the seths had departed. There seemed no sign of their return.

He had gone to the dhaba many times. But his uncle knew neither any pradhan, nor any managing director. He had not even heard that a child was kidnapped. Mukhtiar was caught in a strange situation.

There could be two reasons of their not coming back. Either the child has been traced, or they have gone to some minister to complaint against the sentry.

There could be no question of the child being found. Had the child gone away on his own, he would have come home long back. He must have been kidnapped by some group. And seths like those could arrange to pay at least twenty thousand.

They surely must have gone to some minister. One is the pradhan of a flour mills owners' union, and the other a high officer of thread factory. Both organizations have lakhs of rupees. They must have given lakhs to the ministers during the elections, which have just ended. The ministers are not going to avoid them, so fast. Besides the chief minister, a couple of other ministers also come from this area. These ministers might also owe them a few favours. The chairman and pradhan are big people, if they contact any one of them, then all their anger would undoubtedly fall on the sentry.

Whatever had to happen has happened. Now, what should he do?

The agitated sentry, with his gun on his shoulder, would go up to the munshi, and then to the shops outside. They may telephone. They may be trying to get hold of a C.P.

Like a frightened pigeon, Mukhtiar was waiting impatiently for the two seths, and also reminiscing about his good old days.

Life in the courts were very happy! Many officers had come and gone, but his authority had remained intact. Be it an advocate, or a munshi or petitioners, they all greeted him. He had become very arrogant.

The work of the court was at his finger-tips. If someone wanted to copy the entries of a lawsuit or a petition, this was the only court where the file would be openly taken to the advocate's bungalow. If someone needed to make some manipulations in the affidavit or to the map of the incident, that could be done in minutes. Just add '1' to '1' in the sworn statement, to make it eleven, and you can get the accused freed at the first hearing, even if the case is about a quintal of opium. Just write the names of the witnesses instead of those of the culprits and you could get the accused set free even in a case of murder.

All these were dangerous acts. He used to do all these things during the early years of his job. He was reprimanded, and also admonished many times.

After getting a little more experienced, he started misplacing traffic challans. That fetched him plenty of money. Traffic notices are very common. Any constable, wanting to visit his in-laws, needs a car. The judges also do not impose fines of less than five hundred, for they feel that if heavy fines are imposed, only then will the taxi drivers learn some lesson. Scared of appearing before the court, they would try to appease the police. When the police would get many things only then would the judges get some favour. Judges need cars at every step.

Trying to evade heavy fines many would come to Mukhtiar. It was easy for him to tear and throw away four-five challans. There is no record kept of these challans, so this can never be discovered and there would be no embarrassment caused to the court. Take the challan and tear off the counter foil and the matter is over.

About five years ago, he had given up this work also. Now he did not accept petty amounts. Judges were now open to inducement. That had brought him better money.

First, he had opened up with Sharma. His family lived in Chandigarh. There would be a gathering at his residence every evening. Mukhtiar cooked the meals. Drunken guests spilt many a secret. Which case had brought him how big a bribe, was all at his fingertips. Later on, Sharmaji started sending him to collect the money. Sometimes, the money was brought in a tiffin carrier, and sometimes, in boxes of sweets, or in baskets of fruits. And Mukhtiar would also get a fat tip; sometimes from the party, and sometimes from Sharma.

Garewal helped him the most. It was Garewal who impressed upon him how important he was. Sharma had operated through only two or three firms, Ramesh Flour Mill, Bharat Medical Hall or Gupta Cloth House. Garewal, however, had got rid of them. He would negotiate directly, and that too through Mukhtiar.

It was then, that Mukhtiar had understood that the party should not be brought face to face with the officer. Let them come at least four-five times. Extract a couple of thousands. After a few days, ask them for liquor. Let them do things for you. Clean

them out, and then present them to the officer. Then, take your commission, from the officer as well as from the party. It was under Garewal's protection that he had bought a new motor cycle, bought a gold ring and also a 'kada'.

Sharda Kumar was two steps ahead of him. He was a coward. He would accept money only from the party he wanted to favour. He would inform Mukhtiar which side the case would go, so that he should contact the party. Mukhtiar would extract the maximum from the party after assessing its worth. Sharda Kumar would merely get a thousand or fifteen hundred. Small cases he would get done as bonus.

It was during Sharda Kumar's time that Mukhtiar had become too big for his boots. He had bought a plot in Subhash Colony and started the construction of a bungalow. Consuming a full bottle of liquor in the evening, and being entertained in the evenings by the parties frequenting the courts at hotels, on the pretext of getting their work done, had become a habit for him. Besides, the parties, even advocates hosted him!

The bungalow was coming up without much cost to him. The truck union people had brought, mud, sand and gravel for free. He got cement, iron and tar from the Public Welfare Department. Got bricks from someone, wood from another. He had to pay only the labour charges.

In the evening, people seeking favours would gather at his home. Many times, thanedars, who would get entangled in some legal complication, would also come to seek his help.

He was not aware that those who are imploring him today would one day take their revenge.

Why did he fall? Stupidity and arrogance! He had forgotten that he was a small government employee. He had begun feeling that the entire judicial system revolved around him.

It seemed that while leaving, Sharda Kumar had taken away Mukhtiar's good fortune along with him. The one who came after him, Juneja, was a reincarnation of Harishchandra, a mythological epitome of truth and honesty. The workers had assessed this as they had unloaded his luggage, that times ahead are difficult. No refrigerator, no colour television, nor any other foreign made item. Three trucks had not sufficed for the household goods of most judges. His goods had come in only one truck.

As soon as he took over, Juneja started tightening the screw on all employees. It was difficult for them even to extract two rupees. Those who had some contact got themselves transferred.

Taking the judge's children to school on a bicycle did not seem befitting to Mukhtiar. He was no longer the ordinary constable he had been. He had long ago given up eating in the officer's kitchen. His own children were going to school in a van. Had he been earning extra, he would have taken the judge's children on his own motorcycle. But spending money from his own pocket and working free for others was like poison to him.

He had also rebelled along with Omi, the orderly. It was not his duty to present himself at the judge's residence. He was short of money, and he had the audacity to answer the judge on a couple of occasions.

The result was clear. He did not know when orders for his transfer came. No one took the trouble to inform him. When Mukhtiar was at his peak, then he had served the office clerks well. Had he known earlier, he would not have let this transfer take place! What if Juneja was against him? He could have got himself transferred to some other judge!

No one knew what Juneja told the higher officer. Mukhtiar had gone to all the important political figures, but his transfer was not cancelled. The maximum that he could manage was that he got this thana.

Now that he had annoyed the seths, it looked that his stay here was also going to be short-lived.

Had he been in the good books of the munshi, he could have rushed to the town, gone to the thread mill, could have traced the lost child's home, got them to forgive him. But he could not even tell the truth to the munshi. It meant more trouble. He would ask Mukhtiar who had given him the right to turn the petitioners away from the thana!

It was the month of October. The weather was pleasant. Even then he was sweating, and drops of sweat from his forehead rolled down his face. Was it because of the liquor that he was drinking at night or because of agitation, he did not understand.

As he saw a white Maruti turning towards the thana, the sentry stood to attention. Tucking his shirt back into his trousers, he put the gun on his shoulder, and started his walk in front of the thana.

He breathed easy as he saw the seths alighting from the car. Dervesh, the tall, lanky journalist was with them.

Getting out of the car, Dervesh straightened his kurta, took off his glasses and wiped them, and flicked the dust off the diary he had in his hand, and walked into the thana with long strides.

When Mukhtiar saw Dervesh, for a moment, he wrinkled his forehead. Though he regretted his earlier behavior, yet there still lurked a desire in his heart of extorting money from this party. Of all the C.P.s in the town, Mukhtiar hated Dervesh the most.

He had the tag of a journalist. He drank with high officers, and looked down upon the lower employees. Even the smallest impertinence would be splashed all over the headlines the next day.

Then the sentry saw a mischievous smile in Dervesh's eyes. As though Dervesh was asking – 'Say, buddy, you are not happy here also!'

The sentry thought the next day's paper would be full of news against him. 'The bullying tactics of police...' 'doors of the thana barred to the appellants....' 'the

sentry does not behave properly to...' 'Kidnappers got opportunity to flee due to the negligence of the police'.

As Dervesh came towards him, the sentry got tensed. He tried to think of answers to any questions he may be asked.

He was a Dervesh only by name. His acts were those of a Satan. He had a small press and brought out a weekly paper. For publishing various scandals: Sometimes about the Food Corporation of India, and sometime about Markfed; about black marketing in cinema tickets, and prostitution and gambling going on openly in the hotels; the stories of Public Welfare Department trading in cement, and the monthly extortion by the police from the speculators. If you don't want these stories to be published, then give large advertisements to the paper. Donate.

If he could not think of a scandal, he would organize a programme: collect donations for eye camp, or kavi darbars or a cowshed. The scared officers had to dole out whatever amount he demanded. He just swallowed lakhs of rupees.

This was not all. He was fond of gambling. This was a regular affair in the press itself. Drinks would also be served; and sometimes women too.

'We have brought a C.P. ... is that alright?' The sentry had no desire to answer the sarcastic remark of the pradhan... He quietly opened the door.

'Now that Dervesh sahib is here, you can now relax, the work would be done.' The sentry gave him an unwilling lopsided smile.

'How are you, sentry?' Dervesh asked. He looked back at seths following him, as though saying – 'Do you see?'

The seths followed Dervesh into the thana, with an air of victorious soldiers.

The sentry heaved a sigh of relief at this peaceful blowing away of a storm which had looked imminent.

II

With the formation of a new government, police stations were deserted.

It was ten in the morning. The telephone in the thana had rung only once during this period, and that too, an hour ago. After that, there had been no ring.

What is the sense in registering a report on the phone? Come to the police station, like other respectable people, talk and then, after making the report, get the investigations started. They should know that law does not accept reports filed on telephone.

The annoyed munshi had not even bothered to ask the name of the caller.

'Come to the thana and speak,' with that he had put the receiver down.

The munshi, sitting at his table which had been pulled under the peepal tree, had been idle since morning. By now, he was fed up of reading the newspaper, listening to the radio, arranging the papers on his table again and again.

If you have a look at the newspapers, most of the pages are full of criminal incidents. A man gets sick of reading them. Murder, loot, dacoity and theft... Which crime is not being committed in Punjab these days? If you look at the headlines, it seems that the world is coming to an end. If you come to the thana, you will feel that the world is at peace. There is no trouble. No one has any complaint against another.

And when someone asked for help, the munshi had refused to help. The other party was silenced. The fact that he had lost the party was now irritating the munshi, and his anger was being wreaked on the paper weight. He had been rolling it on the table, and it had fallen off a number of times, and each time, some pieces had crumbled from its edges!

Where would the child go? He must have gone to a friend's home while playing with him and fallen asleep. After the phone call, he had gone through the old records of the thana. No case of kidnapping of a child had been registered.

The munshi was now full of remorse. The police do not register a case immediately. It only gives consolation that the case has been registered. The child would, of course, definitely be found. Then he would have gone to the concerned party's shop in the evening or to their home the next morning and congratulated them and also enjoyed a drink or two; taken a fee to discharge the report. But now he was sitting here, hand on hand, doing nothing.

The munshi had arranged and rearranged his papers, the daily diary, register and carbon papers on the blue table cover spread on his large wooden table. He had lifted the telephone receiver many times, to listen to the dial tone. It may not be working, else, there was no reason that there happened a fight a theft, a murder, an illegal occupation, or an accident of sorts, and the information not relayed to the thana. This sort of peace had not prevailed even in the satyug– the age of truth.

But, where was the need for anyone to come to the thana? From the application under 751 to murder, all applications directly go to the Deputy. He holds his office in his bungalow. He doesn't come to the office at all. He has a good excuse. He says he is on the hit list. Which hit list he is on, no one has a clue about? He has never made out a case for a police encounter, never arrested a militant. The ones he shows as arrested are the ones who have surrendered on their own, out of fear.

On the pretext of being on the hit list, he has taken special police parties from the police captain. His bungalow is to be guarded. Getting one constable from each thana, he has set up a new guard force. Almost a new thana has come up in his bungalow!

Panchayats would camp outside his kothi even before the sunrise. As if the Maharaja of Patiala was going to hold his court. Whole day long there would be a big hubbub outside.

Special police parties have been raised to nab the terrorists, but they are busy doing other work. If a smuggler has not sent his monthly installment on time, go pick

him up. There is a fight somewhere, bring the culprits to the bungalow. He himself extracts all money from these culprits that he can, and then sends them to the thana. Also instructs the party ‘ Don’t give any money to the thana staff; if anyone asks for money, complain against him.’

The people at the thana can neither arrest anyone, nor can they release someone arrested, without the Deputy’s permission. Earlier, an SHO had shown some courage and arrested all the smugglers of the area, and there were complaints against him. The Deputy had himself complained against him to the higher officers. That thanedar was powerful and he got himself transferred. Had he been without any contacts, he would have been dismissed, or compelled to retire voluntarily. After that, no one had ever dared to disobey the Deputy’s orders.

On one hand is the Deputy, and on the other are the groups of jathedars. The moment the government was formed; blue turbans came out like mushrooms. Afraid of the leaders’ annoyance, the chief minister had handed out jathedaris to a large number of people. All and sundry seem to be carrying an identity card of a jathedar. One is the district jathedar, another is the circle jathedar, yet another is a village jathedar, and yet another is jathedar of an area or a that of a lane. It is after a decade or two, that they get the chance to rule. People start recognizing you and saluting you. And that too only for a year or six months. Why shouldn’t the jathedars take full advantage of this situation?

The important jathedars go to Chandigarh with the higher officers, travelling in their cars to attend to the more important things. This time, they are really enjoying their jathedaris. Earlier, they had to travel in buses, and put up in the gurudwaras, eating at the langars there. These days, they have cars at their command. They are put up in hotels: air conditioned rooms, milk white sheets, and the sevadars in their red uniforms! The way they are treated and cosseted, they feel as if they were the relations of Maharajo of Patiala! It is for the first time that they have actually savoured the intoxication of power! Earlier, they were only involved in rendering social service.

The educated jathedars go to Chandigarh. The less educated ones are looking after the district headquarters. Everyone at the offices in Chandigarh speaks only in English, which they don’t understand at all. They don’t get to meet the officer for days. Even when he meets you, he gives you some inane answer and sends you away. They are happy with the lower rungs. They can manage the district collector, the senior superintendent of police and other officers. The small jathedars have also developed a taste for cars; but not for hotels. They manage with cholla- bhatura and drinking lassie at dhabas, and go about in sweltering heat. The rest of them get on to a bus and come to the town. Visit the tehsil office or the courts. If they don’t get their way in either place, they come to the thana with applications of licenses for guns and reports.

Every worker, small or big, has his own importance. The jails have to be filled to the capacity for at least eight months in a year. That is when these small workers are needed. One has to listen to the workers who have spent time in jail. If their work is not attended to, they go the minister of their area. If the intercession of the minister is not heeded, they go to the chief minister. They give statements to the press. They

set rumours afloat that they are planning to join the other group. The chief minister has to bow to their wishes, though he knows what the truth is. As it is, he doesn't have a majority in the legislative party. If a couple of MLA's were to leave him, he would have to vacate the chief minister's chair. The chair is not His, he is there with the support of leaders and workers, he obliges them.

There is a saying that the people follow the king. If the chief minister can issue stupid orders to save his chair, why should the officers put their own chairs to risk? They accept whatever the workers tell them. Orders are issued to please the first jathedar who comes in. The orders are then cancelled if the next one demands it! Let them fight it out between themselves.

The government is yet new, if it survives a couple of years the seths, officers and sardars would teach the jathedars the tricks of administration. They will tell them that they shouldn't go about pleading their cases with one and all. They will learn that they also spend money on elections, and they must collect money now to be able to spend on elections later on. Had the Congress won the elections because of its policies? They create illusions. First, they themselves eat and later on give food to others. This is their policy, on the basis of which they have ruled for forty years.

Once they learn, they would, like the Congress, share with the officers. But, till they learn, what can the munshi do? How does he meet his expenses?

Those who have to get their work done, either go to the jathedars or to the Deputy. Everyone wants to play the leader. The sentry standing at the gate is a great one! The munshi had put him on that duty to teach him a lesson. But, he has been able to find a way here also! Whosoever comes to the thana, he turns him away at the door. He has learnt to extract money because he has worked in the courts. Get the culprits released, and let the staff at the thana face the fire! It had become difficult for the munshi to face the problems created by him. Every day, there is a new notice. Either for wrong presentation of the case-property, or for delay in serving the summons.

The munshi would go up to the gate a number of times to keep an eye on the sentry. This time he saw that the sentry was looking sadder than the munshi himself. The munshi took pity on him. He had got used to living on others' earnings; must be getting tired of standing all alone and carrying the heavy gun all the time.

When he walked back from the gate, the munshi stopped at the mazaar of Baba Zahar Ali Pir. People attributed miraculous powers to the mazaar. It was widely believed that the pir who once lived here, performed miracles. And anyone who prayed here got his wishes fulfilled. People congregate here. No one ever dare tell a lie here. Whosoever did it, he did not prosper. One lost his eye sight, another lost his oxen, and yet another lost his young son. Even now, its influence on the people was widespread, though it was not what it used to be.

The mazaar was in the courtyard of the thana, under a tree, and was given all respect by the staff. From time to time, it was white washed, diyas lighted and 'chaddars' offered at the mazaar.

The munshi stood before the mazaar with folded hands. Closing his eyes, he prayed to the Pir – ‘Please Baba, send a party... I will offer one tenth of the money set apart for religious donations as Prasad – there are many important works on hold.’

A very strong desire had been lurking in his heart, which he had been suppressing all along for he thought it was a sin. If Baba were to grant this wish of his, then not only Munshi but hundreds of employees would benefit. He wished that the Deputy should go. He wanted the Deputy to fall a prey to the bullets of the terrorists. If Baba doesn’t want to cause so much of harm to him, he should, at least, transfer him from here. If not a transfer, then to give him a promotion and send him away, so that they can all be free. Let Baba do something.

God knows what deep sleep Baba seems to be in. It is quite possible that the deputy may have promised Baba a bigger offering to the Pir and thus made him happy. His tenth of the dasbandh – the fifth of income that every Sikh must donate for charity, would of course, be bigger than the munshi’s. After all, this is Kalyug – even God may be appeased with money.

The munshi was still standing at the mazaar with folded hands, when the telephone rang.

For a moment, the munshi’s face radiated happiness. Baba seemed to have heeded his request in no time. He went to the table with alacrity.

His hands shook as he lifted the receiver. It could not be the same party. Someone else may need a car to attend a meeting. It could also be the public prosecutor or even the Deputy.

Frightened of doing a thankless job, the munshi was letting his imagination run wild.

‘If the phone is of the judge then what would he do? Whom would he send to arrange a car? The sentry is not trustworthy; he may extract ten rupees and send off a taxi. Then the taxi men also do not move till their money is fixed and promised. They are always fussing. If the S.H.O. was here, it would have been different. Who bothers about the munshi or the constable? When they see a constable from a distance, most of them lock their vehicles and disappear. If you can get hold of one, even then you would have to pay for the petrol.’

He didn’t have a penny, the fund was exhausted. One can get some money only when people come to the thana. Had the inspector been there, he would have taken care of everything. He has many industrialist friends. Lalas do send cars. This saves on petrol also.

If it was the Deputy ringing then he would ask for opium. God knows how many sardars he is friendly with! As if this was not a thana, but an opium shop! He sends all and sundry to the thana with a sack. This is agent of Garewals, this is partner of Gills. He keeps full account like a baniya! How many sacks were captured, how many distributed free of cost, and how many are remaining! The munshi dare not keep even a bagful for himself. If it weren’t for the fear of the Deputy, the opium itself was enough to pay for the munshi’s expenses. The Deputy had imposed such a harsh curfew that the munshi of a thana goes begging for opium!

Four ministers are touring the area, and the munshi doesn't lift the receiver? He was not in a position, at present, to kick his job and go home.

With a deep fear in his heart, the munshi lifted the receiver.

'This is Munshi Baghel Singh from the thana...'

'I am Surendra Kumar, the public prosecutor...'

For a moment the munshi wanted to give him an earful and then put the receiver down. He must be calling for some or the other favour. Doesn't he realize that there is no money?

But the munshi's life depends on the public prosecutor. He cannot fight with him.

'Hukum, janab,' he asked rather curtly.

'A child in our neighbourhood is lost... the family had come to make a report... the sentry has sent them off from the door.'

'You know that bastard... I am here at your command!' Munshi replied, though in his heart he was cursing the lawyer. It is these public prosecutors who had given the sentry his swollen head!

'It is the grandson of Lala Hardayal, the well-known social worker of the town.. Even then, I am sending Nagpal with them... he will himself look into it... you understand?'

'Don't worry, I'll handle it,' And he put the receiver down and thought deeply about it.

He was annoyed with the sentry. Had he let the party come in, there would not have been any need for the public prosecutor to interfere. The munshi, in the first instance, would have taken five hundred or more from them. Nagpal favours the police. Yet, the advocate must have told the family, that the munshi's fee is fifty rupees. Had they come directly to him, he would have taken more from them. Would have given other officers their share, and kept his.

Once again, the munshi straightened his table. He put the white papers, carbon papers and ball pens into the drawer. Clipped a few used sheets of paper on to the board, and sat waiting impatiently for the party.

The tall, heavy figure of Surendra Kumar, the government advocate, came to his mind again and again. He has the daring of a bull. He does not bother about anyone. He is drunk the whole day, and whichever officer comes into his office, he would offer a drink. He drinks with the lawyers, and with the judges, and also the staff of the court.

Munshi Baghel Singh was paying for his sins!

His fault? Only that he was the munshi of a thana. The munshi is in charge of the store-house of the thana. It is his responsibility to see that the things taken into custody are presented as evidence in the court. But, no one knows that there are twenties of other dacoits to loot the store-house!

After all, he is only a hawaldar. Except the constables, others are of the same rank or are higher than him. The assistant sub inspector, sub inspector, and inspector, are all superior to him. If you get along well, then you get respect. If you are arrogant like the sentry, then the others keep pushing you to the court for hearings.

Many investigators even do not deposit the goods in the store-house for over a month. They can deposit only when they capture the goods. The whole procedure is a farce. Orders are given at the meeting: you give a receipt for five kilos of opium, or present report of raiding a distillery, or of a gambling den. The investigators do not give a damn. Tens of kilos of opium, twenties of sacks of poppy husk, fifties of bottles of liquor. You can collect the goods only in bits and pieces. How can the munshi tell them to deposit the goods first? You have to give a report, even if it means trouble for you. Then, you depend on the investigator. He will bring the goods only when it pleases him.

Distilleries are raided hardly once in a month. Fill up the containers, big and small, with syrup of jaggery. Only once a month is brought the trolley with saw-dust. The empty bottles, and pouches are also sent only once. When you are preparing one month's supply in one day, often mistakes are made. Label of Gurmukh Singh's supply is put to Dhian Singh's goods and Dhian Singh's name is marked on the supply meant for Nihal Singh.

Even, if genuine articles are captured, it hardly reaches the thana? Bargains are struck on the way. Half a kilo of opium is needed by the government advocate every month; who knows whether he uses it himself or sells it! And, it is he who files complaints against the munshi that captured goods do not reach the court properly.

When four sacks of liquor bottles were captured from the contractor, he had come directly to the thana, and had only left after appropriating a full dozen of bottles. The whole consignment of liquor disappeared in this manner, as if it had been stolen. The Deputy's reader was annoyed. The munshi had to send him bottles bought by money from his own pocket, to appease him.

When the workers of the liquor contractor were released, it was this very advocate who had complained against the munshi that the bottles had been confiscated in January, and the ones presented in the court bore the date of March. As if government advocate did not know where the actual bottles had gone!

It was because of the government advocate that he had to suffer the loss of two years of service. Whatever it was, he was the public prosecutor, and the munshi could not quarrel with him. As if these mistakes would not be repeated, but then Nagpal is coming. He does hobnob with Congress men, but, is not himself a Congressman. He knows how to take work out of every employee. No matter whichever party is in power, he is always on the winning side due to the mercy of officers. He is not the one to go back with empty hands; he is game for whatever he gets! Fuel for his motorcycle, fee for his children, if nothing else, then money for the fruit he will take home in the evening. Whatever is offered - is good.

The party had not yet arrived. At the moment he was the master of the thana. He could do anything. But if they are a little late, some thanedar was sure to come

back. The opportunity of striking a deal with the party would be lost. Once, the fee is in his pocket, let the whole thana come, no botheration!

In his service of twelve years, it was the first time that Baghel Singh was short of money. He wanted to throw his uniform off and run back to his village. After all, the department had not realized the worth of his efforts and hard work! Out of the forty members of staff in the thana, he was the only graduate, and that also a second class graduate! Many with only tenth pass, who were recruited after him, already had stars on their shoulders, and he was still a hawaldar.

He and Gurmukh joined the thana on the same day. How is Gurmukh better than him? He was as robust as Gurmukh, as capable and courageous. But Gurmukh had one quality – that he was born in the family of Harijans.

The same year they had passed the qualifying test for hawaldar, and had gone together to attend the course. Baghel Singh has barely got his third stripe, but Gurmukh passed even his intermediate exam and, was promoted as soon as he came back. He is now a thanedar and Baghel Singh is still a hawaldar. Quite possible that in another two years he may come here as Baghel Singh's S.H.O.. Who is bothered if you are a good worker or not! He has earned promotions because he was born in a scheduled caste. Gurmukh does not know anything about work. He has this habit of touching every one's feet. Baghel Singh has never been able to do this. And that is why he has been left behind.

If destiny favours you, it will bestow an unexpectedly large fortune. Santokh Singh doesn't bow to anyone. He is too arrogant. He had passed the tenth class with great difficulty. He was in college for three years but could not even clear the first year. He was thirty two and yet could find no match. Then, suddenly his father passed away. He died a year before he was due for retirement. Santokh became a thanedar in his place.

When he saw the star on Santokh's shoulder, the Deputy immediately got him married to his beautiful daughter. Motorcycle, rings and kaddas were given by other people. The Deputy gifted him his own large bungalow at Chandigarh.

Ever since he has become the Deputy's son-in-law, he has been posted to the best of the thanas. He has earned enough money. He is developing a paunch now. There are many complaints against him, but the deputy suppresses them. It is only Baghel Singh who suffers for the mistakes of others.

But the judge has surpassed all limits. Every other day his peon comes with some request or the other: new tyres for bicycle, locks, utensils, buckets etc. How can he ever keep the goods safe in the store-house! Complaints against him are not blocked at the S.P.'s officer like Santokh Singh's papers. On the other hand, they are forwarded. Everyone forgets the favours you have earlier done to them. The glass that I had sent to the reader for his table was taken off from the car standing at the thana. They ask for anything – even playing cards for their children. They open their mouth wide, as if that is a government-store.

The munshi is ashamed of the new notice that has been issued by the babus, that he has embezzled ten empty sacks. The munshi clearly remembered that the

deputy's servant had taken the sacks to store fodder. Munshi did not know that they bore the American government's seal. They had to set the culprit free. He was the brother-in-law of some other judge. The culprit had sold off the oats meant for school children, and pocketed the money. The offence could have been established only when the empty sacks were presented in the court. The culprit had to be let off. The munshi was put in the dock for embezzling some worthless sacks.

Had the munshi paid the 'monthly' to the clerk, all this would not have happened. He could have paid the monthly only if his own pocket was full. One can't shell out one's full salary.

Money is the solution to all problems, and the munshi was waiting for that.

One whom he saw after waiting for so long was this devil-Derwesh.

The munshi was neither happy, nor sad when he saw Derwesh. If he expected some money from the seths, he was equally scared of Derwesh squashing the whole plan. Derwesh was named Nasib Chand by his parents, but the police department called him 'bad nasib' – ill fated. Whosoever he entangles with doesn't get food the whole day! The long faced Derwesh was a strange person. If he wanted to, he could get you money, a big amount; but if was annoyed with you, he would even file a false complaint against you for asking for a bribe! Every policeman talked to him very carefully. As far as possible, they would agree with all that he said.

The munshi flung a glance in all directions to see if everything in the thana was right, when he saw the journalist walk into the thana. The lock-up had been vacant since many days. The barracks were also empty. There was no suspect either. There was no fun sitting here under the peepal tree. There was only a shoe-shaped device, to beat the suspects, which is derisively named 'Aan milo sajana'; a short thick wooden club again nicknamed 'kilometre', a blanket, and a rope. You can't trust Derwesh; even if he looks at these things, as he walks in, tomorrow, he may send a long article about them to the papers.

It had happened like this. In his rounds, he had reached the courts. There were some cans, some broken cycles, tubes and sacks full of saw dust kept outside the naib's court, because they had to be produced as evidence there. He watched as they were taken into the court again and again. Some culprits were also sentenced. He photographed the various articles in the case-property under different pretexts. He wrote a long article on the basis of statements of the advocates and parties concerned. Many policemen are still grappling with the fallout of that article. The judge also has not been able to find an appropriate answer to the charge sheet handed to him by the High Court.

The munshi got up from his chair to welcome Derwesh. Pulled the chair opposite near his chair and made him sit on it. After that he himself sat down.

'You too have seats, sethji... what to do? There are only two chairs. Please pull up that bench. We are sorry to make you to sit on benches, but the government is bankrupt! A couple of panchayats have agreed, but even they are now silent.' Baghel Singh had begun reciting his own problems to them, instead of asking them about theirs.

‘Last time, I had got you some chairs...’ Derwesh reminded him of the money that was given to him for the chairs last month, and he threw a keen glance all over the thana. There was nothing except a few benches for people to sit on.

‘Those... those were taken by the, Deputy sahib. Who leaves anything here...?’ Baghel Singh could think of no other pretext to close the issue. He had thought of the easiest one at hand. In fact, neither had any chairs come, nor they were taken away by anyone.

‘Right, we will get you more,’ Derwesh did not want to prolong this conversation.

Taking his eyes off the papers on the table, the munshi looked at the faces of Derwesh’s companions. Their faces were sad, and even Derwesh was serious. They all seemed under considerable strain.

‘How come, you have graced us by coming here, Derwesh ji?’ The munshi was eager to know the main cause. ‘What grace..?’ Derwesh sighed. ‘This is the limit... it seems that now the bastards are after kids. Since yesterday, Lalaji’s grandson is missing... someone has kidnapped him... the whole night we have been roaming around, snooping like dogs. We haven’t been able to find no clue. We want to file a report.’

Derwesh’s eyes were moist; the munshi too felt like wailing. The public prosecutor had said that Nagpal would come to file the report. But only ‘nag’... had come. The way Derwesh was acting, made it clear to the munshi that there was no hope of any fees.

‘As many reports as you want... do you suspect anyone?’ The munshi asked, pulling the clipboard and looking at the Lalas, who sat there in silence.

‘Lalaji has no enemies. He is a saint. He is either praying or working for people’s welfare, the whole day. He has never harmed even an ant! What are you saying, munshiji!’ Derwesh intervened before the seths could say anything.

‘Then against whom do I write the report? We have to mention someone’s name in the report... also, bring in some witnesses. Some buggywala, some vendor, hawking in front of the school.. peon, teacher... some one or the other has to be made a suspect.’ The munshi was still concentrating on the seths.

‘There is no quarrel with anyone, but a peon of the school is absconding since many days. His wife is also a trouble maker.. we also have heard that he is a new Sikh... talks in favour of the militants.’

The munshi was shocked at what Derwesh had revealed, but he quickly recovered, and with great humility, tried to rebut Derwesh’s argument.

‘You are mistaken... they are violent... they also loot. Whatever else they do, they do not kill children and women. After all they are religious people.... What enmity do they have with innocent children? This appears to be the work of some child lifters’ gang. Saansis, lepers or beggars, or fake sadhus, who kidnap children for sacrifice. There are plenty of groups roaming about, committing the most heinous crimes. Let the Sardar come, he will start the investigation.’

The munshi felt that his work would not be done, and he pushed the clipboard away from him.

Munshi's argument irked Derwesh. He looked seriously at the pradhan, as though saying – 'Didn't I tell you that the police is with them! Now you know! They just don't let you touch them!'

The munshi saw the flush of bitterness in Derwesh's eyes. He regretted for what he had said. It had been a natural reaction on his part to demoralize the Seths. But he was being misunderstood.

What lies ahead? The munshi reflected bitterly on his poverty!

Had there been something to fall back upon, he would have given up this dog's life long back. He would have earned as much as he could in a few years like Santokh, and bought a big farm. But, now he has nothing, whatever little he earns, the family eats it up. His father has left many responsibilities unfulfilled. He had an aunt and three sisters to marry off, and four brothers to educate. They all look up to Baghel Singh. After their marriages the process of doling out started. This one is expecting a child, there is a death in another's family. The brothers are also of no use. Two are still idle, and the other two have just taken up some clerical jobs. They cannot meet their own expenses, and seek his assistance from time to time.

The younger sister has come for her delivery. It is her first child. If it is a boy, he would be expected to spend at least four-five thousand. The daughter's in-laws are always demanding something or the other. One of their relatives is a thanedar. Something or the other has to be done to uphold the girls' honour and respect in their eyes.

Baghel Singh had planned it differently, but the events seemed to be taking a different turn. He had spoken in defence of the terrorists in the presence of a journalist!

'Do something till the sardar comes. Unless you act immediately, we won't be able to get anything.' Pradhan did not like munshi's silence.

'You people have already delayed it too long. In these twenty odd hours, they have had the time to do whatever they wanted to. But, don't worry. We will do our utmost that is in our power. Wherever they are, in hell or in the skies, we shall find them out. After all, this is Punjab police!.... There is no one in the thana right now. I can neither leave the phone nor can the sentry leave the gate. It may be a new trick of the terrorists to get the thana empty... they have tried many such tricks... then what can we do? This has to be thought over with a cool mind. Let some investigators come, then we will proceed.' The munshi was trying to stall, but these fools just did not take his hints. Derwesh understood the language of the police, but he also was silent.

'If you can't do anything, then at least flash the description of the child to the control room. Then, they will stop people at the check-posts.'

Derwesh was now irritated. He understood the wily intentions of the munshi, but he did not want to complicate things by quarrelling with him. He had a soft corner

for Lalaji. Had it been someone else, he would have left the thana at once, after soundly abusing the munshi.

‘This I will do. The set will open at two... it is now one o’clock. By three the whole staff would have come back. Then, we will really get after the case!’

‘You please write the report. I’ll get the Deputy to do the rest.’ Derwesh pulled the telephone towards him to call the Deputy.

‘Deputy sahib is on leave. I haven’t said ‘no’ to the report.’ Once again, the munshi pulled the clipboard towards him, and looked through the papers.

‘What sort of government is this! The whole procedure has to be noted on paper, but there is not even a piece of paper. The stationery reaches the homes of the babus, so the munshi keeps begging people for a few sheets! Bhai sahib, don’t mind... please fetch half a ream of paper from Kabir Book Depot opposite.’

The munshi wrote the requisition on a piece of paper, and instead of half, he wrote two reams of paper, two good quality ball pens, a dozen of carbon papers and a bottle of Chelpark ink.

Derwesh took the slip from the munshi and handed it to the pradhan. Suraj took it from the pradhan.

For some time a tense silence pervaded the room.

The munshi’s mind was busy. If this goes the right way, it would not be difficult to find the child. The name of the militants is attached to any crime by the way. What will they do with children? This is the handiwork of either Bagga baazigar or those Tamil beggars, who loiter around the stores houses, stealing wheat, or of the lepers from the ashram. It has been rumoured that they lift children from one place and send them on to another. It also may be the work of a barren woman, who may have kidnapped him to offer as a sacrifice in the hope of getting a son!... One reads about such cases every day! There are many evil sadhus going around doing such heinous acts. Sacrificing animals is a common practice. But many women run after black magic and other such acts. Neither can the baazigar escape the munshi, nor are these evil sadhus, beggars or lepers beyond his reach. It is these seths who are beyond his reach! Who is going to pay for all this!

Had Nagpal been present, there was no need for the munshi to ask for money. Nagpal would have arranged that, and then started talking. It is only when blackmailers like Derwesh come as C.P. that the trouble begins. The seths are traumatized because of the child, Baghel is not. When they realize this, they will come straight to the task.

When he saw Nagpal coming in with Suraj who had got the stationery, munshi’s complaints vanished.

Darshan was also with Nagpal, who was a young man of about twenty five. He was dressed in a kurta and pajama with chappals on his feet. He had long hair and stubble on his cheeks. It appeared as if he had had no time to shave and bathe. He had an official diary in his hand.

‘Sentry, fetch the chairs from the S.H.O. sahib’s room and some cold and hot,’ the munshi got up to welcome Nagpal, with great warmth.

‘We will not take anything. We are in great trouble..’ Nagpal was very serious.

‘No.. go fetch seven-eight cups of tea... and...’ He handed five rupee note to the sentry.

‘No... then we will get the tea. Keep the money come on , Darshan, son, get the tea.’

Darshan got up to go with the sentry.

‘Forget about the tea ... ask them to boil tea leaves in the milk itself. Also fetch some namkin... what will that halwai have?’

‘He has kaju...’ the sentry had plenty of experience and understanding about such visitors to the thana. He was hinting to the munshi not to worry, he will handle the situation.

‘You decide yourself. But, there should not be any negligence in looking after them. It is with their help that we survive in this town.’

The munshi was aware of the fact that if he played up to Nagpal, it would bring him a bigger commission.

The sentry came back with plates of kaju, samosas and biscuits.

Darshan took Suraj aside to explain things to him. It appeared to be some bad news. With every word that Darshan uttered, the pallor on Suraj’s face deepened.

No one touched the eatables except the munshi and the sentry, but after munshi’s continuous insistence, they did take the cups of tea and put them before them but did not drink.

With shaking hands, Nagpal took out a piece of paper from his pocket and put it on the table.

As soon as he read the note, he saw stars fleeting before the eyes! Darwesh, pradhan and the other seth all came round the table and read the letter, word by word.

The letter was on a printed letter head, which bore the name of some organization. It was a demand note asking for five thousand rupees to be given before seven o’clock in the morning. Lalaji was also instructed not to organize Ram Lila and Ras Lila in the town again. Any disobedience of the instructions would lead to the corpse of the child reaching home by the evening.

‘It is some mischievous trick... there is no organization with this name active in this area.’ The munshi tried to console them, after having looked closely at the letter a couple of times, and putting it under the glass of his table.

‘If it is only this, then you should have given them five thousand! What was the need to come here?’ Darwesh felt that Nagpal had made a mistake by bringing the letter here.

‘Five thousands is nothing! Five lakhs could have been arranged for Lalaji, but bad luck! No one knew about the letter! We have just found it!’ Nagpal explained the situation with tears in his eyes.

‘Someone saw a measuring vessel of brass on the parapet of Lalaji’s house, an hour ago. Bunty’s school bag was on top... God knows what would happen. Munshi, do something fast, there may be something under the bag...’

‘A bomb or some such thing can be under the vessel... we have already evacuated the mohalla! There is no time to think, it is time to act fast. We have already made a mistake. Had we found the letter earlier, then things would not have reached such a pall.’ Darshan could no longer contain himself.

A bomb or a corpse under the measuring vessel. The story was taking a new twist. The munshi sensed danger. If this was true, then he is liable to be punished. Suspension or dismissal was bound to happen.

‘Lalaji is not a small person. If anything were to happen to Bunty we will spill blood...!’ Darshan’s blood was boiling. He was losing control on himself.

‘Just let me think! What should we do? I think this is what we should do’. Munshi tried to pacify them and also show that he was in deep thought.

‘You do this, Nagpal ji, run and get a taxi.. in the meanwhile I’ll inform the control room; send for the bomb squad. Then, we shall go to Sardarji, who knows about the ministers’ program! They may not even move the whole day long. They may spend the night here. It is essential to inform him. Pradhan ji you come with me.’

The munshi tried to throw off all responsibility on others, before someone close to Lalaji could whisper something to some minister.

He wrote the report, gave the description of the child to the control room, and dispatched the copies of the report to higher officers, and fulfilled all his duties.

Now, let the S.H.O. deal with the control room, look after it and also other officers. It does not bother him?

III

The news of Bunty’s kidnapping spread like wild fire in the whole town before the sunset. Whosoever heard of it dropped his work and rushed to Lalaji’s.

Practically everyone in the town was grateful to Lalaji. This was the first time that he was struck by a calamity. They all felt that it was the time to render whatever help they could to find Bunty.

The search started in the school itself. They recollected a piece of news that was published in papers a few months back. Before the summer vacations began, a child was left sleeping in the class room. The parents, as also the school authorities, looked high and low but no one thought of searching the school itself. When the school reopened after the vacations, they found only the skeleton of the child.

First, no one except the principal and the peon knew about it. Each room of the school was opened. Each bench and desk looked under. The toilet, canteen, the water tank, the cycle stand were searched.

By this time the shopkeepers of this area got the news. They also joined the search.

From the school and went to the parks. After all, he was only a child....quite possible that he went to a park, and forgot to go back home.

From there, they searched cinemas, railway station, bus depots, ponds and lakes, the sewage drains, and the sewerage manholes. Finally, they went from lane to lane, and from house to house.

Without anyone telling him, Bhag Singh, the town proclaimer, took his hooter and cycle, and went all over the town, proclaiming that Bunty was lost. How could Bhag Singh alone round such a large town? Sadhu also sent for a rickshaw. He fitted his loudspeaker on to it, and went towards the colonies outside the town.

Everyone knew Lalaji. Whichever home they went to make enquires, one or the other member of that family joined the search party.

By midnight the search party had become a hundred strong. There were many crorepatis as well as safai workers in the group; there was Chowdhery of the leper's ashram and the nambardar of the Sansis; there were truck drivers, as well as rickshaw pullers; there were members of Sewa Samiti and also those who were from the Mahabir Dal; there were masons; there were owners. Ram Swaroop, the head of Yuva Sangh, did not like this. Why should such a large group follow Lalaji? This is only for show. How will this benefit Lalaji? Each one of them elbows the other, and goes up to stand besides Lalaji. The second one pushes this one behind, and himself takes his place. If you want to do something, then do it properly. As he walked along he consulted his colleagues. They took Lalaji's permission and went and sat in Geeta Bhawan.

Ram Swaroop divided the workers into small groups, and sent them out in various directions. Some groups were told to proceed to Rampura, some to Dhuri. As the buses stop plying at seven in the evening, it would be better to go by cars. The remaining groups, going to Bhador, Raikot, Sekha, Thikriwala and Mansa would hire taxis. The child could be lured into a bus or a train by someone and, may be crying all alone in some corner of a station or bus depot. Gone are the days when people used to look after the needy and would escort them home. These days, even those who save others have to face problems. Good people also hesitate to do good these days.

It was the time for Kalka Mail to arrive. Two groups left for the station. People were contacted to arrange for cars for the other groups.

Ram Swaroop gave strict instructions to all the groups. Whatever information, good or bad, they get, should be communicated immediately to Lalaji. After the meeting he will be available at Lalaji's home, and will supervise things from there.

Lalaji's party got no clue the whole night; and neither did the Yuva Sangh. The women's group also came back home tired.

Lalaji had requested the people to go to their homes many times. No one heeded him. Everyone kept sitting as if they were on a 'sit-down' strike.

The sitting room was now full of people who had been with Lalaji the whole night, looking for Bunty. The new-comers sat either in the passage or went into the courtyard. The women surrounded Kanta in the inner room.

Making place for the sympathizers, Lalaji had got pushed back to the wall of the sitting room.

No good news had come in when the day broke.

Whenever a young man who had gone out to look for Bunty, stepped into the room, Lalaji's eyes would light up with a strange hope. He felt someone would give him the news of Bunty's recovery. But, when the new comer would sit down disconsolately, Lalaji would heave a deep sigh, and sit close to the wall, waiting for the next person to come in.

Once in a while, his eyes would move from the door to the cornice opposite, where some photographs were displayed. Right in the centre was the photograph of Bunty's father, Baldev. The silver garland around the photograph showed that he was no longer in this world. Bunty's photographs were on both sides of that photograph. In one of them, he was on Lalaji's shoulder; in another, he was clutching his finger as he was being taken to the school; and in yet another, he was listening to a recital of Ramayan in all seriousness.

Lalaji was making a desperate effort to keep his eyes open, but they were closing, time and again.

There was a death-like silence all around. Finding Lalaji in deep introspection, people were even trying to breathe silently.

He is a spiritual man. He looked immersed in meditation. Who knows he may have some direct communication with the God. Some diety may remind him of some negligence. He may see the place where Bunty has been hidden.

The believers were thinking on these lines, while Lalaji was thinking of something else. He was apprehensive of his social service of forty years of, and of his deep faith in God. He felt that by preaching about the divine powers he had been misleading people. Had there been any such thing as God, Lalaji would not have suffered this way. What crimes had he committed in the previous birth; had he killed any maharishi, because of which he has been atoning for the last sixty years and his punishment is not yet over? Children are considered the image of God. Why isn't He punishing those sinners, who have kidnapped the only son of a widowed mother?

With an uneasy mind, Lalaji took stock of sixty years of his life.

He could not recollect a moment in his life, when he had laughed freely, slept a carefree sleep, or happiness had visited their home.

Lalaji could not say whether it was a dream, or for real. He, however, faintly remembers his father's face. Eight year old Dayal with a clean shaven head is playing marbles in the lane. His tall, well-built father, dressed in a white kurta, a checkered

lungi and a crested turban on his head, comes home. His pocket is full of sugar balls.. He walks up to Dayal, distributing sugar balls to his friends and picks up Dayal in his arms; Fills his pocket with sugar balls. Showering love on him all the way home. Dayal, up in his arm, feels as if he is on Mount Everest!

The other side of this picture he remembers very well. He is playing with pebbles in the lane. His younger sister Shakuntala, is sitting at the threshold, eating. Suddenly, screams are heard from within their home. Tearful Dayal rushes home.

Their father is lying on the ground in the courtyard. His mother is screaming and crying. She has broken the bangles on her wrists, and her open hair is tangled, and the surma in her eyes is streaking her fair face, with her tears. She has suddenly become very strong. She cannot be controlled by the women around her. She is clinging to their father. If she is pushed away once, she rushes to him again greater force the next time.

Scared, Dayal is standing close to his mother. She holds him close to her chest and there is another bout of crying. The other women also start weeping. The face of his father is uncovered and shown to Dayal once. His eyes are closed, his face serene, as if he was about to rise and take Dayal in his arms. A neighbor covers his face, another picks up Dayal and takes him away. Everyone is saying that his father is dead. What if he is dead? He couldn't understand anything.

It was much later that he understood the meaning of death. It has not one, but thousands of meanings. For each relative of the dead, it had a different meaning.

For a young wife, it meant the suppressing of all desires and hopes; throttling the music of anklets, bangles and ear rings; fading of the bright and beautiful colours; wiping away of the vermilion in the hair and imprisonment in white clothes; to save oneself from the evil men of the neighbourhood; to avoid the glimpses of men who are as old as your father, or your brother or the age of your son; to avoid people on festivals and weddings, to cry in the darkness of Diwali; to remain hungry on Karwa Chauth and yet not to be accepted as the fasting one; to mourn the departed one and to worry about the growing family; to weave durries, yarn, to embroider phulkaris and knit for others to keep the home fires burning. This meaning of 'death' his mother had bore on her body and mind.

For an eight year old son, like Dayal, 'death' meant, to grow up in one day; to wear simple clothes and eat simple food; to suppress your anger even when you are beaten by others; to play less and study more; to share household work with mother at home; to work in a shop when you are not studying; to worry about your sister's marriage. Lalaji had understood this meaning of the loss of a father.

In a family without male members the daughters had to remain within the four walls of the home. You have to look around carefully time and again, before you step out, even to throw out garbage; to make sure that no evil man is lurking about. They are forbidden to laugh, play and go about with other girls. To get married off at a very young age to an older man is their destiny. Married to a lame army man, Shakuntala was facing the torture of that wrathful man.

‘Gurudev, have some tea...’ As soon as Lalaji opened his eyes having reviewed the first phase of his life, Ram Swaroop offered him a glass of tea.

‘No. I don’t feel like ...’ In fact, Lalaji was lost in the past and did not want to come back to the present.

‘Have just a little. Sister Kanta sister has not touched even water since yesterday... if you also lose courage what will happen to us?’ Darshan, the secretary of Yuya Sangh, was also requesting Lalaji to have some tea.

Lalaji’s sad eyes looked around the sitting room. One or two persons had glasses of tea in their hands. More than half of the people present there were those who had been roaming all over the town with Lalaji since yesterday, without food and water. Lalaji was used to fasting. He would fast twenty days of a month. It would make no difference to him if he did not eat for a day. The others may face problems. Amrit, of the cloth stores, Ramgarhia of iron shop, and Master of Sewa Samiti were used to drinking tea thrice in an hour. Lalaji keeps admonishing them when camps are held. Whenever you look at them, you find them sipping tea. If Lalaji does not eat anything, they too won’t eat.

Having thought of all this, he took a glass of tea.

Any sip of tea that he drank in the absence of Bunty was like poison to Lalaji. Who knows in what condition the innocent child is. Did he sleep or had been awake all this time? He never falls asleep unless he is told a story. If you don’t massage his scalp, he doesn’t sleep. He doesn’t eat unless he sits in Kanta’s lap. Bunty could not have slept even a wink. He would have been screaming. He must have become hoarse crying. No one would have even given him a drop or water.

Seeing Lalaji take the glass, all of them took the glasses offered. The neighbours had brought in tea, many times, but no one had touched it. It had gone waste. This time, Dharampal had brought in a small quantity. Only a few glasses could be filled. Seeing that people were talking taking tea, many neighbours ran home to get more tea.

Sips of tea were hurting Lalaji’s heart like sharp arrows. He wanted to go deaf. But this was not possible. He again leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes.

After giving birth to a son, mothers worship the earth many times. Mothers feel protected by their sons. Even after death, they go straight to heaven if a son has lit their pyre. The offerings that his mother may have pledged to the deity at his birth could not be fulfilled, till she passed away.

She had fasted, prayed, had kept awake whole night and went on pilgrimages all her life.

His mother had devoted all her life to Lalaji’s happiness. What did Lalaji give her? Mountains of sadness, tears and sighs!

His mother had dreamt of many things for him. Hardayal would be a big officer. He would marry a beautiful young girl. The old woman, widowed in her youth, would forget her sorrow in the happy laughter of her grandchildren.

How could Hardayal become an officer? Even for getting appointed as a mere school master he had to go to many doors asking for favour. Who would give a girl to a poor school master with the widowed mother and a young sister at home? The sister-in-law would try to dominate the young bride. And when she is married, she will take all that is there, as her dowry. A master's salary is not enough to provide even two square meals. No one wanted to push his daughter into hell. Even for his marriage, his mother had entreated at many doors with folded hands.

Job and marriage depended on others. Lala could not even fulfill his mother's dream of a house full of children.

In the third month of his marriage, his wife conceived. The old woman was so happy, she felt that she was walking in the sky. The whole day long, she would be frequenting mandirs, gurudwaras and deras with her daughter-in-law. Tying threads here, getting an amulet there. She would go to a pandit for some small worship, and visit a sadhu to get some bhabhuti – sacred ashes. She was impatient to see her grandson.

Saudha had a chronic stomach ache. She would keep lying the whole day writhing in pain. Lala tried his best to persuade his mother to take her to a doctor, but mother wouldn't listen to him.

'You are worrying too much because of your love for her. These are women's ailments, and they know the remedies for them. This is her first pregnancy, and her whole body is delicate. She will be all right.'

Saudha was not to get well and she did not. Giving a beautiful grandson to her mother-in-law, she departed from this world.

Mother had hardly finished her responsibilities towards her own family. With Saudha's death, the whole process started all over again. She had to bring up the child, and cook for the family.

For Lalaji, his own home became an alien place. He belonged neither here nor there. While at home, he would feel suffocated. When he would be out, Baldev's screams would come after him, dragging him home. There was nothing he could do. He ate whatever he got, wore clothes that were often untidy and dirty. He would talk to no one; share his sorrow and grief with no one. To come home, silently, eat his food and go to sleep.

Baldev was a sickly child. He would always suffer from cough, fever and loose motions. Either he would be down with heat stroke, or he would have a bad cold. His mother could not manage to remain awake whole night; she was very weak; her eyesight had become weak due to constant crying; knees too were wobbly.

His mother now started advising him. Those who are gone must be forgotten. Get married again. How long can a man look after an infant? This is a woman's job.

Whatever it was, Lalaji was firm on his decision was unalterable. He didn't want to get married again, and did not remarry. When the first one had left him, how could he trust the second one? Then, what would happen to Baldev at the hands of a stepmother? He will not make Baldev's life hell for the sake of his own happiness.

‘Gurudev, please touch this thali with your hand,’ Darshan broke his concentration and presented a thali of batasha before him. An amulet shone on the batashas.

Lalaji did not enquire what it was. He was not yet ready to talk to anyone. He just wanted to think. He touched the thali with his hand, in silence.

Darshan himself informed him. Santi has got this ‘taweej’ It has to be tied to a spinning wheel and the spinning wheel is to be spun the in the reverse. The mantra has to be chanted a hundred times; then, the amulet has to be taken off and put on an earthen shard with red chillies, and burnt. The heat, will reach Bunty’s kidnappers. This will burn their skin till they return Bunty.

Santi had got this news at midnight; she had immediately gone to the Dera where the sants were living. At first, the sant was annoyed at being woken from his sleep, but when he heard of the trouble of Lalaji, he cooperated. He prepared this amulet with full concentration. The sant was well known for his black magic in a wide area. His amulets do not go waste.

After a few minutes the spinning wheel began its reverse spin.

The grinding stones had already been run in the reverse in the house. This charm had been told by the sadhus to Viru. She says that when she was small, her uncle had left home after a quarrel with his wife. A sadhu had told them to do this. Her aunt had spun the grinding stones in the reverse for three days. On the fourth day, her uncle came back.

Kanta had herself put the iron pan upside down on the hearth last night. Once her mother had told her that if one lost an animal, then, if you make a chapati on the inverted pan, the animal comes back by the evening. If the animals can come home, why can’t a human being? She had baked so many rotis that now her basket was full.

The croaks of the spinning wheel and the grinding stone were making Lalaji restless. And he was more upset by Santi’s loud chanting of the ‘mantra’.

Santi was doing her best. She felt it was the payback time for Lalaji’s goodness to her. Her husband had died at a young age, leaving four small daughters with her. God knows what would have happened to her girls, but Lalaji helped her. He had arranged them to be married off through the Ram Lila Committee on Sita Swayamvar day, one by one. The grooms were also good and the dowry collected was more than what her relatives could give for their own daughter’s wedding. All her daughters are now happy in their own homes, thanks to Lalaji’s help.

To take his mind off from Santi’s mantras, Lalaji concentrated on the photographs. At one time, he saw Bunty’s future in Baldev’s photo, and then he saw Baldev’s past in Bunty’s photograph. At times, Bunty would turn into Baldev, and then, Baldev would become Bunty. Both seemed to merge with each other.

Baldev was like Bunty at that age. Large eyes, healthy body and a clear voice.

Had he not become chronically ill at the age of five he would have been tall and well-built like Lalaji. Lack of proper nutrition at a very young age had given him

a weak liver. He would fall ill every fortnight or so. He couldn't even digest water at that time. Doctors would stop his meals. And he would be hospitalised for many days.

Frequenting hospitals had given a new turn to Lalaji's life. Baldev wanted Lalaji's presence but did not want him to serve him. Sitting idle in the hospital led Hardayal to tend to the needs of other patients. He got medicines for some, got hot milk for another, and helped another to the latrine.

There were many patients who had no one to look after them. The hospital staff also neglected such patients. Many died due to lack of care. Lalaji experienced a strange peace after having saved two such patients from the brink of death. His sorrows were now changing to happiness. He had discovered the path to peace.

Even when Baldev was fit, he would visit the hospital. The patients also started to depend on him. The patients missed him if he did not come. One's clothes could not be washed, another couldn't get his milk, and still another couldn't get his medicine.

Baldev grew up and began going to school. Lalaji now did not have much work to do. He started stopping at the hospital on his way back from school. Whatever he could afford, he gave from his own pocket, rest he begged from others. The Sewa Samiti had just been set up. Trying to follow Lalaji, they also started tending to the patients in the hospitals. Then, the money would come from Sewa Samiti, and Lalaji would look after the patients. He became a messiah for the patients.

There were many unclaimed corpses in the hospitals. When such a body would be put on garbage handcart and taken to the cremation ghats by the municipal committee staff, Lalaji would weep. A man has so many hopes as long as he lives. When he loses the battle of life, he dies like a dog. Many did not even get an adequate shroud. The committee people did not even put sufficient wood on the pyre. They tried to make do with cow pat cakes. No final rites, no shradh! There was no question of immersing the ashes in the Ganga. If the soul of the one who is dead, does not get peace, then so be it! How does it matter to anyone?

Lalaji had to do a lot of running about so that such corpses could be given a dignified cremation. He got the municipal committee to sanction some funds, some amount was given by the Sewa Samiti, and some he got from the Mahabir Dal. He supervised the final rituals himself. And he would himself go to Haridwar to immerse the ashes.

When he began visiting the cremation ghats, then the problems there began troubling him. There was nothing there except some shrubs, shards of broken earthenware and broken bricks. One had to go some distance to fetch wood. People who came with the dead body, almost died with heat during summer. There was no place to sit, and no water to drink. No walls, no one to look after the area. Many times, dogs ravished the body of newly buried infants. If it was rainy season, the corpse would not fully burn for three or four days.

First, Lalaji set up a committee. Arranged for the wood, got a tap fitted and then got a shed made. When people realized how comfortable it was, the donations started pouring in.

Mithu Seth gave his old haveli to the cremation ground. It was of no use to him. It had been lying vacant for the last three generations. No one knew if somebody ever lived in it or not. People had only heard tales about the haveli. The Seth who had got this haveli constructed had died childless, despite having fathered fourteen sons and daughters. People had heard strange voices and screams in that haveli, and it was believed that the souls of that couple haunted the haveli. Many believed that there is a black serpent which creeps around the haveli. Forget about living in the haveli, people were scared to pass that way even during day. Some parts of the haveli had collapsed and it was now the abode only pigeons and owls.

Lalaji took on the task of getting the haveli demolished. Before that, the wandering souls were put to rest with full religious rites. Then, after the chanting of sacred mantras, the task of demolishing the haveli was started.

The look of the cremation ground altered with the rubble of the haveli. Parapets were constructed, a water tank was built, and a strong boundary wall rose on all sides. Rest of the debris was sold, and the money earned, paid for the taps and the installation of an electric motor.

When the Jains lost their mother, they got a garden made in her memory in the cremation ground. A statue of Shiva was installed and a gardener was also appointed to look after the garden.

Lalaji's rising influence made many envious. They were sarcastic about it.

'Has anyone earned anything by looking after the grounds for the dead?'

That time Lalaji had ignored everything. Now he was thinking about it. It is true that he has not benefitted by looking after crematoriums. On the other hand, he has come to like it. First, Baldev went, then Ma.. and now... he felt that he had Bunty's corpse in his arms and was going towards the cremation ground, that he himself had got built...

'No... no...!' Lalaji's scream echoed in the air.

'What happened?' The agitated crowd turned to look at him.

'Nothing... nothing... a bad dream....' He felt better with the realization that it was a dream.

To divert his own attention, and that of his sympathizers, he started narrating mythological and historical stories about the problems faced by Harishchandra; of Lakshaman's fainting spell; and those of the four martyred sons of Guru Gobind Singh. It was a bad period for him, but it would pass. Even gods and goddesses become victim of bad planetary configurations. He was, after all, just an ordinary human being.

He told them that every learned man has foretold that Bunty has a long life. There is no need to worry; he had full faith in astrology.

The astrologer would always keep silent while going through Baldev's horoscope. And after repeated questions, he would say the boy will not give happiness.

That could be seen from Baldev's behavior. He would always do exactly the opposite of what Lalaji wanted. He did not believe in any rituals. He did not wear dhoti kurta, like Lalaji. He did not perform any puja in the morning and in the evening. He smoked occasionally. He was not very well educated. He had taken up a clerical job in a private school after passing his tenth class. He got married and two daughters were born to him in quick succession. The third time, he took his wife to Amritsar, paying no heed to Lalaji's advice. One should let God's creation come to this earth. Abortion is a sin. Every child brings its own destiny. But he did not need any more daughters. If the child in the womb is a boy, then it should be born, or else it has to go. Lalaji thanked gods hundreds of times, when it was found that the child to be born was a boy. It saved his family from killing a soul yet to be born.

Baldev called Lalaji an idealist. He did not like to lead a simple life, or eat plain food. He did not want to spend his time at home. He was the father of daughters. He didn't want that his daughters should be married through the good office of the Ram Lila Committee. He also did not want Bunty to study in a government school. He wanted his children to get the best of education and to aspire high.

Through hard work he got a clerical job in a bank. He was now getting eighteen hundred instead of twelve hundred. He would have to go to Sangrur for a few months. After that, he would be transferred back here.

No one could guess, that death was calling him. A better job was only a pretext, to call him to the place of his death. The very second month, he had died under the wheels of a truck.

History repeated itself. Like Lalaji, Bunty was also left an orphan at a young age, but he had Lalaji, who accepted the challenge. He was determined that Bunty should not feel that Baldev was not there.

He was fulfilling his duty for the last four years.

He had set up Yuva Sangh and placed many responsibilities on young shoulders. He was already repenting that he didn't pay much attention to Baldev. Most of the time, he had been busy tending to the needs of other people. Baldev was annoyed with him because of this. He did not want Bunty to have the same feeling.

Who knew that Baldev would any way get another chance to complain!

Baldev seemed to confront him again and again. He was complaining, and telling him – 'Make your social service the soul aim of your life! Your lineage in this world has come to an end. You could not even look after one child!'

Many times, he felt that Baldev was snatching Bunty away from him, and olding Bunty by the hand, is taking him away to some strange place... He almost screamed again, but this time he restrained himself. The one, who went about telling people to accept the will of God, was himself a shaken man! And he had to suppress the scream.

When the last group of Yuva Sangh came back with empty hands, by the nine o'clock train, a pall of mourning seemed to descend on all.

No, there was no other way except informing the police.

Will Bunty never come back? Was all the good work that he had done all his life, worth only this? Hundreds of questions started tormenting Lalaji.

There was not a single act of kindness which Lalaji had not done, with all his heart.

These days any Tom, Dick or Harry can organize a free eye camp just to get his photographs splashed in the media. Actually, it was Lalaji who had initiated this.

Thirty years back, when he had organized a free eye camp for the first time, people were not aware of the fact that an eye operation could be performed so easily. After all the running about, he managed to get only eight operations done. He felt satisfied only when he made sure that people who had lost their vision for over ten years, went back to their homes on buses, travelling alone. These days, an eye camp is organized every six months. Camp sites are decorated as if a wedding is going to take place. Crowds of patients throng the camp. The best of doctors are called to treat the patients. One organization gives free medicines, another gets the spectacles, and yet another supplies the food. The ministers wish to be invited to inaugurate the camps. Is this the only return for giving their sight back to thousands of people? The light of his eyes is being taken away from him!

The pradhan of the Ram Lila Committee informed him that pundits had begun the havan at the Ram Lila ground, and whichever pundit comes to know about, is joining the group involved in the 'path'. After all, Lalaji's contribution to Ram Lila Committee is not insignificant. Had he not intervened and settled the quarrels of the management, the committee would have broken up long ago. He had changed the very style of Ram Lila ever since he had joined the committee. Earlier, dances and wrestling matches were arranged to attract the crowds. Ram Lila would sometimes be held, at the grain market and sometimes at the dharamshala. There was even no restriction on people smoking or drinking there. Whistles and screams were common. Lalaji saw that all this stopped. He persuaded the district collector to allot the vacant plot near the fort to the Ram Lila Committee. He encouraged the people to donate for the construction of a stage. A boundary wall was built and rooms as well were constructed. This ground was now used for many functions. Ram Lila is staged every year, 'jagratas' are organized, katha recitals also take place here. If someone wants to put up a good dramatic performance, there is no need to run after the cinema owners. There is a proper stage available here.

The Swamiji of Geeta Bhawan had also started his akhand kirtan. He had vowed that the kirtan will go on till Bunty returns home. His disciples were also fasting.

Lalaji wanted to accept this as something improbable, an accident. If it is so destined, no harm will be done to Bunty; if not, then police is not going to do a miracle. The Yuva Sangh was not ready to accept this. Undoubtedly, Bunty had got into the clutches of some bad elements. These elements cannot be arrested without the

help of the police. Moreover, the whole atmosphere has become so vicious; even the right thinking people are affected.

The managing director of the thread mill took on the responsibility of lodging the report in the thana. The pradhan of the flour mill's owners union went along. They always seek favours for the police mess and ask for a sack of wheat every fourth day. They took Bunty's uncle Suraj along for all information regarding Bunty, which is required to be provided at the police station.

As soon as Suraj and the managing director left for the thana, the nambardar of Sansis, and Chaudhary of Lepers' ashram became very uncomfortable.

The first assault the police will make to look for Bunty, would be on their bastis.

'Ann data', wait for some more time... it is us that the police are going to harass.' The nambardar came forward from the crowd and stood before Lalaji. Chaudhary of the lepers' ashram was behind him.

It was Lalaji alone who could save them from the terror which the police are going to unleash on them.

It was Lalaji's kindness which had changed the Sansis' way of life. They had given up their old profession – that is theft. The men were now plying pushcarts and women worked in the fields. They were now breeding more cows and pigs. Their children were going to school. The police are not going to distinguish between good and bad; both the good and the bad are all going to be hanged by the same rope. Many would lose their livelihood, and many would not get even a loan to get their broken bones mended. They would get a chance to speak against the nambardar. If one is going to be beaten up by the police even if one is honest, what is the use of shedding your sweat the whole day? What was wrong with what they had been doing earlier? Sleep the whole day long, come out of your home at night, Rustle a couple of homes, give half to the police and the rest is yours! If you cannot get into a home, then lift someone's stack of cotton.

Chaudhary had the same fear. Earlier, they were called beggars. They loitered near the station, bus depots and rotted in desolate places. That time they kidnapped children and also committed thefts. The larger the number of hands to beg, the better it is. Chaudhary himself was a victim of childlifting, he had been kidnapped as a child. It was at Lalaji's initiative which had got them the area near the grain mandi for their huts. They stopped begging. Their leaders would take round of one mohalla one day, and another one the next day. They got enough money for food. Donors were coming to the ashram itself. They got woolen garments, and blankets in winters. They were comfortable. With the news of a child being kidnapped, the police will head for their ashram straight away.

'Don't you worry... we will not let anyone suffer. Sit quietly at home...' Darshan tried to convince them.

Before Chaudhary could offer an explanation, the sweeper-woman came to stand at the threshold with 'Ram, Ram' on her lips.

Last evening, when she had been cleaning the drains, she had heard about Bunty's disappearance and she had come to Lalaji's to ask about it. There was no one at home. They were all out, looking for Bunty. Someone had handed her a piece of paper. She had to give this to Lalaji. She had waited for him to come back for a long time. Then she tied the piece of paper in a corner of her dupatta. She forgot to give it.

When she had recalled it in the morning she had come running to hand it over. She wanted to give it to Lalaji himself.

Lalaji's hands shook as he opened the folds of the letter. A look at his ravaged face, made others look into the letter.

What everybody had been apprehensive of had happened. The letter was from the terrorists. Five thousand rupees are to be put under the banyan tree near the Panjwili pond. Or else, the dead body will reach his home by daybreak.

It was ten in the morning now. Many hours had passed since the time mentioned in the letter. What would happen now?

The whole crowd looked at the sweeper-woman with anger. Had she handed the letter on time, Bunty would have come home long ago. What was the fault of this illiterate woman? She shook with fear.

Five thousand was not a big thing. One man could have given it. But how would the time lost be made up?

'Bunty's school bag...!' His school teacher almost screamed when she saw his school bag under a measuring vessel made of brass. She felt that Bunty had come back. And having flung his bag here is hiding somewhere.

The crowd turned to the parapet to look at the bag. The appearance of his school bag was not a good indication. The warning given in the letter was known to all. One could see the garters of Bunty's shorts under the measuring vessel.

'May be there is a letter underneath. They may have given some more time.' Someone cried out in a choked voice.

'Wait... this may also be a threat...' Another stopped the one who had moved forward to lift the vessel.

'This can't be.... The vessel is small... there may not be a bomb under this...' This was the advice of former captain Dharam Singh. Such events were now common. When the enemy is after you, then anything is possible.

'Captain Sahib is right...send for the police immediately... get back all of you...' Sehgal, the advocate, had also come forward.

The crowd was now scared. Many left for their homes. Captain Sahib and Sehgal helped children and women to move away.

Lalaji sent Darshan to Nagpal to ask him to call the police.

Sehgal and the Captain were asking Lalaji to leave the sitting room.

But Lalaji lay down on the ground and covered himself with a sheet.

Better if this bomb goes off. He will get rid of this sad life.

IV

It was three o'clock by the time Shiv reached his quarter.

He had not yet recovered from the cheap liquor that he had drunk. His head still reeled occasionally. His also had a stomach upset as he had gorged himself on too much meat.

He wanted to sleep till the evening muster. He would sleep off the hangover, and his stomach would get normal.

He had taken care not to be seen while coming in. Avoiding the thana, he had come from behind the drums, like a thief. He was sick of following the minister for two days. If anyone were to see him enter the premises, a message would soon come for him. He is like an extra tyre. Shiv Prasad must go where no one else wants to go!

The room was in total disarray as he had been away for two days. Everything was covered with thick layers of dust. He cleaned the table. Taking out his revolver from his holster belt, he unloaded it. He put the bullets into the holster belt, and hung it up on a peg. He now loosened the belt of his trousers, which had been badly squeezing his stomach.

He had just taken off his crested turban and put it on the table when what he had been afraid of, happened. The sentry was at the door, calling for him.

“Babuji, don't take off your uniform. Lalaji's grandson has been kidnapped. Someone has left a measuring vessel at their door. They think there is a bomb under the vessel. The munshi has sent a wireless message to the bomb disposal squad. Till they reach the place, you have to go there and guard the spot.”

Shiv frowned. This is what he did not like. He is posted at the thana, and has no connection with the policing in the town. There are two other inspectors, equal to him in rank; a hawaldar too is there. They would all be on duty as per the muster. But they must be at home, sleeping. That was the advantage of living in private houses. Even when you are at home, you can say that you are out! Shiv had taken a government quarter so that he can save some money, but not to take on all the extra responsibilities. He was extremely tired, was drunk too. He would not go because it was not his duty.

“I am not going. Send someone else. I have not yet reported back on duty.”

He scolded the sentry and sent him back.

The whole thana is involved in all the dirty tricks. If it is about collecting money, the city thana is ahead of others. It was they who collected 'Monthly' from the gambling dens, the speculators, and those running the lucky games racket. Whether it was the F.C.I.'s special which had to be unloaded, or the sale of government rice in the black market, or even if the food supply people vacate their stores, they get their share. But, when it comes to a difficult task, they all look askance at others. Many of

them disappear in the tea shops opposite the thana. And they think that Shiv will go! This is what they must have thought even now!

He had come to know about Bunty's kidnapping yesterday. A house-to-house and village to village search had already been launched. For a moment, he had thought of informing the thana. The Lala is a good man. And, all children are precious, and dear to all. But, he had kept quiet thinking that if he had come to hear about it when he was miles away from the town, then, the people at the thana must have come to know about it! They were right in the centre of the town! The police is always patrolling the town. It is a different matter, that they chose to ignore it though they all must have heard about it; the way Shiv had done. They were all aware that often the one who speaks has to bear the brunt. He may be told to do the hard work! There is nothing much to it, but there is fear of complaints being made, of constant harassment. This is the chief minister's constituency. Higher officers ask for explanations all the time. Even the most worthless feel free to pass comments about the police being careless. Shiv had taken his trainer's advice to heart, that one must keep clear of thankless labour as much as one can. He would openly say that if you found a corpse floating in a water canal, kick it to make it float further ahead, and do not fish it out and start investigating.

It is like confronting death head on!

Shiv lay down on the cot, without taking his uniform off. He knew that he would have to go, and therefore, he wanted to rest for whatever time he could.

God shouldn't make anyone fat! Obesity is a punishment for one's whole life. He now weighed more than a quintal and a quarter. He had a tummy bulging like a drum. He had vowed many times to control his food habits and exercise more, but liquor was his weakness, and if it was accompanied with spicy meat, all the vows were forgotten. After stuffing himself to his fill, it becomes difficult even to stand properly. He suffers from acidity and gastric problems, and suffers from constipation for days together. Even medicines do not help.

Afraid of his bad stomach he takes the first two pegs neat. Then, when his stomach seems to be on fire, he starts to eat meat. Drinking this way helps his digestion. After that, he may eat two chickens without any problem. But, if he were to eat even a piece of barfi without taking a drink first, his stomach gets bloated. He can't digest anything, till he has had plenty to drink.

The sarpanch of Sahijra had played dirty with him by getting him drunk. He went on offering him glass after glass. Shiv had tried to tell him that the minister was against drinking. If someone complains, or he even gets a whiff of this, he may demote Shiv. The sarpanch did not pay any heed to him. Sometimes, appearance does not reflect reality. He says one thing, and does exactly the opposite! This is politics! This minister was not a 'kachcha' wearing jathedar, but one who wore a trouser suit! He was not a radical, but had been a professor for five years! He drinks occasionally. He won't dare to smell Shiv's breath! He would avoid him and will snore till he reached Chandigarh!

Shiv went on drinking in deference. The sarpanch was a close friend of the minister. If you don't drink with a Jat, he doesn't take you to be his friend. If you are not friendly, who would oblige you? And who knows, you may need a favour from someone tomorrow! It was this consideration that made Shiv go on drinking with the sarpanch. In the present political scenario, one must have a minister in one's pocket. When there is no one to protect you, then even a powerful inspector can send a man like Shiv to the lines in no time, and can himself take over from him.

Shiv needed to rest for a couple of hours in order to be fit.

His uniform was dirty. The minister had come for one day. He had not taken an extra uniform. The minister had extended his stay. One could see the dirt on his collar and cuffs, and Shiv was not used to wearing a dirty uniform. A police officer stands to lose his influence if he is not properly dressed. His clothes reeked of sweat. An obese person sweats profusely.

Shiv wanted to rest for some time and then bathe, put on a new uniform and only then go out. If he goes out, who knows when he may come back. There can be an encounter, and he may have to chase the culprits for some distance, or even lay a siege. This is the trouble with the job of a police job! It is a twenty four hours job! Where is the time for anything else?

He tried to sleep, but the munshi himself came to call him.

“What is this, babuji! The matter has been reported to the D.I.G. and you are still sleeping!... Any untoward thing might happen... leave for the spot immediately! I have marked your return and your departure for the spot... I have dispatched two constables there. I have given you the information. Now, do as you wish!”

The munshi was panting. There was uneasiness, a plea in his voice. There also was a show of rank.

“Get up and leave! A job is a job! Why throw a tantrum?” Shiv consoled himself. He tightened his belt, put on the same oily turban on his head, loaded his gun, and picking up his cane, went out.

At the gate of the thana, he looked around. He had hoped that someone would be waiting for him outside the gate. Lalaji's house is not very far. It doesn't take more than ten minutes, even if you walk the distance. Even then, why should he trouble himself by walking?

Shiv had no bicycle because of his heavy body. Whenever he had ridden a cycle, everyone would look at him and smile. If he was not in his uniform, children did not hesitate to make fun of him. Girls showed scant respect even for his uniform, and passed comments! He was afraid to ride a motorcycle, for he had had a bad fall while trying to learn to drive. Then, why should he spend money on expensive petrol? If he cycles, his knees pain, and he becomes breathless. His blood pressure rises. If they have work for him, they must arrange a vehicle for him.

No one had come to fetch Shiv, and there was no arrangement made to take him there. He looked around like a pigeon caught in a trap.

No matter, if there is any conveyance for him. There are plenty of rickshaws standing near the chowk. It is their duty to take a police officer when he is on duty.

As soon as the rickshaw pullers saw him coming towards them, they started leaving. Two went towards the railway station, and four towards the old town. Those who took time to think over, disappeared in the nearest shops to avoid him. They would have to give a free ride to him! But whosoever gets caught, will have to take him! If it is only a matter of a couple of miles, the rickshaw pullers don't grudge. But, if they are dragged the whole afternoon on an empty stomach, they get upset. That is what they wanted to avoid by disappearing.

Shiv was annoyed. This is uncalled for and rude. It amounted to an insult to the police. Arriving at the chowk, he deflated the tyres of all the rickshaws standing there, and put their valves and nuts in his pocket. They would now have to spend money and also their time!

Shiv caught hold of the one who could not get away!

"You people think that this chowk is your father's property! Can't you see that you are blocking the traffic?" Before Shiv could give him a slap or two the rickshaw puller asked:

'Where do you want to go, babuji?'

'Tagore street', Shiv told him twisting his moustache.

'Stop at the doctor's turning for a while,... that bastard panwala stops here daily. The lane is hardly two feet wide....'

Shiv was afraid, that he still reeked of liquor. The intoxication of the cheap liquor that he had drunk, may wear off in an hour or so, but its smell remains on you till the next day. He was burping all the time. The acrid smell was fouling the atmosphere. The Yuva Sangh is opposed to liquor. He had seen its members quarrelling with drunkards during the Ram Lila. Ram Swaroop, Darshan and Narata – they are all drunkards. They have shared drinks with Shiv many times, but surreptitiously, and, at an appointed time. If a constable on duty is found drunk, they would not hesitate to insult him publicly. Recently, when there was a shootout at the truck union, the police had reached the spot an hour late. There had been uproar for quite some time. The Sangh people looked for the Deputy, who was not to be found. Someone had informed the Sangh, that the Deputy was at the doctor's, drinking. They surrounded the doctor's residence. They declared that they would get both of them examined. The besieged Deputy had to apologize. If this could happen to a Deputy, how can Shiv stand any chance! He has no one to support him.

Had there been someone to back him, he would not have been sent home on a long suspension of six years. He would have returned on the third day, after getting the enquiry filed.

For the first time in his long service of twenty eight years, he had picked up some courage. But, in that very first attempt, he had been nearly caught! People were right when they said that he lacked the guts to extort money. Even though he wanted to, he could never make a big catch. It was not that he never got an opportunity to

make big money. He had had many chances, and he had been posted for many years at the border also, where truckloads of opium passed through. Had he wanted, he could have earned lakhs. He could never let a confiscated truck go. It was different matter that the trucks were never brought to trial. Some or the other higher officer intervened, and after extracting money, let them go.

Once he had caught some rich seths gambling on Diwali day. Old men, in their sixties, were playing cards, to while away time. There were fifty thousand on stake, and more money was tucked under their knees. The frightened seths had even taken off their rings to give to Shiv, and had told him to keep the money also, but to protect their honour. They were all respectable, with children married into good families. If they were to go to the thana even once, the whole prestige would be lost. They offered him the money, and told him that if he wanted more, they would give him the amount he wanted. But Shiv did not have the courage to take even the money that they had given him. The news would have leaked somehow. The constables with him also pleaded with him, let Shiv not take, but at least let them take. Frightened, Shiv did not let them touch a single note. That money was taken by the Deputy. Shiv was reprimanded. Did the seths look like criminals to him? Is it a crime to play cards at home? The law is meant for lower class people, who play in public.

After that, constables avoided going on patrol duty with him. He starves himself, and also keeps them hungry.

Shiv takes only a hundred or two. At the most he asks for a thousand. Half of it he gives to the constables with him. Some he keeps to spend on the government advocate and the judge. If you take a small amount, then no one complains.

Shiv was aware of his own circumstances. He was the son of a shopkeeper. He was neither the son-in-law of a Deputy, nor the nephew of a minister. He could not afford to give up his job half-way. He neither has the money, nor the experience, for business. He must keep on working, under any circumstances. One who is scared while working, cannot earn money.

The other way of earning money in the police is the 'danda-parade'. The police work on the principle that the more you hit a berry tree, it gives you more fruit. The more you beat the suspects, more the money you get. But, Shiv would sweat at the thought of 'danda-parade'. Once he had broken the leg of a baazigar – a conjuror. That day Shiv had vowed never to touch anyone again, once the case was taken care of. It was a good that the conjuror had kept quiet, after getting five hundred from Shiv. Had it been anyone else, he would have got him punished. Many thanedars have been dismissed as well from service. The present S.H.O. had been responsible for a man's death, a year ago. The members of his family had come with guns. But, he had a good reputation and was also had good connections. A minister had brokered peace between the two parties. Even then, he had to pay one lakh as compensation. Shiv did not have such resources. It was, therefore, good to be silent.

Shiv was always given a step motherly treatment because of his inability to make money. Wherever money was involved in an investigation, it was taken away from him and given to someone else. He was always given some unimportant work. The way he was now being told to look for Bounty. Whether there is money or no,

there was at least the satisfaction that there was no danger of any complaint, or enquiry, and no headache.

In all these years of service, there had been only one complaint against him, and that had scared him to death.

In that case also, Shiv would not have taken that much money, had there not been a combination of various factors. First, the police captain was to retire in six months, and he was intent on extracting as much money as he could. He wanted money. You do whatever you have to; that did not bother him. He would also sign blindly wherever you ask him to. He would even let off those who were accused of murder. In the Bhador case, Charan Singh had let off the Sardars for fifty thousand. He had given ten to the higher officers and kept forty for himself. Poppy husk and opium were being openly sold in the market. The munshi had sold off everything in the storehouse. Not only poppy husk, but even empty bottles, sacks, and tins were sold. Munshi had earned thousands in this disposal. Even the constables were free to catch a man, take money and to let him go. Those going out to serve warrants, bargained and came back with money. If the accused pays up, they let him go, or else handcuff him and put him behind bars. It was raining money all over.

It was this freedom which had given Shiv the courage to do what he did.

There was no fear of the captain, and then the accused was a Jain seth. They are loaded with money. The boy's uncle was the owner of many industries. He owned the biggest cloth shop in the town. The nephew was financially weak, and, was a munim in some shop. The uncle was not bothered about spending five or ten thousand. The case involved honour and also a kilo and a half of gold.

The uncle claimed that the disputed gold was his personal property. The jewellery had been given to his mother by her parents on the occasion of her marriage. Before her death, she had given the ornaments to his wife. The nephew asserted that they were his. The ornaments were in his father's possession. At his death, the son was too small, and his mother was already dead. Being the head of the family, the uncle was given the gold, along with the other property. Now, when the time to hand them over to the nephew has come, the uncle was playing dirty.

The relatives were with the uncle. He was a generous man. He was donating ten thousand every year to the gaushala. He would not take what did not belong to others. The boy is not well-off; therefore his greed is making him do this.

The important thing was that the G.A. of the District Commissioner was the uncle's brother-in-law. He had called Shiv to his officer, and had ordered him to help the uncle.

Shiv had taken all the ornaments in his custody, by threat and coercion. He had put them in a box and sealed it up. Had it been some other investigator, he would have either removed a couple of ornaments or put fake ones in place of the real ones. The seals are only to hoodwink the courts. All the documents are with you. You may break the seals and put new ones whenever you want. Signatures have already been obtained on blank sheets. The owner is trapped and cannot say that the signatures are not his. If he denies, he may lose whatever real ornaments may still be there in the

box. Shiv had not ever indulged in any such hanky-panky. He had struck a bargain with the uncle. He had taken twenty thousand, after getting him to swear again and again the he will not tell the G.A..

When the nephew did not budge from his stand after two days at the thana, Shiv accused him of having two kilos of opium, and took three days' police remand; and, did not let him get bail for five days.

By the time he came home after ten days in jail, the tables were turned. The whole Jain community was now in favour of the nephew. They were saying that the uncle had crossed all limits. He had sold his meek nephew to killers. To hell with such money! This was the first time that any boy of the Jain community had gone to the jail.

The uncle also relented. He had lost face after getting his nephew embroiled in the case. When he came home, the uncle announced that he was giving the ornaments to his nephew.

If an agreement was signed, the boy would be freed. Were he to be sentenced, it would be difficult for his children to get married. The community's name would be tarnished. The uncle, who was earlier keen to give bribe to get his nephew jailed, was now eager to get his nephew free.

Shiv did not have a magic and get the nephew his freedom. The boy could be freed only after four hearings, or the other way was that he should plead guilty to the charge. He would then be let off, after furnishing a bond for good behavior.

Shiv was upset at the impatience of the uncle. The G.A. was also sending messages. Shiv was scared that if the uncle were to tell the G.A., Shiv would be in trouble. He could see only one way out of it. The daily-report register and register number 19 (stock register) would have to be manipulated. Two kilos should be altered to hundred grams. The judge would not accept the guilty plea of two kilos of opium, but for two hundred grams he would accept it immediately.

Both, the uncle and the nephew were ready for the confession. The munshi made the necessary changes in the registers after taking five hundred. In the register number nineteen, ink remover did the job.

When they went to the court, the advocate took an obstructive view of the case. Once the nephew pleaded guilty, he would be considered a criminal all his life. He would be marked for life. If he is the G.A.'s relative, why should he be scared? The case has been cooked up, and then, there has been an alteration in the records also. Hold an enquiry and get the case dismissed.

When the advocate's objections were explained to the G.A., with craft and guile, he extracted the whole truth. He was incensed with Shiv. When he had recommended the case to Shiv, why did he take the money? He would get the case cancelled. But a complaint against Shiv must be filed. When the complaint was filed, the ground slipped from under Shiv's feet.

Shiv had given ten out of the twenty to the captain. A couple of thousands had been given to a few subordinates. The Jains wanted the full amount back.

He was not afraid because of the captain.

The preliminary enquiry was conducted by the Deputy (headquarters). A deal was made for five thousand. He took a few statements and submitted a report in favour of Shiv.

The G.A. was furious. He got the report rejected by the divisional commissioner.

The second time, it was conducted by the S.P.(D) came. He was known for his strictness. He had recently joined the service, and did not take any bribes, Shiv ultimately caught hold of his wife's brother, after a great deal of running about. The brother-in-law took ten thousand, but got Shiv a favourable report. Shiv heaved a sigh of relief. At last the matter was closed.

The G.A. again put up a hurdle. He sent the enquiry to the vigilance, and wrote to the captain asking for Shiv's suspension. As long as he was on the job, the enquiry could not be conducted properly.

Shiv had been the reader of the D.I.G. vigilance, at one time. Shiv believed that the report would be in his favour. But, he was wrong, as the daily-report register and the stock register were sent to a document expert. The report had to be against him. The D.I.G. asked for twenty thousand to change the report. Shiv swallowed this poison also. But when fate is against you, everything goes against you. The D.I.G. died before he could alter the report.

Shiv did not have the courage to pursue the case any further. He had spent whatever money he had. He sat at home on half salary. To make ends meet he set up a desk and typewriter in the court. He was good at his job, and knew better than many new lawyers.

The G.A. had managed to get the opium case dismissed and also slapped case for taking a bribe on Shiv.

He had pleaded with the Jains, time and again, asking them to help him. It was after four years of running from pillar to post that the case was, ultimately, dismissed.

Once burnt twice shy, Shiv did not want to go to Lalaji's house, while he was drunk, and get caught in the same problem, as Yuva Sangh members were present there. He still had three years of service, and wanted to go home on a full pension.

He asked the rickshaw puller to stop at a vendor selling pan.

'You have been told a thousand times not to stand at this turning, as judge sahib's car passes this way, but you don't budge from here....' He rapped his cane on the tin-roof of the handcart, as he sat in the rickshaw.

The panwallah was flustered. He tried to collect his things with shaking hands.

'One, two good pans... a packet of cigarettes, and a packet of cardamoms.... For sahib....' The rickshaw puller knew Shiv well, and told the pan seller with a smile, what needed to be done.

When Shiv put his hand in his pocket for money, the pan seller stood with folded hands.

‘All right, keep standing here today, but tomorrow make some other arrangements,’ Shiv told him, and putting one pan in his mouth, and the other in his pocket, he moved ahead.

‘Murghi chor...hen stealer...’ Shiv thought that the rickshaw puller was mumbling this. He tried to catch very carefully what he was humming, and found that he was mistaken. He was humming just some film song.

Who else was there who knew about this? The incident had taken place some five years ago.

A raid on the Sansi basti had been conducted, and Shiv had liked a hen. A deal could not be arranged, and he got someone to steal it. Somehow, the Sansis had come to know about it, and they came to the thana, shouting – ‘murghi chor...murghi chor...’ Since that day, he was teased thus. Perhaps, the Shiv within him had become rebellious after his taking free pans and cigarettes.

Shiv looked around at the hoardings on shops and buildings, to divert his mind.

Tagore Street was the third turn. It seemed as if the whole street was standing on the road.

The constable, who has already reached the spot, has done a lot of work, as the munshi had instructed them. He had told them to get sandbags put around the measuring vessel. Had it been some other place, it would have been difficult to get sandbags. But, one of Lalaji’s admirers, Labha, sold sand, granite and gravel and he was here. He had immediately sent for a cartload of sand bags.

By the time Shiv arrived, they had done everything. People stood on the roofs of their houses. Old and also young, all of them keenly looking at the measure, the schoolbag and the sandbags.

As soon as he reached. Shiv was given a bottle of Limca. Another man brought a chair.

‘No, no, I have not come here to sit.’ Shiv thanked him, took out the pan from his pocket and put it in his mouth.

Shiv did want to sit, but the chair had arms, and he was well aware that he could not fit into that chair. His acquaintances knew of this problem, and he was always given a chair without arms. If no such chair was available, a cot would be brought.

It was better to keep standing instead. Shiv kept standing.

Shiv was himself astonished at his obesity. Meat and liquor had deposited a huge layer of fat on his body.

He had been an agile and slim young man, known for his kabaddi for about fifty miles around his village. It was the kabaddi that had got him into the police. Those days, one did not need certificates, recommendations or bribes to get into the police. One needed to be tall, well-built and strong and to have guts. The deputy had been pleased to see him run on the field. He had stopped him during the play itself, and announced that he was being taken into the police.

A bania's son and police-service? The family members pondered over it for many days. His father could not recollect a single relative who was in the police. What have Brahmins and banias to do with the police? One has to use force and violence in the police. Their boy is afraid of cows, how will he fire bullets? No one will give him their daughter in marriage. The police personnel are known to use their hands on their women folk also. If he starts beating his wife, what will happen?

The whole village was congratulating him. His father was feeling embarrassed. It was the nambardar who had persuaded his father to agree. If a Jat boy is selected for the police, they celebrate for a month. Relatives come to congratulate. If even one person in the family is in the police, then the whole family is happy. Your enemies are scared.

His father had also benefitted from his being in the police. Earlier, he had been a 'karaar' – a shopkeeper, for all and sundry. It was difficult for the women in the family to go out. Anyone and everyone would tease them. When he walked through the village, in his uniform, for the first time, even a goon, like Mundar, started addressing his father – 'Lalaji'; and all those who owed him money, paid up. Those who considered his father a weak man, all paid up their credits, and that too with interest. People no longer threatened those who were sent to collect money. The owners of the neighbouring shops, who had earlier tried to entice his customers, became friendlier. The whole atmosphere changed. His father earned plenty of money.

They were well established in the village, and today his brothers are rich men. After making good money in the village, they moved to the town, and opened a cloth shop. Once the shop was a success, a cotton factory was set up. When paddy agriculture started in the area, they set up threshers. Though, they did not think highly of Shiv, but their prosperity was all due to Shiv.

What, if his brothers are rich? He too did not want for anything. All people worry about their children, particularly, those in the police. There is no constraint on their children; for the teachers are afraid of a father who is a cop. The neighbours dare not complain even if they beat up their children. No one asks them for money, whether they go to the cinema or a hotel. There were so many instances of the children of policemen getting thus spoilt. The money Santa Singh had earned, perhaps, no one had earned. He goes to his village every month, with a briefcase full of notes. He owns many shops, many farms which bring him lakhs in rent. But all his children are out of his control. The elder one starts drinking at sunrise, and the younger one is a gambler. Every other day they go away from home. And then, Santa Singh begs them to return.

Bhan Singh had also earned a great deal. But, like the father, the sons are also womanizers. They have been beaten up by the police. The girls are even more wayward. One has even eloped with a teacher.

All three of Shiv's children are good. One is a doctor, the second one is an overseer, and the girl is a lecturer. She is married to a tax inspector. He has bought a car. What more does Shiv need? There are only the two of them – he and his wife, at home. His salary is sufficed. Though he does not want, even then, he earns a few

thousands additionally. The constable made a sign to the person standing near by. The man brought a cot for Shiv to sit on. And, also two pillows.

Shiv was not very comfortable on the cot. He turned on different sides to make himself comfortable.

He had drunk almost a jug full of water. But, he still felt thirsty. His acidity was also increasing. He felt nauseous and wanted to throw up. Had he been elsewhere, he would have taken some more liquor as remedy to this. But here that was not possible.

Who knows when will the bomb disposal squad reach? Shiv could not keep waiting for it. The Yuva Sangh people were abusing the sentry, and also the munshi. Had they acted in time, this would not have happened. The workers were ready with their sticks. Shiv had tried to pacify them by saying that he was a Hindu brother.

They were now upset about the bomb squad. It did not seem to be coming. If something untoward happens, then it would be irrelevant whether the bomb disposal comes or not. They have also telephoned to Sangrur, and talked to the captain a few times.

‘You must look to see if the sandbags have been placed properly’, Ram Swaroop was irritated at the sight of Shiv lying on the cot. He tried to make him do something.

‘Yes, yes, let’s go...’ Shiv also realized that he was in the wrong. It was his duty to inspect the spot at his arrival; to look at the measuring vessel and the school bag. On the other hand, he was just lying on the cot.

The measuring vessel was small. It was completely hidden under the schoolbag. One could see the garters of the shorts peeping from under the bag on one side. If the garters were there, then the shorts were bound to be there. The shirt also may be there. This had been sent as a proof of Bunty being in their custody. There does not seem to be any sense in the idea that a bomb may be there. It cannot also be a corpse. Had a body been there, there would have been blood all around; insects and flies too would be there.

Shiv still felt befuddled. The munshi also had not acted wisely. He had summoned the bomb squad without proper enquiry. Shiv had made the same mistake. He had spent an hour on mere talk. There was nothing under the measuring vessel. At the best, there may be a letter.

He sent for a long pole. After hammering a nail in on one side of the pole, he went up to the roof of the house.

Carefully, he hitched the nail on the pole to the clip on the strap of the bag, and pulled up the satchel.

With his heart throbbing, he lowered the pole again. He hitched the nail on to the garter. Once the garters were raised slightly, the measure fell on one side. Shiv pulled up the shorts. The shirt dropped on one side.

Shiv was proud of his success, he looked at the Sangh workers with a look of victory in his eyes. Happiness peeped from their eyes. The sandbags were removed. The Sangh members wanted to keep the schoolbag and the clothes. But, Shiv was helpless. He had to take all these things to the police station as evidence. They could also give some leads against the culprits. There could be fingerprints on them. Someone may recognize the vessel and give some clue about the culprit.

There was a letter in the pocket of the shorts, which Ram Swaroop read out. All that had been said earlier was repeated. They were aware of the delay in the receipt of the first letter. And, that was why they were giving another opportunity. The place and the time was the one that had been given earlier. They were told not to inform the police. This was their last chance.

The letter had fallen into the hands of the police! The Sangh was dejected at losing this opportunity also.

Shiv was happy. There was no news about the bomb squad, and when they come, they would try to upstage things!

Shiv was now free. He would go back to his quarter, have a few drinks, and try to cure his indigestion.

V

Finally, the opportunity that Manbir Singh Bhullar, the city in charge, had been waiting for long did come his way.

Ever since the worst thanedar of his batch had been made a deputy, he was impatient to tackle the terrorists. A couple of times he had also pleaded with his officers for a posting to a district on the border. The chief minister was not ready to transfer Manbir. He trusted Bhullar like a son. Any work, good or bad, the chief minister would straight away tell Manbir. He did not have to reveal anything to any higher officer. He knew that Manbir wanted to jump into fire for the sake of promotion; he must have patience. As soon as the opportunity comes up, he will see to it that Manbir gets another star on his shoulder.

The very thought of Ninder would upset Manbir, The thin wretch could not even climb the rope during their training; he had no sense or physique. It seemed as if he had given a huge bribe to be recruited.

First, he was posted to the border districts, where he had amassed wealth. Then, twice he had eliminated the extremists and earned two promotions. Now, he is enjoying himself as a Deputy. Last time, when Manbir had met him, he did not even recognize him. That day, Manbir had vowed that he would not rest till he himself becomes a Deputy, even if he has to kill extremists to earn that promotion.

It was not Ninder alone, there were many like him in the border areas, who were now inspectors. In another four-five years, they will become Deputies. And here

is Manbir, who has not yet been confirmed even as a sub inspector. If he continues in this district, forget about a Deputy, he would not even become even an inspector.

Ever since Shiv Prasad told him that Bunty was kidnapped by the extremists, Manbir started feeling that his prayers have been granted. Without giving much thought to it, he had taken over the investigation, and had begun going over the various aspects of the case.

The border districts were affected by extremism. This district was yet free of that disease. This did not appear to be the work of the terrorists. They could get plenty of money from the banks. It appeared to be the work of some criminal gang. Everyone had a printed letter pad. And they sent out letters to whomsoever they wanted. If they are able to extract money, it's well and good, or else, they keep quiet. If Manbir were to put a little pressure, he was sure to get some clue – And once he finds Bunty, then his promotion would follow.

As it is, the chief minister is happy with him. He acknowledges him amongst hundred others, and asks about his welfare. He would not say no to him.

Manbir had also worked for the Sardar with all his heart and soul. He had staked everything all, and steered the Sardar's rocking boat to success.

There was a time, during the elections, when there was no one willing to hoist his flag. Not a single election meeting could be arranged by his workers, despite all efforts. His opponents were holding meeting all over the town. The whole town was annoyed with him that once the Sardar wins the election he goes away to Chandigarh, He becomes a minister, but when you go to him for any work, he either argues like a lawyer or finds numerous excuses to avoid doing anything. This time, they are going to elect a candidate, who would always be with them. Who would stand with them through thick and thin. Babuji was such a man. He rushes to the police station or the court if you request him just once. What do people have to do with the leadership of the Sardar?

Bharatiya Janta Party was opposing the Akali Dal at the state level. Earlier, the election work in the town was being looked after by Bharatiya Janta Party. It was impossible for the Akali candidate to win without the votes from town. And the whole town was opposed to the chief minister.

Someone advised the Sardar that Manbir could steer him to success. He could bring people like Ram Lal, the pradhan of the Vyopar Mandal, and Master to Sardar's side. He had good social relations with both of them. Both had directly joined the Bharatiya Janta Party, but do not belong to the Jan Sangh cadre. They were, also, not idealistic. The party people were not very happy with them. But people follow them. Once they come over to the Sardar's camp, his victory may become easier.

Master, before his election as the secretary, was a school master. Finding it difficult to meet both ends, he had started a grocery shop. His partner was an active member of the R.S.S. On the instruction from the Sangh, he had joined the Bharatiya Janta Party. And to keep his own group in dominance, he had also made Master a member of the Party. The Party had just been formed. There was always a long queue of people with various requests. A big crowd would gather at Master's shop. He was

good at paper work. He had soon risen to become the secretary of the party. He got to know the officers. He had handled the taking and giving of money with discretion. Both, the officers as well as the people respected him. It was better to give money to get something done rather than run after workers. Master had, in the process, acquired many quotas, taken many loans, and had set up some small factories. The other workers did not like Master's growing wealth; there had been many allegations against him. Resolutions had been passed against him. He had also been suspended, once. But, when the elections had drawn near, he had been reinstated. Master had come back to the party, but was on the lookout for ways and means to jump over to another party.

The same was true of Pradhan. He had been wearing Khadi since his childhood. The town had numerous Congress men. He could not gain any recognition because of the presence of senior freedom fighters. But, he was an obstinate man. Whenever a minister was visiting the town, he would go to the meeting, whether he was invited or not, and seat himself on the dais. Division of the Congress presented an opportunity to him. He became the treasurer of one group. When emergency was imposed, he earned a lot of money. He got agencies for tractors and fertilizers. And, he became powerful because of his wealth.

When the Congress was swept away from the town, he threw off his garb of khadi. He joined the Janta Party through Brish Bhan. He could not, however, get a foothold in the party, and remained on the fringe.

When the Janta Party split, he stayed on in the Bharatiya Janta Party. He was waiting for the 'come home' message from the Congress. But, the Congressmen were already feeling that there were too few chairs to go around, and they were not interested in recalling a turncoat. He sent his men a couple of times, but to no success.

It was his luck that the president of the Bharatiya Janta Party died in an accident. He was the only one in the party capable of cornering Ramlal. He was an experienced freedom fighter, had connections at the centre. The rest were all young and raw. They were fond of wine and money. The former president had not let any senior member survive in the party; whosoever had tried to stand up to Ramlal had been ousted.

When the Pradhan died, many eyed the president's post. Pradhan may not have gone to jail, but he was adept at getting work done. The bureaucrats listened to him. He had a car, was wealthy, and at times, he did not hesitate to spend. The other workers did not even have the fare for Chandigarh. All the members were keen on making him the president, but the high command refused. It wanted a man from the cadre to become the president. Such a person may be young or old; that was not important. A person from the cadres was disciplined, and also goes according to the rules of the party. Ram Lal failed to get the presidency of the party, but he got the presidency of the Vyopar Mandal. Since then, he has been occupying that chair.

Last time, when Darbara Singh's ministry had been formed, he had been indifferent to the party. No one bothered about it. There were only a handful of members, from the beginning of the year to the end, no meetings were held. He did not take up the membership of the Congress, but he began sending feelers. The

Bharatiya Janta Party was annoyed with him on that score. He was seldom invited to participate in discussions on important matters. The party had pilloried him for asking a worker to pay the E.T.O..

In these circumstances, it was not difficult to get Master and Ram Lal on one side.

But, this could be managed only by Manbir.

The Sardar sent for Manbir and talked to him personally. Pleaded with him and assured him of a lifelong gratitude.

Manbir was not a stupid thanedar. He was an M.A. in Political Science, and he fully understood the political ups and down. He was convinced that the Sardar had been chosen to be the next chief minister. Once Manbir got into his good books, it would be a winning game for him. Keeping this in mind, Manbir exerted all pressure on these two.

It was godsend for the two of them! The Sardar was sending for them, and they came with alacrity. They reassured him that they would pressurize the Party to extend full cooperation to Sardar. In case this could not be managed, they will first constitute a citizens' council with all their men, and then, announce their support for the Sardar.

And, it happened exactly this way. The Council was set up with great fanfare. An office was set up in the centre of the bazaar. The Sardar immediately filled the office with flags, posters and banners.

Within two days, things took a different turn in the town. Flags were put up all over, and meetings were held in galis and mohallas. The Sardar was garlanded at each home. The neglected workers of the Bharatiya Janta Party also came to accept the Sardar. Their opposition to him stopped. And, two days before the elections, they left for other areas.

Besides all this political manoeuvring, Manbir, had also undertaken various other jobs for the Sardar: he gave him fifty thousand rupees in cash, arranged five cars for him, and also the petrol for them.

Whatever work the Sardar phoned him for, Manbir immediately did it. On the Election Day itself, the speculators had a field day. Again and again, and in his presence, he saw to it that the betting went on. The liquor contractors were given a free hand, and liquor flowed like water. Smugglers had been given a green signal. They had procured all the opium from Rajasthan. Manbir had imposed only one condition on all of them, that they all stoutly support the Sardar.

Manbir was extremely careful on voting day, If Sardar's position seemed shaky on some booth, Manbir put his special men on duty. Whenever the polling agent signalled, Manbir himself escorted bogus voters to that booth. If bogus votes were being cast for the candidates opposing Sardar, he would himself drive them away. He saw to it that thousands of bogus votes were cast.

Complaints were made against Manbir, both telephonically, as also by telegrams. Slogans were also raised at a few places. This worked in his favour. The

officers also came to know that Manbir was Sardar's man. Sardar also realized that Manbir had come all out for him.

Then, why shouldn't he take the full due of the services he had rendered by finding Bunty and his kidnappers?

First, he summoned all the owners of the printing presses of the town, their employees, sellers of utensils, the school staff and also the rickshaw pullers for making enquiries.

The letter pad may have been printed here at some local press. The press owner may have done it under threats. Any worker of a press may as well harbour some sympathy for a group. He may have done it in a clandestine manner!

The measuring vessel was brand new. It must have been bought recently. Maybe, some shopkeeper could identify the buyer.

Any teacher may recall Bunty talking to a stranger, going away with someone.

The rickshaw and buggy pullers are familiar with the regular vendors. Maybe, some new vendor had come that day? Someone may have seen Bunty standing at some hawker's?

After all, Bunty was not a needle that someone pocketed him and walked away with him. The police, also, has no magic wand, that merely by waving it, a criminal may be apprehended. One has to look for clues. And these were the most likely people to help him in looking for leads.

The buggy pullers had already understood his intentions. Three or four of them were Bihari bhaiyas. Abandoning all that they owned here, they caught the first available train to their villages. One was the son of a juggler, and there were many to support him. He had been regularly taking children to school for the last eight years. There had been no complaint against him ever. The S.D.M. had recommended him personally.

The school staff had a large number of females. The town people did not like their being called to the police station. As if the thana was a brothel! And they would be polluted the moment they would step into it!

With great difficulty one teacher and one peon could be summoned to the police station. The teacher fainted the moment she came in. The peon was highly agitated. He was incoherent in his answers. When Bhullar threatened him, he pissed in his pants.

The rest of the staff went to Lalaji's residence. They were willing to do anything for Bunty's sake, but did not want to go to the police station. Lalaji also supported them. There was no need to be harsh with the staff. The investigation should be conducted properly.

Manbir had yet not been able to sort out this problem, when Master and Pradhan started ringing him up.

There was no hope from the school people. He gave orders to question the printers and the utensil sellers. He did not trust the constables. They would let anyone off, even if offered a ten rupee note. He sent the hawaldars.

They could also catch only two. One, from his home and the other from the press. The rest fled off as soon as they got the wind of it.

The absconders reached Master and Pradhan. The printers were sitting at Pradhan's and the utensil sellers were at Master's shop. They believed that they would be left off after some bribes are exchanged.

Manbir did not agree to that. He had earned enough money. Fifteen years had passed since he had got into the police force. God had been kind to him, and he had never seen hard days. He had had good postings. Reason? His trainer had taught him a lesson. Divide all that you get in bribes – he always shared his earnings, and both his officers and subordinates, received their shares.

From the constable to the Deputy, all gave him the respect that was due to him. He was free to walk into the D.I.G.'s bedroom itself. The D.I.G.'s wife was fond of foreign saris. Every few months he presented a suitcase full of foreign saris to her. She could get things done for him faster than the officer himself. The D.I.G. couldn't refuse him anything that was endorsed by his wife.

The captain treated him like a younger brother. Before attending to a newly appointed officer, Manbir took the trouble to secure a list of his likes and interests. Then he proceeded in accordance with that. First, Sharma had come, and Manbir had got a foreign revolver for him in the first week of his posting. When Duggal came, he found out that he was getting a bungalow built in Chandigarh. He kept up a regular supply of bricks, cement and iron to Chandigarh. As long as he stayed, he heaped rewards on Manbir. Kainth came and Manbir presented the most beautiful women of the town to him. Mad after women, Kainth would drop in the rest house every third day! Manbir could get him to sanction whatever he wanted. Gupta wanted money. Manbir put three or four smugglers on to him. That kept both, the sahib and the smugglers, happy.

Then, who was there to obstruct Manbir's promotion? Once, the opportunity for promotion came up, the whole system would swing the way he wanted.

Manbir only needed to find Bunty. He was not concerned about the kidnapers. If the real kidnapers were not found how would that matter? He could always catch a few others! As if he had not killed people earlier at the behest of officers! If he were to kill a few for his own sake, then the sky would not fall!

Manbir was determined to get a promotion! What status did a mere sub inspector have? You were subordinate to everyone! Once, he were to become a Deputy, he would lord it over all, like an officer! He would have six stations under him! The monthly intake would be real big!

That was why he was saying 'no' to both these men. Manbir had to make these enquiries! No one would speak the truth without being thrashed. Manbir would, however, make one concession at their request. If someone were to own up to this crime, he could let the others go. He would neither touch the person, not disclose his

name to anyone. But, he had to solve Bunty's case. He was not going to spoil his chance for the sake of money.

He was not a beggar's son that he should hanker after money! His father owned fifty acres of land even before he had joined the police service. And an equal measure of land has been acquired after his joining. His two brothers were engineers, away in Canada. His only sister was married and lived in England. His brothers wanted him to come over to Canada, but Babu doesn't want this. Someone should be here to look after the lands here. Manbir may not be as good as his brothers in studies. He could complete only his M.A. But, he was fortunate, that at that time, police jobs were advertised. He had paid fifty thousand and was selected. Now, he was no lesser than his brothers. The income from the lands was not inadequate and extra earnings as a thanedar! There was no need to be avaricious.

As it is, Lalaji is a good man. Bunty must be found – It is Manbir's moral duty. Then, Yuva Sangh also has to be reckoned with. They start agitating on small issues and this is something which was of serious concern to them. Every member of the Sangh was willing to stake his life for Lalaji. Manbir still remembered when the wife of one of their active worker's had died of burns. The sons of Ramu, the Bootanwala, were proud of their newly acquired wealth. Barely six months had elapsed since the son's marriage, when bickering between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law started. Ramlal's favourite son, Sohan, was known as obedient to his mother's wishes. On Karva Chauth day, after a session of drinking, he went to his in-laws. His wife was fasting. But he insisted that she must immediately come home with him. There was an angry quarrel between the two. She came back with him, but sprinkled kerosene on herself and set herself alight. . Ramu was confident that the police and the judiciary would listen to him. No one from his family would be harmed. He had owned a shoe shop some thirty years back. These days he was a rising businessman of the town. He had agencies ranging from gas to electronic goods. He was the owner of five trucks. He was also very close to Jagga, the Pradhan of truck union. A jeep load of bad characters was always parked outside his door. After talking to the S.H.O., he took his daughter-in-law's body to the cremation ghat, even before the arrival of her parents.

When one of the workers of Sangh heard of this, he called an urgent meeting. This was unjust and a big blow. Ramu pleaded. Sohan was also a member of the Sangh. But no one heeded his pleas and arguments. The cremation was halted. The girl's parents arrived, and a postmortem was conducted. Call for a strike call was given and it continued till Ramu's entire family was arrested.

If anyone was to hear of this, then, along with Manbir, even Master and Pradhan would be in trouble. He did not know why they failed to comprehend this.

Pradhan was, time and again, reminding him of the 'Bal Katti' Case. This was when Manbir had just been transferred here. He had cast his eyes on a girl, famous as 'Bal katti' or one with shorn hair. She could be seen roaming all over the town the whole day long. Slim, with a red Japanese parasol in her hand, dressed in a Benarasi sari, tied well below the navel. Put on heavy makeup; wore sandals with high heels. Once, even Manbir had been tempted! She looked like an apsara – If he could present her to an officer, then, it would be excellent!

After making enquiries, he had learnt that she was born and brought up in Dehra Dun, had been educated in good schools. Her father was a rich man who worked as a contractor in Mumbai. 'Bal Katti's mother was his mistress, whom he had kept in Dehra Dun for his summer holidays. By mistake the girl was been married off to a village boy who was working in a cloth shop. She did not like the boy or his job. He also did not like her habits of sleeping late, roaming about all over the town scantily dressed, watching movies, and reading novels. From constant quarrelling over petty things, matters ultimately culminated into divorce.

The proud girl, in order to teach her in-laws a lesson, camped in the town itself. They didn't like her roaming on the streets. That is why they were making various allegations against her.

To satisfy himself, Manbir asked a couple of men to follow her. When they came back after being soundly thrashed, Manbir decided to close this chapter.

God bless the advocate! He was a neighbor of Bal Katti. He had alleged that she was a prostitute. She behaved like a hooligan in her mohalla. Half of the mohalla, however, supported the girl. The advocate had not been able to have his way with her, and that was why he was falsely accusing her. But he was not the one to lose heart. People realized the truth of his allegations, when he caught the manager of Food Corporation of India with her, red handed.

The manager was the younger brother of the superintendent of police (vigilance). The police had to let him go, but they were able to apprehend 'Bal Katti'. The list of her paramours that she gave to the police was astonishing. Doctors, advocates and judges; even the present S.D.M. figured therein. Industrialists and politicians had to be there.

Manbir first called Lala Ram, the soap seller, when 'Bal Katti' rattled of a list of his misdeeds, Kalu Ram then almost collapsed. He quickly produced twenty thousand.

Manbir spread a rumour through his trusted men. The lovers became anxious. Some of them ran to the S.D.M., others to the judge. First, the officers tried to throw their weight, and alleged that the police was trying to entrap a respectable girl.

When Manbir offered to send tapes for them to listen to, they were upset. The S.D.M. himself came to the police station, the judge sent the public prosecutor. The matter must be closed. The S.D.M. promised to close all the files of ongoing enquiries against Manbir, and the judge promised to dismiss the petitions pending against him. Officers are officers! The police had to work with them. Manbir stopped the investigation.

He had to deal often with Pradhan during those days. He had taken on the task of collecting money from the various lovers of Bal Katti. He knew very well how much to take from the Saraf, and how much from Atma of Thuliwal, and how much from Bhan of the cinema.

Bal Katti spent three days in police custody. Manbir made a total of two and a half lakhs. Pradhan took about fifty-sixty thousand. A year had passed since then, but nobody had raised the slightest sound.

Pradhan was a man who could be trusted. Manbir had tested him many times. On the occasion of every festival, he brought the exact amount fixed. It is forbidden to sell crackers on Diwali. He brought five thousand quietly. The shopkeepers were free to sell crackers, and the police looked the other way.

Master was also a good man. He showed his caliber, when Kala was caught by the police. Kala was a clever thief, who was committing thefts all over, but always eluded the police. It was Manbir's good luck that he was able to catch him.

The police cannot earn from a thief! A thief does not steal to hoard things. Those who wanted to buy are faster than even the thieves. They run after the thieves.

It is from these shopkeepers who buy from the thieves, that the police earns. It can confiscate the goods and also extract money from them to let them go free. Kala has been a prolific thief. Fans, radios, televisions, cameras, cloth and watches! There was no shopkeeper in town who had not bought from him. Whichever shop Kala would stop at, the shopkeeper would shiver! Kala would refer to something he had sold to him years back. The shopkeeper may remember or not, but he would acquiesce out of sheer fear of police. That time, Master had done a good job of collecting money from the shopkeepers.

Tempted by good money and the pressure of his friends, Manbir agreed to let the printers and the utensil merchants go. He would look for clues about Bunty elsewhere. But he didn't want to let the money go that was coming on its own accord.

Hardly had two hours passed after the settlement of the matter, that a rumour started doing the round in the market. Manbir's friends warned him. It would be good if the money were returned. A few of the people involved were financially weak. Pradhan had extracted too much money.

Manbir phoned Master. First, he was told that he is not at home. The second time he was told that someone had taken him to Chandigarh. He was out for three days.

There was a call from the C.I.D. There is a move afoot to go on strike.

Manbir was now upset and he called Pradhan. He was told that Pradhan was out on some assignment of Manbir's.

Manbir was now regretting his decision, and was afraid that this may cost him dear. All this, instead of helping in his promotion, may lead to his being reverted! If there are meeting against him, what would the chief minister think of him? The situation with Bal Katti and that with the thefts was different, At that time, those who were paying were criminals in the eyes of law. These people were innocent. Why would they pay? Pradhan was a hard task master! He must have extracted a heavy fee. That is why the ones having to foot the bill were protesting.

Manbir did not have much control over the Yuva Sangh. The Sangh only needed a pretext to speak against the police. Manbir had no one who could silence them. Manbir was known as the chief ministers's man. But no creature of the chief minister could help Manbir.

Manbir sent a vehicle to fetch Darwesh. He refused. Police was busy making money. For the last three days, Darwesh had been shouting that a peon of the school was absconding since that day itself! He had been seen giving kulfi to Bunty on that day. If the police could not take the trouble of calling the peon's wife to the police station at Darwesh's suggestion, why should he help the police?

Manbir talked to Nagpal on the phone. He also objected to coming to the station. The matter was becoming serious. If he favoured the police openly, he may also earn a bad name. All those people, who had been forced to pay Manbir at some time or the other, had now come together against him. And, anyone appearing to be on the side of the police would be a tempting target for them.

There was only one way: Nagpal should be arrested and brought to the police station. They should go to the shop, say a few unpleasant things, push him into the jeep and take him away.

When Nagpal was brought to the station in this manner, all of them were upset.

Manbir was very angry. The same bastards who had been groveling at his feet to be let off in Bal Katti's case, were now becoming bold enough to speak against him!

The leader of this group was Prem, the bamboo merchant. The favoured lover of Bal Katti! He says that this thanedar is accustomed of looting banyas! He invents some false story or the other, and snatches money by the bushel! This thanedar had given a free hand to thieves and dacoits, but harasses the respectable!

Sita Saraf was hand in glove with him. He was the one who buys most of the stolen goods. These days his business was slack. Therefore, out of irritation he says that Manbir supports the Sikhs. He troubles the Hindus because he is Sardar's man! There should be a Hindu thanedar in the town.

Manbir had not been able to understand what grudge did Shinde, the dealer of guns had. He had a little political standing. Whichever candidate appeared to be stronger during elections, he donated money to his campaign and supported him; took care to see that he figured in some photographs with him, and then, nothing! He had never come to the police station, and his arms and ammunition business was now closed. He must be waiting to commit some crime or the other. He may be thinking that the police will keep quiet this time. Or he may be seeking some quota from the chief minister. If he was active in politics, only then would be able to catch the minister's eye.

Nagpal's opinion was that Darwesh should be controlled as soon as possible. He was collecting affidavits from the people. He would go to the press, and also demand an enquiry.

The press people were busy printing posters. Posters were no less dangerous. Every poster carried a new story. Some carried Bal Katti's story, and some others the story of thefts. Even the chief minister had been dragged in. If they are put up on the walls of the town, even the chief minister may turn against him. Politicians have no loyalty. They are different when they need you to do something for them, and totally

different when they have to do something for you! Like the police, they are nobody's friends!

Manbir was irritated with both Master and Pradhan. One had gone to Chandigarh, the other had disappeared! None had given him any money! And, not even told him who had given how much. Without them, even the money could not be returned.

When Manbir talked to Pradhan, he was evasive. Neither was he willing to come to the thana, nor did he want Manbir to come to his house. He said that this would give him a bad name. He advised Manbir to keep quiet. Only a couple of people were bad. Pradhan would take care of everything. What was Manbir worried about? He was here today; tomorrow he would go to another place! Pradhan belonged here and would always stay in this town. Once he got a bad name, he would lose his leadership!

If someone were to ask Pradhan – is getting a job an easy task? How can Manbir keep quiet?

If the whole issue was given the Hindu-versus-Sikh colour by the town people, then there could be some defence for Manbir. He had friendly relations with the jathedars. They would, at once, blow up this issue. To strengthen his own position, Manbir sent for his trusted constables, and gave them instructions which village they should go to, to meet which jathedar. What were they to say? Let them be prepared. A small procession may be necessary at any point of time.

The sentry informed him that half of the bazaar had closed down. The Sangh people were forcing the shopkeepers to shut the shop, and were coming towards the thana from the station! There were various groups. Posters were also being put up.

Manbir dialled the number of Pradhan for the last time. He pleaded with him to return the money anyhow, or else to send the money over to Manbir. He would himself make arrangements to return the money.

Pradhan was not committing any thing. If the money was to be returned now, it would act as oil on fire. He was repeating the same thing again and again. Manbir should not bother. Pradhan would manage everything. When would he do that? When Manbir is suspended?

'Pradhan, this is not good... you have got me entangled and are not giving me a straight answer... I am also the thanedar... if need be I can arrest you for taking bribes in my name...!' Manbir said whatever came to him in that agitated state of mind.

'I have seen twenty thanedars like you... if it is so; let's see... you first protect yourself!' Pradhan's voice was also equally harsh.

The slogans were getting louder. The crowd was advancing towards the police station.

'Boys, load your guns.. take up your positions.. if anyone tries to create trouble, shoot without hesitation... I will take care of it.'

Manbir also loaded his own revolver. Mad with fury, he waited for the bad time looming ahead.

VI

The Deputy was giving Manbir full support. He was the only thanedar out of six, who visited the Deputy's bungalow, morning and evening, to pay his respects, and ask him for orders. Even otherwise, he never said anything against the Deputy; there were others, from constables to inspectors, who shivered in his presence, but thoroughly abused him behind his back. Manbir did not hide anything from the Deputy. He would tell him everything. How much he has taken, from whom, - he would tell him everything openly.

The Deputy was also supporting him for the fact that he was a courageous officer. What is the worth of a thanedar, if people do not agitate against him, if they do not go on hartals against him, or hold public meeting in protest? This is the mark of an efficient and hardworking officer. If a police officer goes into hiding in a hole like a rat, who would oppose him? He has been a Deputy himself for ten years, but the investigations that had been initiated against him, when he was a thanedar, are still going on.

If the Lala is receiving threatening letters every second or third day, how what can Manbir, or the police, help it? The conditions are such, everyone is scared. The culprit may be the protégé of some important person, yet, out of fear, he might drop a hint. What the people were demanding was wrong. Instead of helping in the investigations, they have tied the police up in meetings and processions.

The morale of the police is already low. He does not want to give it another blow, by reporting against an officer like Manbir.

But, when, stories of Manbir's doing were flashed in the headlines by the press, the Deputy felt dejected. The scandal of 'balkatti'. The scandals about the thieves and the one about Diwali. The Deputy could not believe all this. Had Manbir earned all this money, sometime or the other, the Deputy would have come to know of it from some source. He felt that the journalists were inventing these stories so that Manbir would be transferred.

The Deputy was proud of his informers. Surely, they were not so inefficient, that they were not able to sniff out the misdeeds of the seths for years. It is because of his ability to train informers, that he is considered one of the leading Deputies of Punjab.

He did not trust the C.I.D., from the first day. They destroy the evidence after taking money. They file reports on basis of hearsay, and send them on to the senior officers. The first thing they do, on being posted to a new place, is to train a batch of reliable informers.

He has his own methods of training good informers. It is his experience that people are frightened of coming to the police station, because of the harassment by the

police. The informer may have come to the police station at great risk to himself, but the thanedar orders lassi, tea and sweets even before hearing what he has come to tell. The thanedar may reveal the name of the informer, after taking money, to the other party. This creates enmity. No one is mad enough to come to the thana, and earn enmity with others, and get flayed!

The Deputy's attitude is exactly opposite of this. There are chairs and benches laid out for the supplicants. As they arrive, water is served, and, if they have to wait for some time, even tea, and biscuits, may be made available. If it is meal time, then even food can be served. No employee dare send for a cup of tea. Other Deputies make fun of him. They laugh at the 'langar'- the open kitchen that he runs. He laughs at those foolish Deputies. If they had some knowledge of human psychology, they too would have started their own langars. The money for this doesn't come out of your own salary. If one drinks a cup of tea once, the next time he comes, he brings a can full of milk along. If someone eats a meal, he sends a sackful of wheat. Many a times, the Deputy has to organize an akhand path, so that the surplus rations may be consumed. Those who are invited by the Deputy, feel elated. The next time they come, they spill the beans: Which smuggler will get which truck of opium on which day; whose son is getting married when; which day the still will be fired for the production of illicit liquor; which hawaldar has spent the night at whose place; which land is under dispute; which party is getting ready for a showdown...

He was popular among his officers because of his network of informers, and, his subordinates were impressed by him. If anyone disobeyed his orders even slightly, he would immediately insult him at a meeting, where he would expose all that he knew about him, like, how much had he taken...! Obviously, that man would fall at his feet, and beg forgiveness. If anyone tried to bluff it off, then he would complain against him to the superior officers, and get him set right. This is the advantage of being friendly with your officers.

He was unhappy that he had not come to know about Manbir's doings! How could have all this escaped his informers?

The news had put even the director general in a tizzy. Every other day, he was making statements about dismissing corrupt officials. The journalists asked him about Manbir, at every press conference. He had no answer to give. The director-general was scared, as this was the chief minister's constituency. No one knew why the chief minister was still silent. A hartal was going on in the town for many days. Some of their leaders had also been arrested. A couple of times, the police had to resort to the lathi-charge as well. But no investigation had yet been started into the charges made against the thanedar. Even the small request of his transfer was not being accepted by the department. If Manbir is right and blameless, then the department should investigate. The D.G. was asking the Deputy for a report. He wanted to act against Manbir on the basis of that report.

The Deputy did not believe the reports of the journalists, but, when Manbir himself admitted it, and begged the Deputy for his help, there was no reason not to believe.

Though, he now wanted to teach Manbir such a lesson that in future, he should never dare to fool his superiors, but keeping in mind Manbir's relations with the Chief Minister, he did not write adverse comments. Who knows, Manbir may get the minister to phone, and get the whole matter hushed up. He should only write what would be acceptable to all.

The Deputy only recommended Manbir's transfer. That also, to some other thana. No one doubts his courage. The Deputy needed thanedars like him to solve such tangled problems.

Half of the Deputy's request had been accepted. Manbir was transferred, but to the police lines. He escaped any other action.

Manbir's scandals had created a worry for the Deputy, Naunihal Singh. He found it difficult to digest the fact that Manbir had gone even further than him! In his service of twenty five years, this was the first time that he had not been able to find out about the crimes in the area under him.

What has happened to his informers? Why are they silent in Bunty's case?

He had been trying for a week to trace Bunty's whereabouts. He wanted to maintain his reputation as one who exposed big conspiracies. But, so far, he had been unable to catch hold of even one clue to unravel this terrible and complicated problem.

A week had passed, but the investigation had made no headway. The news items being published in the newspapers had made it even more serious. The Chief Minister could demand a report any time. And, that was why the Deputy had been ordered to conduct the investigations himself, and to report to the Director-General about the case, from time to time. The Director-General did not want to be humiliated in the presence of Chief Minister. He wanted to have all the facts of the case on his fingertips.

The Deputy was happy and at the same time sad that he had been given the task of investigation. He was sad because, there was no indication of recovering Bunty; he was happy because one can do what one wants in a 'blind case'. In such delicate affairs, even if someone, close to the Chief Minister, could be rebuked without any consideration.

The first thing that the Deputy did, after taking charge of the case, was to make a list of all these people whom he despised, and whom he wanted to be arrested the very first night.

He was greatly annoyed with the Khudda-nambardar. He thought himself to be Haji Mastan. Neither had he given up selling poppy seeds, nor had he come to any agreement with the Deputy. Wherever the Deputy had been posted, he had carried on with his poppy-trade as he wanted. He let the small smugglers go, and shaken hands with the big ones. It was the smugglers' work to bring the goods from outside. Selling it was the Deputy's work. Everyone's income went up. Firstly, bringing in the goods was not very troublesome. He would send two constables with the man bringing in the goods. The vehicle would easily pass through all barriers. Secondly, they sold the goods, at their own rates, in their areas. No one else dare sell even ten grams. No

addict dared to buy it elsewhere. Whosoever dared, the Deputy slapped a legal case on him. Then, there was no need to give the 'monthly' to the police.

The nambardar had not fallen in line. His men had been caught a couple of times, and he had been rebuked by his officers. This was a golden chance to avenge the insult.

The Deputy could not close the deal for the land he wanted to buy for want of money. Twenty five acres of land, adjacent to his land in the village, seemed to be slipping from his hands. Otherwise, he had plenty of lands, and he was afraid of it being declared surplus, he had registered it in his children's names. He had divorced his wife. Even then, he could not give up the idea of owning that land. There was plenty of money in his account, but, if he had to buy land with money from the bank, then what price him being the Deputy? He wanted to buy it with money that would come from someone else's pocket. One food supply officer was also eyeing that land. Earlier, it was ten thousand per acre, and now the price had gone up. Had the nambardar not been obstructive, he would have finalized the deal long ago.

He will beat up the nambardar in the village itself. He would confiscate all his stuff, and see to it that he suffers a loss of lakhs of rupees. He would also get the whole operation photographed and see to it that it is published in all the newspapers.

The second on the list was the liquor-contractor, Major. He too was one who always aim high. He would always be on cloud nine. This is a good pretext. The excise minister is his relative. Twelve contractors had formed a group and taken all the contracts of the subdivision. They manipulated the auction of the contracts. And, by conniving with the department, they freely supply country liquor to many villages. They charge their own prices. The same bottle, which in Patiala, is sold for forty five rupees; they sell it for sixty five, here -a clear profit of twenty rupees. Other profits are over and above this. The Deputy's family had always been in this trade. Thus, he knows all the ins and outs of the trade. There is plenty of money in this trade.

It was his habit to take a part of this trade. If not a big share, at least his earnings should cover the expenses of his children's education in Doon School. This means the contractor gets a free hand, and he gets the money he needs.

These days, even the constables demand a bottle every evening. Moreover, there are the monthly payments to hawaldars, thandedars, and also their other demands. If the Deputy is involved, no policeman dare ask for anything, they dare not even go near the shop. If the Deputy is a shareholder, even the contracts are auctioned at half rates. The Deputy gets jeeploads of g also dare goons on the auction day. Once, someone had tried to take part in the auction. The Deputy's men had broken their heads.

Major was not falling into his trap. He says, take double amount as 'monthly', but I will not show you my account books. The minister has a share. This can give him a bad name. Once a month, the minister visits here. He also tells the officers to watch the interests of the contractors.

Let alone giving a share, they do not even pay the full 'monthly'. They do not let the constables and hawaldars come near their shops. They hand out a meager sum

to the Deputy as if he was a menial; and, what they give is too little, it doesn't pay for even one child's expenses. And he has to educate three children. It is here, now, that he has come to realize that the children are getting too extravagant.

Now, he must catch the Major some way or the other, and arrest him. He is a stubborn Jat, the rest are all seths. They will agree at the first threat.

The third target was Pabbibadmash. He has also done as he pleased. He has been cornering plenty of lands, shops and vacant plots, under the cover of the chief minister's name.

This work of occupying lands is a grand one. Naunihaltoo is involved in this work. If he has hundred acres of land today, a dozen harvester combines and tractors, this is all thanks to this work. He had been taught this trick by Pardumen Singh, tehsildar. Once they had met at a tea party, and the tehsildar had explained the scheme to him. A field of twenty acres, near the newly constructed by-pass was in the possession of a bania. He has been in possession for the last fifty years, but the owner's name, in the revenue record was different. The revenue department had even located the real owner, and the land had now been registered in one of their own men, at throwaway price. They needed the help of the Deputy to get its possession. What objection could the Deputy have? He was to get two lakhs as one tenth share. The bania raised hell! The police threw away all the shacks and shanties on the land.

After that, the Deputy himself started keeping in touch with the patwaris and qanoongos. He would call them after every twenty days or a month, and give them liquor. He would extract full information regarding any surplus or unclaimed land. There is no dearth of parties wanting to take over such lands belonging to old men or the childless. At the first opportunity, land is anyhow registered in the name of a reliable man, and then, it is taken over. If anyone tries to protest, the Deputy slaps a couple of false police cases on him. If there are some pressures from above, an agreement is arranged. If there is a problem about a house, or a shop, the Deputy's man at once contacts the weaker party in the dispute, or the one who is, by now, tired of the litigation. They buy that property out at the lowest price, and later on, threaten the tenants and evict them. The Deputy is owner of many such shops today.

Here, Pabbi and his men don't let him get a foot in. They have now become a part of 'dharma yudh' – the righteous war, began by the chief minister, and have been to the jail also in connection with that. The whole lot of them, fully armed, provide the chief minister full security during elections. Wherever there is a threat of any danger, they patrol that area. If need be, they fire in the air also. It is they who are guarding the chief minister's fortress like bungalow. Why should do they care about a mere Deputy? If he is too obstructive, they may even, get him transferred.

Recently, they have grabbed a piece of eight acres, adjoining the new bus stand. On the pretext of an agreement for sale, they got the owner's thumb impression on a benami deal. They lay low for a couple of months, and, then occupied the land. They Deputy had tried to pull them up, by filing a police case. But then, the phones started ringing. The Director-General accepted the registration document as a genuine agreement, and cancelled the complaint.

They had sent five thousand to him, the way you give charity to a beggar. He kept the money, taking it to be better than nothing. Those days, the teacher from Patiala, was with him, on a visit. Her expenses also, had to be met. It was the Deputy's fault that she has become so demanding. Travelling to and fro to Chandigarh, he would spend the night with her. She had not married, for she had kept waiting for him. It was this that made the Deputy her devotee! She is forty, and has been nurturing this friendship for the last twenty years. The Deputy, out of his love for her, had got a bungalow built for her, and given her a big bank account. He had made her give up her job, so that she may not have to face the barbs of her fellow teachers. She is now used to living like a queen, and easily spends about five-six thousand in a month. Her frequent visits here were now like poison to the Deputy. He had got rid of her by giving her those five thousand of Pabbi's.

He is not going to leave any of these three. The worst they can do is to get him transferred. This is what he wanted. A transfer is better than dying of hunger. He will go to a better place than this. If he has to spend a couple of years in a corner, he shall do so. But he will still see them all behind bars.

He did not share his plan with any subordinate. The parties, he was planning to confront had very long arms. Any policeman could tip them off.

He sent for two trucks and two jeeps quietly, and ordered them to be parked in the compound. He also sent for extra force from all thanas. The other employees were only told that some hideouts of the militants were to be raided, at three in the morning.

He must have seen the face of some unlucky man, in the morning, that all their labour had gone waste. He did not find the Major, neither nambardar, nor Pabbi. On the other hand, his plan was exposed.

He had, however, succeeded in harming the nambardar. He had seized thirty sacks of poppy seeds, and ten-twelve kilos of opium. He could file a case against the nambardar, on the basis of the seizures he had made. The nambardar could be shown as having run away, leaving the goods behind. They had brought away a few of his workers. If nothing else, he would file a case against them. At least, this would have inflicted a loss of thirty to forty thousand.

Three employees of the contractor had also been arrested. When they would reveal details from where the liquor was being brought, and where it was hidden, then, the contractor would be exposed to the imminent danger.

They had not been able to find anything at Pabbi's home. Only, a few women were there. Pabbi's wife had a ten days' infant in her arms. His mother was blind.

The only woman who could be brought to the thana, was his brother's wife. She was brought in a jeep. He would come running to get her released.

The sun was rising, by the time they started back from Pabbi's village. It was insulting to the Deputy's to come away with empty hands. Some victim had to be entangled! There were Dhanaula, Pindi and Pharwahi on this route. Who should be arrested from there? He was thinking at the speed his jeep was being driven!

The Deputy, near the taxi stand of Dhanaula, recollected that the pradhan could be arrested. He was reading the paper, sitting on a wooden board! Dressed in sparkling white clothes, like a prominent villain!

He was the first victim of the Deputy.

Since the jathedar of Dhanaula had become the chairman, this pradhan seems to have gone berserk. Earlier, they were paying their dues on time, a vehicle and petrol as well. Now, they say, they will send the car on their own terms. Firstly, the car would be driven by their driver. The Deputy sends the driver who takes the car to his bungalow, back. He drives the car either himself, or asks one of his constables. The car becomes a rattle in two days. That is not all; they abandon the car where ever it runs out of petrol, and come away. Secondly, the car should be sent back within the period it has been asked for. A car, asked for a day, is not sent back even after a week. They are told the car is going to Sangrur, but it is taken to Delhi.

None of these conditions was acceptable to the Deputy. The Deputy has many confidential assignments. No driver can be trusted to keep all their secrets. The Deputy was not their employee that he should abandon his assignment midway, because the time the car has been sent for has run out.

Since the last few months, they have been evasive about sending a car. There were a couple of diesel vehicles. They are cheaper. The owners have sold them, and bought petrol vehicles. The Deputy doesn't let them go.

At the Deputy's command, the taxi stand was surrounded. Two constables were sent who dragged the pradhan out. When he objected, they caught him by his hair, and threw him on the ground. The Deputy came forward, and himself gave him a couple of kicks.

The whole town is looking for Bunty.... This nawab has been taking him all over in his taxi.... Didn't inform the police!'

The reason for the arrest of the pradhan was revealed by the Deputy to the frightened taxi drivers, who stood, shivering in his presence.

Nearing Pindi, he thought of Fakira. Last time, when a car had to be sent for the Inspector-General, the Deputy had sent him a message, asking him to collect five thousand each from all reliable parties, and the well-known smugglers, and present himself. The Deputy was aware of the fact that he had given up his activities, for the last five years. He can start all over again, the Deputy doesn't stop him. His name is still on the list of bad characters. Till his name is struck off that official list, the police have all the right to ask him for money. Earlier, he had collected money on the occasion of the D.I.G.'s daughter's wedding. He had even collected three-three thousand from the panchasand sarpanchs. That time, Fakira had paid up at the first call. This time he had refused. He says, he can hardly meet his own expenses. He has become a Radhaswami. He doesn't involve himself in bad things. Earlier, he had never refused the Deputy. But, it is difficult to fulfill each and every demand.

If a carefree man like him can say 'no' to the Deputy then, who is going to give him money? The Deputy initiates some such project every third month. This way, he collects plenty of money. The officers are happy, and he also gets his own share.

Another benefit, bad sponsors dare not come near him. Only he, who can happily spend money a number of times, can dare to sit with him.

Let him deal with this rude man also. He has acquired a twenty acre farm, by trafficking Bengali women. He has ruined thousands of them, and now, he says that he is a Radhaswami!

When they looked into his home, after surrounding it, they found him reciting his prayers, in the courtyard. When he saw the policemen jumping over the wall to enter, he stopped the recitation, and prepared himself for the trouble he saw coming.

‘Now you have become a saint! After ruining thousands of homes, you say you are a religious man!’ The Deputy said sarcastically, giving him a kick.

‘My crime?’ Fakira stood before him with folded hands.

‘You hid Bunty’s kidnappers! How innocently you ask! As if you do not know!’ And without listening to any other argument he put him, also, in the truck.

After reaching Pharwahi, they raided Maghar’s farm. He had bypassed the Deputy, and directly given the captain a share. He handed only a petty sum of thousand rupees to the Deputy. He did not realize that the Deputy’s fee was a minimum of five thousand. Earlier, he used to give his predecessor five thousand. We shall see what help can the captain give him now!

By the afternoon, the news was all over the town that the Deputy is out with all severity and harshness. He has laid his hands on all the prominent bad characters. The thanedar of the city is only concerned with collecting money.

The higher the screams from the thana rose, greater was the relief felt by the crowd collected outside the thana. Would anyone hand over the child willingly, if he is treated with kid’s gloves?

Whosoever came out of the thana, was all praise for the Deputy. They were all convinced that the Deputy could recover Bunty anytime now.

Someone would come out and say that the pradhan of the taxi union of Dhanaula had admitted everything.

Another said that they had spent one night at Fakira’s. It is difficult for him to lift women, as he is now old, and hence he has taken to this now. He has put up another house only for this purpose. Scheming rat!

Bholu, who had gone in to give tea, came back with the information that the workers of the contractor were singing. The contractor had hidden them at his wholesale shop at Major’s request. They had also supplied liquor, as well as food to the militants.

Ramesh, the grain dealer, who had met the Deputy, felt that the whole mischievous plan was that of the nambardar of Khuddi. His Siri was saying something to this effect. Strange boys used to come in their car. Many times, he was sent to serve them food. At times, they had women with them, and on other times, children. A child, who looked like Bunty, identified by these workers from a photograph shown to them, had stayed in their vehicle, for two days.

The journalists were pressing the Deputy to make a statement. The Deputy was asking them to be patient. Any statement by him can cost Bunty's life. The culprits could be arrested within an hour, though they had still not been able to find where Bunty has been hidden. He was more concerned about Bunty's life, than about the criminals.

Lalaji had been receiving threatening letters, every third day. The day for the next letter was tomorrow. It has not yet come, and this means that the police have been quite successful.

The Deputy, happy with the winds of opinion blowing in his favour, added more names to the list of his enemies.

This was the best opportunity of teaching a lesson to many more.

VII

The orderly had laid the food on the table, and was waiting for the sahib. But, there seemed no end to the phone call, the sahib was busy with.

The call was from the D.I.G. Khan was being informed about the order which had come from the chief minister. The chief minister wanted Khan to shift his headquarters to the town for the time being. Khan should personally investigate Bunty's case and maintain peace and order in town.

The chief minister had ordered that Khan should immediately leave for the town. The D.I.G., however, was of the opinion that there was no need to hurry. It was already dark, and it was dangerous for police officers to be out at this time. Khan may leave in the morning. As if the heavens are going to fall, and it cannot be averted by anybody except Khan.

After the call, Khan the Superintendent of Police, reviewed the whole situation in his mind. It was eight o'clock. It would take him about half an hour to reach the town. He would be ready in ten minutes. He doesn't have to bother about a family. He is all alone. It means only an attaché case and a bed. It is better to leave for the town now, and study the situation first hand, and begin the work tomorrow, rather than spend a restless night here.

Khan immediately sent a wireless message to the thana, that he is reaching right now. All investigators should be ready for a meeting.

The reader was asked to collect all the information he had, and to bring it to the captain.

According to the file, the child had been kidnapped ten days ago. The threatening letters are being posted in the town itself. Though the police had searched half the town, but the problem was yet unsolved.

The police thought it was clever to snatch the letters before they reached their destination. The file recorded satisfaction at this vigilance of the police, time and again.

The reader told him that the people of the town were ready to pay money to the terrorists. They have collected fifty thousand instead of five. The police do not want this. It would mean a blow to its prestige. The police would like Bunty to be recovered without paying any ransom.

The need for Khan was felt when the last letter had come. It had shaken the whole town. Neither does the police take any effective steps, now does it let the people do anything. How could the child be recovered this way?

The Deputy shows off as a pretentious officer. But, he too has not been able to make any headway. The Chief Minister woke up only when people arrested were not from the opposite camp, but his own men, Pabbi, contractor and nambardar. They had bagful of complaints against the Deputy.

When a minister on tour visits a respectable man, or eats with him, then it carries a meaning. It is an indication to officers and people both, that the host is someone close to the minister. No one need doubt Pabbi's proximity to the minister. If the women of Pabbi's family have been brought in, then, what will befall the ordinary people? This the Chief Minister can easily assess.

The contractor had given the Chief Minister a two-point programme. One, the transfer of the Deputy; Second, to bring Khan to the town, so that the town could be saved from the harassment and looting by the police.

The angry Chief Minister had immediately acted upon both points. The Deputy was transferred to P.A.P.Lines, Jalandhar. He would come to his senses, when all sources of extortion dry up. This is what he believed.

The Deputy may not have been able to get any clue about Bunty, but he did get an inkling of his own transfer all right. Before the order could be dispatched, the speaker of the Legislative Assembly came to the Chief Minister's bungalow to meet him. The Deputy had played a card the Chief Minister could not outplay. Had it been a mere M.L.A., or even a junior minister, he could have ignored it. What can he tell the speaker? The Chief Minister has already lost his majority. The instable ministry needed the speaker, the same way as a dying person is in need of oxygen. If the speaker is annoyed, he could upset the Chief Minister's applecart anytime. After a great deal of thought the Chief Minister, decided on a plan which would satisfy both sides. He cancelled the transfer orders and made the Deputy apologise to Pabbi. Neither Pabbi, nor the contractor had any personal grudge against the Deputy. He should not interfere in their work. When, the speaker came to know that the Deputy had not spared even the Chief Minister's men, he scolded him in the presence of those present.

In the pursuit of the second point, Khan had come to the town.

The Chief Minister had transferred Khan's headquarters to the town, and also expressed his anger to the Captain. The Chief Minister's town was in utter disarray, but the captain seemed to be sleeping. The newspapers are full of complaints, but he has not begun investigation of even one accused. A hartal had been going on for many days, but he has not toured the town for a single day. He should leave everything else and concentrate on Bunty's case. The clever, efficient, and honest Superintendent of

Police, Khan, had been asked to move his headquarters to the town, to restore the confidence of the people.

The confidence that the Chief Minister had demonstrated in Khan's ability, was a matter of pride for him. Khan had joined the I.P.S. only two and half years' back. He had been under training for a year and half. He had proved his ability only in a year.

His first posting had been to Moga, as an A.S.P..

Whatever was happening in the area was a matter of surprise for Khan. A series of cases had been slapped against drug addicts. The police were hand in glove with the traders of poppy seeds and opium. The village, Ajitwal was notorious as the opium market. The retailers here gave sixty thousand as 'monthly' to some thanas, and forty thousand to others.

As soon as he assumed charge, he had gone after the big fish. He had received threats from the big smugglers at first; then, came recommendations, and finally, various proposals. Someone was offering to give him a car; another a bungalow; yet another was offering a lakh per month; and someone else a lakh and a half.

Khan had vowed that as long as he was here, he would not let any intoxicant or drug be sold. When the smugglers made no headway, they began pursuing the ministers. He was transferred a number of times, but there were many good people who got the orders cancelled. Khan had taken out public procession of smugglers with blackened faces, made them rub their nose on the ground, and made them swear in temples and gurudwaras that they would not sell drugs.

The people were however, taken aback when Khan exposed the zaildars.

When he had just taken charge, he was shown the file on the murder of the zaildar's daughter-in-law. A year had passed since the murder. The murderer was a 'bhaiya', and, was absconding since that day. The police had tried its best, yet, it had not been able to catch him. He had been declared a proclaimed offender. The junior officers were keen to close the file declaring him as 'untraced'.

Khan smelt a rat here. Surely, the Punjab Police was not so inefficient that it could not arrest a bhaiya. There was definitely something suspicious here.

The story was rather strange. The murder had been committed in the early hours, at day break, when the elder daughter-in-law, was milking the buffaloes. The blood-stained trousers and jootis of the bhaiya were lying nearby. The gold chain, the Sardarni had been wearing round her neck, was missing. The family suspected the bhaiya. He had been obviously covetous. The problem was that no one knew his home address. The police failed to make any headway. The zaildars accepted the death as the will of God. If no one else wants to pursue the case, then why should the police pursue the case? Where there are hundreds of pending files lying, one more will keep lying with them.

As he read the first information report, it struck Khan that the murderer was someone from the family. The bhaiya had only been a child of eight when he had come to work at the Sardars. He had lived with them as one of the family for the last ten years. He would get up in the morning, feed the buffaloes, and after attending to

other chores, would help the sardarni in milking. Had he been a thief, he could have stolen something more costly. Why would he commit a murder for a mere necklace, worth about five-seven thousand only?

How did the body reach the barn where hay was stored? Why had no one heard the screams of the woman? How did blood appear on the trousers and jootis of the bhaiya? The murder had taken place at six in the morning, but the report had been filed at ten o'clock. Why was the whole matter hidden for four hours?

All his belongings were still in bhaiya's room. Looking through them, they had also found some money. He also had an account in the post office, and a deposit of four hundred was still there. Had he been planning to run, would he not have taken this money?

When Khan sent for the zaildars for a casual enquiry, he received a call from the D.I.G.

'The Sardar is my relative. The family has already suffered. Don't trouble them anymore.'

Now, Khan was all the more convinced that bhaiya was not the murderer. This sort of recommendation meant, there was something to hide.

He got some secret investigation done, and discovered that the husband of the dead woman has been living in England for the last ten years. When he was here, even then, he had not got along with the sardarni.

In England, he had married again, and also had children. The deceased had first gone back to her parents. But her quarrelsome sister-in-law had driven her out. She had come back to her in-laws. The zaildars had kept her, taking her to be a free servant. Her expenses were even less than the bhaiya's. She worked the whole day long, with bhaiya. The neighbours felt that she may have become intimate with the boy. She had often been seen laughing and talking to him.

After investigating for four days, Khan's sharp mind was able to piece together the facts. She must have had illicit relations with bhaiya, and they must have been caught in hay barn. The furious sardars must have killed both of them. It was difficult to conceal the death of the daughter-in-law, and after some consultation, the murder had been blamed on bhaiya. That was like killing two birds in one stone.

Ignoring all recommendations, when the elder Sardar was stripped for a thrashing, he came out with the whole truth.

When Khan went to the field to dig out bhaiya's bones, four hundred people stood crowding around him. There were reporters with video cameras, running around, as if they were covering a wedding.

The stories and photographs of this sensational murder continued to appear in the newspapers for days. Reporters came from distant places to interview Khan. Letters of congratulation poured in. The D.G. himself called him up and appreciated his work.

Papa had sent a congratulatory telegram from Kolkatta, and also written a long letter of advice. Khan has not done right by annoying the D.I.G. A new officer should not go against his seniors in this manner. The officer can, any day, pull up his juniors. Papa advised him to go with the wind. But, Khan believed in changing the direction of the wind.

Khan was impatient to call up his father. He wanted to tell him that his work had been acknowledged by the Chief Minister. People have now put pressure on the Chief Minister to send Khan for investigation. He did yet have time to call his father. He had to reach the town, connect all the links of the investigation, and to find a way to recover Bunty.

After reaching the town, neither Khan did sleep himself, nor did he let the investigating officers sleep. He snarled at the thanedars. He now regretted that the investigation was still at the initial stage. No one had done anything except fill pages of reports. Everyone had adopted the 'hit and trial' method. Picking up the old lists, summoning the criminals, beat them up, and, then, let them go. Even the Deputy had not bothered to find out what type of paper was being used for the letters. Was it from an exercise book, or from a ream, or from a letter pad? What type of ink was being used? Was it the ink that is normally used in offices, or by school children, or by shopkeepers? Has a pen been used or a pencil? Is the same type of paper being used every time, or has it been different on different occasions? What was the handwriting like? Was it of an educated person? Were there any spelling mistakes? Is it the same hand writing or different in different letters? No one knows anything. They only know one thing, get the letter anyhow and file it.

Khan was upset at the state of investigation. He hardly had any time. If he goes by the last letter, then he only had a day and a night. He had to do everything. The kidnappers were still in the town. They seemed to be determined. They were hiding in some very safe place. They were, also, getting all information. They must have heard of his arrival in town. They may have been upset. Khan's worry was that if they kill Bunty, then what would the Chief Minister think? Khan's reputation would suffer a blow.

Gradually, Khan overcame his tension. It was his habit to be upset when confronted with something big. This happened to him even during his exams. He would be upset at the sight of the thick volumes. But, when he would sit down to study, he would finish the work in no time. He was proud of his determination. Once he makes up his mind to do a thing, then there is no rest or peace for him till he has completed it. It was this quality of his which had helped him get into the I.P.S.

Khan took this investigation as a test. It was very similar to the situation Khan had faced at Moga, when he had got caught in a fight of two bulls!

At that time, the pradhan of shellers' union, Lala Shiv Dayal, had shot the pradhan of labour union, Banta Singh, in the open market. Banta had the support of the truck drivers. He was hurling the most awful abuses – aimed at women of the family, at Lala Shiv Dayal, in the presence of hundreds of people in the bazaar. The whole market was witness to the fact that the Lala was trying to avoid a fight till the

end. He had kept walking to his shop. Banta was all the more excited, and he kept following the Lala upto the shop.

Shiv Dayal too was not meek. He was the father of five strapping, brave sons. He owned two shops, four shellers and eight trucks. He had been the president of the Bhartiya Janta Party. No one had the courage to look straight into his eye. He felt that it was better to die rather than hearing the filthy abuses. Disgusted, Shiv Dayal had picked up his gun.

It was difficult for Banta as well to withdraw. For the last five years he had been doing whatever he had wanted. Banta's father had been sweeping at the retailers' shops all his life. So what? Banta was now a rich man. Many sons of the lalas were now working under him. He had a bungalow, a car and a post in the Congress Party. His luck had smiled when the Food Corporation of India opened a department in the town. At first he had worked as a labourer; then took up a contract for the local market; and, later on, for the district. Bought two trucks and joined the truckers' union. Became its president. He was always surrounded by his henchmen. His influence was greater than a minister's. Wherever he was invited, he would donate at least five thousand in charity. His quarrel with the Lala was over the accounts of the union. He took Lala's gun to be a mere threat. Banta was not the one to turn and run away.

Had Lala not shot, perhaps, he would himself have been shot by Banta, who always carried a loaded gun.

Banta's henchmen put two more bullets into his dead body. The Lala was already entangled; they also embroiled two of his sons.

The problem had now become very serious. Various unions were demanding the arrest of Shiv Dayal's sons. Sometimes, the labour union would hold a meeting, and the other time, the truckers' union; and yet again Balmik Sabha organized a dharna, or did so the Dalits. One Akali leader, who was a distant relative of Banta, also sat on dharna.

The whole market was with the Lalas. The ministers and the bureaucracy too supported him. The Lala had himself surrendered to the police. The traders would not let anyone touch his blameless sons. One day, the labour union would get the market to close, and the second day the Vyopar Mandal.

The police was in a terrible dilemma. The higher officers were not willing to do anything. Orders were being issued by the dozen: sometimes, of arresting the sons; then of confiscating the gun; the next moment, the order would be rescinded, saying that the boys are innocent. Present a challan against them after putting them under column number two.

When the home minister issued an order for investigation, all the officers avoided it. Ultimately, it became a test for Khan's ability.

The Union did not like Khan's appointment. They wanted a man who could be tempted with bribes. Khan's integrity was unimpeachable. He was, also, not very easy to approach. His father was an I.A.S. officer, and his brother was commissioner of customs. It was always difficult to approach such high placed officers, let alone get

recommendations to them. As it was, the family was a rich family, and was in Kolkatta. They had no connection whatsoever with Punjab. The Union people were scared. They had blundered by shooting Banta. It may recoil on them.

The Lalas were no less smart. They got all the reports in their favour. The first, that the bullet with which Banta had been shot was not fired from the gun Lala had handed over. Second, the last two bullets had been fired from close range. And with two different guns having different bores.

Khan had called an open 'darbar'. He was fed up of attending to the phone calls and listening to the conflicting reports by the police.

The Lala had, somehow, reached Khan's elder brother, and had brought him over from Delhi. During conversation, Khan went over the facts of the case that he had been able to piece together.

The Lala had committed the murder. The men, who had shot Banta later, had also been identified. Khan was now thinking of arresting them.

His brother was happy to hear what Khan had told him. He had come with five lakhs that had been given to him, so that the boys could be declared innocent. If the supporters of Banta could be arrested, then, another lakh could be got.

His brother explained to him the significance of money till late at night. Earlier, he also had been an idealist and honest like Khan. He would confiscate gold and silver of big smugglers. He was lauded and praised for a couple of years. Then, all his opponents got together. Had his father not come to his rescue, these criminals would have hounded him out of his job. Now, that he has begun accepting money, all are happy. If the beginning is with five lakhs, then Khan should accept. There is no harm in that. The report is the way they want. He is his brother, had he been only a go-between, he would have swallowed the money, and no one would have been any wiser.

Khan was not influenced by this advice. With great humility, he refused the money.

Bribes, like a theft or love, can never be concealed. The news spread all over the town in two days. At first, Khan was afraid. Gradually, the support for him started swelling. Only a man with high moral values could return such a large amount of money, was the opinion at large.

His brother wrote a very strong letter after his return to Delhi. He felt that it had been childish of him. But, Khan had no regrets. His strictness was bearing fruit. The Chief Minister had himself chosen him for this investigation; it was a matter of pride for a new officer. His colleagues are still in police lines, and he is an S.P. If he can find Bunty, then he is likely to be made an S.S.P.

He felt that it was impossible to locate Bunty in such a short period. Had it been Moga, people would have come forward, without any fear, to give information. His reputation was such that even the lowliest could approach him. Everyone was free to come to him, and tell him their problems. Even his juniors were changing their attitudes, looking at his reputation. They now knew that Khan would not keep quiet

after signing an application. He would go on asking till the applicant is not satisfied. Also, no one dared to lodge with him a false report against an employee. He would himself begin verifying the allegation. Sometimes he would beat up a criminal and even ask him how much had he given to the police. A criminal has to pass through different thanas for investigation. Thus, no one dared to hide things from Khan.

While he was harsh on one hand, on the other, he was also very supportive of his juniors. He did not look askance, the moment some danger loomed large on the horizon.

Whatever action he ordered, whatever enquiry from whatever source was initiated, he would stand with his juniors like a rock. The morale of those working under him was always high. He took no time in taking up even the most dangerous assignment.

He needed employees who were willing to take all risks, and, also people who could help the police without fear, to recover Bunty. It was surprising that so far no officer had sought the help of the people, and had not, even chalked up a common agenda. Whosoever was in charge of the investigation took the file and looked around for means to make money.

As soon as he arrived, Khan called a meeting of the citizens, at the rest house itself. The leaders of every group and section and class of society were invited to attend. From the rickshaw union to the Vyopar Mandal, all were asked for help.

The meeting was to be at two o'clock. Khan spent the intervening time to finalise the rest of the programme. Handwriting experts were called to investigate the letters. The force in the various thanas was examined to see from which thana extra force could be summoned. Also, vehicles, arms and ammunition were verified.

As soon as the meeting began, the people's anger spilt over. Khan listened to everyone in silence. All their complaints were valid. He would enquire into all these matters, but this was not the time to look into the lapses of the police. Their primary aim, now, was to find Bunty, and to arrest his kidnappers. Later, Khan would be in town, as long as the people want him. He would personally look into all allegations against the employees.

Khan was happy that the whole town was united on this issue. There was support from each party, every class and all sections of society, who had forgotten all their differences. If money was to be given to the kidnappers, they were even ready for that.

One thing surprised Khan. Delegates of each mohalla, class and party were present at the meeting. No one had any clue about the kidnappers. Each one swore that the kidnappers were not in their area. They were all of the view that the child and the kidnappers were still in the town.

Where could they be? Who is sheltering them? About that, there was a difference of opinion.

Bihari Lal, the president of retailers' association, was of the view that such a dastardly act could be committed only by professional and hardened criminals. There

was no dearth of such criminals in the town. And, Lalaji had nurtured more by building the lepers' ashram. The pradhan had voiced his opposition even at that time, when the project was first mooted; who doesn't know that the only occupation they have is begging. They are good in pretending to be suffering from all sorts of diseases. They try to squeeze maximum of money from people by exploiting their sympathy. Otherwise, there is no reason, why each and every member of their family are either disfigured or maimed? They kidnap children from well-to-do families, disfigure or maim them, and use them to evoke a feeling of pity, and train them to beg. There are numerous such cases reported in the newspapers every day. He had, himself handed such a case to the police, a few days ago. A maimed eight year old child was being taken from area to area, on a cart, for alms for many days. Money was being collected – by evoking sympathy at his condition. On the fifth day, his corpse was set out in the chowk, and money was being collected in the name of his funeral. As chance would have it, the pradhan's brother-in-law happened to pass that way, and was surprised at this, because fifteen days back the same group had done the same thing in Bhatinda. The pradhan had the guts to expose them. This group had been involved in child kidnapping and disfiguring them, and collecting money, even when the child died. They got good money. They may have cut down on other criminal activities. They may not do it themselves, but they can get it done by someone close to them. Crime is in their blood. It is essential to search their area. They should not be dismissed as mere beggars, and their criminal past must not be ignored.

Ram Sharan, the advocate, did not think that this was a good suggestion. They were criminals and can think of criminal activities. If the child is only kidnapped, this could be acceptable. But here, there is a letter every other day. How do they have this courage or the means? The advocate was of the opinion that this could be the work of either the Sansis, or the baazigars. These tribals know only one thing – crime. Theft is their religion. They are taught all possible methods of crime from childhood. His own experience as a lawyer was that at least ninety percent of thefts were committed by them. Their children are now going to school, and have studied a few classes. They are now capable of writing letters. Men of these communities commit thefts in the town, children pick pockets, and women snatch chains in the buses. If they do not get any opportunity, they pick cotton from the fields; steal wheat; or even drive away animals. This is an age of films, and the new generation has learnt new methods. This is their doing. In order to win support for his point of view, the lawyer said that they commit crimes in areas close to where they live.

These arguments were not liked either by Lalaji or the Sangh. This was an indirect attack on Lalaji. This was a severe criticism of all the work that Lalaji had done. Lalaji did not say anything, for it was not the time for him to say anything. But, Darshan could not restrain himself. He was more amused at the arguments of the lawyer, rather than those of the pradhan. The Sansis were neither criminals, nor beggars. Circumstances have made them criminals. Since the time Sangh has started working in their area, there has hardly been any crime involving them. Even then, if they are looked down upon as criminals, and condemned, then what would they do, if not become criminals? Society does not accept them. The Sangh is convinced that Bunty is neither in the ashram nor in the Sansi area.

Ram Swaroop was trying to assert, with all his strength, that this was the act of these twine twisters. They are professional butchers. They slaughter hens and goats like carrots and radish. When they had come here, after Partition, the town had given them shelter. They were accommodated in the ruins of the old fort. In the early days, they were earning their living by twisting twine. When mechanization took over, they also changed their occupation. They took to vegetable selling, rickshaw pulling, and, some had even taken to truck driving. They are still as aggressive as they had been earlier. They would kill a man even for the sake of an egg. Recently, Sikhism is being newly preached in this area. A grand gurudwara has come up within days. The granthi of the gurudwara looks dangerous. He is always making provocative speeches. In several meetings held in the last days, boys with naked kirpans have also been in attendance. They have created trouble in several Hindu religious processions. They may have done this under instructions from some higher authority. Furtilla is their leader. If they can be persuaded, then it is fine, or else, the whole mohalla should be searched, including the gurudwara.

Furtilla interrupted this harangue. He was furious at these allegations against his people. They are Rajputs, it is their duty to fight. Rajputs never stoop to such low and demeaning acts. They fight openly, and face to face. They never attack women and children. If it was this then they should have been told earlier. They are ready for a house-to-house search. Bunty is as dear to them as their own children. What was the need to humiliate their people in this meeting? Ram Swaroop's harangue had angered him. Had Khan not pacified him, he would have taken no time in walking out of the meeting.

Sharmaji, the headmaster, had a different view. The root of this problem is neither the Sansis, nor lepers, and also, not the twine twisters. The real root of the problem can be in the Aagwar of the Siddhus. In fifty years, the population in Aagwar has doubled or even trebled, but agricultural land has shrunk to only one fourth of its original area. The town has spread on all sides. Half of its land is now under factories and mills, and the other half under bungalows and houses. On the other hand, boys are getting educated. They dress up in western clothes. They have big degrees. They are no longer fit for a farmer's work, but don't get any other jobs. Idle minds are bound to turn to evil things. When the Naxal movement had begun, half of these boys had shorn their hair and had become Naxalites. Many of them were killed; many were dumped into jails. Now, again, they have all taken to wearing saffron turbans. More than half of the crowd carries kirpans. They hold meetings under the name of the federation, take out processions, and put up posters. The twine twisters are not so intelligent. If someone has to be arrested, it should be from Aagwar.

The headmaster's view had made the zaildar sweat. He interrupted the headmaster many times. But, Khan let the headmaster have his say. He wanted to hear all sides. Until they speak openly, the root of the problem could not be identified.

The zaildar was not upset by the boys taking to religion. On the other hand, this was good. Every citizen has the constitutional right to follow whichever religion he wants. What problem can there be if, instead of killing people as atheists, you serve people? To these Hindu seths every Sikh was a terrorist. They all come from well-to-

do families. Who would commit such a mean act for a mere five thousand? He would not let them his boys at any cost. He would speak to the Chief Minister.

The zaildar was proud of his proximity to the Chief Minister. He had supported the Sardar at every step with money, and also men. Here also he was present as the representative of Aagwar. It was his responsibility to answer all allegations made against Aagwar. He was fulfilling his duty very well.

Lalaji has also been opposed to the many houses. Why can't Bunty be in the bungalows of Model town? What crime is not committed by the people of these kothis? Black marketing, smuggling, and many other crimes are hatched there. If they cannot do these things themselves, then, they hire people. Many seths are unhappy at Lala becoming the chief of the Sita Bhawan,, year after year. The others are deprived of the opportunity to serve society. There are others who want to control the Ram Lila Committee. There is politics even in the Sewa Samiti. Lalaji dominates the Mahabir Dal also. Even in elections, they have openly supported one party. Anyone can avenge a personal enmity by taking advantage of an unfavourable situation. Until the kothis are searched, zaildar will let no one come towards Aagwar.

Khan listened to all of them. Though, each one of them supported his own party, the arguments they had put forward were also weighty. Anyone could be guilty. From the Sansis, lepers, to the Seths.

Different theories of crime came to him. He was still undecided as to which theory he should pursue in this case.

Many criminologists believe that the instinct to crime is hereditary. Crime runs in genes, and goes on, generation after generation. There is no dearth of such tribes in the Punjab, whose only occupation is crime, and this they learn right from their birth. It is impossible to reform such criminals. The only remedy lies in keeping them in prison.

Those who support Marx are opposed to this theory. They assert that it is the environment which is responsible for making them criminals. As long as there is inequality in society, people do not get fair return for their labour, and exploitation is rampant, there would be crime in society. Instead of fighting criminals, we should seek to eliminate those conditions from society that create inequality, and exploitation in society.

Thinkers like Sutherland reject even this theory. Their view is that there is no lack of money; it is the lust for money which lures people to crime. If people become criminals for money, then the rich should not be indulging in activities that are criminal. These days, it is the richest section of society which is involved in various crimes. Bribery, evasion of tax, smuggling and black marketing, are all crimes of the rich.

Whatever anyone may say, Khan believed in what Lombrosa had said. Some criminals can never be reformed. Our judicial system has strayed from its goal. Khan was in favour of eliminating such criminals. He approved of the policy of Bihar Police, who had blinded the criminals. He did not like the ravings of social activists. If the courts cannot save society from such criminals, then the police must do it. He had

also not liked Lalaji's idealism. There was greater possibility of Bunty being in the areas where Sansis, conjurers and beggars lived.

There was sense in the allegations against Aagwar of the Siddhus. What can the unemployed middle class youth do, if not rebel? Half of the government-jobs are reserved for various castes, the remaining were either given to the rich or the relatives of the leaders or officers. The educational system was not capable of equipping them with adequate occupational skills. The boys of Aagwar are members of the federation. A couple of them are even absconding. Aagwar of the Siddhus also cannot be overlooked.

The suggestion of searching Model Town had not appealed to Khan. He himself belonged to a rich family. There were plenty of crimes for the rich to be involved in. They would never stoop to this sort of a low act. What does the presidency of Sewa Samiti, or the headship of Sita Bhawan have to do with the child? They can always give money and enroll new members, or raise a new building, or set up a new organization. Khan did not favour the idea of harassing the seths, but, knew that if other areas are to be searched, then even Model Town has to be searched, in order to appear to be impartial. He must give instructions that special attention must be given to servants' quarters. Sometimes, there is darkness under a light. Servants are often known to use their quarters in rich areas for criminal activities.

There was no alternative but to impose curfew and order a house-to-house search. He could not discuss his decision with the people sitting here in the assembly. The police had to make many arrangements. The news may reach the criminals, and they may run off, even before the arrangements are completed.

There was a unanimous opinion that there should be thorough search. The problem could, only then be solved.

Before the end of the meeting, he assured the people that he would recover Bunty without imposing curfew. He had, however, already decided on the final course of action in his mind. He would talk to the leaders after consulting his officers at the next meeting.

The next meeting had been fixed for four o'clock in the evening.

Khan well knew that there was no need for the next meeting. A curfew would be imposed in the whole town, and the whole town would be sealed, and a house-to-house search would begin.

VIII

The strict security arrangements that had been imposed in the last few days included a thorough check at all entry and exit points of the town, and of searching of all incoming and outgoing vehicles.

Hawaladar Darshan Singh took full advantage of his proximity to the Deputy. He had, himself chosen the Handian Dian Kainchian Wala Naka. There were four roads going in four directions – Bhatinda, Monga, Sangrur and Barnala.

More than fifty vehicles passed that way in an hour. The Naka in-charge could do whatever he wanted.

For the first few days, he had nothing much to do. He would stand under the neem tree with two constables. Stop a couple of scooters and motor cycles, go through a few cars, and that was all. Rest of the time he just collected money.

Ever since he heard the news yesterday that Khan's headquarters had been transferred to the town, he had made his searches more strict.

Overnight, he had got fifty empty drums from the P.W.D., and lined them on the road, to put up a barricade. He got them painted white; asked the forest department to cut a large eucalyptus tree; got about twenty sacks filled with mud to put up a barricade.

Darshan had taken double precaution to see that the vehicles pass the crossroads at a very slow speed. The drums had been placed on the road in such a manner that every passing vehicle had to crawl like a snake, and move at the speed of an ant. If someone wanted to be clever, then there was the eucalyptus to block the way. He had got two wooden posts put up on one side of the road, the trunk of the tree was placed over them, and a sack of mud was hung up on a branch to weigh it down. A rope was tied on the other end, and a home guard was instructed to monitor it. Until a vehicle was not properly cleared, he had to keep the rope tight, and can let it loose only after Darshan gave the signal to let the vehicle pass.

Who was not aware of Khan's strictness? Darshan had the quality of moulding himself to the methods of an officer. No one could tell when Khan may decide to check the security arrangements himself? He is known for inspecting thanas at one in the night and four in the morning. He is proud of his uniform. If he found any subordinate with unpolished boots, or a crumpled uniform, or a loose turban, he immediately sends them to the lines, and admonishes them not to come to the thana, unless they learn to wear their uniforms properly. Darshan had ironed his uniform in the morning, and had brought an extra set. As soon as his first uniform would be soiled he intended to immediately change into the second one. He had asked the two constables and those from the C.R.P. who were with him, to be careful about the uniform.

He had got bunkers put up, as instructed by the department, on both sides of the road. The jawans could take up positions if the need arose. He had, also, got the Naka swept and cleaned, and had got water sprinkled. Cots and stools were hidden. A small table and two chairs had been brought over from an adjacent shop. Khan believed it was wrong to rest while on duty.

After Khan's arrival in town, Darshan had been given one more section of four C.R.P.F. men. All of them were on duty here.

Every jawan had been given a photograph of Bunty. They had an album of photographs of dangerous terrorists and notorious bad characters. They were to check

each vehicle and each occupant carefully. Even the bundles carried by old women were searched thoroughly.

People would even pass sarcastic comments.

“Will those ruffians ride in buses?”

“Now they are going to find bombs in the buses!”

No one bothered about these taunts! There was a traffic jam off and on. People would protest. The police would ignore this. They had to do their duty, in spite of the inconvenience to some. If people are weary of waiting for some time, they can get off their cars, eat something at the dhabas. Sometimes, they deliberately delayed the long route buses. The hotels on the highway, should also earn something. They would not, then mind giving free meals and tea to the police party. By afternoon, the energy of the police had also waned. People were right. They are not going to travel in buses with the child. This is merely getting the police to do extra work.

Darshan had become stiff having stood at the crossroad since morning. His back started aching. He was feeling dizzy.

Darshan has been a hawaldar for the last four years. He was no longer used to hard work. When he had been a constable, it was different. A constable has to run about the whole day long. Sometimes patrolling; chasing after suspects at times and also standing as a guard. Those days, he had been slender and slim.

He had spent these four years in thanas. There is nothing much to do for the hawaldar in a thana. As he stood at the Naka, he realized for the first time that he had developed a paunch, and his hips had grown heavier. His neck had also thickened. It was not his fault, though. The police could no longer be called a disciplined force. Once, you complete a course at Phillaur, after that it is all comfort and ease. There is just one parade in a week and that also for those unlucky ones who are posted at district headquarters. There are so many different excuses to avoid attending that parade. Then how can the employees be agile and fit?

Darshan’s health had been spoilt also by tobacco and liquor. The department he works in, is such. Drink drums of liquor and eat dozens of chicken! There is no dearth of anything. The job is such that you are constantly dealing with thieves, thugs and smugglers; wherever you go, people are waiting for you, ready to serve liquor. Darshan does not have the strength of character to refuse. You do get tempted. He tries to limit himself, but when it takes hold of him then he can’t give up.

As it is, Darshan thinks that he has been successful because of liquor. Until you have a long drinking session with someone, he doesn’t spill the beans. The police needs evidence at every step. What work can a police officer do, if he cannot persuade people to come forward with evidence?

Last night he had decided that as long as Khan is in town, he would not touch liquor. When he had gone to the overseer to ask for drums, he was waiting for him with a bottle. Contractors were also sitting with him. The liquor was of top quality. Meat was well cooked. Of course, he was tempted. He was not allowed to get up till he had downed two glasses. If you want people to do something for you, then you too

have to be courteous. When, he had gone to the ranger of the forest department, he was already drunk. The ranger also forced Darshan to drink a couple of pegs!

He was now feeling tired because of heavy drinking last night. Lemons were ineffective. He worked for some time, then again felt dizzy. Twice, he swallowed opium. That also was not very effective. Perhaps, it was not of good quality. Darshan could neither lie down nor have a drink to overcome his tiredness,. He had just received a message on the walkie- talkie that Khan was in a meeting with the citizens. Some significant decision would be taken. As Khan is here, he is bound to do something.

The meeting would not be over in an hour or so; as many people, as many tongues to wag. Each one would make his suggestions. As long as the meeting lasts, Khan would not come this side. Why not stretch out on the cot and rest for a while?

Tired, Darshan convinced himself and went towards the dhaba.

He had just dozed off when Nathu constable and two jawans of C.R.P. came shouting. Darshan was taken aback. Has someone come for inspection? Has an encounter begun? Have they arrested the kidnappers? All these questions passed through his mind.

It was a trivial matter. Nathu had confiscated three bottles of whisky from the scooter of a bhaiya. Nathu said that it was illegal to keep three bottles of liquor. The C.R.P. jawans were of the view that bhaiya was merely an employee. He is the munim of RamLal who has a poultry farm. He was only carrying these bottles for his employer Nathu has even taken a hundred and twenty rupees from his pocket on the pretext of searching. They were of the opinion that he should be let off and his money returned. The police party is here to look for Bunty and the kidnappers, not to arrest people for carrying liquor. As it is, bhaiya belongs to their state.

Darshan assessed the whole situation at once. Bad liquor is being sold at the country liquor shops in the town. The liquor at Handias is famous. The poultry people must have sent for it. The bhaiya is not at fault. He is an employee, and must follow orders. Moreover, he is no lawyer, and doesn't know all the laws of the land. Out of a hundred and twenty, bhaiya's share was of only four rupees the rest belonged to his employers.

Darshan let the bhaiya go at the recommendation of the C.R.P. jawans, gave back his four rupees also. But, he confiscated the rest of the money, whiskey and the scooter. He should send his employers, and they will beg for the release of their goods, and also, pay the fine. If nothing else, they will at least send five six hens. This would open the way to the poultry farm for him.

Darshan thought over it for some time. Then, he took the money taken from Nathu and divided it amongst the C.R.P.F. jawans. This is the only way of shutting their mouths. He also kept two bottles of whiskey aside for the jawans. Let them enjoy themselves once they are off duty.

Nathu was astounded. He had confiscated the things, but these bhaiyas had benefitted! Darshan signed to him to be patient. They will take much more from the

poultry people; Earn plenty. This was only to give a taste to these bhaiyas, and get them into the racket!

This was the secret of Darshan's popularity. He always divided what he got, with those who were with him. People said he was open hearted, but Darshan was only giving them what he got from them. He had categorized each and every employee, and divided the money according to that categorization: One fourth for the higher officers, one-tenth for the clerks in the S.P.'s office, one-tenth for his own hangers-on. He is popular with everyone. What the thanedar cannot himself do, he asks Darshan to do.

Darshan alone is sent to look after the work in the courts. The court employees are always happy to see him. They know that now, that he has come, he will give them their due. Some clever police officers are very stingy. What does a public prosecutor have to do with him? But, as soon as he enters his office, he sends for gulab jamuns and milk. If it is summer, he orders juice. If it suits him, he may even send for a couple of whiskey bottles. All this doesn't cost much. Later on, he may get him to do something worth more than twenty thousand!

The police are unnecessarily afraid of the judges. The maximum he may ask you to do is to ask for a car. That also, only up to Ludhiana or Chandigarh. The police has only to get a taxi from the taxi stand, and it may not have much petrol in it. If the judge asks for a bottle of Aristocrat whiskey, then he sends a bottle of Macdowell. The judge is ecstatic when he sees Darshan in the court. He for him in his chamber, gives him tea, and then asks about his work. If you get one work out of the judge in a year, then, you have earned gratitude for full one year from those who look up to you. If you want him to make a recommendation to your officer, that also, without paying anything, he will do. The police officers do not say 'no' to judicial officers. By spending money of the employees and officers on them, he also gets their appreciation.

It was this technique that he had used now. Once he had given the jawans a taste of bribery, then he could do whatever he wanted. What do these boys, taking four annas or eight annas as bribes, know that the minimum fee for Punjab police personnel is a bottle of foreign liquor, the cheapest bottle costing sixty five rupees. If not that, then a bottle of Indian liquor, which is also of thirty five at least.

After pocketing thirty rupees each, the attitude of the C.R.P. jawans changed. They started calling him 'Sahib.'

Nathu and Pala both took two pegs each from the remaining bottle. Even, Darshan was tempted, but he was waiting for the news of the decisions of the meeting. It was only after hearing those decisions, would he draw up his next programme.

Nathu felt very brave after hobnobbing with the C.R.P. jawans and two pegs of expensive whisky. Pala was yet new to all this, but Nathu had an experience of thirty five years. He was a good investigator. He understood Darshan's signal, and went back to the barricade.

Pal Singh and two C.R.P. jawans were made to stand on one side. This party was to check the vehicles coming from Mansa. Nathu, with two jawans, was on the

other side. He had taken the road to Bhatinda. The home guards were also alerted. Catch the rope properly. Whatever action they would now undertake they also would be given a share.

Darshan came back to the table. So far they had been checking the papers and letting the vehicles pass. Now, they would find faults with the documents. Threaten with challans. Make a few scooters and motorcycles stand under the trees. They had got the powers of traffic police with great difficulty. There is nothing wrong in taking advantage of the occasion, and extracting something.

Within two hours, Darshan had filled his bag with notes. At first, the C.R.P. jawans hesitated. They did not understand the documents. As the bag got heavier, their understanding of the documents increased. There were so many rules that a vehicle with all proper documents could also be challaned. Someone had no insurance, someone had not paid the tax, and then, another had not got the vehicle approved. If all this is alright, then, some one's lights are not working; the glasses of another have not been blackened; and yet another, has bad light. You can also challan them for parking the car on the wrong side. If a vehicle cannot be touched on any count, then you can be slightly rude to its driver, put his license in your pocket, and challan him for driving without a license. He would have to go to the courts with you, and also bring some recommendation to get his license back.

The taxi and truck drivers take out their wallets before they hand over the documents. And give a twenty without being asked. They may be from Delhi or South, or even Mumbai. What is the sense in going to the court? One needs to be silent and plead guilty. You need a lawyer, spend money on your trips back, get guarantors. Here, you can get rid of them for only twenty. There, everything depends on the mood of the judge. If he is irritated, he may slap a fine of five hundred on you. If he is in good mood, then he may let you go in fifty. Then, you bribe the court clerks, readers, and various other court employees. There is nothing except harassment; even while fining the judge will take the side of the police. The truck and car drivers know all this well. That is why they give money like good sons!

Those on scooters, squabble. The C.R.P. did not like their squabbling. If not twenty, then they should give at least ten. They increased their harshness with the scooter riders.

Darshan had to intervene, when there was an altercation with a babu. The babu was saying that he is the brother-in-law of the public prosecutor, Surendra Kumar. This scooter belonged to the lawyer. He had only borrowed it. The papers were in the dicky. He doesn't have the key. The C.R.P. jawans were not willing to accept his plea. There were no documents, and it could be confiscated. Nathu had moved away. He knew that the scooter actually belonged to the public prosecutor. He had himself got petrol for it several times. But he thought there was no harm in the C.R.P. boys earning something, if they could. Even if the advocate complains then the mistake could be attributed to the C.R.P.. Darshan was upset at Nathu's greediness. These fools do not know anything, but at least Nathu should be more careful. We have to deal with government lawyers the whole day. One should not spoil the game just for mere twenty or thirty rupees. Darshan let the scooter go, and also admonished the

jawans. It is only the police which can examine documents. They do not have any such powers. Then, they should also be more careful in assessing people they are dealing with, lest they create a problem for themselves.

Once again, Darshan had understood the delicacy of the situation.

After the meeting with the citizens had come to an end, Khan held a meeting with his officers. All the security parties at the various check points were alerted as soon as the meeting ended. A curfew was to be imposed in the town in a short while, and a house-to-house search would begin. The culprits can make an attempt to flee the town. It is essential that the checking parties are very alert and careful.

Darshan, again, understood the situation. Whatever money had been so far collected, he divided it between all.

Once again, the kidnapers were to be hunted with all care.

In the new phase, their first victim was the liquor contractor. Sham Lal was himself driving the jeep. His daughter and daughter-in-law were sitting at the back. They had their children with them, who were asleep. The tilaks on their foreheads showed that they were returning from some wedding, or from some religious trip.

Darshan tried to tell the jawans that this is the contractor's jeep. They are prosperous people. They do not indulge in such activities, but the jawans did not budge. The faces of the children were covered with chunnies. There were tin boxes, baskets of fruit and other things. A search was called for in their opinion. Kidnappers can adopt any disguise. In the case of bank dacoity, at Bhaunchun, even a woman was involved. Many extremists skip out under the cover of women and children. Whatever the Punjab police may say, they will not let jeep pass without a search.

Darshan gave up in face of their insistence. He made a show of apology to the contractors. He was helpless. He went and stood some fifty steps away and turned his face the other way to exhibit his annoyance.

With what face could he search their jeep? They were very friendly. You could take as much whisky as you wanted, whenever you wanted. They never showed any irritation. They were also willing to help financially, in times of need. They have good relations with many captains and commissioners. They never say no for any work. They gave their vehicle, spent money, and it would be used by Darshan for his own personal work.

When the jawans insisted that the women get off the jeep, then, Darshan angrily abused them in his mind. Darshan took this as his insult. But what could he do? It was a delicate affair. If Darshan were to stop them, they may complain against him to their officers. People are already blaming the police. He kept quiet, and watched the fair, buxom women with children in their arms, get off the jeep.

With his heavy body, it was very painful for the contractor to get out of the jeep. He was sweating heavily, and the heavy gold chain round his neck got entangled in the clip of the pen in his pocket, and broke. He nearly fell down.

This paunchy contractor had been slim as a reed some fifteen years ago. Whole day long he would be in his seat at the country liquor shop, near the gate. At that time

he was only an employee. He was an expert at his job, and even his masters would consult him about everything! Darshan's visit to the shop pleased him. He would give him plenty to drink. He would cook meat once in a week or ten days. Darshan was attached to the contractor since those days.

It was his luck that the contractors were divided into two groups. Dhani Ram had money, but no experience, and Sham Lal had experience, though no money. Both started working as equal partners.

That was a different time; today it's an entirely different time. Shamlal has been collecting money on all sides. His boys, who used to wash plates at the liquor shop, move in cars. They are married into stinking rich families, to beautiful girls. They have good looking children.

Darshan laughed when he saw Nathu leering at the sethanis, loaded with gold round their necks and arms. Had he been in the thana, he would have asked them to take off their jewellery on the pretext of body search. He would have also slipped off at least one piece of jewellery into his pocket. That was impossible here.

The daughter-in-law had to bend a little to get off the jeep. Her heavy breasts could be clearly seen, as she bent. These women were so delectable!

Pala went to stand near the jeep, to enjoy these sights at first hand. He was dead drunk. Could not even stand up straight.

The sethani was overwhelmed by the stink emanating from Pala's body. Holding her child with one hand, she covered her nose with her pallu.

All his intoxication dropped off and Pala started checking the boxes in the jeep, muttering all the time. One of them contained apples, and the other had oranges. The basket was full of bananas.

They had drunk a full bottle of whisky neat. They had not eaten anything. He cleverly snatched a few apples and five seven oranges, and peeling them, walked off.

The jawans tried to match the sleeping children with the photograph of Bunty. He was a sickly child, and these children were healthy.

Darshan came back to the jeep after he got the signal from the jawans. In an attempt to lessen the anger of the contractor, he again apologized.

The contractor was about to start the jeep, when Nathu whispered something in Darshan's ears. Darshan also seemed to recollect something. Night was about to fall. It was time to eat. One should ask for a note from the contractor.

'It is nothing! You people may not have let Sham Lal go, but he is not going to disappoint you. Shamlalji, give them a note. He has been drinking since morning, even then he doesn't stop!'

Darshan could see that the contractor's anger had not yet subsided. That is why he had stretched his hand to his pen. Darshan held out his own pen. Took out a two rupee note from his pocket. So that he could sign on that.

The contractor wrote on the note, unwillingly.

After the jeep had left, Darshan looked at the note! He was incensed. Only two bottles and that also of country liquor! He very well knew that Darshan did not touch country liquor. Then he became calm. The contractor had to take his revenge.

The message to impose curfew in the town had been received.

Traffic was stopped. There was none coming from the town. If a vehicle came from outside, it was to be stopped there. If anyone wanted to return, he could do so.

It was almost dark. There was silence all around.

When he saw people returning home Pala was worried. No bus would now go to the town, and his village was at a distance of twenty miles. If he is delayed a little more, then, even the workers going to the village would leave. He was drunk, and could not even ride a bicycle. No one would come this side now. Even if someone does come, Pala's absence is not going to make the Police army weak. There are plenty of jawans around.

Pala came up to Darshan slyly and asked for permission to leave. Nathu too was keen to leave. Pal's case for permission was stronger. Nathu was older, if he doesn't go home for four days, it does not matter. But, Pala was just got married. He must go home.

Darshan decided in favour of Pala. He immediately handed over his rifle to Nathu. Took off his turban and put it in his bag, and changed his shirt to look like a college going boy. Slinging the bag on his shoulder, he waited for a lift.

The vehicle, which had brought food for the jawans, gave them the news that an intense search was being conducted in the town. Many parties have been recalled from the entry points, and asked to help in the search. Under these conditions, it is impossible for any officer to come this side to check.

Darshan sent for cots. He took the home guard from the rope duty, and sent him to nearby dhaba for scrambled eggs, meat and some savouries. The jawans refused to drink while on duty. The only ones to drink were Nathu and Darshan, and they would fill the glass for the home guard now and then. With this temptation, he was eagerly working for them.

Darshan was about to tell the jawans to go and rest, when a speeding vehicle from Bhatinda gave them a fright. They could not make out anything whether it was a truck or a bus because of the strong lights.

Darshan was signaling with a torch, as if the sleeping driver could not see anything.

The agitated jawans took positions in the bunkers. If the need arose, they could blow up the tyres and also hit the driver.

Had the truck come a little closer, he would have given the order to fire. He heaved sigh of relief when Zaila stepped down from the truck.

'Oye, you? Saala, you are racing the truck as if you owned the area! Luck has favoured you. Had you moved a little forward, you would have been lying here on the ground!' Darshan told him, as he embraced Zaila.

When they saw Darshan and Zaila embrace each other, the jawans came out of their bunkers.

‘I had learnt on the road that the traffic is being stopped. But with you here, why should I be afraid! I wanted to bring in the truck.’

Zaila had been in Rajasthan since last week. He had guessed that checking is going on. But, it was not safe to travel with a load worth two lakhs in an unknown area. There is no danger when one is on one’s own ground. With this thought in mind, he had raced through, handing out money at various check points. The truck was to go to the godown from here. This was the last point.

‘This is the cattle feed for the elder Sardar.... I have to take it to their poultry farm.’ He gave his message in signs. There is opium in the truck. It belonged to him and had to go to the godown. He is ready for service.

Darshan had a load worth two lakhs under his hand. He could confiscate the truck and win accolades from the department. The other side of the picture was also known to Darshan. He could lose his rank and he could also lose his job. Zaila was not a small man. He had long arms. He had been a partner with more than half of the deputies in the state. Many jathedars and khadi wearers waited on him all the time. He gives money to all the contestants at every election. If a politician did not help him, he wouldn’t oppose him as well. If he made out a case, it would be like making an enemy of the crocodile while living in the river.

The other way was to take the money quietly, and let the truck go. Zaila knew Darshan’s nature well. He always took a hefty amount. At one hundred a sack, it would come to ten thousand. Zaila was getting upset about Darshan’s silence for so long. Who knows, what would he come out with? Whatever he says, would have to be accepted. He told him the price of letting the truck go with a gesture.

In the presence of the giant like Zaila, Darshan felt like a pygmy. Darshan had known Zaila since his childhood, when he used to accompany his mother to sweep the thana. Darshan had seen all the changes in Zaila’s fortune. Clad in a tattered kurta; with a running nose; bleary, mud filled eyes; and hair full of lice. He would go about, meuling the whole day long after his sweeper mother. Many a times, Darshan had tipped him four annas or eight annas, and told him, to stop crying. When he grew up a little, he began doing small errands for the thana staff. Sometimes he would fetch tea; and at times, get clothes ironed; and yet again, help in cleaning the store house. When he grew older, he started drinking with the police staff. People started taking advantage of his acquaintance with the police. He started getting commission for the police; started fixing monthly payments, and also extracting money.

Growing up more, he became a partner with Pahariya. Whatever illegal goods were confiscated by the police, Paharia and Zail bought those goods. Gradually, he became a wholesaler. Now, the thanedars began cultivating him. Constables would stand before his bungalow for hours for a bottle.

He owns five trucks, country liquor shops, owns a big bungalow near the canal. One full truck vanishes in an underground godown in a flash. He owns telephones. He has a grand guest room. There are a couple of South Indian women for the service of

guests and visiting police officers. All deals are concluded on the phone. Darshan was surprised to see him driving the truck himself.

After some thought, Zaila accepted Darshan's demand. There was one condition. Nathu should accompany him to the godown, in the truck. It would be his responsibility to take the truck safely to the godown. If there is a constable sitting in the truck, no one will stop him. If anyone stops him, then, Nathu should get down and say that this truck is being plied under the sahib's orders.

Zaila was, at that time, empty handed. He would give the fee to Nathu when he reaches his bungalow.

Zaila wanted to leave some money for the jawans. Darshan stopped him. If he does that, then they would become suspicious. Yes, if he has whisky, he should give two bottles. His hangover was wearing off. The shops were now closed.

Jumping like a monkey, Zaila immediately took out a whiskey carton from the tool box.

They both took a large peg each to seal the deal. It was dangerous for all of them to delay any longer.

Having put Nathu on the truck, Darshan poured two more pegs into his throat. He began snoring the moment he lay down on the cot.

IX

Pritam Singh, the station head officer, suffered most, by the matter being blown out of proportion. Nothing would come out of all this running about and investigation, but money was being spent as if a wedding was taking place. Every day some new company would come: one day it is C.R.P., and the next day it will be B.S.F.. All the dharamshalas and temples in the town were full of them Khan has sent for more force. There is no problem about putting up the force, but arrangements to feed them have to be made.

Some officer or the other arrives daily. He may be from the Home Guard, or even from the stores, but arranging for their meals is the responsibility of the police department.

What can those, who pay for this do? The police have practically flushed out everything from Ved, who runs the Satta business. As such, with in all this running about and police snooping everywhere, his business has virtually stopped. On top of it, providing ration for their meals is his responsibility. Pritam can understand his situation, but Pritam's subordinates do not. On the pretext of getting a bottle, constables start lining up at his door as soon as it starts getting dark. That is the time to earn some money. When Pritam scolded them a couple of times, they were affronted, started muttering:

'He snatches his monthly on the first of every month; as if one bottle of ours is going to make him a beggar!'

Good or bad, Ved is taking care of the supply of ration.

From where would the liquor for the officers come? They always demand the best brand. They may drink as much country liquor as they want. The contractor does not give Peter Scot, MacDowell or Aristocrat. But, Pritam cannot be strict. Firstly, it is said that some ministers are partners in these country liquor contracts. Whenever a minister comes this way, he reprimands the police, on some pretext or the other. Secondly, the contractors pay a fixed monthly fee. They are so rude that they refuse to make any adjustments in expenses. Major doesn't even know how to talk properly; he started shouting on the phone itself.

'Under the prevailing circumstances, no one knows which thanedar may be transferred. Then, what would we do? No concession will be given by those who will come to collect money. They will take each and every paisa!'

When he asked Shamu, he laughed it away.

'You earn plenty! If you get a little less one month, why crib! Let us also earn some money. Sometimes spend from your own pocket! You are always filling it.'

This trouble was not yet over, and Khan had started the search in the town. Pritam Singh was given charge of the operation. Had it been some other person, Pritam could have been free. Those who give monthly could very easily have said that they are not responsible for the police of the whole district. Giving a 'monthly' means that neither the S.H.O. nor any other officer would harass them. They are not responsible for the police coming from outside. If you get a monthly, and then go and carry out a raid, then how can you show face them?

How many can Pritam save? He started feeling as if the town was teeming with criminals. The Model Town, everyone thinks of as a respectable place, is the place where most number of thefts takes place. He is most worried about the pradhan of the Vyopar Mandal. His business of selling gas cylinders in black is flourishing. He sells a cylinder costing sixty, for one hundred and sixty. If a customer wants to retain the cylinder, then he charges a thousand instead of five hundred. He doesn't let anyone else do this business in the town, nor does he let anyone else set up a gas agency. The Jains tried to get the agency several times, but he quickly filed some complaints against them, and got the permission cancelled. He himself sells it openly from his shop. He supplies to the smaller shops in various areas, gives a commission of ten rupees to the shopkeeper. His garage is full of cylinders. That colony is being searched by inspector Ami Chand. Neither does he take any bribe, nor does he let any criminal go. He is a Pandit. He is well acquainted with the tricks resorted to by tradesmen. Pradhan may rave and rant at others, but he is terribly afraid of Ami Chand. In one threat, all the secrets will come tumbling out. How much money does he pay to Pritam Singh and how much is given to the City Incharge. The coward will spill out everything. He keeps a full account of the cylinders he gives free to the constables and hawaldars. The pradhan was present at the meeting. There was a talk of curfew and search. If he has taken a hint, then it is good, or else, there would be a case against him under 7 E.C. and a case of corruption would be slapped against Pritam also.

Somehow Mahindroo should be informed at Aagwar. He is so daring that he sits with his packets in the open. His wife has a weighing balance at home. They sell opium so easily, as if they are selling melons or cucumbers. Pritam had often advised him that this sort of daring is bad, but it has no effect on him. He looks at his wife and laughs. She goes straight to the Deputy. No subordinate can dare to spoil his relations with the Deputy. Now, she is middle-aged, but, when she was young, she used to openly spend nights with Captain Sharma. He is a D.I.G. now. Whenever there is a problem, she goes to him even now. He is a lover boy, and immediately flashes wireless messages all over.

Apart from this, Mahindroo is good at accounts, and as soon as the month begins, he pays everyone his due, rank by rank. He is irritated by free favours. If an officer asks even for ten grams, he charges full money. If more is needed, he does not hesitate about even complaining against one, and get him arrested. He allows none to have an upper hand. Khan is a sworn enemy of smugglers. If he finds even a trace of opium, he is bound to take the harshest action against Mahindroo. Pritam will also be sent to the lines. How can that damn Mahindroo be informed? He could not figure that out.

He was afraid of Babu and Gheela in the Sansi area. It would be better that they are home, but not with any stolen goods. Though, the thieves follow a rule that they sell off all stolen goods before coming home. Gheela and Babu have invented a new method of committing theft. They target only the rich. Their first victims are bank managers and insurance people. Earlier, when they struck at teachers' and clerks' houses, there were agitations against the police for days. Their unions would take out processions against the police. The police would have to arrest the thieves. The rich do not do that. On the other hand, they are happy. They are only concerned with reporting of the theft, and getting a copy of the report. Their goods are already insured. They report a bigger theft than has actually taken place and make a bigger claim. If anything is recovered, even then, they will ask the police to keep the goods recovered with them, so that they don't have to return the money received in claim. This keeps the thieves happy, and the police do not have to run about. If any stolen goods are found in their houses, there is bound to be trouble. Khan is going to ask, when these two are bad characters, history sheeters, why were they not summoned to the thana, why were their premises not raided? They may not be able to remove the goods because of the curfew. Mahindroo and pradhan will ultimately somehow manage to wriggle out, but these good-for-nothings cannot do anything.

And Inspector Bujha Singh has been given that area. He is Pritam's enemy number one. Bujha Singh has been in the C.I.D. for many years. Both of them had enlisted at the same time. Became sub inspectors at the same time. But, when he happened to kill a man, his bad time began. He was suspended, and his promotions were stopped. Pritam is the S.H.O. of an A class thana, and Bujha Singh obviously can't digest that. He is always targeting Pritam. He complains against him directly to the boss. Recently, he had joined the C.I.A. people and issued summons to addicts. Once he had sent for force from Sangrur, and had raided the premises of Ved, the sattawala. He had wanted to prove to the boss that Pritam is sleeping over this. Had not Pritam talked directly to Sahib, he would have lost the thana long back. Bujha

Singh has his eye on the city thana. He keeps sending recommendations, off and on, to Sahib. He would not let this opportunity to attend on Khan go waste. He is bound to create trouble for Pritam.

The same is true of the twine twisters' colony. It is there that the largest number of Pritam's henchmen lives.

There is bound to be something lying at Bhana's and Sadhu's homes. Both are truck drivers. Therefore, their modus operandi of committing thefts is different. They lift things from the loads that they carry: a package of clothes here, a box of tea and a sack of cloves there. They are very clever.. They keep a keen eye on the goods as they are being loaded. They quickly pick out the goods from the black market. The owner is afraid of complaining, either to the police or to them. They lift good things. Their earnings are good. Last time they had given Pritam a bagful of cashew nuts; once, a box of cloves. If this time, something like this is recovered in their homes, then what would they do?

You can raid Santu whenever you want. His house is full of cans and tubes of illegal liquor; you can also find full drums too. If you are looking for dregs of country liquor, you can search the refuse heap. When you are passing by his house, you feel the strong stench of liquor. This is known to each and every person at the thana. More than half of the thana is Pritam's enemy. If anyone wants to humiliate him, Santu's house alone is enough. Most people of the thana drink there, and while leaving, carry a couple of bottles home. They also do not take any time to betray each other. The situation there was extremely difficult for Pritam.

The rest may still be able to fend for them, but Nihalo is sure to get Pritam caught. She has already submitted a file full of applications. Pritam had not taken that big an amount from the Sardars, as he has spent on this case. She has sent complaints to all and sundry from the district complaints committee to the prime minister. If she were to hear that Khan is in town, then dragging her cripple son, she would limp all the way to appear before him. She would raise hell with her raving and ranting, the bitch!

Had Pritam even filed a small complaint at that time, there would have been no problem. But, at that time it seemed that the Sardars would surely come to a compromise. He kept on postponing filing the case. One day, two days, three days, but somehow Sardars, could not come to a compromise. Later on, the advocate gave the Sardar some other advice. The report has been delayed by four days. If a case is filed now, even then, they would be released. There is no sense in smearing dirt on them.

The whole affair boomeranged on Pritam. He used to drink with the Sardars. It was this which cost him dear. Otherwise the Sardars were guilty. Earlier also, Nihalo used to collect kindling for her furnace from their fields. That day her daughter was with her. The sons of the Sardars fell for the girl. When Nihalo scolded them, they abused her. When her son intervened, they broke his arm with a rod. When Nihalo rushed to save her son, they broke her legs as well. Their arms and legs are plastered for over a month. Doctors wanted to amputate her leg. Pritam had stopped the doctors. He wanted Nihalo to come to an agreement. Pritam was willing to give four-five

thousand. Let her leave him. If a person like Khan were to hear about it, then he would surely dismiss him.

The same problem was here as well. Pritam Singh had asked to be given charge of the search of the twine twisters' area. No one heeded him. That party has been put under Inspector Sardul Singh, who has been with the C.I.A. for the last five years. Pritam has been inspector for only a year, while he is about to become a Deputy. Many times he has raised objections in meetings. He has been dislocated in such a manner, that it has become difficult for him to get his bearings again. One needs a briefcase full of currency to become an S.H.O. This is possible only for a person who has already been the S.H.O. of a thana. The C.I.A. people don't have such money. Sardul Singh would go all out to see that at least four-five arrests are made, so that he can justify himself before Khan. Last month, he had stage managed the capture of a gang of thieves! Had photographs taken, and got them printed in the newspapers for many days. It had seemed to Pritam that his stars were helping him.

By making Sardul the in-charge of the party searching the twine twisters' courtyard, the Deputy had taken his revenge on Pritam. People rightly say that the deputy is like a camel in enmity. You can never trust him; he can harbour a grudge for twenty years and more. But Pritam had thought that the matter had ended after his humble apology.

It had happened during the time when, imitating the big thugs of Sirhind, many small thugs had set up shops everywhere. Some would give double the money you deposit with him after fifteen days, and another would give a motorcycle for five hundred, after a week. Such shops were growing like mushrooms in every lane. People also forgot all caution and rushed to them. With crowds everywhere, the police, occasionally, had to resort to lathi-charge.

The Nabha people had set up shop in this town. They had gone to S.D.M.'s bungalow with a colour T.V. and a Japanese V.C.R. and got the permission to set up the shop. When the tehsildar came to know, he sent for a refrigerator. The reader got a cooler by depositing a hundred rupees. The B.D.O. took a motorcycle. The thana heard about it only after the shop had been siphoned off. If the constables took tape recorders, washing machines; the hawaldars grabbed sewing machines, radio and sofa sets. The younger thanedars took steel almirahs and dining sets. When the Deputy visited the shop, there was nothing for him to take. He took fifty thousand. It is rumoured that he took a Fiat car. Whatever it was, the Deputy had taken a large bribe. When it was Pritam's turn, the Deputy telephoned to say that the Nabha people should not be harassed. He had to back off. The thugs did send him a few things, but they did not even add up to one-hundredth of his expectations. He waited for the right opportunity with patience.

Such schemes of theft do not last many days. After ten days, the shop was being emptied. People pressed for the return of their money. When a little pressure was applied on them, they ran away overnight. For three days the Yuva Sangh people organized a strike; asked that the culprits be arrested. Again, the Nabhawalas struck a deal with the Deputy. The Deputy himself stood at the shop at night, and got the goods loaded in a truck and sent it off.

Again, the Sangh took out processions. The chief minister intervened, and a case was filed against them. When the lock of the shop was broken and records were examined, it came to light that they had collected at least fifteen lakhs in the town. Police raided many places but failed to find them. People tried to find out about them. They were in a hotel in Delhi, living life to the hilt. When, Pritam, taking courage, did arrest them, they gave him ten thousand, only to see that they are produced before a court in Delhi. This was a legal point. They got bail through some central minister. The Deputy was still annoyed with him that he had taken ten thousand from his people.

He could do nothing else at that time, but, now by making Sardul Singh the in-charge of the party to the twine twisters', he was trying to create problems for Pritam.

Sardul Singh has selected rouges as his hawaldars. The first was Banta Singh. When Banta Singh was first posted here, Pritam had tried his best to convince sahib that he should not send this rebellious piece here. He is himself prone to squabble, and he will mislead others. Sahib had a very good excuse. No one else was willing to have him. He sits in the police lines and spouts against the Captain. After all, he has to be posted somewhere. Banta Singh was depressed. He was being denied promotion for the last fifteen years. He still had about five year of service left. He is not bothered about anyone. He is always inciting others. He was dismissed during the police agitation, but was reinstated when he won the case. These days, he has been full of complaints against everyone. He was not bothered if the officer sitting in front is the Captain, D.I.G., or D.G.P. He thinks himself to be a big leader, and treats everyone else as dirt.

Once, he had picked up a quarrel with the M.L.A. The whole department was happy that he would now be either dismissed or transferred from the district. No officer spoke up for him. But it was the M.L.A. who stopped coming to the thana, out of shame. He keeps complaining about Pritam to the ministers. He believes that Pritam had deliberately instigated Banta against him. Banta knows each and every criminal. If he gets a chance to make out a case, then he will first get a written statement from the guilty. How much he gives to which policeman. Then, he will take the statement directly to the D.G.P.

As if Sardul and Banta are not enough, now Sadha Singh is also with them. Pritam had let off the men running the still that Sadha Singh had captured, and since that day he has become a bitter enemy of Pritam Singh. After all, Pritam Singh is the S.H.O. He can catch anyone he wants, and let anyone he wants, to go. If he is going to be frightened by a hawaldar, then, what price his being a thanedar? Pritam had told those Jats to give Sadha Singh two thousand before they left. Five thousand was Pritam's fee. If they did not do that, and gave him only five hundred, how can Pritam be blamed for it? He should have insisted on two thousand or returned the five hundred! Who is bothered about hawaldars? A thanedar has to do many things free of cost. Many times you can share the expenses. But, some have to be kept confidential. Those days, the daughter of a High Court judge was getting married. The magistrate had asked Pritam to arrange for a refrigerator. Had Pritam wanted, he could have asked the investigators to share the cost. This way, the magistrate's secret would have been out. Pritam quietly sent the refrigerator. But this money was not going to come

out of Pritma's salary. These fools do not have this much of sense that the S.H.O. has a load of responsibilities; he is not like them, that whatever they earn, they pocket it and walk out.

Since then, Sadha Singh has been up in arms against him. Pritam had taken what was, rightly his share. That was Sadha's capture. If not five, then at least three should have been given to him. That still was being run by the guilty since a year. No one had the guts to catch him. It was Sadha who had dared to do so, and he should have got his due. Banta agreed with him on all counts. He was inciting him against Pritam.

With Bunty's kidnapping, Pritam's bad time had begun.

Praying for solace, he watched police parties being formed.

He felt that these police parties were not being formed to look for Bunty, but, were being formed to collect evidence against Pritam so that he could be dismissed from service.

X

Neither was the town new for Ami Chand, nor was Ami Chand a stranger to the town.

Though he had grown hair and had a beard, and looked a Sikh, but, everybody knew that he was a Brahmin by caste. The whole town called him Sharma.

He was a pandit not only by caste, but he was very religious as well. He used to offer prayers in the mornings and evenings. He hated liquor, eggs and would not touch other women; he also did not let any ill-gotten money enter his home.

Honesty and a stern nature had enabled him to rule the hearts of the town people. People of every town took delegations to meet sahib and asked for Ami Chand's posting to their town.

He had worked for full eleven years in this town. He had come to this town as a hawaldar. When he was promoted as A.S.I., he became the city in-charge, when he became a sub-inspector then the people organized a dharna. Sahib had to enhance the rank of the city in-charge. Earlier, an A.S.I. was the city in-charge but since then, this office is held by a sub-inspector.

When the people of Model Town learnt that Ami Chand's party was to search their bungalows, they thanked God time and again. Had it been some other officer, it would have been bad for them. People would have had to do so many things and a lot of running about. The real issue was that of finding Bunty. The police would have taken control of the account books of the traders. Someone would have gone to the store; another would have entered the kitchen. If the police enter your house, they take away more than what the thieves take away. Thieves act surreptitiously, but these people loot you before your eyes. If Ami Chand would be there, this sort of looting

would not take place. People had not forgotten the day when he had beaten a drunken constable at the chowk, and had sent him to the lock up after taking off his uniform.

Ami Chand did not think it necessary to take a big force to the Model Town. Four constables and a hawaldar were enough. He was aware that the rich are neither concerned with any religious ritual, nor politics. They have only one religion: collecting as much money as they can. Who is mad enough to leave their palace like bungalows, fairy like beautiful wives and all the comforts of their houses and go to prison? He had opposed the idea of a search of Model Town even at the meeting. Khan agreed with him but had to concede to the people's opinion.

Ami Chand had been ordered to start the search from the Park side.

There reigns a death like silence in Model Town even on a good day. People normally sit at home. The roads are empty even during the day. Rarely can you hear a scooter or a car passing by the road. One can hear the sound of a gate being opened. Once the car is brought in, all is silent again. But even this much was missing because of the curfew. Leaves that the trees had shed had a free run on the roads. One could hear dogs barking in their bungalows, as if welcoming the police.

The first bungalow belonged to Ram Chand Lotia. When they rang the bell, Ram Chand's eldest son, Suraj Bhan, himself opened the door. Ami Chand nearly laughed when he saw Suraj Bhan's fat body in a silken dressing gown. Is it the same Suraj Bhan whom Ami Chand had kept in the thana the whole day, after blackening his face? In these last six-seven years he had traversed the road from earth to sky! At that time he was a well-built young man, studying in first year in college. He was not much worried about his studies. His father's shop was doing well. Iron was being sold at sky high price. The Lala had only two sons. The younger one had been adopted by his maternal family. The business was to be his. He spent freely. Rode a motorcycle. He was always running after girls. Haunting the girls' college; from the college to the bus stand; from there to the cinema. The scared girls did not complain about him. His father was a member of the management committee of the college. The principal could not deal with him strictly. On the other hand, the girls would get a bad name.

When Ami Chand came to the city, he came to know about Suraj Bhan's waywardness. He summoned the boys and explained things to them and also gave them advice. Those who were aware of Ami Chand's nature listened to him. To Suraj Bhan, this seemed like a joke. The first time, Ami Chand deflated the tyres of his motorcycle; next time, Ami Chand dragged him in the bazaar like a he goat. The Lotias pleaded with him. But, Ami Chand blackened his face, took him in a procession, and only then, let him go.

'How are you, son?' Ami Chand asked catching him by the arm as Suraj was bending to touch his feet.

Suraj Bhan had become a man after having had his face blackened. Ashamed of himself, he had left town that very next day. He did not come back till he had proved himself as a businessman. He was now a bigger success than his father. He gave Ami Chand the credit for his success.

Suraj Bhan insisted that Ami Chand should come in, and should at least drink some tea. But, Ami Chand did not have the time. He explained why he was there, and asked for help in finding Bunty. Suraj was ready for the search. Ami Chand knew that there was no need to search this kothi, and, after a cursory search, went ahead.

The next bungalow was that of the naib tehsildar. Garewal. When he takes a bribe, it has to be a hefty amount. If there is any complaint against him, he becomes as meek as a calf. When Ami Chand was a hawaldar, at that time he was a patwari. He had been caught by the vigilance while taking a bribe of fifty rupees. He kept fainting the whole day long while sitting at the thana; kept rushing to the toilet the whole day long. No one even talked to him except his brother-in-laws. But, he was let off after he had bribed them all. He was also promoted after his release. Another attempt – another promotion and he became a naib-tehsildar. After his promotion, he earned a lot of money, as if he had discovered a magic wand. He took full advantage of his previous experience, and maintained good relations with his senior officers. He would invite the vigilance officers – from hawaldar to the Deputy, to his home once or twice a month, for drinks. No one could dare to complain about him. He was only concerned with earning money. What would he do with Bunty or his kidnappers? Ami Chand read the name plate and went on to the next bungalow.

The next bungalow belonged to Faquir Chand Shukla. He was a lawyer. A lawyer may advise a client to be brave, but he would think ten times before doing something illegal. Ami Chand wanted to move ahead, but, then, it occurred to him that he was a criminal lawyer and one never knows if he may be sheltering some criminal here. Lawyers are known to shelter thieves and dacoits in their cabins to save them from arrest, and are also known to take them in their cars to their hide outs. And, it is widely known that they give shelter to them in their own homes till they are able to arrange bail for them.

This lawyer is known for such things: making the witness go back on their statements; to get changes done in the list of things that have been confiscated; to be hand in gloves with the public prosecutor. All this forms part of his legal work. He also influences the judges.

Once he had met Ami Chand also. He told him that he had given the judge a Fiat car. He would release the accused in any case. He can also get thirty thousand rupees for Ami Chand. And, if he is willing to share, then he can get fifty thousand also. Ami Chand had exposed him in the open court. After that, he refused to take any case where Ami Chand was in charge.

He had a flourishing practice. He had different categories of clients. He could do anything for money. Ami Chand felt it was essential to search the lawyer's residence. After the bell was rung, it was found that Shukla ji was not at home. He had gone to Chandigarh in connection with some case. Ami Chand couldn't believe this. This could even be a ploy to turn the police away at the gate.

Ami Chand explained the reason for his being there to the daughter-in-law of the advocate. At first, she was hesitant. There was no one else at home, except the servants. When Ami Chand introduced himself, she consented.

The daughter-in-law, wrapped in a heavy silk sari, led them to the verandah of the bungalow. To reach there, they had to cross a fifty feet wide lawn. Badminton net was up in the lawn.

The constables were all staring at the beautiful slim daughter-in-law. Ami Chand was trying to assess the worth of the jewellery she was wearing. If not more, it was at least worth thirty to forty thousand rupees. If she is wearing all this jewellery at home, how much jewellery would she be wearing when she goes out to attend weddings? From this one can assess how wealthy Shukla is!

The daughter-in-law, trailing waves of expensive foreign perfumes, left them standing at the door, and went, to open the door to the lawyer's office. She also alerted her mother-in-law. Mrs. Shukla tried to straighten out the things that were scattered in the sitting room. She was not surprised to see the police at home. Shukla was considered a police friendly lawyer. The police was often known to visit their bungalow in connection with cases.

Ami Chand was not interested in the office or in the drawing room either. He wanted to see the servant quarters and any extra rooms they may have for clients.

He threw a cursory glance at the office which was filled with books and legal papers. Who knows the fate of how many clients has Mr. Shukla sealed in these legal files!

From the office they were taken to the drawing room. Expensive sofas were waiting for them. Glasses of juice and plates full of dry fruits were brought in by the servant in no time. But Ami Chand did not sit down. The room was full of pictures, statues, paintings and other bric-a-brac. What Ami Chand was looking for was not here.

There were sounds of crying – Ami Chand was alerted. It seemed as if a child was screaming.

‘What is this?’ Ami Chand had not lost his reason, but his hand swiftly moved to his revolver. He threw a warning glance at his constables.

‘This is nothing. The children are sitting with the v.c.r.. Their tutor could not come because of the curfew. The children were playing pranks. We thought they would at least sit quietly’, Mrs. Shukla explained, walking into the hall.

The eight year old Madhu met the police men, as they were leaving the hall. ‘Uncle, keep the curfew for many days. We have to watch so many films!’ For Madhu, the curfew had come as a blessing. She was pleading for it to be extended.

‘Do you know Bunty? Have you seen him anywhere?’ Madhu seemed a good informer to Ami Chand. He picked her up in his arms.

‘I know him, uncle, but have not seen him anywhere. Find him fast. His mother must be crying. He also must be crying.’ Talking about him, tears came to her eyes, and, Anu, who was older to her, also started crying.

After having questioned the children, Ami Chand was satisfied. There was no need for any further search.

The next bungalow belonged to the overseer of P.W.D. department (B and R), Jassal. He had also swallowed cement and iron! Material belonging to the government had been used less on government buildings, and more on his house, which had so much of marble that it looked like the house of an immensely rich man. If you were to look at his background, it would be found that his father earned his living by stitching police uniforms. He used to sit in front of Ramgarhia's shop. The overseer must be busy drinking. Ami Chand had no time to squabble with a drunkard.

Ami Chand had a desire to look into the palace of Lala Chajju Ram. Not for Bunty, but to have a look at the bar for which this kothi was famous. Those who knew said that there was a grand bar in the lobby of the bungalow. All types of whiskey, Indian and foreign, were displayed there. In the evenings, a bartender would serve liquor, in the true film-style; a kitty party is held at least twice a week; there is also dance, and plenty of fun and frolic. As long as Ami Chand is posted in the city, the bar is closed. Juice is served in place of whiskey.

It is well known that Ami Chand hates liquor. No drunkard dare come out in the bazaar in an inebriated state. The contractors dare not offer anyone even a glass of water. Otherwise, contractors turn their compounds into drinking bars. They put a pitcher full of water and a glass in one corner. If nothing else, they can collect forty-fifty empty bottles by the morning. They can get at least thirty rupees by selling them, and this pays for the servant. They break these earthen pots when they hear that Ami Chand has been posted there. Venders selling dahibhallas, pakoras and fish also forget jugs and glasses. They may suffer a loss, but do not let any drunk stand near their carts. Ami Chand is known to have stripped drunks in the bazaar and beaten them. He would send for the women of their families and humiliate them in their presence. That is why Chajju Ram's bar would also be closed.

The watch man at the gate ran inside when he saw Ami Chand coming towards the bungalow.

When the bell was rung, he turned back. There were signs of worry on his face, and he was panting.

'Come.. come, Sahib... come... ' with this the chowkidar guided him to the drawing room.

'Where is Lalaji? Call him. I want to search the kothi.' When Ami Chand shouted, the watchman trembled. He could not decide whether to go in or not.

Waiting for the seth, Ami Chand thought of the days when the seth was on the verge of bankruptcy. At that time, he had a cotton mill. He had bought large quantities of cotton. He had perhaps hoped that the rates of cotton would go up again, the way they had gone up last year. But, to his bad luck, the rates kept going down. Had he not been a little clever, Chajju Ram could not have cleared off his loans even after selling all of his property, including his children!

He consulted his friends. One of them suggested that he should get his mill insured for fifty lakhs. And, then it should be set on fire and the compensation claimed. This was the only way of paying off his debts.

Those days, Ami Chand was the city in-charge here. The whole town was glittering with fire at two in the night. A huge fire had assumed terrible proportion in the east of the town. An agitated Ami Chand tried to contact the S.D.M. and the fire brigade, but found their phones dead. No one had even informed police about the fire. When Ami Chand reached the spot, he found that Lala's mill was ablaze. A few workers were trying to douse the fire with the help of buckets. Neighbours were very worried, for the fire could reach their houses.

Ami Chand rang for the fire brigade. The phone was working. By the time fire could be controlled, everything had been destroyed.

In the morning, Lalaji had come to file a report. Ami Chand did not think that he had suffered a loss of forty lakhs. He had spent the night at the site. The cotton could not have been more than forty thousand. Ami Chand refused to file the report.

The Lala was terrified at Ami Chand's refusal. First, he got the S.D.M. to phone him. Sent him a blank cheque, he could write whatever amount he wanted.

Ami Chand threatened to sue him. There was a clear case of arson, and then a fraudulent claim for compensation against him.

Before Ami Chand could take an action against him, he was served with orders of his transfer. He was told to hand over within an hour and present himself at the Police lines. How was Ami Chand concerned? He was always prepared to move. He handed over the charge and presented himself at the Police lines.

After his transfer, Chajju Mal had got a claim of thirty lakhs. He has been in a very strong position since then.

It was after many years that he was to meet Chajju Mal.

Chajju Mal was afraid of coming face to face with Ami Chand. He was drunk, and then, he knew he had been responsible for getting Ami Chand transferred. He was not the only one who was drunk, many of his neighbours were also there with him. They were all at home because of the curfew. He had thought it was a good way of whiling away some time. Otherwise, they hardly met each other, because of their business preoccupations. Who could imagine that an old enemy would appear in this manner!

Chajju Mal begged his friends to plead with Ami Chand. At first, his friends were taken aback; they were all concerned about their own reputation. They kept quiet. They will take matters as they come.

He sent a message to the women of his family through the chowkidar. They should themselves help in the search. If Chajju Mal were to go before Ami Chand, he would never be able to face his own daughters or sisters. Ami Chand showed scant respect for anyone. Once, the M.L.A. had pleaded for a thief, and Ami Chand had scolded him thoroughly. The M.L.A. had made the mistake of calling him to his bungalow Ami Chand had said –

‘If I have some work at the bungalow, I'll come. If you have some work with me, you come here. Being an M.L.A., are you not ashamed of helping a thief?’ He

also entered a report in the daily-report register. The M.L.A. did not dare to come to the thana after that. Lala had no guts to face Ami Chand.

Ami Chand had not come to hunt out the drunks. His one and only purpose was Bunty. If he was not here, then there was no sense in Ami Chand staying on here.

How long could he avoid meeting Ami Chand? Finally, Chajju Mal had to come out.

‘Do you have any news of Bunty? Have you insured him somewhere?’ Ami Chand asked him sarcastically, sniffing at him.

Tears came to Chajju Mal’s eyes. He had grown such a big paunch, that despite all his efforts he could not bend to touch Ami Chand’s feet.

Ami Chand looked at him rather keenly. His belly had expanded by at least four-five inches. There was flesh around his neck also, and his checks were so bloated that his eyes seemed to have sunk deep into them.

Ami Chand turned to leave, after having made his point. He had no time to eat or drink anything. He went out of the bungalow swiftly.

The hawaldar’s kothi was no less than the overseer’s kothi. Looking at the huge mansion, Ami Chand’s heart was filled with sadness. Had he not taken a vow in the presence of sants that he would not accept any bribe all his life, he also would have been rolling in money. Even a constable has his worth; and he is, after all, an inspector. He had also tried to dismiss all this mere superstition, and tried to accept a bribe. First time he took money, his son fell ill and he recovered only when all that money had been spent. Ami Chand again vowed never to do it again. The second time he tried to accept a bribe, he himself met with an accident. Again, all the money was spent. In the bargain, he got his arms and legs broken. After that, he never dared to break his vows. Though, he did regret it.

He did not have the courage to stop at the hawaldar’s bungalow. He went ahead with a sad heart.

The name plate proclaimed it to be the bungalow of Dr. Sukhdev Singh. He had been in government service. He not only sold government medicines in the market, but also interfered in the work of police. You could get him to change things as you want: he would change twenty four to twenty six and twenty six to three hundred and seven. Once, he had changed the viscera of a dead man. The old man had died of the severity of wounds received during the fight. The police prepared the case on that basis. But, this brave man, before sending the viscera for testing, mixed it with poison. When the report came, the case took a new turn. According to the report, the old man had died of poisoning. Ami Chand was aghast. The department would take him to task.

Ami Chand reprimanded the doctor, he apologized. He prepared a new report. Sometime later, he was caught in a case of black marketing of medicines. He was dismissed and had now set up his own private practice. He had such a flourishing practice that he has a three storeyed hospital. One bed costs five hundred rupees per week.

When the bell was rung, there was no one at home. The whole family had gone to Manali on a holiday.

The next bungalow was Satpal's. The same Satpal, who had been a munim with a sheller, and is now himself the owner of a sheller. He has made plenty of money. He has taken to visiting Ludhiana with inspectors of food supply and F.C.I., going to hotels with call girls. His own wife now seemed fat and dark in comparison to the modern beauties. He would keep thinking of ways and means of getting rid of her all the time. Finally, he hit upon a plan, which could come only to a man like him. The mercy of a stove-god!

The stove-god was merciful but pandit Ami Chand was not! The stove did kill Satpal's wife, Sheela, but Ami Chand was not willing to accept it as a mere accident. Satpal had burnt his own hands as well. However, the kitchen where his wife had been burnt revealed the true story. The four walls of the kitchen were dark with the smoke but there was no smoke where Sheela had died. Had she caught fire suddenly, she would have rolled on the ground, cried out for help, and tried to put the fire out. She wouldn't have sat quietly against the wall waiting to die. One could clearly see Sheela's silhouette against the wall. She had been killed before she was set on fire. Her dead body was been put against the wall, and set on fire. This was sufficient to arrest Satpal. Two tight slaps and he had spilled the beans. He had killed her first in the hope of a second wife.

Ami Chand had collected the evidence with great care. If the court does not sentence a man without an eye witness, then what can he do? The poor parents of the girl could not pursue the case. Satpal was let off.

Satpal's wishes were granted. He got married to a really beautiful woman.

Ami Chand had a deep desire to see that fairy. But he felt a loser before Satpal. He could not get him convicted, despite his best efforts. He had no heart to knock at Satpal's door.

The last rays of sunlight were about to fade.

Ami Chand kept peering at the shining nameplates outside the gates of the bungalows, and making some enquiries at some of them, and going on. What reason did this wealthy colony, indulging in all frivolity, have to get involved in any case like Bunty's?

The last bungalow was that of Babu Kanshi Ram. He was a politician who had once been as popular as the chief minister. Time had not been kind to him. He got tired of political upheavals, kept frequently changing his parties. The result was that no group trusted him.

He now maintains a low profile. Off and on, he makes an attempt to come back into the limelight. He creates a little space for himself, and then he commits another blunder. Once again, the story of the princess turning into a mouse comes true.

Kanshi Ram could have made the huge blunder of kidnapping Bunty out of jealousy. He had been looking for a chance of getting into everything: from Ram Lila

committee to Geeta Bhawan, and out of frustration he could have made another huge miscalculation.

The four constables were told to take positions in the four corners of the bungalow. Taking his revolver in hand, and checking that the hawaldar's gun was loaded, he rang the bell.

Kanshi Ram was strolling on the lawn. A tape recorder was on the table, and some foreign tune was spreading happiness all around.

Had it been some vulgar song Ami Chand would have broken the tape recorder. He had a deep abhorrence of vulgar songs. Wherever he had been posted, he would order the tape companies and the trucks to throw away all obscene tapes. It was often the truckers who disobeyed. They would find excuses to go on strikes, jam the traffic, but they could not browbeat Ami Chand.

He neither liked nor hated this music.

Kanshi Ram himself came up to open the gate, when he saw the police party.

There was a time, when officers thronged his bungalow. Even the I.G. had to wait to meet him. That was the time when Gyaniji was the chief minister. He was a close friend of Kanshi Ram. Gyaniji was a romantic man, and so was Kanshi Ram. When he became the chief minister, Gyaniji obliged Kanshi Ram to the hilt. Transfers, jobs, quotas and licenses, all were done at his hint.

Within days, a huge poultry farm had come up on the western side of the town. The government had allotted them land for agro industry. A thread mill also came up. A pesticide factory was sanctioned. Boys from the village were recruited in the police, and those from the town in the food supply department. Someone was given an agency of Sohna ghee, someone else got that of Markfed fertilizers. Kanshi Ram had a hidden partnership in each and everything.

Kanshi Ram had brought many people into politics. Someone was made the block president, another of the youth wing of the district. It was said that he eyed Sharma's wife. Another said, the advocate's wife was staying with him. Whatever it was, he had also brought many women into politics. Some of them had also become confidantes of Gyaniji. They could get whatever work they wanted, directly.

Kanshi Ram would have never thought that his old record would also be looked into.

In his youth he was a shopkeeper in a village. His first wife was always ailing. There was no money for her treatment. He had, at one time, given an application for government help. Some clerk was so annoyed with Kanshi Ram, that he got the application photocopied and gave them to the Janta Party people. They made a mountain out of a mole hill. Posters were put up everywhere. A demand for an enquiry into his wealth was made.

He had gone to the Congress Party's office in Chandigarh as a clerk, when he was almost starving. He had never held any big office. How could he amass all this wealth?

A report was filed. He was arrested. He was beaten up. He gave all his money out of fear. He also gave a statement against Gyaniji on oath, and evidence against him in the commission. At that time, who could have foretold that Gyaniji would reach this office?

Gyaniji was irritated and upset. Kanshi Ram had often begged for forgiveness. But, he had not forgiven Kanshi Ram. A friend who doesn't stand by you in need, is no friend. He tried his luck in other parties also. But there was no place for him. He was tired. He was now again trying to make a comeback to local politics.

Ami Chand looked into every nook and corner of Kanshi Ram's bungalow. He was the one who had got him transferred after taking twenty thousand from Chajju Mal. The whole house was full of foreign goods: right from undergarments to saris; from cigarette lighters to geysers everything was made in foreign. Who knows how much money had he made, that after all these years it had not yet run out. Had Ami Chand wanted, he could have asked for receipts of these foreign goods and avenged his transfer, but he did not do that. He was not intoxicated with the power, the way Kanshi Ram had been.

After turning Kanshi Ram's house upside down, Ami Chand was extremely irritated. All the kothis of Model Town were owned by thieves, dacoits and looters. One was corrupt, another - a tax evader, and yet another - a black marketeer. What was surprising that neither did society condemn them, nor did the law punish them! On the other hand, they were looked upon with respect by both.

Feeling helpless and defeated by these modern thieves, he was finding it difficult to walk any further.

He turned back to the thana with a sad heart.

XI

The officers Khan had especially summoned from outside to look for Bunty were Ami Chand and Gajjan Singh.

Though only an A.S.I., Gajjan Singh had been made the leader of a party which included six hawaldars, twenty four constables, forty jawans of C.R.P., and also a sub inspector. It was a matter of pride for Gajjan to be given the responsibility, though there was a sub-inspector in the party. He was eager to prove himself.

The party had been given a very crucial assignment. They were to search Aagwaar. Many boys from that area had gone underground. Also, there were many Sikh families, who had settled here, after having lost everything in the riots. There were two gurudwaras and a Dera. To conduct a search of this area, one not only needed to be patient and sensible, but also have plenty of enterprise and courage. Gajjan had all these qualities in abundance and had exhibited them, time and again.

First time, it was when he did not desist from following a truck laden with an illegal consignment of liquor, though he was under heavy firing. The truck belonged

to a very big party. Gajjan was neither tempted by money nor intimidated by threats of ministers. When pressure was exerted for Gajjan's transfer, Khan opposed it tooth and nail. He met the D.G.P., and explained the real situation to him, and got a reward sanctioned for Gajjan.

He had once restored peace in an area against heavy odds. An armed contingent of Nihangs wanted to take over some land belonging to the lalas. The poor lalas could do nothing except tremble and shiver! Gajjan tried to explain things to the Nihangs, but they began shooting. Immediately, Gajjan struck two of them down. The others he gave a sound beating, and hauled them to the thana with broken arms and legs. After that the Nihangs did not even look that side.

If there was a thanedar, who could stand up with courage, it was only Gajjan Singh. Though, no one doubted the wisdom of the sub-inspector Gurdas Ram, who had been put under him, but now that he was old, he did not have that capacity and strength. Gajjan was young. Khan felt that he needed to temper his courage with experience. He had put Gurdas Ram with him to see that Gajjan should not lose his patience. With a great deal of thought, Khan had balanced strength with wisdom.

Gajjan had been posted to this thana a year back. The Aagwar area had been under him. He knew everyone and everything in that area, good and bad, but even then he was given the intelligence reports and there was also a hawaldar from the CID with him to acquaint him with all the changes that had taken place here, in this last year.

The town had been surrounded before the announcement of the curfew. This was the first time that a curfew had been imposed in the town. Not even a child was allowed to whimper.

Gajjan hardly took half an hour to plan the search of Aagwar.

They stationed themselves at the dharamshala. It was in the centre of Aagwar, and also, there was plenty of place for them. They could get beds if they had to stay overnight. And if some investigation had to be made, then, the screams would not be heard outside the dharamshala.

A batch of two hawaldars and ten jawans were to stay in the dharamshala. They were told to be ready to reach wherever help was needed and asked for.

Gajjan decided to begin with the riot-hit families. Gajjan's experience and intelligence reports say that it is these families which are often lured by the terrorists. There is bitterness in their hearts, and the local people do not know their relatives. No one can suspect any stranger who may happen to visit and stay with them. They also need money, and can give shelter to anyone even for small amount of money.

The first raid was at the Bhapas. They had come from Kanpur. They had a very big transport company there. Most of the members of their family were killed in the riots. Vehicles had been burnt. The survivors included two old women, two young widows, and a twelve year old boy, who had been saved as they had disguised him in a girl's clothes.

When they had come here, they had nothing except the clothes they were wearing. They first stayed at the railway station, then at the Singh Sabha gurudwara. The Aagwar people brought them to this house which belonged to a family which was in Canada. They bought this house, and then, a lot of furniture and various other things were also bought.

The intelligence reported that they are being given money by suspicious people. The Bhapa family says that their friends in Kanpur had sold off their lands and property, and sent them the money. Earlier also this family had been quizzed a few times. Those reports may be wrong. Many times, reports are filed without proper enquiry while sitting at the thana. Those who have lost everything, have become paupers from prince, how can they sit idle? There is always a fire in their heart. And, they are always on the lookout for revenge.

As the door opened, Gajjan gave a couple of tight slaps to the young girl who had opened it. She fell down in the courtyard. The others tried to help her, Gajjan let loose a shower of abuse on them. He hit the young boy, who stood bewildered by the turn of events, a few times with a stick. He was crying. Gurdas stopped Gajjan's hand, but he was scolded. Gajjan believed they were not entitled to any mercy. Who will tell the police anything if criminals are treated properly? And in order to show that he meant business, he also pulled the old woman's plait.

After plenty of beating, scolding abuses, slaps and kicks, did Gajjan accept that no suspicious character visited them, or gave them any money.

Gajjan let the Kanpur family off, because they were women. But those from Delhi and Kolkata were themselves of doubtful antecedents. They are rude. And openly say that they are being helped by Singh Sabha, and also by the jathebandis - groups of young men. The record of the Delhiwallahs was also not very good. They had been up to plenty of mischief there also. They had a motorcycle repair shop at Delhi. Their father had been killed, and their workshop had been set on fire. They had received compensation from the government. The same was true of the Kolkatta people.

When the door was opened, they found all the young men at home. Their saffron turbans were on the pegs, which Gajjan felt was proof of their being opposed to the government. But the houses were bare. A couple of trunks, cots and beds, and utensils was all that they had. It did not take them more than five minutes to carry out a search.

Time was needed if the men were to be questioned. They were tied up and taken to the dharamshala, to be questioned at leisure at night.

Another source of information about Bunty could be those families whose boys were absconding.

The first one to run away was Lachcho mistry's son. The father had died at a young age. The mother, somehow, had managed to see him through college. He was good at studies, and passed with good marks. But he could not get a job for a long time. His uncles put some money together and set up a workshop for him. The boy worked very hard. When he began making some profit at the end of year, the Thuliwal

people set up a far bigger workshop in the neighborhood. Their goods were even cheaper. They were charging less for the labour. In no time, his workshop was deserted. All his customers had gone over to the Thuliwals.

First, he started drinking. Then he became sober. They found this out when he tasted the amrit - the Sikh baptismal ceremony, and started wearing a kirpan. He would disappear at times, and at other times, a group of boys would keep sitting and talking the whole night in his workshop. The secret came out when they shot the Thuliwal boy dead in broad daylight. He has been absconding since that day. The mother has been beaten so much by the police that she has lost her mental equilibrium. There is another brother at home, and an old grandmother. Whenever there is any incident in the area, they are the first target of the police. Both have suffered police atrocities. They cannot do much, and therefore have gone away, the door is locked.

There is his friend, Shinda. His story is very similar to that of Lachchoo's son. His father had married twice. The first wife had four sons, and he was the only child of the second. He was only four years old when his father passed away. The brothers did not give him even an inch of land. As long as he could, he fought the case with the help of his maternal uncles. When he could achieve nothing against his powerful brothers, he took to arms.

The same brothers, who were not willing to give him his share even after losing the case, meekly gave up, out of fear. But, why does Shinda need the land now? Killing a couple of people is now a moment's work for him. He has even fired a few times at his brothers. It was their good luck that they escaped unhurt.

Shinda's elder maternal uncle was earlier living with Shinda's mother. Ever since Shinda left home, he also left. His uncles had been beaten many times. Their homes have been demolished and their crops burnt. But one can tell about him only if one knows anything. The police receives a letter from Shinda every fourth day. Why do you beat my innocent uncles? If you want to meet your father, meet him at such and such place. The police do not go to the place he invites them to.

His home is also deserted.

The third one was caught with the help of his parents. He is in jail. The police do not harass them. They had helped the police.

Gajjan doesn't think it wise not to search their homes merely because there were locks on the doors. Many a times, such deserted places have been used by the militants for hiding. The boys could even now be hiding here. In times of militancy, people are not willing to say anything even if they have seen something suspicious with their own eyes.

He got the locks of both the houses broken. He did not want to turn back even when he saw the thick layers of dust, and heaps of dead leaves in the courtyard. The militants are far more cunning than the police. Then, where do they have the time to clean up? It is easier to live in deserted, desolate places.

It was essential to search the kitchens, barns and the places where animals were kept. The inner view was even worse than the one outside. The grain in the barn was

had fungus on it, ants had made anthills in dung cakes. Thick layer of dust lay on the boxes, cots, stools and charkhas lying inside the rooms. It seemed as if no one had lived in these houses for centuries.

The constables and hawaldars kicked the various things. If there is something worthwhile, they would take them along. They are not going to lock up these houses again. Anyone can loot the deserted houses; if the police took a few things away who is there to know?

When he could not find any clue from the two houses, Gajjan was a little sad. What would Khan think? Gajjan Singh had hoped to get some clue or other concerning Bunt. Khan had already given him a reward and a certificate. If he succeeds this time, then he is sure to be made an S.H.O. Earlier, he had appointed Madan Lal and Sham Singh S.H.O.s, even though they were only A.S.I.s. He appreciates work. Gajjan felt his S.H.O.'s chair slipping from under him.

But Gajjan Singh was not the one to give up so easily.

He divided the force into many parts and sent out each party in a different direction. He himself went towards Bhani's house with one party. The other parties had been given strict instructions that each and every house has to be searched. If anyone opposes then, they should immediately contact him.

Gajjan's hope was now pinned on Bhani. Whatever cases Gajjan had caught in this area, most of them had been caught with Bhani's help. People made comments about Gajjan and some even made allegations against him. Once, he was also scolded in a meeting by Sahib that he openly frequented a loose woman's home. But, Gajjan is not bothered. How can a policeman benefit by becoming friendly with traders and mill owners? To catch a thief, one must befriend a thief. Who is aware of the fact that Bhani is the daily occurrence register of this area? Whatever happened in Aagwar, was known to Bhani.

When the Nambardar's old uncle, who was childless, suddenly passed away, it had surprised the whole of Aagwar. The old man was a bachelor. He had twelve acres of land and on the basis of that, asserted his right to be fed by his nephews. He was so rigid that despite all efforts he had not made his will in anyone's favour. He was living with his younger nephew for the last thirty years. Now, he had developed some affection towards the older one. He had wanted to move over to him. When the younger one came to know about it, he had scolded the old man, and also cajoled him. But, before the old man could get out of hand, he strangled the old man.

In the beginning the elder one tried to create some problem. He was heir to half of the property. When the younger one showed him the will, he was taken aback. When the older one insisted on a postmortem, the younger one was alarmed. Sensing that it may lead to a greater ruin, the brothers came to an agreement: four acres of land to the elder and eight to the younger. No one even guessed that the old man had been strangled. Had not Bhani told Gajjan, he would not have got fifty thousand. Before the matter could go any further, they had given one acre's price to Gajjan.

It was also thanks to Bhani that Ginder of Pala was not murdered. Shinder was very angry with his sister. She had everything. She should have been ashamed of

asking for her share of land. It was Shinder who had sold everything to get his sister married. There was only four acres of land. The sister went to the court, and finally did get her share of two acres. She did not even show this much consideration, that she should sell the land to Shinder. She sold the land to his relatives. This was a very big blow to Shinder. He had four daughters and three sons, and it was difficult even to feed such a large family. If there was an illness in the family, then, things became more difficult. He owed money to shopkeepers, friends and banks. Shinder bought a pistol from Rajasthan. He would destroy the home of his sister, who had brought this calamity upon him.

The sister was not bad; it was her husband, Ginder, who was always inciting her. 'If you don't get your share of land, then I will send you back to your parents', he would always threaten her.

Shinder had brought Chajju badmash with him. Chajju also had no other place in the town. They spent the night at Bhani's. After two pegs, Chajju told Bhani the whole story.

Scared, Bhani immediately sent the information to the thana. Afterwards, the police may drag Bhani also into its net while investigating.

Gajjan was praised by all for getting Shinder to hand over the pistol. Pala was very grateful to him. Later on, Pala gave evidence whenever Gajjan asked him. This way, Gajjan succeeded in solving many cases, and getting the guilty convicted.

Bhani would give him more reliable information about this Aagwar than all the intelligence agencies in the country put together and that too, without changing the facts, or even adding spice to them.

Finding the police at her door, Bhani was dumbfounded. When through the slits of the door, she saw Gajjan, she breathed a sigh of relief. Gajjan was an old paramour of hers. While he was posted in the town, Bhani had had a very good time. Many of her neighbours had begun calling her the thanedarini!

Dressed in a black satin shirt, her fair body looked extremely seductive. Her kohl lined eye, her beautiful white teeth, the two front teeth with gold nails, enhanced her beauty. The tattoo of the peahen on her forehead, which she had got done when she was younger, looked so lively even today that it seemed as if the peahen was about to fly off any time.

Gajjan was surprised to see her take him to the sitting room. Earlier, she took him to her room, where her coloured bed always waited for him.

'What can I do? My son has come back from the army. My daughter-in-law watches me all the time. The boy doesn't even let me breathe.'

She explained her problems to him when he asked.

A year ago she was completely free. Her husband had died of a snake bite in the third year of her marriage. The son was about one year at that time. Bhani got married to her brother-in-law. After six years' he left her for another woman. His argument was that Bhani could not bear a child.

This broke Bhani's heart. She brought up her son with the help of her in-laws.

When her son joined the army, the lonely house seemed to oppress her. She started working for people, getting their works done along with the lady member of the local body.

Now, her voice carried greater weight at the thana, or the court than that of the lady member. At times, she even spent the night at some thanedar's house.

When Gajjan was posted there, he gave her a great deal of attention. She could get whomsoever she wanted, arrested, or released. This way, money began coming in, and she also acquired a taste of liquor.

Bhani brought in plenty of work for him. He would get all the news of Aagwar without having to work for it.

Her beautiful large eyes, her firm and seductive body and her tall figure enticed Gajjan.

Seating Gajjan on a chair, she herself sat on a cot lying on one side. She opened the window which opened on the courtyard, so that her daughter-in-law could watch them freely from her bedroom.

'Why all this?' Gajjan asked pinching her thigh. He was in a teasing mood.

'Come some other time. This woman has made life difficult. One day, she caught me with Sajjan hawaldar. She created a row, marjaani. Once, the stupid Bant hawaldar filed a case under 109 against me. I have been running around in the court for six months. I am very badly caught.' Relating her problems, tears came to her eyes.

'Let it be. Tell me, do you have any information about this boy Bunty who is kidnapped?... I have heard that he is hidden somewhere in this Aagwar.' He could hear the whistles being blown outside to call him, and the sounds of coughing emanating from the bed room, he came to the point.

'For heaven's sake! There is no one in Aagwar who would stoop so low!' Bhani had turned pale at hearing Bunty's name. She wrung her hands as she offered an explanation.

'Many collegiates go about with saffron turbans! No one can say, when they may stoop to such an act.'

'Everyone moves with a saffron turban! My fauji had also got one. There is nothing wrong in that.'

'What do you think of Dheru badmash? You can't trust a man who can kill for money, who knows when he will do the worst possible thing. For a man like him killing a man is like killing an ant.'

'You may get him to commit any other crime, but he can never do this. He has lamented before me many times: why do they go about killing the innocent children! If you want to kill, then kill your enemies; that too, after challenging them. He can never do such a thing to a flower like child.'

'That Nathu barber also goes about with a decent turban.... From where has got this money, that he keeps changing his turbans and clothes? Many times mischievous

elements give money to such people to entice them. It doesn't take much for a man's mind to change.'

'No... no... he also is not like that.... He has got hold of free land. He got together with the Kolkatta people and got that old woman to put her thumb on what they told her to be an agreement, while actually it was a benama. It is that income which is showing off. That poor man doesn't know anything about such things.'

'Then do tell me something? Show me some direction.' He took out a hundred rupee note and handed it over to Bhani.

'Keep this in your pocket. I never told you anything because you gave me money. I loved you. Then, I was in need of money at that time. Now, the boy looks after the household. I have given up all this.'

Bhani explained as she gave the money back to Gajjan.

'Go to Bhaiya's. A truck load of opium has come. Ten -twenty seers should still be there.'

'I am asking you about Bunty. Who wants to pick up a fight with him! These days he drinks with ministers.'

Bhani became thoughtful. What could she tell him about Bunty? She could only say whose daughter is in love with whose son. Which unmarried girl got aborted by which midwife. Who is a regular visitor at whose house. Whose wife goes out with whom for illicit sex.

She had nothing about Bunty except shaking her head.

'Fine, then tell me about some good catch! At least I can get some money for my expenses!' Gajjan put the hundred rupee note under the durree on the cot, and changed the topic of conversation.

'If you want liquor then go to Mahinga carpenter. He had fired a still yesterday. He draws very good liquor.'

'Tell me something useful.'

'If you want to have a look at some new face, then go and knock at Sadhu's. The boy is in the army. People look after his wife. She will embrace someone as good looking and handsome like you.'

The jawans had started knocking at the door. Her daughter-in-law had also brought two glasses of milk. She looked at Gajjan slyly trying to have a clear picture of his face.

'This is not the time to enjoy. If you can help me earn some money, then tell me. You will get your commission.'

'If you want money, then go to Mangu bania's. Don't you see he has constructed four stories on top his house? Ever since some harsh law has been passed, the weak ones have all fled. Only he remains here. He has doubled his prices. He has bagful's of money. That dark wife of his, who used to work at the sewing machine the whole day long, is now loaded with gold. She has also bloated up.'

‘Where is those couple of Naxalites?’ There was only one thing in Gajjan’s mind. He came back to that.

‘They are still the same. Their hair is still shorn. They trim their beards. They live with a baba. They go out to perform; sometimes they go out with fake sadhu sants. They are never at home.’

Bhani was not telling him anything. If she had nothing to reveal then there was nothing in Aagwar. It was useless to conduct a house-to-house search in the hope of finding Bunty.

Had Gajjan wanted, he could have raided the places indicated by Bhani, and earned some money. But his conscience did not agree to that. If he were to do that, it would mean giving a bad name to the local police. Pritam Singh was a close friend. If he were to do this in Pritam Singh’s area today, tomorrow they will do the same in his area. This way, the reputation of the police suffers. Gajjan knows it was best to refrain.

They went directly to dharamshala from Bhani’s.

The whole force was again gathered. The searches that had been conducted were reviewed. Again, new parties were sent off to search the houses that had not been searched so far.

Gurdas Ram was sent to Mangu the bania. There was no harm in quietly getting their fee. He was not the one to tattle.

Gajjan had no other work left, except sending a report that ‘all is well,’ and opening a bottle.

XII

Hawaladar Des Raj was most reluctant to go to the lepers’ ashram.

Des Raj had made many plans before coming to the town. He had thought that he would be able to search the houses of Banias and Brahmins as a member of the police party. He would be able to earn good money, through threats and extortion, and have a good time eating and drinking.

For the last two years, Des Raj had been working at the Police Lines as a trainer. He would run about on the ground sweating the whole day as he supervised drills. There was nothing else to do. If you were a little strict, the recruits and your colleagues express annoyance, and all you get to eat is the dry rotis of the mess.

By making him the head of the search party being sent to the lepers’ ashram, Khan had dashed all his hopes. On top of it, there was another blow. No vehicle had been given to the police party. They had to march to the ashram.

He and his party started with dejected hearts.

Des Raj was, otherwise, proud of the uniform he wore. There was a miracle in it! Wherever you went, you rattle your cane. Money comes running after you! A police man, however, has to be clever with his tricks, like a magician!

It is not necessary that they should spend all the time in the ashram. There are a total of fifteen or twenty small rooms. The necessary search could be done in about half an hour. Later on, they can join some other party. The hutment of the Sansis is also at a distance of two hundred yards from there. If they are not able to find anything in the ashram, they are sure to find something at the Sansi basti. The Sansis are notorious for criminal activities all over the district. Half of them know Des Raj. The party he is going with, has surely not been cursed that it should remain hungry?

Had there been no curfew they needn't have walked to the ashram. They would have stopped any truck or tempo, and got in to it.

Then, he consoled himself. It is better to walk. There are numerous houses and shops on the way. . Even if a small shutter of a house is found open, or the shutter of a shop is lightly raised, their day would be made.

Or, may be, someone may venture out to quieten a crying baby, or even come out to answer nature's call. They are going to swoop like eagles on anyone who happens to be out!

That is why they took the longest route to the ashram: from behind the thana, passing through the hospital and the market committee, so that they could have a look at maximum number of shops and houses. Had this hope not been there, walking even ten steps would have been like climbing the Mount Everest for them.

But people were really overwhelmed by fear. There were no signs of life anywhere. They were all sitting behind locked and barred doors!

Des Raj had spent a major part of service in Police Lines. It was only sometimes that he was posted to a police station. This happened when someone had to be sent to the Police Lines as punishment. He would spend these four five months in the station, and then someone else would come to replace him. This is the way it happens with those who are without any influence!

This town was unfamiliar for him. He had been here a few times earlier, but his visits had been confined only to the thana.

Des Raj had a beautiful picture of the ashram in his mind: A clean place, surrounded by trees; a boundary wall around it; a big iron gate, and a beautiful board hanging on the gate. Inside, the rooms would be airy; on one side, there would be a row of flush toilets; on the other side there would be bathrooms; there would be a platform under the tree; a couple of divans would be placed there for people to sit and exchange views and opinions; a temple for prayer and to repent for all the bad deeds committed in the past. People would be busy the whole day long in prayer, trying to improve their lives, in the births to come.

It would be difficult to recognize those beggars now. They must have put on a lot of weight, after eating khir and puris. He had heard that their lives had changed due

to Lalaji's munificence. Anyone wanting to give donations comes running to this ashram.

The number of donors is so large that they have to first contact Chowdhary of the ashram. Chowdhary doesn't remember the bookings of the ashram. He maintains a diary for the purpose, and it is only after looking up at the bookings in the diary, that he tells you when you can avail of the opportunity for doing your good deed. Chowdhary also has a full menu for them. On Mondays it's khir puri; Tuesdays is a fasting day for Hanuman. That day, only sweets are given. On Thursdays they are given halwa puri.

It seems as if the clubs in the town also cannot find another place for their good acts! If anyone wants to distribute jerseys, comes here! If blankets are to be distributed, it is here! If any organization from outside comes for rendering some help, it is to this place!

The way in which photographs and news are published in the newspapers, at that rate, these people should be having twenty blankets and fifty sweets and jerseys per head!

If things go well, they will surely be able to take a few blankets from Chowdhary! He must be having plenty of new ones! They can be used after being dry cleaned.

Des Raj was pondering over all this as he walked towards the ashram. But, on his arrival there, what he saw was completely different from what he had imagined.

The dirty water of the town was emptied in a pond close to the ashram. In fact, half of the pond had been filled and the ashram built on that, and the other half was still receiving the dirty water. The board announcing the name of the ashram had been put on the road. Different posters had been pasted on the board, and its legs were twisted. The posters had completely covered the name of the ashram.

In an area of about three hundred yards, crude shanties were constructed in a circle. Some were covered by reed mats, some with elephant grass, and some others had covers of old discarded black tarpaulin from the F.C.I.

In the middle of the circle there was a platform, on which a small temple had been built with some twenty odd bricks. This temple was shaded by a small peepal tree. The bricks had been white washed. There were diyas and some sindoor placed near the bricks. This was the place of worship for them.

Near this platform, there was another platform, but in a dilapidated condition. Its bricks were broken at many places. There was a goat under the tree, gnawing at some dried rotis and green grass.

As the police party came in, a few children ran out of the huts, with cries of 'uncle', 'uncle'.

They looked hungry. Perhaps no one had brought any food for them because of the rumours of curfew. The children may have expected them to be carrying some food for them.

When a ten year old girl recognized the uniform, she scolded the other children – ‘They are not ‘uncles’, but police. The police can never do you any good!’

Scared, the children disappeared in their huts.

The police was being insulted! Chawdhary should have come to know about their arrival in his ashram! His disappearance was increasing Des Raj’s anger!

Standing near the bigger platform, Des Raj called out loudly to Chowdhary.

Had Chowdhary been there he would have come out. He was not there since morning. Hearing the loud roar of the hawaldar, those inside the huts shivered.

A few more minutes passed. When no one came out even then, a short constable, standing behind Des Raj, shouted –

‘Hey, you bastards! At least one of you must come out! Or else we are about to start the ‘danda’ parade!’

It was very difficult to stand there any longer. The stench rising from the dirty pond had become unbearable because of the intense heat. The wind was also, blowing in their direction. Hankies on the nose proved to be of no use.

The threat of the short constable showed its results! A skeletal figure dragging itself on the ground came out of a hut that was in front of them.

His legs were shriveled because of some illness. His complexion was black and his teeth yellow. He had two wooden blocks fixed with strips on his hands. This saved his hands from scraping and bruising as he crawled on the ground. He had only one cloth on his body. That was a langoti. A part of a big rubber tube was tied round his buttocks to save them from being bruised as he crawled on the ground.

The short constable recognized him at one glance. Before coming here, he used to beg at the station. He used to sleep there under the water tank. His only possessions were a small bundle of clothes and a tin box. The Yuva Sangh people had brought him here.

Behind him came out a young woman, who resembled him, She wore a dirty petticoat and a torn blouse to cover her breasts. Her hair was badly tangled. It looked as if she had not bathed for years. A sickly child was in her arms, sucking her left breast. The child was stark naked and because there was no milk in the breast, he whined as he sucked.

This woman also was earlier a beggar at the bus stand. At times, she was also seen at the railway station. She had been raped by truck drivers, railway employees and the labourers employed at the Food Corporation of India, time and again. She had also become pregnant once.

She too had benefitted from the kindness of Lalaji. He was the one who had got these two married. The short sentry could not decide whether the child she had in her arms was the one born earlier, or another, that was born recently. She was also scared by the appearance of the police. She tried to cover her half-naked body, as though the police had come to take her!

‘Where is Chowdhary? We have to make a search!’ Des Raj was a little disappointed at the things that he had seen here. He was feeling suffocated in this hell.

‘He is not here, Sahib. You can search whenever you want, we have no objection. Whatever is ours is all before you,’ the man spoke in broken Hindi. He pointed towards his wife. She went to the huts calling out to the people inside.

In no time, men and women were coming out of the huts.

The ashram was ready for the search. Police could conduct the search whenever it wanted.

Some eight-ten children had also joined the crowd, standing around the police. Their noses ran and eyes were full of mud, and flies swarmed around them. Almost all of them were naked. There was not much difference between boys and girls. All had shorn hair, were of dark complexion, and weak in body; marks of tears on their dirty faces; with swollen eyes. The time for the donors to come had passed. Many of the huts did not have even a hearth. The children must be very hungry; a few fortunate ones had pieces of dried roties and dry puris. They were nibbling them very happily. The rest were watching them with greedy eyes.

‘This gaggle of kids is yours or have you brought them from elsewhere?’ Des Raj asked them, suspiciously looking at the hoard of children there.

All the men and women of the ashram, who had come out from the huts and stood before them, were extremely weak. Someone had a leg amputated; another had an arm amputated; some one’s foot was swollen to an elephantine size; some other had a thigh swollen; someone’s nose bone had disappeared, another had no lips; some one’s fingers had fallen off. None of these men and women seemed capable of having children. Then, from where had this large gang come? Have they all been kidnapped like Bunty?

‘They are ours, Mai Baap..’ a ghost like woman came forward. Des Raj looked at her abdomen. She was fully pregnant and was ready to deliver any time.

Des Raj did not have the courage to ask for any further proof.

‘Theek hai... it is all right... search the premises’ – Des Raj advanced towards the huts, brandishing his cane, and trying to wind up the whole affair quickly.

It was pitch dark in the first hut. Someone could be heard coughing on the other side. A whiff of stench brushed past Des Raj’s nose, and he immediately rushed out of the hut.

‘Who is there? Bring a light!’

He was totally shaken.

‘This is Ramu, sahib. He has high fever for so many days. Medicines also have not helped. Bawa has cast some spell on him.’ The hands of Ramu’s wife, who was lighting a candle, were shaking.

As soon as the candle was lit, a skeleton like figure could be seen. He was very dark complexioned, and had a necklace of multi-coloured beads around his neck. An earthen plate lay near his head, in which some incense was burning. There was some

charm tied to a pitcher of water, which rested on a small earthen platform. There were nails on its four corners, with string woven around them.

Des Raj inspected the whole hut: two bundles of clothes, one basin of water, and one broken tin, was all that it contained. He opened a bundle with his cane. Torn clothes and pieces of dry rotis fell out on the ground. The second one contained tattered pieces of sacks, which had been stitched together to be used as a quilt during winter.

The second hut, also, was in the same condition. Here it was a woman fighting with death. There was a hand cart and nothing else in the hut. When her husband had been alive, he used to push her in that hand cart and beg on the road. Since his death, she had no other support. She was old, and could not walk. If some kind hearted person gave her something to eat she ate, or else went hungry. She had a silver polished bowl and a plate lying near her head, which were her only possessions.

She did not recognize Des Raj. She thought he was someone who had brought food for her to eat. She sat up and tried to pick up her plate and bowl. Perhaps, she was hungry.

‘Leave it, Ustad! What is there? The leaders bark without any sense. Someone says they are criminals, and should be treated harshly. Another says, the Sangh has changed their conditions, and they are enjoying themselves here! But, it seems that no one has ever visited this place!’

The short one, who had been shouting around till now, was moved. His throat choked, and his eyes were wet.

Turning away from the hassles of the search, he stood on the edge of the road, where the board of the ashram stood.

‘He is right. Let’s stop. They cannot even look after their own children. What will they do with the children of other people? We will say that we had thoroughly searched the ashram! There would be no trouble!’

Bhushi also went after the short one, and stood near the board.

Des Raj did not have a different opinion. He also was feeling nauseous.

On his way back, Des Raj kept puzzling over one thing. After all, where had all those blankets, quilts, and sweaters gone, about which he keeps reading regularly in the newspapers?

The lies being churned out by the people were becoming difficult for him to digest.

XIII

Let Bunty go to hell! Bujha Singh was concerned neither with Bunty, nor with his kidnappers. He was worried about his own life. It had gone off the track sometime back, and he wanted to get it back on the track.

Had this Bunty been kidnapped five years ago, Bujha Singh would have surely been given the charge of investigation. He was the only thanedar of the district, who knew what it meant to fight with hoodlums. Watching his progress, the other thanedars would remark – ‘The sweeper had just been made a thanedar. He is going to break his mother’s rump, what else can he do!’

It was this courage of Bujha Singh which had once cost him dear. Out of sheer bravado, he had picked up Jeeta, the up and coming villain of Hamidi. Bujha Singh was proud of his cane, and Jeeta was proud of his villainy. When he had been younger, people were frightened of even uttering Jeeta’s name. Even now, though he was old, no one dared oppose him. He could enter any shop, and take whatever he wanted. No one could ask him for any money. He would go to any field with a gun on his shoulder, and order that four maunds of wheat be delivered to his house.

Bujha was also an eccentric. Only one villain could remain in the area where he was the thanedar. And, that villain would be only Bujha Singh. He could not stomach Jeeta’s arrogance.

When Bujha had tried to admonish Jeeta, he received a mouthful of abuse from him. Where had this thanedar come from who dares to challenge Jeeta?

To teach Jeeta a lesson, Bujha Singh got him hauled to the thana, and had him hung upside down. Bujha kept on beating him with a cane, and at every stroke, Jeeta kept on abusing him. Bujha Singh went on, till Jeeta’s tongue came to a stop forever.

People were relieved. They got rid of a big hooligan. Bujha Singh was congratulated, but in muted tones, and often, surreptitiously.

But the department got after him, due to the manipulations of a few of his colleagues. Bujha Singh had hurriedly made arrangements for Jeeta’s funeral, but at the last moment was stopped from cremating him.

A postmortem was ordered, and Bujha Singh had to flee his thana. He got an anticipatory bail. The case went on for three years. All the money that he had earned was gone.

By the time the case against him was dismissed, and he got reinstated, the department had forgotten Bujha Singh. Many other thanedars had earned more fame than him. The police captains now valued money more than bravery. Bujha Singh had no money. If he is given a chance, he could earn. And, if he earns, then only can he give. But he did not get the chance to earn money.

When he managed to be assigned the duty for the Sansi area, he felt that Vaheguru has been kind to him. This area is the hotbed of all crimes. You can catch as many as you want. Even if you cannot catch the real culprit, it does not matter. You can fix any crime on anyone. There is a history-sheet for each person of this area. They were all criminals. Only a couple of them have been lucky enough to have escaped being imprisoned. You could entangle anyone in any case you thought suitable. All their appeals are dismissed in the light of their previous record.

He can do as he pleases under Khan’s protection. No one would lift a finger at him. Any other captain would object to cases being registered in the area of another

thanedar. If this sort of interference is allowed, then, it affects the record of the S.H.O. And in turn, it has an effect on the captain himself. But, Khan does not understand this game yet. There is no need to give him money, he only looks at your record, and on the basis of that, he makes appointments to the thana. He reviews the record of the thanedar: how many kilos of opium; how many pistols; how many stills have been captured. It is this that counts. Greater the number of cases, the better the thana.

Bujha Singh felt that the time for him to leave the C.I.D. had come. What sort of department is it? He has been there for two years. His actual reports were thrown in the dustbin. And more weight was given to false reports. Earlier, he had gone out of the way to pry out information. Then, he would write and rewrite his reports, recording the number of opium and poppy seeds trucks that came into the area; the various gambling dens; the trafficking of women.

But it was of no use. He found that copies of the reports would find their way to the guilty. Many of them filed complaints against Bujha Singh. Tired of this entire thing, he decided to give it all a damn. He sent in copies of old reports, the way many of his colleagues did.

Now, he was repenting having done that. Had he not been filing false reports, and had kept a more vigilant eye on the area, he would have now easily caught the real culprits red-handed.

Whatever it was, he was not bothered about the truth and the falsehood now. He had to make a few cases.

He has been reporting on this area since the last two years. He knows the names of many professional criminals. If nothing else comes up, then he can always pick them up.

Nathu Sansi is Bahiya's courier. All the opium that is sent to Bhador, is sent through him. He must be having a few kilos of opium lying at his home. Whatever the measure, he would add a zero to the weight, and file a case against him.

Bansi's record shows that she must have started picking pockets and lifting things as soon as she was born. Now, she was a full blown woman, as intoxicating as any drug. Fair of complexion, with beautiful features, she has an ethereal look about her. When she dresses up in style and uses light make up, and sits next to a young man in a bus, he is bound to forget everything. He would only come to his senses when either the wallet from his pocket or the gold chain round his neck is lost. She has now, gradually, widened the sphere of her activities. These days she helps in unloading suitcases or trunks or boxes from buses or trains. One or two cases can very easily be slapped on her.

There is bound to be an animal in Khairaiti's barn. He is an expert rustler and brings in animals from Ambala or Jind overnight. This he does a couple of days before the animal fair is held. After selling them off, he destroys all proof. Even, if he has his own buffalo in his barn, Bujha Singh will take possession of it under 102.

Bujha was happy for the first time in many years, as he went over his plans for the raid.

He had seen to it that has his own subordinates, Hawaldar Sewa Singh and two constables, were in the party. He also had eight C.R.P. jawans and one hawaldar. Bujha Singh had seldom come to this area himself. But, the constables visited it regularly, whenever they needed a fowl or two, they would visit Chanda Sansi. His birds were well fed, and also delicious when cooked. The constables have been telling him this on the way here. They will get some fowls cooked by Chanda's wife today. His wife is an extremely good cook. But, Bujha Singh is neither interested in fowls, nor in liquor. He needs cases, only cases.

This Sansi settlement, located at the corner of a lake, did not seem to be much affected by curfew. A settlement of about thirty five huts and the same number of semi-brick houses, the area seemed busier than ever. Old and young, mostly dressed in vests and undershorts, were busy in their work.

Kehara was cleaning and oiling his hand cart. He was free because of the curfew. On other days, he is too busy to clean it properly.

Shinda was cleaning the barn behind his hut, where he kept his pigs. He had been going out to work on daily wages, and had not been able to clean the barn, which was dirty and stinking, with puddles of urine all over. He had got a cartload of sand a few days back, half of which had been scattered by the children while playing. Their school was also closed today. Tejo and his two daughters are also helping him clean up the barn. This would do for a few days.

Bachni was worried about her hut, which was in danger of falling down. She had been so busy cleaning other people's homes, washing their utensils and clothes that she had no time for her own work. The sethanis don't let her take a day off, and when she does take a day off, they not only protest, but also deduct her wages. But, the curfew has given her a free day, and they cannot complain. She had already collected the various things that she needed to plaster the walls. She quickly went to the edge of the lake and pulled up some twenty troughs of thick black mud. Once she has prepared the mud, she would start plastering the walls.

Ginda's family did not like curfew being imposed. That meant no work for him, and no wages. Who knows how long would this curfew go on? If the twigs they bring in are not sold till evening, dry up, and cannot be sold the next morning. The spinach Gelo has stolen is also wilting, and no one would buy it in the morning. She had walked fifteen miles to steal the spinach, with the dogs yelping at her heels, and almost tearing off her left leg. She had hoped to get some money so that she could buy medicines for the ailing Seeto. If he does not get medicines for one day, his suffering increases. He had just got up after five days. He had hoped to go out to ply his cycle rickshaw today. If nothing more, he would at least earn the rent of the rickshaw. He already owed a few days' rent to the owner. If he cannot pay for a week, the owner may take away the rickshaw. He would not be able to get a rickshaw which looks new and is in good shape. The rate is the same, but an old rickshaw means more problems. One day the chain breaks down; the next day, there is a puncture; and then you have to exert more to drive an old rickshaw. Ginda's family was worrying over these problems, as they sat under the trees. They were praying for the curfew to be lifted soon.

When they saw the police party surround their area, they turned pale. The arrival of police is never a happy event. The moment they arrive, they start beating people. No explanation is asked and none given. Only bones are broken. Women are dragged by their hair; utensils are thrown out; homes and huts are searched thoroughly. The police look at every big and small thing, as if it has been stolen.

The children that are left behind go about crying for their parents; men are beaten for many days by the police; women sit outside the thana pleading for their men. They tolerate all the jibes and dirty remarks thrown at them by the policemen. Whatever little they have, is given to the police. It is only after a long wait of a month or so that they are taken before a court. It is with great difficulty that they get bail, and with a sigh of relief they return home. But, by that time some such event again takes place.

The group sitting under the tree scattered as they saw the police. They all tried to hide wherever they could. Those who were captured first by the police would get beaten the longest. Old crones, women and girls, children, young men, no one would be spared. Those who escape capture, their animals are let loose, their huts demolished, and all their goods set on fire. The area mourns its losses for days. They have to go hungry for days as they are not fit to work with their broken bones.

Shamu was told by everyone to go into his hut. No one will ask if he is guilty or not. No one will accept that they have given up theft and taken to honest work.

But he was adamant. He lay on the cot reading a book. When he had done nothing wrong, why would the police arrest him?

Bujha Singh was annoyed by this behavior of Shamu. How dare this Sansi defy the police!

Catching Shamu by the hair, he pulled him off the cot. The book in his hand fell down in tatters.

Shamu was not given the chance to utter even a word. No one heard him say that he was studying in college, doing his B.A., and is the secretary of the Punjab Students' Union; that their union is against the militants, and has even passed a resolution against Bunty's kidnappers. He is a follower of Baba Gurdatt Singh, whose ideology is well-known.

Shamu's white pajama and kurta were torn to shreds. His shorn beard was pulled. He was slapped so many times that his face was red and blotched.

'Search this badmash's house. Bunty has gone nowhere, it is someone like this villain who has taken him.'

All those who watched this capable young man being thrashed mercilessly, were agitated. But, no one had the courage to intervene because of the presence of C.R.P. You never know, they can beat them all into corpses.

Had it been only the police, they would have also picked up their sticks. But, they could do nothing except peep from behind the door, through the slits, and sigh. They waited for Shamu's beating to stop.

At Bujha Singh's command, his loyal constables took Shamu to his room.

The room was well decorated, and there was a pile of books on the chair and table in the left corner of the room. Each book was looked into. Sewa Singh was looking for a book with coloured photographs. Once, he had searched a bungalow, and had found a book with coloured nude photographs. He had savoured that book for months. This boy was also the same age. Even one copy, tucked under your arm is enough for going to the college. If there is a pile of books, it means these must be dirty books!

There was something else. 'Dialectical Materialism,' 'Red Morning', 'An Epochal Jump,' 'I am an Atheist,' 'Mother'. There was also a calendar with a picture of Bhagat Singh on one wall. There was another calendar, and the picture on it seemed familiar to Sewa Singh. He went up to the wall, and read the caption under the picture, and learnt that it was the picture of Beant Singh of Moosan, who had been captured some fifteen twenty years ago by their police party. This means that this boy is also an extremist.

Sewa Singh's suggestion appealed to Bujha Singh. A pistol could easily be fitted in with the books discovered. Had Bujha Singh been posted at a thana, he would have reported the discovery of a A.K. 47 rifle. The C.I.D. people find it difficult to buy even a pistol worth sixty rupees.

After fixing up their victim, they went in search of Nathu and Banso.

Bujha Singh was irritated as he heard Chando. Nathu had been dead for six months. Banso has lost a leg, as she had fallen on the track while changing at Ambala. For the last three months she has been in the hospital, hovering between life and death. Khairaiti had been picked up by the Sarsa police. He has lost his vision, and needs to be helped even for the smallest thing.

Bujha Singh was thanking his stars. His officers are as careless as he was. Had anyone bothered to verify, he would have been out of his job. His reports showed Nathu to be hale and hearty. He was restless, and wanted to immediately go back to his office, and correct his reports.

One by one, all the houses were searched. Leave alone any expensive stuff, they did not find anything – even broken, which could be of any use. This was the result of Lalaji's labour. He had helped many people, and persuaded them to give up criminal activities. He had persuaded banks to give them loans, and helped them to buy hand carts, rickshaws and buffaloes. He had sent for a new breed of pigs from Nabha. Buffaloes in every house, milky white pigs running about, hens clacking in the lanes, proved that there had been some changes here.

The area has changed, therefore let it change. Bujha Singh had suffered the ill effects of a seven and a half period of bad luck – Sadhe saati, for five years. Now, he wanted to change his own destiny. He must definitely file four or five cases.

If they have changed, he would help them. As soon as he becomes a thanedar, he would bear the expenses of their cases from his own pocket. It would be for him to give evidence and provide the proof. He would give such evidence, that the judge would dismiss all cases at the first hearing.

Having made up his mind, Bujha Singh began picking up people. Shamu could be brought in for a pistol; Ginda could be booked for ten kilos of opium; theft on Bachni; Shinda could be arrested for a still. Four cases will bring him plenty of fame.

After some more beating and picking up whatever was essential for framing of charges; Bujha Singh picked up four-five other men along with Shamu, Shinda, Ginda and Bachni. If the need arose, the names of persons involved could be changed.

Bujha Singh was happy as he went back. Now, the thanedari was within his reach.

XIV

The night was in full bloom.

Gupta, the Deputy Commissioner, had already downed three pegs of Peter Scott, and swallowed two sleeping pills, but had not had a wink of sleep.

Gupta was cursing the moment when in a fit of bravado, he had decided to jump into the fray. He could have also sent his subordinate to supervise the searches in the town, as the police captain had done.

But, now that he had himself come to the town, he could not turn his back and run away.

Gupta had heard Khan being praised by many. Gupta believed that Khan would solve this problem anyhow. And Gupta would win plenty of accolades by default. This was a great opportunity for a Deputy Commissioner to be noticed by the chief minister.

Actually things were going the other way. The entire police force had been busy carrying out a house to house search for the last two days, but, success had been elusive so far.

Gupta was frequently meeting the Sangh members, the various other unions, and, also the police officers. The problem remained where it was.

The Yuva Sangh objected to the police not having searched the twine twisters' area. Standing at the door, carrying out a head count of family, is surely not a search. Do they really hope to find Bunty that way?

The police has also not gone to the gurudwara, though there was a strong possibility of Bunty being there.

Whenever the gurudwara is mentioned, the jathedars tend to jump at you viciously like a hungry tigress. They would lay down their lives, but would never let the police enter the gurudwara. They have made a proposal. Let Lalaji himself go into the gurudwara, and search each nook and corner of the gurudwara. The Sangh was, however, not ready to accept this. If something were to happen to Lalaji inside the gurudwara, who would be responsible for it?

At Gupta's insistence the two parties agreed that the area should be searched again, but under certain conditions. That is, the police party should personally be led by Khan. The Yuva Sangh would only be satisfied when five of its members were to be included in the search party. Gupta had also given permission to the jathedars to accompany the police. They were very critical of the first party that had made the search. One complained that a certain hawaldar had taken eggs from his home; another man complained that a certain constable had taken coins from the bag of a vendor; and another said that a thanedar had teased the daughter-in-law of a family.

The Deputy Commissioner wanted to get some results as soon as possible, and therefore, he had put the whole police force to search.

Khan was very happy with the results of the search. Though, Bunty had not been traced, yet Khan had got many other culprits. Whenever Gupta talked to Khan, he was full of his own achievements.

They had succeeded in arresting an absconding culprit, who had been evading the police for the last eight years. He had crushed a small child under his truck at Patiala, some ten years ago. After a few appearances in the court, he had stopped coming to the court. It is not easy to find a driver. They are always out on trips, sometimes to the East, and at other times, to Delhi or even further South. The police gets tired after a few raids. The judges also do not like to wait indefinitely. They issue a warrant for appearance a couple of times, and then, proclaiming the accused an absconder, they close the file. This had happened in this case also. It was an achievement for the police to arrest him. What was more interesting was that he had been living here for the last eight years, and no one had known about it.

The second thing that Khan was happy about was the capture of guns from Bantu. Bantu loved to be known as a prominent 'don' of the area. He was close to one section of truckers' union, and had been to jail many times, because of brawls and fights involving the union. He could have used these illegal arms in any illegal operation any time. This way, by confiscating these guns, Khan had averted a very serious mishap.

The police, now, was busy preparing a list of each household and also a list of each member of each household, at Khan's instructions. The result also brought its own surprise. They had been able to locate Katho Rani's brothel. She had hidden two girls and three boys in her house, the way a broody hen hides its brood of chicken in a hole. The inquiry revealed that college boys and girls often came here. Katho charged them a fee. The boys and girls were from well-to-do families. They had been forced to stay here because of the curfew. Khan immediately issued a press note on this matter. He also suspended the hawaldar whose party had conducted the first search. A man who had failed to spot five illegal persons, how could he spot Bunty?

The police had also picked up Bhag and his Bengali wife, but, they were now in a dilemma about filing a report. Bhag was about fifty, and his Bengali wife was only about twenty three or twenty four. He had never been able to get a woman, and had now bought this girl in his old age. Though, they had been living together for at least three years now, but even then, it was a crime. As long as they don't verify her old record, till then they can't let her go.

Gupta was irritated with Khan and his tales of what he had achieved. He had told him at their last meeting that he should talk to him only about Bunty. His other achievements he can discuss with his other officers.

Khan, who was otherwise very vocal about other things, would remain silent whenever the matter of searching the gurudwara was brought up. As long as the gurudwara is not searched, the Sangh members would not keep quiet. They had been very clear about it in the last meeting. They felt that the Deputy Commissioner is a coward, and is bent on getting Bunty killed.

All the intelligence reports of all departments were silent about the gurudwara. No one even knew how many people were inside the gurudwara. Which place does the granthi come from. Not even one jathedar knows the name of his ancestral village. There is no record about his earlier life, where was he employed before he came here. If the granthi is a man of god, why doesn't he himself come out of the gurudwara? His being holed up in the gurudwara, lends credence to the Sangh's suspicions.

Gupta also believes that their suspicions about the gurudwara are valid. The gurudwara must be searched.

Khan is ready to search the gurudwara, but wants Gupta to give him a written order for it.

How could the Deputy Commissioner take a decision on such a delicate matter as the search of a gurudwara? Gupta had done whatever he could do. It is on his order that the gurudwara has been surrounded on all sides. Armed men have been posted on the roofs of the buildings around the gurudwara. The electric supply to the gurudwara has been cut, so that the granthi may not make any announcement on the loudspeaker.

The Deputy Commissioner had been trying to contact the chief minister, the whole night. He could only once talk to the chief minister's personal assistant. Gupta had explained the situation in detail. As soon as the chief minister is free, the P.A. should take a specific order and inform Gupta.

The P.A. had told him that he would get in touch with him within five minutes, after getting an order from the chief minister. But, he also seems to have gone to sleep!

Fed up, Gupta contacted the Chief Secretary. Initially, the Chief Secretary stalled.

'You are a young officer. You are intelligent. Take a decision according to the need of the hour..'

When Gupta wanted a clear 'yes' from the chief secretary, he remarked – 'You should not have brought this to the chief minister's notice, but, now, that you have done so, don't act without consulting him. It is a very delicate matter. It can give him a bad name.'

When there was no order from Chandigarh till the next day, Gupta decided to make a trip to Chandigarh. He would talk to the chief minister face to face.

When he called up the chief minister's P.A. to make an appointment, he was in for a disappointment. The Chief Minister had already left for Delhi, to meet the prime minister. From there, he would go to Bangalore, to attend the opposition chief ministers' conference. It was impossible to contact him for the next three days.

The chief minister had gone to Delhi!

The chief secretary had also gone to Delhi!

If, on one end, things were at an impasse, he was getting the worst news from the other end. Young men had started assembling in houses close to the gurudwara. They have collected bricks, stones, kripans and choppers. Any time, they may clash with the police.

The press had spread news of the siege of the gurudwara, far and wide. The B.B.C. had already started commenting on it. Various statements of political leaders were being published. People were congregating in the villages to protect the gurudwara, and could march towards the town any time.

The town was very unhappy after three days of curfew. Many sick people had died because they could not get medical care and medicines. Food was getting scarce. Milk and vegetables were not available.

The Sangh people were insisting that the curfew should be lifted from the other parts of the city. Though, their demand was valid, yet Gupta was reluctant to take the blame of being partial. He was already feeling trapped because of his being a Gupta.

Keeping the demand of the Sangh in mind, the strictness of the curfew in other parts of the town had been relaxed. The police did not object to the people coming out and walking about.

Gupta also passed the second day of the siege in putting off a decision. To some people he told that he was sending for extra force from outside; to others he said that he is trying to persuade the granthi. The problem could be solved, if the granthi would come out of the gurudwara. Gupta was trying to put pressure on the jathedars to arrange this. A couple of jathedars did go inside, but the granthi was adamant.

Observing the attitude of his senior officers, Gupta had decided that even if the whole town is devastated, on his own he would not order the police to enter the gurudwara.

Caught in a dilemma, Gupta was having strange thoughts. It would be good if he were to get some bad news from home! He wouldn't mind if he were himself to fall ill for a few days. Once he gets some leave, he would never again come back to this town.

He found himself On the horns of a dilemma. If the police enter the gurudwara, there is bound to be trouble, and if they don't, even then there is going to be trouble. Neither his superiors, nor his subordinates are with him. They wanted to make him a scapegoat.

It was at one o'clock in the night that the telephone rang. Gupta did not want to take the call. It was bound to be about some new problem. He was avoiding picking up the phone.

After a couple of rings, it stopped.

He then regretted not having answered it. It could be from Chandigarh. It could be an order from the chief minister, or the chief secretary.

He was about to take another sleeping pill, when his orderly informed him that Khan was in the guest house. He had not been able to talk to him on the phone, and had, therefore, come over to personally talk to Gupta.

Gupta was stressed and feared that the news that Khan had brought was bad.

Khan had brought the worst tidings.

Some time back he had received information, that a child's dead body had been found near the ruins of an old furnace, behind the sugar mill.

The information had been given to Khan by the supervisor of the mill. One of their workers had taken his girlfriend to the ruins for some moments of romance. When they found the corpse of a child wrapped in a carpet, they were scared. Initially they decided to keep quiet. But, frightened of being blamed for the murder, they informed the supervisor. The supervisor had passed on the news to Khan, after making him promise not to reveal the names of the worker.

Khan had himself gone over to the site. The body was that of Bunty. He had been strangled to death. At the moment this was known only to the supervisor, the worker and his girlfriend, and two hawaldars. Leaving the body there, Khan had come over to Gupta, to discuss things with him.

Khan had investigated the worker thoroughly. They had visited the same place even a day earlier, but at that time there was no corpse there. The body had been dumped there a little before their arrival. At present nothing could be said about the killers. How many of them were there; from where had they come; where had they gone, nothing had yet been established.

'There is no longer any need to search the gurudwara.' this thought relieved Gupta.

He could now play the role of a Deputy Commissioner very comfortably.

'The killers were in the town all these days. They have killed the boy, and thrown his body in the ruins. Was the police sleeping all these days?' Gupta tried to pull rank on Khan.

'People go wherever they want to make love! The police don't seem to know anything about it! What sort of a curfew is this? A waste of money! Who is responsible for confining the people in their homes for so many days?'

Gupta admonished Khan. He was annoyed with Khan for not letting the police enter the gurudwara, and asking for an order in writing.

Khan had no answer to these questions. He could do nothing except to apologize.

The ruins had been searched earlier. For the last few days, the police had been concentrating on the gurudwara. It was at Gupta's order that the curfew had been relaxed in other part of the town. If someone had taken advantage of this relaxation, what could Khan do?

Whatever had to happen has happened. The main question confronting the two officers was to keep a check on the people and not let their emotions run berserk. If the news about Bunty's dead body being recovered spreads in the town, there is bound to be a big trouble. The problem can become a state problem, and may even be blown into a national issue. If something like this happens, not only the reputation of the police would suffer, but also the reputation of these two officers would be tarnished. They must think about the steps they should take to safeguard their own reputation.

Khan had already thought of a plan.

Let the police vehicles stage a run through the town, blowing their horns. Let the whole town be awakened. When people come out to find out what has happened, the police should inform them that there has been an encounter with the kidnapers. They have run towards the sugar mill, and the police is chasing them. At the sugar mill, some intense firing should be staged for half an hour or so. Finally, it would be announced that the kidnapers have escaped and Bunty has been recovered, but is badly injured.

The doctor of the government hospital would have to be taken into confidence. Bunty would be kept in the emergency ward and administered oxygen for a day. By the evening, when the anger of the people cools down, it should be announced that Bunty has succumbed to the injuries.

Gupta agreed to Khan's suggestion. He was again regretting his previous harsh behavior towards Khan. Gupta had not even thought of this thing. Khan was definitely more farsighted than Gupta.

After seeing Khan off, Gupta threw away the sleeping pill which he had been clutching in his fist. Why does he need it now? He was already yawning. It meant that sleep was beckoning him. There was no reason for him to keep awake any longer.

After a couple of hours, Khan woke him up again.

The first plan had failed. On the other hand, they were caught in a bad situation.

The police had just brought the corpse to the thana, when they began receiving calls from the people.

The first phone was of the journalist, Derwesh. He wanted them to confirm the various rumours floating around the town.

The next was from a Sangh member. If Bunty's body has actually been recovered, then Lalaji should not be harassed. The body should be quietly handed over to him.

Gupta was angry with Khan. How had the information leaked?

Again, Khan was ashamed. He was taken aback. Either of the two groups could be responsible for this: the police party, or the mill owners. The mill owners were themselves frightened. He was angry with his police. The fools could not keep quiet even for a short time.

The police party posted at the ruins was busy with their wireless. Some people were walking about, indifferent to the curfew. They were looking for the spot where Bunty's body had been found. The police were asking Khan to instruct them how to deal with these people.

The sentry at the gate of the thana also had the same report. The number of people outside the thana gate was swelling.

It was, now, difficult to hide Bunty's body. It was dangerous to take the body back to the ruins. This way, the public would be suspicious about the police itself.

Khan was extremely tired because he had been up the whole night. He was now in a dilemma as to what should he do. He had, therefore, come to consult Gupta.

Gupta had slept soundly for a few hours, and was fully alert. His mind was again working like a computer.

There was no need either to hide the body, or take it back to the ruins. There is no need to invite unnecessary trouble.

The solution was very simple. Look for a desolate place like the ruins. Put the body there, and then report its recovery to the public.

Khan could think of no such place, which was similar to those deserted ruins.

Gupta had a solution to this problem also.

The staff quarters of the veterinary hospital under construction near the cremation ground, were unoccupied and deserted. Afraid of the dead bodies constantly being taken for cremation, people refused to live there.

Khan felt a little relaxed after talking to Gupta. Having seen Khan off, Gupta lit a cigarette and began humming a song from a film.

The frightening stance of this dark night, no longer scared him.

The killers may or may not be arrested. That was the responsibility of the police. The Deputy Commissioner's job was to visit the bereaved family, and to condole their loss in a grief laden voice and with tearful eyes, and to give them some financial aid from the Red Cross.

Gupta was extremely good at offering words of sympathy in a voice full of sorrow, and with moist eyes.

If the town is under a cloud of misfortune, so be it. The sadhe saati, seven and a half years of ill luck, which had been obstructing Gupta's hopes of a bright future, was now over, with Bunty's sacrifice. He fell into a deep, trouble-free sleep.

XV

The news that the curfew had been lifted came as a blessing for the inhabitants of Gandhi Basti, which lay beyond the railway lines. There was hardly any family in the area which had not gone hungry during these dark days.

Imposition of curfew had meant something entirely different for this basti, which had earlier been known as Chuhrian da Vehra. They were not confined to their homes, like others, but their freedom of movement had no meaning.

The basti had been given the name of Gandhi Basti due to the efforts made by the Congress. There was one common water-tap in the centre of the basti. There were a few electric poles, with bulbs hanging on some. But, Gandhi's name, electricity, or a few drops of water, were not enough to fill their empty bellies. For this one needed to fill it with roti which was snatched from them by the curfew.

They had only one support in those bad days, and that was Ghaffoor Mian. Whenever anyone fell ill, or lost a day's wages because of some incident, it was Ghaffoor Mian who gave them loans to tide over the crisis.

Ghaffoor was no seth to keep lending money to the whole basti without his coffers getting emptied.. The borrowers were poor and so was their money lender. Though, he did set out thirty-forty boxes, but it was only for show and he actually used only eight or ten of them. He would sale only a few selected items: flour, salt, ghee, tea and jiggery; onions and potatoes. Mian bought these things from the bazaar in the morning, and would sell them out by the evening. And, in this transaction, he would earn his own bread.

During the curfew, he felt pity for these people. He could not bear that his customers should die of hunger. He did not say 'no' to anyone till his stocks lasted. His wife had also given flour from her own kitchen.

Since yesterday, he was hungry himself.

They were all very happy when the curfew was lifted. They would now be able to earn, if not much. Some work would come their way.

On paper, it may seem that this area has developed, but the fact was that the conditions in this basti had deteriorated. Many families were, even now, extremely poor. Many houses would be locked with the Sunrise, and all members of the families would go out: some of them to sweep and clean the shops, others to clean houses. If the man worked on daily wages, then, the wife went to some office to clean and sweep. Some people would drive rickshaws: some of them would start from the railway station and others from the labour- chowk. Those with handcarts, looked out for loads at the shops, as traders from neighbouring villages wanted loads to be carried to these destinations, and this would bring them a day's earnings.

But this arrangement had been disrupted by the imposition of the curfew.

Meeta had also cleaned and polished his handcart. He wanted to try his luck at the vegetable market. He knew well that on such days, the biggest crowds are found in the vegetable markets or near the flour mills. Who knows when the curfew may be imposed again? You need these things to fill your belly.

There were about four-five mills in the town; some in the North, and others to the South of the town. Meeta set out for the vegetable market. Every small and big buyer will need to buy onions and potatoes according to his needs.

From the basti he reached the level crossing, then, from the level crossing, he walked along the railway track up to the station. Then, he went through to the sadar bazaar, and set off towards the thana. From behind the thana, he wanted to go on to the college road and from there to the vegetable market.

There was a large crowd in the markets. He had hopes of getting some load en route. It was not necessary that he should get a load only at the vegetable market. If he could earn some money, on the way there, it would be good.

He walked with rapid steps. What if all the loads are booked even before he reaches the vegetable market? Perhaps vegetable sellers may not have brought a big load to the market because of the curfew.

The market had opened after many days. Meeta was surprised to note that people did not look very happy, and that a pall of gloom seemed to engulf them. The shopkeepers should have looked cheerful. Their shops were not Meeta's handcart, which could not bear the loss of a day's earning. They were accustomed to earn large amounts, and will not scruple to raise their prices to make up the loss that they had suffered.

Buyers were running around the shops in frenzy. Women and children were shopping with bags and baskets clutched in their hands. People rushed towards whichever shop opened its doors.

The shop would again pull down its shutters after ten minutes. That was the reason why people were buying in such a hurry.

After a little while, the bazaar closed again. People stood around in groups. Sadness was in the air - a heavy feeling of grief and also that of anger. There was many a tearful eye.

Meeta had guessed that it was not a good time. He was also in a hurry to earn a few rupees. He had to buy some flour and a few other necessities. No one knew when they would be confined again to their homes, and forced to starve.

Meeta was aware that Lalaji's grandson had been missing for many days. He had been kidnapped by the terrorists.

They were demanding five thousand from Lalaji. The police had taken a rigid stand. Houses were being searched. And that was the reason why the curfew had been imposed.

After all this, Bunty should have been found. People would have been happy if he had been found. Then, why were they unhappy instead of being happy? Meeta could not understand.

Meeta was thinking of the public prosecutor who had helped him in getting the police to close his history sheet. Police was no longer harassing him.

Had this incident taken place a year ago, Meeta would have been immediately taken to the thana and beaten so badly as to break almost all his bones.

Meeta slowed down as he recalled the manner in which he had earlier been beaten. He felt a shooting pain in his shoulders; he felt that his handcart has become heavier by tonnes.

The past seemed to have revived before Meeta's eyes as he again started walking fast towards the vegetable market.

Meeta had grown up on the crowded bus stop. He had been handed down the art and skill of picking pockets as a legacy by his own father. He had first been taught to pick pockets of school going children; then of young men who loitered about the roads watching the road shows, and finally, of people boarding buses at the stand. Initially, he was given only full meals as wages, then he was given a share; and finally, he operated independently.

His father introduced him to people in the profession: with Desu dada of the bus stop, and his companions; with the coolies at the bus stop; and also with the constables there. Success came only when all elements worked together. He was instructed in what proportion were the pickings to be divided between all. He was also told in what way each one of them would help. The coolies would indicate the parties to be targeted. As they carried the luggage, they assessed which party was rich. If you were caught, Dada's people would save you. But, if things are beyond their control, then the police was there to help you. They would give you a couple of slaps, catch you and lock you up. When the crowd gets dispersed, they would take you elsewhere and let you off.

You also must not cheat on your companions otherwise the whole system would break down. If you didn't pay the coolies, they would inform either the party concerned, or the police against you. If the police were not given their share, they would harass you by slapping cases on you. If you quarreled with Dada, he would not even let you enter the bus stand.

Meeta had learnt the tricks quickly. Within no time, he had come to control the bus stops for Ambala and Rajpura.

It had not occurred to Meeta at that time that he would have to wait for hours to earn a day's wherewithal at the market, and to do that, he would have to carry heavy loads.

Had he been the old Meeta, he would have earned five six hundred rupees by now, and would have been sitting in some hotel, downing a couple of pegs. A day like this would mean a 'season' for him.

People in grief are unconcerned about their welfare and are oblivious to what is happening around them. You can mix with any group you want and snatch a wallet from whichever pocket you want.

Meeta, who was once known for emptying the pockets of others, now himself had an empty pocket! There was a time, when his father had been so happy at his success that he had also handed over his own work to him, and taken on another occupation.

He had now moved to Rajasthan, and had made a greater success in his new life. He was now a dacoit there. A thanedar had introduced him to a group of dacoits there.

Meeta's father was bringing in loads of money, and Meeta had become an ustad here. Meeta had also selected some assistants. Whosoever picked a pocket brought it to Meeta. They would all go on drinking binges, eat meat and use opium. They would go to Ludhiana to buy new clothes, watch movies, and would also visit brothels. They would stay in Ludhiana as long as their money lasted.

When bad days came, the things changed completely. The Rajasthan police arrested his father. He was wanted in connection with many murders. And a reward of one lakh had also been announced by the government for anyone giving information about him. He was sentenced to life imprisonment.

Meeta's mother eloped with a constable.

After that, Meeta had been in a bad shape. He had also been caught several times and beaten severely every time.

The arrangements with the police had gone awry. They were now demanding double rates. They wanted practically all that Meeta brought in. You picked a pocket of five hundred, and they wanted a thousand. There were so many different types of policemen. One is the goonda staff, another is C.I.A... Then there is, the city police, and also the thana police. Meeta would have to shell out almost all that he earned. You may have picked a pocket in Patiala or Amritsar, but the police here also wanted a share in that. If by some mistake the pocket of an informer or some particular acquaintance of the police was snatched Meeta would be summoned and told to make good the loss! The police take away the money, and it is the pickpocket who is asked to pay!

Tired of the harassment by the police, Meeta's companions left the town. Many of them were in prison. Meeta was also tired. He had also been to prison many times. Every time he was released, he swore to give up this occupation. But the moment he came out, one or the other police man would egg him on.

'Start working. I'll take care of everything.'

Who would take care of things? As long as they got their share, things were fine. But, if a problem cropped up, they all looked the other way.

He was, now, a known history sheeter. Every month he had to present himself at the thana. This was a method of extracting money from him. From the constable at the gate, munshi to the thanedar, each one took his pound of flesh.

From the identification marks on his body, to his photographs, everything had been pasted in his file. Whenever anything happened, Meeta would always be rounded up. Many a times, he would be summoned to different thanas. At every thana, he would be beaten up, and money snatched from him.

Recalling the beatings and the money snatching, Meeta's misgivings evaporated. He was happy that he had given up pick pocketing or else, he would have been beaten up the moment news of Bunty's kidnapping became public.

His house had once been raided, during the curfew. Thank God, he was at home. He was trying to light a fire with some wet dungcakes. The police was satisfied when they found him home. They went away, after giving him a few hard smacks. This was nothing for Meeta, who had borne severe beatings. He had thanked his gods thousand times, that he had not been dragged to the thana.

By the time, Meeta came near the thana, the markets were again empty. Forgetting the shopping, people drifted homewards. They were hurrying away, as if they did not need anything, or their hungers had been sated.

'What has happened?' Meeta finally asked a rickshaw puller.

'What to say, brother! They say that Bunty's body has been found in the veterinary hospital. These are very bad times. A great tragedy has befallen us.' The rickshaw puller related the whole story in few words, and then cycled away quickly. He was also anxious to earn some money.

Meeta understood the whole situation every clearly. He trembled within himself. Tears came to his eyes. This was indeed a calamity.

Meeta had been a pickpocket, but he had never picked the pocket of a poor man. He had always gone after rich people. If they wanted revenge, they should have taken it on Lalaji. How had Bunty harmed them? As it is, what was Lala's fault? If you need money, loot a bank. What does Lala have? He is also barely making the two ends meet.

There was no need for anyone to call for a strike against this cruelty. As long as the innocent's corpse is before the town, who among them would be so stonehearted as to be able to sell and buy things comfortably and peacefully?

If the perpetrators of this cruelty could be made to understand the enormity of their crime, Meeta was also willing to put away his handcart and join the protest, even though he may have to starve for many days. But he knew that these strikes and processions have no effect on criminals. He also had once been a part of such a group. On the other hand, the criminals are happy when they see others suffering.

'So, Bunty has been killed!' the very thought made Meeta's heart sink.

'O my God! Do one more thing . Please see to it that the murderers are caught, or many like me would be harassed to death.' He was impatient to run to the government advocate. It was at his insistence that the police had closed Meeta's history sheet, but this was a case of murder. Who knows when they may think of opening the old file? Who cares about the public prosecutor in a murder case? These thoughts passed through his mind as he pushed his handcart along the road.

‘Even if they catch me, Gurmit will get me out.’ He got some consolation from this thought.

Gurmit was the government advocate who had set him on the straight path.

Meeta had been caught by the police in a drunken brawl at the bus stand. He was confined to the thana for many days. Gurmit had newly arrived in the town on a transfer. Some coolies were needed to fetch his luggage from Patiala. Meeta had been one of them. Had it been morning, they would have got some men from the labour chowk. But by this time the chowk was empty. When they could find no other way, they pulled in some rickshaw drivers. What was their crime? You can pin whatever you want: you can say they have parked their rickshaws in the wrong place. The punishment given was to fetch the government advocate’s luggage.

Meeta would be made to sit at the thana for days at end. The police would put him to work as he was idling. The police deputy or thanedar would take him to their farms for harvesting or weeding. Let alone giving him the daily wages, they did not even give him a square meal.

This government advocate was a different type. As soon as he came back with his luggage, he asked the rickshaw pullers how much did their daily earnings amount to. A little scared, they gave him the figure of ten rupees. He immediately took out the money from his pocket and paid them fifteen rupees each.

When he saw Gurmit handing out money like that, Meeta had told him his whole sordid story. Meeta felt that Gurmit seemed to have a great sympathy for criminals like him. He had fired a volley of questions at Meeta.

Such petty criminals commit crimes to fill the pockets of the police. All that they earn goes to the police. They are left with beatings, imprisonment, and the curses of the unfortunate who have been their victims. What did Meeta have? Nothing at all. Torn clothes and an empty stomach!

With Gurmit’s encouragement, Meeta had given up picking pockets.

He had driven a rickshaw, initially. But people were scared to sit in his rickshaw. Who knows where he may take them and snatch all that they had with them?

Then, he looked for any menial job on daily wages at labour chowk. But, here again, no one wanted him to enter their homes. Masons shook their heads, afraid of getting a bad name.

When Meeta was on the verge of losing heart and giving it all up, Gurmit showed greater confidence in him. Taking the help of an acquaintance of his who was a bank manager, he arranged a loan for him, and got him the handcart.

When he began getting some work, his past crimes came back to haunt him.

Once here was a large gathering of writers at the college. For two days they had a langar. When the program ended, the writer responsible for running the langar, sent for him, so that the leftover material could be sent back to the grocer’s. Meeta knew the writer well. He was an impressive speaker. He often talked about embracing

persons like Meeta. He had also published many books and was known as a friend of the poor. Meeta felt that he was a sensitive man. Whatever Meeta had asked for as payment, he agreed to pay him.

Meeta loaded the goods on to his cart, and started for the bazaar. The writer was talking to someone. He had not given Meeta the name of the shop the goods had to be taken to. Meeta looked for the writer from shop to shop, lane to lane.

Meeta found the writer when a constable caught him by the neck. The writer had filed a complaint against him. He had trusted a man who had been a pickpocket, and was now regretting his mistake. Meeta had run off with the goods.

No one was ready to listen to Meeta. A case was registered against him, and his handcart was confiscated.

Gurmit had to beg and plead with the writer to get him to come to an agreement.

Other things were all right, but Meeta did not get much work because of his bad name. Many shopkeepers avoided him as a delivery man.

Whatever came, Meeta faced it with determination. A full year passed, and he had not even glanced at another's pocket.

'This is all a mischievous plan by the police. The body has been found near the old furnace near the sugar mill. But they say it is lying in the veterinary hospital... all lies!'

Meeta's reverie was broken by these comments of a group on the road.

'The gardener at Ram Bagh was saying that when he had gone to the courtyard to give water to the animals, a police jeep had stopped near the gate. A few men had got off the jeep and gone into the hospital. They were carrying something. After a while they came back. It must be the body that they had carried in.'

The other young man was confirming the statement of the first.

A group of young men went past Meeta walking fast.

Meeta guessed that all these groups were going towards the veterinary hospital.

'The police say that they were told by someone on the phone that the body is in the hospital. The telephone people say that no one from outside talked to the police on the telephone. They have a list of names of people who had phoned the police last night. The phone was from Derwesh, or from the Sangh... all hell has broken loose.'

Someone gave all this information as he went past Meeta.

Meeta stopped at the crossroads near the government hospital. The road bifurcated here. One road passed Ram Bagh and went on to Bhador. A little ahead, another road branched out, going towards the veterinary hospital. The second road was the Kacha College Road, on which lay the vegetable market.

The news of Bunty's murder spread like wild fire in the town. The bazaars had all shut down. There was no question of the vegetable market being open. Meeta had no hope of getting any work now.

He went on to the Ram Bagh Road. He parked his cart in the garden and then turned towards the hospital.

XVI

The whole town seemed to have converged on the small compound of the hospital.

The doctor had got tables and chairs placed under the rosewood tree. Two cots were also placed on the side. The chair in the middle had been kept vacant for the Deputy. The rest were already occupied by the thanedar and hawaldars. The constables were sitting on the cots.

Tea had been brought from the doctor's residence. A beautiful tea set on a tray was put on the table; constables were served tea in glasses.

The City In-charge sipped his tea, as he dictated to the hawaldar. He would look up and survey the scene from time to time, and then, again go back to dictating.

The hawaldar had also arranged his papers carefully on a sun mica clipboard. He was making his notes carefully in his beautiful hand, for which he was known in the whole district.

A piece of durree could be seen through the window of a room, which was exactly opposite the place where the policemen were sitting; there was a black patch on the edge of the durree, which looked like the hair of a child. Nothing else could be seen from outside.

The crowd had one aim. To get a chance to peep into that room anyhow. To have a look at Bunty's face. The police was also determined that as far as possible, no one should come within two hundred yards of the spot where Bunty's body was kept. It was getting more and more difficult to keep the crowd out; they had even resorted to a light lathi charge, to push the crowd back. But, people were in no mood to disperse. They would surge forward, as soon as they were pushed back.

Anyone who came in would go towards the body. The Deputy stood in the crowd. He was trying to explain the situation to the people around him. There is a danger of proofs and evidence being destroyed if the people were to go near the body. The police have sent for the dog-squad and finger prints experts and other investigators. If the crowd gets too near the corpse, that could mean trouble for the police.

Many people moved away, and were now sitting on the boundary of the compound, but most of them were totally unmoved by the Deputy's plea.

Meeta also mingled with the crowd. He was impatient to have one glimpse of Bunty's body. He had pushed to the front by elbowing out many. The policemen pushing the crowd back, knew him. They glared at him and pushed him back.

Constable Kulwant caught him by the shoulder. In signs he made it clear that he has seen Meeta, and any pockets he may pick here, are to be shared with Kulwant. To do so Meeta must bring his share to his home.

Meeta's fingers had also brushed against many fat bulging pockets. He had also been tempted. What is wrong in picking a pocket once in a while? At least he would not have to go hungry. But, he took hold of himself. If he gives into temptation even once, the process would start all over again. Many policemen had seen him. He may not pick any pocket, but if anyone's purse goes missing, they would all pounce upon him. He controlled himself.

Ramesh, the hawaldar, hurled abuses at him, when he saw Meeta in the crowd, and shouted – 'You... goon! Spare this place at such a time! People can't stop their tears and you are eyeing their pockets!'

Ramesh's abuses hurt Meeta deeply. The crowd was also scared. All eyes turned to him. To them Meeta seemed as big a criminal as those who had killed Bunty. Each one of them felt their pockets with their hands, and was relieved to find their wallets untouched.

Meeta was disheartened. He wanted to yell at the police and the crowd that he was no longer a pickpocket. He is a worker and works hard to earn his bread, and has been doing it for a year now. But not a single word could he utter. Who would believe the honesty of a criminal?

Meeta wanted to leave, but where? He could not decide. The whole town was here. All work was at a standstill. He would not find any work. He was fed up of sitting idle at home.

He turned away and went to the side where others like him stood – cobblers, sweepers, and menial works. No one had any money in his pocket, and there was no danger from a pickpocket. More than half of them knew him personally. And, if the need arose, could vouch for his honesty.

Constables seldom stepped that side. Meeta also could not be seen by anyone.

He stood there, without fear, watching the police doing various things.

First, the dog squad arrived. They had been brought from Sangrur, in a Maruti van. There was a trainer, one each for the three dogs. They strained at their leashes in a hurry to get down to work as soon as they arrived. But the Deputy stopped them. The dogs had travelled from far and would be tired. Let them rest for some time.

One constable brought a tray of tea and another fetched biscuits. The trainers were more worried about their dogs than their own selves. They would take one biscuit and give four to their dogs.

Watching the dogs eyeing the crowd, Meeta slipped back to the last row. He had, once been entangled with these dogs. Any one they touch is bound to get into deep trouble.

Meeta had been caught when a theft had taken place at a bank manager's residence. Everything had been stolen – jewellery, clothes and electronic goods.

Meeta had also been standing in the crowd, watching the dogs sniffing at the various spots.

One dog caught him by the kurta, and would not let him go. From the police to the judge, no one listened to what Meeta had to say. His old record was enough to prove him guilty. The police had registered many false and old things against him and had succeeded in getting a six months' sentence for him.

This was a case of a murder. This would mean a life sentence. Scared, Meeta stepped behind to stand at the back.

It may also be possible that the dogs do all this at the behest of the trainers. They catch hold of someone like Meeta at a signal from the trainer. And, Meeta was well known to these trainers, he told himself.

Meeta was aware that all this was just a drama. One dog would go up to the bus stop and stop there, another would stop at the crossroads. One would be confused by the smell of petrol, and another would be put off by the scent of perfume. Now, criminals no longer have to walk long distances. There are buses, and trains leaving the town every few minutes. Within two hours you can be in Chandigarh. The dogs would go round in circles. These days criminals are no longer ignorant, and know everything necessary about the habits of police dogs. They know many ways of hoodwinking them. After half an hour, these dogs would lift their faces to the sky and halt. The trainers would earn their travelling allowances and daily allowance, and police will prove to the town that they are very quick and efficient.

Standing at a distance, Meeta watched these proceedings. First, the dogs were made to sniff Bunty's corpse; then the durree and the room.

In a few moments, the dogs started dragging their trainers...

One dog took his trainer towards Ram Bagh. Half of the crowd went after them, raising a din.

The other two were puzzled. They would again and again go back and lie down at their trainers' feet.

They were again taken to Bunty. The durree was again lifted and they were again made to sniff his body.

The dogs were now more alert. Now, they were pulling at their leashes with such force that the trainers found it difficult to restrain them.

One of the huge dogs, got after Ramesh, the hawaldar. He tore his trousers and tried to bite his hand. The trainer was taken aback, and tried to pat him. What was the dog doing? Ramesh is a police hawaldar, not a criminal.

'Arrest this hawaldar! Why don't you catch him?' Someone from the crowd shouted.

Ramesh had turned pale. His legs were shaking. He was sweating. Bewildered, he looked at the Deputy and then at the dog.

Finding the Deputy standing silently there, Prem from the the Bans Bahiawalas, was annoyed. The dog was clearly pointing out the culprit, and the police

was not taking any action. Who does not know that the police itself are in collusion with the militants? The police may be involved, even in this incident. The murderers had stayed in the town, despite such heavy searches. They killed the child, as and when they wanted, and left the body here. Half of the police force is involved with them, and the other half is scared of them. The dog is not doing this under duress.

‘This policeman should be caught!’ Prem shouted again. Shindi Bandukwala also agreed with him. ‘If the police can commit thefts, then it can also do this. There is better money in it!’

He told the story of an old woman, who was robbed by two constables. The old woman was the old type- brave and alert. Without losing her wits she bit one of them on the shoulder as they grappled with her. The next morning, when the thanedar came to her house to investigate along with the constables, she recognized them. The thanedar tried to threaten her. But, she insisted that the constable take off his shirt. And when the constable took his shirt off, everyone saw the marks of the bite that were still bleeding. If the police has taken to thieving, is it impossible for them to strike a deal with murderers? This hawaldar must be arrested.

The president of the vyopar mandal went up to speak to the Deputy. The Deputy vouched for Ramesh’s integrity. He has been with the Deputy since yesterday. Ramesh has been around on this site with the Deputy many times, and that is why the dog has come after him. He is an animal and can make mistakes.

When the pradhan still looked doubtful, the Deputy changed his strategy.

‘He is your Hindu brother. Can he do such a thing?’

How could the Deputy tell the pradhan that Ramesh was the leader of the party which had brought Bunty’s body here. He had impressed upon Ramesh that either he should wear some perfume, or should not come back to the site. He should have taken a bath and also, changed his clothes. The fool had not heeded him. Now he was facing the music; and, in the bargain, giving the Deputy a bad name.

The Deputy was happy that Ramesh was a Hindu. Had he been a Sikh, the agitated crowd would have surely got him arrested.

After the Deputy’s clarification, there was silence for some time. The trainers took the dogs to the thana saying that they needed to rest.

The second dog was barking at the jeep. He was sniffing and snarling at the seats of the jeep.

The Deputy was tensed again. The dog was not wrong. Ramesh had made another mistake. The Deputy had told him to use a private vehicle to carry the body. It appeared as if he had used the government jeep.

The Deputy now realized that he had also blundered. What was the need to send for the dogs? All this drama may cost the police dear. What could the dogs find here? They were actually needed in the ruins behind the sugar mill.

People were already talking about it. The Deputy did not want to confirm their suspicions by sending the dogs there.

The Sun had risen high and it was almost noon. The fingerprint experts and other investigators had yet to begin their work. The post mortem also would take a few hours. It was also necessary to have the child's funeral before the Sunset. If the police were to run around with the dogs in this manner, it would not be possible to have the funeral on time.

Keeping this in mind, the Deputy sent the dog squad back to the thana.

He also sent Ramesh hawaldar to Lalaji. 'Let him come and take charge of the body. It was getting difficult to control the crowd.'

The Deputy instructed the experts to collect whatever prints of the culprits they could find at the site. Before they began their work, the Deputy explained things to them. There were no prints here. They merely have to pretend that they were doing all that was necessary. There were two reasons for sending for them: first, to convince the people that the police is not leaving any stone unturned; second, if later on, the crime has to be foisted on to someone else, the investigations here can be of great help. The evidence picked up from this site, can be exchanged with the prints of real culprits, anytime. Only one thing is essential: the report of these experts should be entered in the daily-diary register, and the first information reports of the crime. They need not spend too much time here.

The experts began their work after at asking a couple of credible persons to act as witnesses. The culprits appeared to be very clever. They had left no mark anywhere. It was, even otherwise, difficult to find any print whatsoever. The room was still being built, and there was nothing here except bricks and wood. And it is difficult to find any prints on them. After poring over the room for more than an hour, they did succeed in finding a few prints.

The Sangh members were irritated at the slow pace of investigation. They did not think that anything significant would come out of all this drama. The one who had to die was dead. Even if the killers are found, he would not come back. The Sangh wanted to get the body as quickly as possible, so that the final rites may be performed before the Sunset.

The Deputy also did not want to delay matters. The paper work had been completed. Let Lalaji come. Let him identify the body, and sign the receipt, and take charge of the body.

On his return Ramesh informed the Deputy that the Deputy Commissioner was at Lalaji's condoling Bunty's death and sharing the sorrow of the bereaved family. This was the reason behind the delay. Khan was also with him. Gupta had been called to an important meeting. He wanted to leave immediately for Sangrur from Lalaji's. There was nothing for him to do now. The police is bound to nab the killers. People were now at peace.

Gupta has announced an ex-gratia grant of twenty thousand to the bereaved family. He gave an assurance on behalf of the Red Cross and also said that a grand memorial would be built in the memory of the dead child. He also appealed to the experts to submit plans for such a memorial as soon as possible.

Gupta had also announced that a 'Bunty Memorial Award would be instituted by the Red Cross, and would be given to the student topping the tenth board exam.

He instructed Khan that Bunty should be cremated with full state honours. One section of police should present arms at the occasion.

Ramesh had also brought a message that as soon as the Deputy Commissioner leaves, Khan would himself bring Lalaji here.

The Deputy made full use of the extra time. As long as Lalaji does not arrive, the experts should show their importance. After plenty of running about, they did get two footprints. To save them from obliteration the footprints were covered by earthen bowls.

One of the investigators busily prepared the mould of the print. The second one tried to look for other prints.

They were still busy, when Khan's jeep arrived. Cutting through the crowd, it came to a halt in front of the room where Bunty lay. As Lalaji alighted, the crowd held its breath. Silence was all around.

Khan escorted Lalaji to the room.

'Hare Ram..... Hare Ram.....'

'Vaheguru....Vaheguru....'

'Ya Allah.... Rahim....'

'The killers have filled their coffers by looting this derwesh!'

Different slogans made the atmosphere heavy with sorrowful.

Lalaji almost collapsed when he saw Bunty. Khan held him up with great difficulty.

Lalaji hugged Bunty to his chest. He kissed his face which hung limply. He could not hold Bunty's body in his arms, a leg fell this way, and an arm the other way.

Tears flowed from his eyes. When they saw the condition Lalaji was in, Ram Swaroop and Darshan, defying the police rushed to him.

Looking at Bunty's face, which had, by now, turned ugly, and his thin reed like body, they also broke into loud sobs.

'We will not allow any postmortem. What is left in this innocent's body, which they want to cut up?' Darshan shouted at the hawaldar, who had brought the papers for Lalaji's signature, and dashed the papers on the ground.

Khan did not lose his cool when he saw Darshan scatter the papers thus. He tried to pacify him.

'Post mortem is essential in order to punish the criminals.'

'You will make the same efforts that you have made earlier' Darshan said, brushing away Khan's hand. He again broke into sobs.

‘You are yet young... you do not understand the complexity of law... postmortem is essential... or else the culprits can escape punishment....’ Khan was not annoyed. He was continuously trying to gain control over their emotions.

‘You do your duty... what attachment with this handful of dust now? He will be consigned to dust in no time.... Do what you need to do, Khan sahib.’

Lalaji said, as he took off the towel wrapped round his head.

Wrapping Bunty’s body in the towel, Lalaji carried him towards the mortuary.

The mourning crowd followed him.

Meeta also could not stop his tears.

XVII

The body had been in the mortuary now for two hours. But the post mortem had not yet begun. The doctor had taken his chair as soon as the body had been brought in. He had also sent many messages to Joginder.

Joginder, taken up by his own importance, was busy scratching the back of his stud buffalo.

The doctor could understand the reason for his annoyance. He had not been given his fee, and he was not going to get it. It was foolish of him to expect to be paid in every case.

In this case, there was nothing to be done. He had to be there because the procedure demanded it. The doctor had himself examined the body. There was a deep wound on the head. He had been hit with an iron rod. When the child did not die of this hit, the same rod had been pressed on his neck. The popping eyes and the lolling limp tongue were proof enough of that. The grime on his body and the tearstains on his face showed that the child had not bathed and had been continuously crying.

Death was the result of these deep wounds. The doctor did not think it necessary to cut the stomach open. Yet, he had to do it so that the legal formalities could be complied with. He had to take out the viscera in order to assess the cause and time of death on the basis of food eaten and digested. The doctor needed the sweeper in order to cut open the stomach. And, Joginder took a minimum of fifty rupees to put his hand into filth.

If the body has been lying in the mortuary for two hours, let it be so. If the Sun is going to set shortly, so be it. The doctor is calling for him, let him keep calling. Joginder also has to feed his children. No one is going to call Joginder and his ilk, to a wedding. On the contrary, if they are the first ones to be encountered by someone on a happy occasion, it is considered inauspicious. They are soundly abused for that! There are only a couple of bodies brought in for postmortem in a month. How can a horse be friendly with the grass, and refuse to eat it?

Joginder was not afraid of the doctor. It was not a part of his duty to help in the dissection of the body. On paper, he is a sweeper. His job is to clean the hospital. It is a different matter that they have all forgotten this. Now, his job is to clean the morgue, and help the doctor in carrying out the postmortem, or to look after his stud buffalo and to grow vegetable for the doctors on the land near the bungalow.

Earlier, the stud buffalo was government property. He was used to pull the Persian wheel. If he was free, he could be taken to impregnate the buffaloes of people living nearby. They would give him jiggery for this service.

The times changed, and the Persian wheel was replaced with a pump. The money being spent by the department on the stud buffalo stopped. But Joginder loved the stud buffalo and still looked after him, now he began charging twenty rupees for each buffalo the stud buffalo impregnated. Four of five animals would come in every day. He and the stud buffalo, both were happy. There was no dearth of grass and hay. There was plenty of grass on the land near the morgue. No one had ever tilled the land, as they were frightened of spirits and ghosts. Taking full advantage of this superstition, he took it under his control. The stud buffalo happily feasted and loitered in the lush green grass.

Again, time took another turn, and even this stopped. Instead of bringing their animals to Joginder's stud buffalo, people now took their animals to the veterinary hospital. He was not even earning the money he was spending on the buffalo. But, Joginder was so attached to the animal that he could not even think of driving him away. He was not a burden on Joginder.

If, under these conditions, Joginder were to help in the post-mortem, without getting his fee, would not he starve?

Unhappy, Joginder was sharing his sorrow with his stud buffalo. He was continuously scratching the buffalo's back.

He may be Lalaji's grandson. Had it been Lalaji who had died, even then, Joginder would not have done it for free.

Joginder knew very well how good a man Lalaji was! The Ram Leela Samiti arranges to get one poor girl married during the celebration of Seeta Swayamvar every year. Lalaji selects the girl whose marriage is to be solemnized on that occasion and it is a matter of happiness for the whole family. People give so many gifts for the dowry, which a man like Joginder could never collect for his daughter in his whole life.

Whenever Lalaji organized a camp in the hospital, Joginder went all out to serve the patients. He would clean and mop and pick up filth the whole day through. Not even a fly dared to fly around! All this was done with the hope that one day Lala would be good to him. He had hoped that Lala would recognize his services and recompense him. And with this in mind, he had even selected a boy who was a compounder. He explained to the boy's family that he would see that they get a huge dowry, the like of which they would have never seen.

Joginder spent most of his time among doctors and compounders. He knew how much they earned. They sell medicines on the side, and don't examine anyone

without taking their fee. The medical stores pamper them. They have plenty of private practice. The girl would be happy and would be called 'doctrini'!

But this Lala did not heed his pleading. Joginder asked the doctor to recommend his case. Even Modi, the chemist spoke for him. But he stalled everyone. He said that they had already decided on Shanti's daughter. If anyone were to ask Lalaji, is Shanti poor? She works at the chief minister's bungalow. She is in constant and direct touch with Bibi. Every now and then, she is driven to Chandigarh. Her whole family is now in government service. If one is a chowkidar at the market committee, another is a sweeper in the supply department. Someone is in the Food Corporation of India, and every day brings a sack of wheat home. Her daughters are always well dressed. Shanti can afford to pay for a wedding herself. She can marry off her daughter to whomsoever she wants! But Lalaji did not listen him. And it was Shanti's daughter who was married, because of Lala's kindness. He may have got the chief minister to do something for him in return! And he goes about saying that he doesn't get along with the chief minister!

Had Lala agreed to his request for next year, Joginder would have begged the boy's family to wait for him. But he again stalled. He said next year's decision would be taken next year. What if some other minister would come up with some other proposal? Who would heed Joginder's pleas?

Joginder had to tell the mediator plainly that the marriage would be like any other sweeper's wedding.

Why would they agree to it? There was no dearth of proposals for their well-qualified son. The very next day, they had finalized his engagement with a girl who was a teacher.

Joginder's dreams for his daughter were shattered. She was still living in cow dung and squalor. Because of the broken engagement, he had to get her married off quickly. Poor in-laws were poor; a clerk for a husband. Had Lala been kind to him, his daughter would have been comfortable all her life.

Joginder wanted to show them that he too had some importance. They may be called executioners, yet they are necessary for society; even if only for cutting up a dead body. He will not touch the corpse without taking his fee. Never!

The constables who had come with the body for the post-mortem were not to be blamed. They had indirectly made it clear to Lalaji's followers that they must take care of Joginder. But, these pot-bellied ones, shedding crocodile tears, had no real sympathy for Lalaji. Otherwise, what are mere fifty rupees? Anyone could have paid it! And, as it is, the fee is not always paid by the family. Whosoever comes and is informed by the constable, pays it. Here, each one of them is ignoring what he is told and goes out and sits amongst the mourners.

Joginder remembered hawaldar Budh Singh. He was a good man, especially to Joginder. He was not very good at writing and reading. The thana people also gave him duties that mostly kept him outdoors. He came from a poor family, like Joginder. He understood Joginder's situation well. He had been taken in as a constable because of a kind police officer. He got promoted because of his obedience. He was the son of

a sweeper. As soon as he completed his course, he got his stripes. He liked Joginder. Whenever he came with a dead body, he would see that Joginder got hundred rupees. Once, he even got him three hundred. They do not give from their own pocket. It is only a matter of telling the party who comes with the body, to make the payment.

He had also brought unclaimed corpses a few times. Even then, he had given fifty rupees from his own pocket. Joginder had refused and told him that he doesn't have to pay. They do not do anything in the case of unclaimed bodies. They only keep the body for an hour or so in the morgue, and then send it back. Joginder also does not touch any unclaimed body.

Joginder recalled that it was in such a case that Dr. Sharma had got into great trouble. He charged at least a thousand rupees for a postmortem. That also had to be given to him at his bungalow, or else he would not step into the morgue. In this case, a bhैया was murdered. No one knew the actual story. Instead of taking the trouble to find out, the police had made a story of a drunken brawl which had turned fatal. While writing the report they had written that the victim was a drunkard. The other man, who was also a bhैया, had hit the dead man under the influence of alcohol. Frightened, he had then fled home.

The culprit was also a bhैया, and so was the dead man. Who would pay a thousand rupees? If the money was not paid, the doctor had no time even to read the documents sent by the police, He wrote out a simple report.

When the report was sent to the government advocate, he was furious. According to the police, the dead man was a drunkard. The medical report said that there was no alcohol in his stomach. Who is lying, the doctor or the thanedar? He also wrote a long letter to S.S.P. The guilty should be punished. The case should be dismissed. The police, of course, took the side of their own brethren. The Captain ordered that a case of negligence be filed against the doctor. The S.S.P. had received information from the doctor's own henchmen that he had not even opened the stomach of the dead man. The doctor got off only after paying a hefty sum.

Joginder may do anything or may not do; Budh Singh had to pay him his fee. He often said that in some cases, the police take about a lakh from the party concerned. Paying from his pocket would not impoverish him. He would get the munshi to give him the money.

Thinking of Budh Singh, tears came to Joginder's eyes. Who had known that Joginder would have to cut open his stomach with his own hands?

He was an alcoholic. Many times, Joginder had warned him. Once he started drinking he wouldn't stop. Often, he would be found lying in ditches, or on the road.

Then, he bought a motorcycle. Even then, everybody tried to stop him. That became the cause of his death. Even a sober man cannot always control an Enfield, and he was a habitual drunkard.

Then happened the most dreaded thing. After a month he was dead. It was tragic way to die. Driving in drunken daze, he did not realize that there was a culvert ahead built over the canal. As soon as he crashed into the culvert, he fell into the

canal. His collar bone was broken. The bike caught fire. The body was burnt beyond recognition. No one even informed the police. He lay in the canal the whole night.

In the morning, they came to know that he had gone to his village to fetch some country liquor. Having drunk to his fill he had put the rest in his dickey and driven to his death.

The officers were kind to him in his death. He had died within the boundary of the thana of Tape. If this would be written in the report his family would not get even a penny in compensation. It was necessary to show that he had died on duty.

On the advice of the government advocate, a summons for Bhatinda district was put in his pocket. The roznamacha was also torn and a new report entered on a new sheet. He was shown to have gone towards Bhatinda.

The rest was at Joginder's discretion. If the alcohol in his stomach was mentioned in the postmortem report, all these arrangements would go futile. Questions would be raised. The doctor was willing to extend all the possible help. Only Joginder's consent was needed.

Joginder was not the one to run away. He could do anything for this hawaldar. Incising him, Joginder felt as if he was cutting his own son. He even had a feeling that Budh Singh would get up and say – 'Slowly, brother!' But corpses do not get up. And Joginder went on dissecting his body.

Joginder had been paid for Budh Singh's postmortem also, though he had tried to refuse. He could not give anything to Budh Singh's children, therefore, he should, at least not take anything from him. But, the policemen did not agree. If Joginder was keen to do something for Budh Singh's children, then these fifty rupees paid by the policemen's union would not impoverish their union.

These people are not even concerned about Joginder's fee.

If they were not bothered, Joginder too is no less. He is the son of a chuhra. The pride of a chuhra is well known. If he once makes up his mind, he would not accept even five hundred. Let the doctor do his own work. If the doctor does this, then he will also boycott the doctor. From now onwards he would incise the half burnt corpses only in doctor's presence. He would not take the viscera to the doctor sitting half a mile away!

If Joginder could not manage to do things the way he wanted, then, at least, he will do to them what he had done to that comrade who had died in an accident. When Joginder had mentioned his fee, his companions began raising slogans. As if they had not found a single capitalist to shout against! They had only poor Joginder, who earned his bread, working in filth and squalor, to oppose and malign.

Joginder was compelled to dissect the body. But he paid back to the comrades in their own coin.

Joginder had to cut his stomach up, but he also loosened all the joints. He, also, did not stitch up the body properly.

The corpse fell apart as soon as it was put on the trolley. They then understood his importance. Forgetting all rituals, they tried to give the corpse a semblance of a body. Finally, they had to tie up the body in a bundle and take it for cremation. This had made Joginder very happy. This is what he could do!

He would have to show Lalaji his might in the same manner.

One policeman told Joginder that the doctor had asked Murari to try to persuade Joginder.

Murari belonged to the group that was close to the doctor. A frequent visitor to the hospital, he was an agent of the doctor. He was the one who would get him his cases. If it was a rich party, he took his share. Drinks were on the house. Flirting with the nurses a bonus!

Joginder had always looked after him. He would sit outside keeping a watch, when the doctor and Murari would be drinking inside. He would fetch a chicken, or a packet of cigarettes, and sometimes even a bottle of whiskey. Joginder was sure that Murari would get him his fee.

But Joginder did not anticipate that the buck toothed man with yellow teeth would call Joginder a 'bribe snatcher' and vilify him.

'There is a limit to taking bribes. This is like snatching the shroud off the back of a dead body!' Hearing his rants, even the doctor could find no place to hide. But, he kept his silence, though he was visibly upset.

Joginder wanted to catch hold of Murari by the neck and ask him what his measure of goodness was. Ever since he had opened a flour mill in the nearby colony, he is flourishing. The poor Sansis, Biharis and Tamils hardly collected a few kilos of wheat after working hard the whole day long. He buys wheat at a throwaway price, and sells them flour at three rupees a kilo. From the workers at the Food Corporation depot to the truckers, all sell stolen wheat to him. He has also been arrested a few times. But, with the intervention of the doctor, the police had dropped the cases. Is this not theft? Is it not corruption? Is it not criminal to mix maize flour with wheat flour, or mix corn flour and gram flour? Those who grind the bones of dead mice in red pepper, don't they think about shrouds and coffins? They don't.

If a relation of Murari's were to be brought to the morgue, Joginder will show them, what the real meaning of taking bribe is.

Everyone was upset at the delay in the postmortem for no apparent reason.

A huge crowd had gathered around the morgue. Many young and old had climbed on to the boundary walls. The Deputy also had made a trip here.

The crowd was now becoming restive. Anytime now voices would be raised against the doctor.

The evening was rapidly turning darker, and Lalaji now changed the program he had drawn up earlier. He had wanted that the body should lie at Geeta Bhawan for some time. People would be able to pay their respects. The women of the family had also been told to reach Geeta Bhawan.

Because of the delay, this was no longer possible. There was only an hour left till sunset. If the cremation did not take place within this hour, then it would have to be postponed to the next morning. That also was not possible. Who knows how long the child had been dead! The body could not be kept overnight. Kanta, Bunty's mother, was in a bad shape, and fainting frequently. Bunty must be cremated as soon as possible.

This could be done only if they were given the body soon. The doctor was still sitting. The sweeper was still scratching the back of his stud buffalo. No one could understand what it was all about.

With Babuji coming on the scene, the crowd seemed to come to life.

As soon as he came, Babuji hugged Lalaji, as was his habit.

Lalaji had been so far sitting quietly. He had patted the back of all who had come up to him to condole and advised them to accept the tragedy as the will of God. But, Babuji's loud wails demolished his composure, and tears flowed from his eyes also.

First, it was Lalaji consoling Babuji. Then, it was Babuji consoling Lalaji who had broken down completely. Watching the two respected elders of the town crying, eyes of all present filled with tears. Some sympathizers sighed.

When some normalcy was restored, the Sangh members told Babuji about the delay in the postmortem. Babuji was a leading Congressman. From an ordinary worker to the big industrialists, all were his admirers. He would help one and all in their hour of need, and share their moments of happiness. Be it a wedding, a birth or a death, Babuji would always be there, unasked and uninformed. If there was a need, he would go all out to do what he could. If there was the need to go somewhere, he would be ready, without asking about the destination, or the time he would need to spend away from town.

The doctor cannot say no to him. The Sangh would deal with the doctor later on. It did not want to pick up a quarrel or any sloganeering at this sad occasion. Let Babuji sort out the problem now.

As soon as he saw Babuji going to the doctor, Joginder became alert. If he were to insist, Joginder would have to surrender. He was bothered about the doctor's order, but it was difficult to avoid Babuji's order. Babuji had gone out of his way to help his family.

Joginder's brother-in-law had died in the '71 war. His younger sister had been left a widow at a very young age. Joginder and his family were shocked by this tragedy, and could not even think of what should they do. Where would the young widow and her child go? It was difficult for Joginder even to feed his own family.

When Babuji heard about it, he himself came. He got the girl's name registered at the employment officer, got the card, and also got her the job of a sweeper in the tehsil office. Now she is earning well. She gets a good salary, and collects about fifty rupees daily in tips. The boy is also working at the tehsil now. He earns more than her.

Joginder's family blesses Babuji daily for the kindness that he had shown them. Joginder cannot say 'no' to him.

But what Joginder wanted had happened. The doctor took Babuji aside, and explained the whole situation to him.

Babuji left the Sangh people standing near the doctor, and himself came up to Joginder.

Ashamed, Joginder even forgot to touch Babuji's feet.

Catching him by the hand, Babuji took Joginder aside. He took out a bundle of notes from his pocket, and searched for a note.

'What are you doing?' Joginder felt that Babuji was very angry with him. He was being put to shame. He felt as if he was repeatedly being slapped, called a traitor. Pushing the note away, he slowly walked to the morgue.

Dissecting the child's stomach open, Joginder felt as if Babuji had kicked the empty bellies of his hungry children.

XVIII

Nirbhay Singh, the D.I.G., was under great stress since many days.

He was agitated by the obstinate behavior of the Deputy. Not long ago, the Deputy was always kowtowing to the D.I.G. He had been sidelined and given a posting at the police lines. Had not Nirbhay Singh spoken up for him, he would not even have seen the face of P.I.P., let alone get a posting to this subdivision. Now, the deputy thought he could ignore the D.I.G., as he had become overfriendly with a couple of jathedars. If a message is sent to him he doesn't come, and he does not even respond to a communication on the wireless. When a meeting of all the Deputies had been convened, he did not even attend that, on the pretext that the situation in the town was tense, and trouble could break out anytime. His presence in the town was essential.

He also had the audacity to threaten the D.I.G.'s men. If you go to sahib next time, I'll put your whole family behind bars.

When he got the news of Bunty's murder, the D.I.G. had a sense of relief. This was his opportunity to visit the town, and personally inspect the murder-site. It would give him the chance to set the Deputy right. If even after that, he doesn't come to his senses, he would recommend his transfer and end the whole affair.

There were so many problems that he needed to settle with the deputy.

First was the problem with fifty acres of land at Raisar. He had emphatically told the Deputy that the Garewals should get control of the land this time. They had come to him with a letter from a Central Minister. The Deputy knew fully well that he had been posted to this subdivision at the intervention of the same minister.

The D.I.G. had advised the Garewals that if there is anyone who could help them to get control of the land, it was Naunihal Singh. They had passed on this information to the Central Minister, who had immediately talked to the D.I.G. personally. Within an hour, the transfer orders of Naunihal Singh had been issued. After getting his own work done, now he is avoiding the Garewals.

The Garewals had complained to him a number of times. The Deputy is in cohorts with the other party. Now, he avoids them. If they do not get the land, then, even the D.I.G. would suffer a loss of many lakhs. Out of fifty, he would get five acres.

The second problem was that of the nambardar. He had been camping at Nirbhay Singh's bungalow for many days. The Deputy knows that the nambardar has powerful connections. Even then, he doesn't heed him.

He has a very good excuse.

'It is the D.G.'s orders. There is a ban on the sale of poppy husk in the whole state. It is only in this subdivision that it is being openly sold. The Captains of the neighbouring districts have complained to the D.G. that their strict control is rendered ineffective because of this. The addicts go to the town for their needs. The D.G. has sent a list of thanedars who are being paid a 'monthly' of ten thousand to fifty thousand by the nambardar. It is the D.G.'s order that a thanedar of some other thana should be sent after the nambardar.'

Had he made out a case against some employee of the nambardar, there would have been no problem. But, he should not have attempted to arrest the nambardar. Let him, at least, arrange for anticipatory bail. On the other hand, he has also put a word in the session judge's ears. Scared, the judge has cancelled the bail.

One could even ignore all this. But the Deputy should not insult and humiliate the wife and daughter of the nambardar. He has summoned them to the thana many times and insulted them. He may detain the car at the thana, but where is the point in getting all the goods from his home - trunks and boxes, T.V. and geysers, to the thana?

The D.I.G. had often advised the nambardar that now he should give up this work. He had earned piles of money. He must be having a property of at least a crore. He presents cars to four or five officers every year. Why is he running after money even now? He has only one daughter. She too could not have any children; she is barren and has been sent back to her parents by her in-laws. They had been to many doctors but to no avail. She has been with her parents for the last five years, and her husband has remarried.

But the nambardar is so involved in the whole business that though he swears to give it up, every time he goes back on his word. He is saying the same thing this time also. Once this matter ends, he would not do anything illegal again.

The D.I.G. wants that the nambardar should not be humiliated in the court. He has his eye on the nambardar's daughter. The D.I.G.'s good-for-nothing son also doesn't get along with his wife. She has been staying with her parents since many years. The D.I.G. wants that his son gets divorce and marries the nambardar's daughter. His son already has two sons, and even if the nambardar's daughter can't

bear a child, it is of no consequence. His foolish son would have so much money that he need not work his whole life.

The D.I.G. is awaiting his retirement. Only two years were left. If the marriage takes place now, it will bring him a bad name. The nambardar is a notorious smuggler. Once he retires, there would be no problem. He has also told the nambardar of his desire. The nambardar has agreed to the match.

The nambardar is not the only rich man in his family. His relatives are also important and rich. One of his wife's sisters is an I.A.S. officer. She gives him whatever help he wants. He can get her to sign on blank papers, even at midnight. Whatever documents the Deputy has sent the nambardar, they have all come back bearing her signatures. A transfer is a very small thing. She can help them earn lakhs in no time. When she had been the transport secretary, Nirbhay Singh had got three permits for long routes. The black rate for one route was fifty thousand.

One of his brothers-in-law is a high court judge. He respects the nambardar like a father. Ministers are of no significance to him. They are in power today, and may be out of power tomorrow. Judges are definitely more powerful and permanent than ministers. No magistrate or even a session judge may defy them. At the slightest hint they rush to Chandigarh with their files. The judiciary must obey the judges, and even other officers cannot ignore them. Who knows when you may have to go to the High Court in some matter?

At the last meeting of the Captains, Nirbhay Singh had pulled up the Sangrur Captain. That had also proved effective. The nambardar's household goods had been sent back home, and the summoning of women to the thana had been forbidden. Only the car was still at the thana; that too, because it been made a part of the case. More than this, he could not help. The Captain also doesn't get along with the Deputy, who has made it known that he is Nirbhay Singh's man! The Captain, therefore, could not take any action against him. Now that the D.I.G. has given him a hint, he would set the Deputy right.

Had it been a Congress government, the nambardar would have dealt with the Deputy long back. Though the Chief Minister was not an opponent, but he does not also help in any way. The nambardar has always been with the Congress. All his relatives are also Congressmen.

He has many friends in this government also, but they are all ministers holding minor portfolios. Ministers hesitate to call up the D.G. in such matters. The D.G. gives little credence to these ministers. He has direct contacts with the Central Government. Many times ministers have openly spoken against him and demanded his transfer, But to no effect. How can such a man be trusted? Who knows, he may record the telephonic conversations of the ministers, and hand over the proof to the press? Earlier, he had said that ministers are in league with the terrorists. Now he may say that they are also helping smugglers!

That was why the nambardar was behaving sensibly.

The session judge had done his job. He had stayed the arrest of nambardar for fifteen days. If the police were to relax its hard stand a little, he would gladly grant anticipatory bail.

The nambardar was willing to pay the Deputy any amount of money. But the Deputy was scared and was avoiding taking money. He had told the man who had gone to arrange the deal that he is afraid that the nambardar would either arrange for a raid, or file a complaint against him.

The nambardar had been camping at the D.I.G.'s, so that he should force the Deputy to do what he wanted.

The nambardar wanted only one thing. He was not worried about his goods. He would also stop his operations for a few months. He would also face the case filed against him. He would present himself at the thana, whenever asked. But, neither should he be beaten, nor humiliated publicly. He should be taken to the court, but without handcuffs.

The Deputy was still not coming to heel. The D.I.G. was looking for an opportunity to teach him a lesson – that an officer is an officer, and he himself is a powerful D.I.G..

Finally, the opportunity has come his way.

As soon as he received the news of Bunty's murder, he sent a wireless message to the town. He would come to the town in the morning, to inspect the site of the crime. A public hearing would be held, and separate meetings with the public, local important political leaders and the leading citizens of the town will also be conducted.

It was now the nambardar's turn to attack the Deputy. He has given plenty of money to many. He has friends in all political parties. All the local political bigwigs come to him and are his friends. They would now tell their followers to complain against the Deputy.

Even a few complaints were enough for the D.I.G. to set the Deputy right. The rest he would deal himself.

Having sent the nambardar to the town, the D.I.G. began his preparations to tour the town.

XIX

The information about the D.I.G.'s tour could not be sent to all the villages, as there was no time. A public proclamation had been made only in the town. The general public was asked to assemble in the B.D.O.'s office; the important citizens were to meet him at the rest house.

The police wanted the D.I.G. to inspect the murder site first. A large crowd had already collected there. A big police force was deployed to maintain peace and for the

security of the officers. Once the inspection is over, that force would be free to be used for the security of the D.I.G..

The D.I.G., however, wanted to first meet the people, before going on to inspect the site. He had a plan in his mind, and was sure that if he went about it the way he had planned, he would get what he wanted. Only then could he achieve the purpose of his visit.

A large crowd had already assembled at the B.D.O.'s office. They made many complaints, but the complaint Nirbhay Singh wanted to hear, had not yet been voiced by anyone. There were complaints of eviction from land, extortion of money, and also, of illegal occupation with the connivance of police. Few did speak against the police. This hawaldar had beaten that man, and snatched his watch; that thanedar had held the complainant in the thana for two day, and helped his opponents to build a wall on his property. Though he was disappointed, the D.I.G. noted the complaints.

Why don't people openly speak out against the police? They seemed to be afraid of the policemen standing around. They don't want to speak against these men in their presence. The D.I.G. will go away. The police are bound to harass them behind his back. The man accused may not himself do it, but he could always get his colleagues to help out. Thus, making a complaint could be a troublesome affair.

When Nirbhay Singh was himself an S.H.O., he did the same. He would confine his opponents to the barracks. This is what must have happened here today.

He asked all the policemen in the room to go out. Even then, he could get nothing. It was not possible that not even one of the nambardar's men could reach the town? The Deputy must have got a whiff of this. He must have beaten the nambardar's men to frighten them off. But Nirbhay Singh was also not the man to lose heart. If he could not get anything here, he would surely get what he wanted at the meeting with the important citizens of the town. They could not be frightened away by the Deputy. What is the worth of a Deputy? Today he is here, he could be elsewhere tomorrow. The nambardar will always be here. He is a wealthy man and people go to him asking for donations: someone wants a donation for a gaushala; another for a drama club; and yet another for elections. No one would like to annoy him.

A few men in the crowd, wanted to speak to the D.I.G. in confidence.

The D.I.G. now realized his mistake. He should have himself got it announced that if anyone wanted to speak to him privately, or wanted to give him some information, or make any complaint against the police, he could meet him privately.

What objection could the Deputy have to this? He took the deputation to the next room. Nirbhay Singh hoped that nambardar's men would be amongst those wanting to talk to him in confidence. This time, he even sent his reader out of the room. He himself took paper and a pencil to note the complaints.

These men, however, were the comrades. They did not speak the language of the nambardar. What they were saying was exactly the opposite. They were blaming everyone – from constables and hawaldars to inspectors, and alleging that speculative trading, gambling and prostitution were freely going on in the town. Liquor was being sold illegally. Opium and poppy seeds were being brought in truckloads. Half of the

police force is at the speculators in the evening, and the rest at the gambling dens. Prostitutes are frequent visitors to the thana, and the thanedars treat them as honoured guests. Their words carry greater influence than even the word of representatives of the people. The police have a share in all illegal activity in the town. One could buy opium, poppy seeds from the thanas. They have about twenty men sitting at the thana to do their begar. They hand them a bag of poppy seeds, and make them work the whole day long in return. When the police themselves encourage the people to get addicted to drugs and liquor who is going to put an end to crime?

The police interfere in the hartals. It forcibly arrests workers sitting on dharnas. It slaps false cases on them, making them out to be criminals, and prevents their getting bail for more than a month. And for all this, they accept money from the capitalists.

They read out a long list of names of policemen, and the amount each had taken from whom.

It included the names of all. Only one name was missing, and that was the one which the D.I.G. wanted. He realized that the Deputy had sent this group.

‘You should have given this list to the Deputy.’

‘He also is not honest... he is a bigger crook... we had complained to him also. But no action was ever taken... he takes his share from the guilty, and keeps quiet.’

‘Do, you have any proof against him?’

‘He doesn’t leave any evidence. Big businessmen and jagirdars are his agents. We comrades cannot lay our hands on them... No one opens his mouth against him... From where do we get proof?’

Nirbhay Singh gave full assurance to the comrades. He would thoroughly consider their complaints. He will get the guilty demoted, or dismissed. They should cooperate with the D.I.G. If they succeed in getting some proof about the crook Deputy, the petty criminals would be frightened. He was in favour of rooting out corruption at all levels.

With this brief lecture and exhorting the comrades to look for solid proof against the Deputy, the D.I.G. boarded the jeep and left for the meeting with the prominent citizens.

On his way to the rest house, the D.I.G. was thinking that the nambardar may not have succeeded in getting men against the Deputy. The Deputy, after all, is the boss of the thanas. The police today have very extensive powers, and they may shoot anyone they want and brand him as a terrorist. Only a person, who did not fear for his life and has a steel like heart, could stand up against the Deputy.

As comrade Basant had challenged the police long back. He had made allegations against Nirbhay Singh in a large meeting and insulted him.

At that time, Nirbhay Singh was a Deputy and the Naxalbari movement was at its peak. Basant was gradually drifting towards that movement. The police had killed a

dangerous Naxalite, Beant of Mumma village. The I.G. had himself come to inspect the site. Basant had accused Nirbhay Singh in the presence of all.

‘This Deputy of yours is drunk the whole day long. If you want, you can check, even now he would be drunk. This drunken Deputy forgets the difference between right and wrong. He orders the police to kill all young men in police encounters. Beant has not been killed in an encounter; he was first captured, tortured, and then killed.’

Nirbhay Singh had quietly accepted the reprimand of the I.G. at that time, but till he eliminated Basant, the bitterness had festered in him like a sore.

Nirbhay Singh had given all the bad characters, smugglers and thanedars instructions that he should be shot at sight. No one would even touch them.

When no one dared to do so out of fright, Nirbhay Singh had himself undertaken the job.

He named him a criminal in four or five old cases, showed that he was present on the site of the crime in some new cases. Got him declared an absconder, and got the authorities to announce an award for his capture.

He arrested Basant after creating the image of a dangerous Naxalite around him, and then showed that he had been shot in a police encounter.

Accounts of this courageous act of Nirbhay were highlighted by the press. He was honoured and awarded. Though he was junior to about a dozen other Deputies, even then he was confirmed because of his bravery. It was because of that brave deed, that he is today a D.I.G.. His batch mates could only become S.P.s.

Basant’s death had struck such a great fear in the minds of the people that, let alone the Deputy they did not voice any grievance against a constable also.

Naunihal is no less! He also would not let anyone do anything. That was why Nirbhay Singh felt that he himself would have to look for some excuse to reprimand the Deputy.

Nirbhay did not have much hope from the meeting with eminent citizens. They are not in the habit of complaining about others. Not even a peon. The Deputy’s is a very high post. Their purpose in coming to the meeting is to meet the high ups, strike an acquaintance and to show their own importance and status. Neither the police can annoy them, not can they upset the police. The police needs them to meet various demands from time to time: suddenly, it may be asked to send wheat or cars, or even provide dinners for a wedding. It is these who fulfill these demands without much bickering. They give cars, also drivers and fuel. If the need arises, they even give money for the journey. If the demand is very big, even then, they do not refuse. There are so many associations like the sellers’ association; the cotton mill owners’ association; and iron dealers’ association. Every organization has lakhs of rupees in their funds. They send money from these funds.

The police have given them enough help. One round of the industry in a month is enough to keep the labour under control. The police officer also does not mind the inspection. He is given a lavish welcome, and usually comes away with a gift. It is

only once in while that a 'danda' parade' of the workers becomes necessary. The mill owners are happy if the workers are scared.

These respectable citizens would only praise the police. Nirbhay Singh was in no mood today to hear praise.

Nirbhay Singh concentrated on the plate of almonds and cashew nuts. Their point of view and advice was routine.

His last ray of hope was the Yuva Sangh.

The Sangh was extremely annoyed with Pritam Singh. They were saying that Pritam Singh was a staunch Sikh. He goes all out to support Sikhs. He does not listen to the point of view of Hindus. If the gurudwara had been searched on the first day itself, this situation would not have arisen. The murderers would have also been captured, and Bunty would have also been saved. Strict action must be taken against Pritam Singh.

'Pritam is a very capable officer. He is on the hit list of the terrorists. The one who is at the root of all this, you people have not been able to identify him. How could you? He is cunning as a fox.' The D.I.G. used the first arrow from his bag of tricks, looking through his papers.

'The one who is your Deputy, he is the poisonous root of all this. All his relatives are in Amritsar and Gurdaspur districts. One of his nephews is a 'B' category terrorist. He is the one who is protecting him. The government has received intelligence reports that the nephew visits and stays with him for days. This Deputy hides him in his own house.'

Nirbhay Singh did not want to leave any stone unturned.

The curtain of darkness seemed to have lifted from the eyes of Yuva Sangh. Their anger rose sky high.

'That is absolutely true. Since the day he has arrived, a new incident takes place every day. First they shot Disha on the Dhanaula road, and then Nirankari. At the time of the last bandh, they killed two Hindus. With his encouragement, that terrorist must have set up a base here.' Ram Swarrop, the pradhan, began connecting the links between the Deputy and the events that had occurred earlier.

'When the murderers are being encouraged by the Deputy, how can you catch them? We will talk to Sardarji (the Chief Minister) immediately. We shall see that he is sent away from here.' Darshan expressed his agreement with the D.I.G. banging his fist on the table.

'A hint is enough for the wise. You help me. I will myself get him dismissed. There is no need to go the Chief Minister.'

'You instruct us, we are wholeheartedly with you.' The Sangh members were now agitated, and were willing to do anything at the D.I.G.'s command.

'Right now you must do a small thing; go to the site. When I reach there, raise slogans against the deputy. I'll see to the rest.'

'That's fine. If you want us to raise slogans, we can do that right here.'

‘No, then he will think that I have incited you. I am meeting the staff. I shall be there in five minutes. You should be ready. Put all your strength into it. Collect all your workers there.’ Nirbhay Singh happily sent the Sangh away.

Now, Nirbhay Singh had plenty of ammunition for the showdown with the Deputy.

The meeting began in a tense atmosphere. Each and every officer was frightened. The D.I.G. had talked to the people privately, and heard their complaints. Who knows what the people have said against the thanedar? Each one was scared about himself.

As it usually happens at such meetings, the D.I.G. first reviewed the statistics of the thanas. Six S.H.O.S had been summoned, but the situation of the city thana alone was discussed.

The number of stills had gone down since the last year. But, more pistols had been recovered. The number of murders had also gone up. Incidence of theft had declined, but snatchings had increased. Opium and poppy seeds were not visible. But gambling and speculative trade had increased. Vagrancy had also increased.

‘People complain that trucks of opium and poppy seeds come into the town daily. Your figures show that there is no addiction whatsoever! What is this?’ This was the first question of the D.I.G..

‘People have the habit of making false complaints. The Deputy taught the smugglers such a lesson that they dare not enter the town for generations now. Ever since the new law has been made, the addicts and petty smugglers are badly frightened.’ This was the answer given by Pritam Singh, the S.H.O.

‘You have sent the smugglers packing, but can’t you see these gamblers and speculators? As if they are big wrestlers! If you cannot deal with them, what would you do about the terrorists?’

‘No one gambles here, sir. This is because the judge sahib told us that if we do not present the same number of cases this month as we did last year, then one court would be abolished. We had to make cases, to save the court, sir. All the guilty owned up to their guilt.’ The newly arrived city in-charge clarified.

‘Sit down, sit down I know everything about all the wrong you people are encouraging here. I’ll look into it later on. Let’s talk about Bunty first. Deputy sahib you throw light on that.’ The D.I.G.’s tone became a little harsh as he asked the Deputy.

The Deputy was a little upset by this sudden attack by the D.I.G. He had not thought that the D.I.G. would question him. Dazed, he began turning the pages of his diary.

‘Please be quick... I have to inspect the site also. A wise officer has everything on his finger-tips.’ Finding the Deputy flustered, the D.I.G. was hell bent on creating more trouble for him.

‘We have not found any clue, sir. One rickshaw puller and one peon are absconding. Once they are arrested perhaps we may get some clue.’ The Deputy tried his best to find some appropriate excuse.

‘What efforts have you made to catch them?’

The Deputy was silent. He had not done anything, what could he say?

‘Had you made an effort to look for clues, only then could you find them. You people are intent on collecting monthlies on any pretext. The whole town suspects you; they say that it is your carelessness that had led to the death of the child. They know that, one of your relative is a terrorist of ‘B’ category. They will meet the Chief Minister in this connection.’

‘This is not true, sir. I have tried my best.’ The Deputy was agitated at this direct attack by the D.I.G.

The Deputy had understood the intentions of the D.I.G. He realized it would be better for him to keep quiet. It was not possible for the murderers to be caught in the near future. Someone had to bear the brunt of this case. Anyone could be made the scape-goat. He had been posted to this area with great difficulty. If anyone does complain to the Chief Minister about him, he would surely suffer. He had just scraped through earlier. The Chief Minister would not forgive him the next time.

The Deputy now regretted having spoiled his relations with the D.I.G. If the D.I.G. makes any such allegation against him in his report then his dismissal orders could immediately be issued. There would be no argument, and no appeal. He was impatient to apologize to Nirbhay Singh for his mistake.

‘I have done my duty as an officer. Now, you know your duty best. This is the Chief Minister’s area. I cannot take any risk. If anyone makes a written complaint, then I would have to take action.’ With this, Nirbhay Singh got up to go to the inspection of the site.

The moment D.I.G. reached the site, things came to life.

Constables, who had been lazing, jumped to do their duty. Some sixty-seventy constables and jawans of the C.R.P. were struggling to control the crowd. Some had taken their positions and stood with their guns ready.

The crowd was kept half a kilometer away from the room, where the body lay.

The constables, who were talking happily to the crowd a few moments ago, now seemed to be carved of iron. They pushed the crowd back with great show of force, as if anyone in the assembly would shoot the D.I.G..

The moment he got out of his vehicle, a few reporters and photographers rushed to the D.I.G. He did not pay them any attention. He would first go to the site, and then only would make any statement.

An inspector led the D.I.G. The Deputy was beside him. Constables, equipped with stenguns surrounded them. Behind them came a procession of people from the town and the press.

The inspector was explaining the incident. The D.I.G. was listening with full attention.

The body had been found here; there was only one way the murderers could have come in; which way they would have possibly come in and gone out through which door; where had they collected fingerprints from; in which directions did the dogs lead the police looking for the culprits, and how far, did they go.

The D.I.G. was paying full attention to every detail. He was also asking questions. How many culprits could there be? What type of vehicle could they have used to bring the corpse? Why didn't they throw the body in the open field? What are the places in the neighbourhood, where they could have hidden themselves? What sort of people are living around the hospital?

He scrutinized each road coming into and leading out of the hospital closely. He observed the roofs of the nearby houses as well.

He was still inspecting the site when the conversation between a child and his grandfather standing at some distance, disturbed his concentration.

The child was asking – 'Baba, who is this person who has a black ribbon round his turban?'

'He is a big police officer, who has come here to inspect the place.'

'Why is he going into the room and coming out again? He looks up and also down. What is he doing?'

'Play drama, hoodwinking the people. Bigger the officer- better the actor. He is pretending to inspect the site. He is throwing dust into the eyes of the people.'

Nirbhay Singh was incensed when he overheard what the old man had said. Had there not been the badges of his rank on his shoulder he would have strangled the old man.

He cast a tough glance at the old man. The old man stepped away quietly.

The police didn't seem to have any pride left. This old man was sarcastic about the police and the sentry standing nearby was laughing! Had Nirbhay Singh been in his place, he may have done something drastic.

The old man's taunt had demoralized the D.I.G. He could not keep up the pretence for very long. His conscience had been jolted. He realized that the people had seen through his intentions.

He was now impatient to hear the slogans of the Sangh. Even if he heard only a few, he would leave the place for the meeting with the Sangh at the rest house.

The Deputy took him aside, on the pretext of showing him a corner.

'How have I made a mistake, sir? I am your obedient servant.' The Deputy wanted to bow and touch the knees of Nirbhay Singh. But the crowd, though far, was watching them, and he only inclined his head.

'No, it's me who has made the mistake, as I have got a man of little loyalty posted here.'

‘Someone has misinformed you, sir. Tell me how can I serve you?’ The Deputy seemed to be as soft as wax.

‘Am I a child to be misled by anyone?’

‘Then, do tell me!’ Two or three Sangh workers were coming towards them. Making a sign to them to stop, the Deputy again implored him.

‘Did you find only the nambardar to loot? Why are the Garewals not getting control of the land? Even a witch skips her neighbours’ houses.’

‘That....sir....’

‘Say it is the D.G.’s order. It is a very good excuse, but it is now old. We used it some twenty years’ ago.’

‘Let it be, sir, I’ll do what you tell me.’

‘Do what, the nambardar tells you. He will give you the right share. Get the Garewals the land, and send me a report tomorrow.’

After getting the Deputy to agree to his demands, the D.I.G. asked the Sangh workers and the press to come to him. He gave a statement about the investigation.

‘I am fully satisfied with the ongoing investigation. The culprits have been identified. Police parties have been sent to arrest them. They may be produced before you any time. Had it been in my power I would have revealed their names also, but that would not be in the public interest.’

The D.I.G.’s statement won all hearts. Their faces reflected the satisfaction in their hearts. The Sangh workers were so happy that they forgot to raise slogans against the deputy. The D.I.G. also wanted this. He had now struck a deal with the Deputy. Slogans could vitiate the atmosphere.

Having admonished the Deputy, the D.I.G. was suddenly very hungry. His loyal inspector had been missing for quite some time now. He knew what Nirbhay Singh liked. He must have gone to arrange for chilli chicken.

Having made all parties happy, Nirbhay Singh now proceeded towards the rest house. He made the Deputy sit in his vehicle. This was the best opportunity to have a heart to heart talk. It was not Nirbhay Singh’s habit to lose an opportune moment.

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The D.I.G.’s promises could not keep people happy for long.

The secrets behind his game were exposed by Bujha Singh of the C.I.D.

‘He had not come here to see the site, but had come here to set the Deputy right. He got his way and left. You can see, since that day the nambardar is full of energy and is seen all over. The Garewals have taken possession of the land. Even on that day no one knew the murderers of Bunty, and they still have no clue. That was an absolute falsehood.’

Bujha Singh's fulminations had their effect.

A hartal was on in the town since Bunty's death. It was unprecedented. Ever since trouble started in Punjab, there was a strike every third day. Sometimes it is the Sikhs, and at other times it is the Hindus who go on strike. If the Sikhs strike, the Hindus do not open their shops till the afternoon, out of fear. Then, they open their doors slightly, and gradually, the doors are opened fully. It is only by evening that the bazaar comes to life.

If the Hindus call for a hartal, the atmosphere is tense. Half of the Sikhs don't close their shops. Emulating them, some Hindus also open their shops. Some say, they are Congressmen, and others say they are comrades. They say that they have no connection with communal parties and their programmes. The members of Bhartiya Janta Party or the members of Vyopar mandal take a round and make a round of their shops to get them closed. After that they go home.

This time it was entirely different. Because of Bunty's murder, all shops – right from the dhabas to the vendors of country liquor - were closed. No one could get even a cup of tea, not even travellers from outside. No rickshaw was available even to take a patient to the hospital. After all, you need peace and order to carry on with your business. Who has the heart to work in an atmosphere of disorder and murder? A child had been kidnapped in full daylight, and the police did its best, but could not lay its hands on the killers even when they were in the town all through. They went on threatening, and fled after killing the child.

What does the common man do in such conditions? Scooters had been snatched from people many times, and many times banks were looted. No one could ever be captured on the spot. People are desperate. No one wants to go out to work.

Bujha Singh was giving himself all the credit for this hartal. It was he who had set the ball rolling.

Bujha Singh's first attempt to get out of the C.I.D. had failed. He had tried to rig up five cases when the searches were being carried out. The Punjab Students' Union had raised such a row that Bujha Singh had to release other Sansis also, besides Shamu. The Union had somehow come to hear of this, though the curfew was still on. They had immediately phoned to Khan. Instead of promotion, Bujha Singh got a reprimand from Khan.

The hartal was his second attempt. He was sending out detailed reports. And, ultimately, everything ended at Pritam Singh, who was blamed for everything. Bujha Singh was, through his reports, hell bent on proving to his superiors that the real cause of all this unrest was Pritam Singh, the S.H.O.

Pritam Singh was the direct target in all the news that were published and the rallies that were organized. Details of his corrupt deals were revealed. Since the day he had joined the police force exact figures of the wealth he had accumulated, and property he had bought were revealed in various posters distributed.

Bujha Singh had also sent a secret report to the chief minister through a jathedar, saying that the people were opposed to Pritam Singh, and since their demand for his transfer had not been accepted, they are now gradually turning against the

Chief Minister. People are now feeling that the Chief Minister is also a party to this trouble. How does it matter if his party has won the elections, this time? Yesterday, they were also raising separatist slogans. If the Chief Minister is not concerned about his own constituency, what good can he do for the state? Why does he have such great attachment with a thanedar? His silence has given the police a free hand in extorting money from the people.

The demands of the people were valid. They are not asking that a policeman should be hanged. They are demanding that honest an officer should be posted here. The Chief Minister must look into these demands and manage the people's anger.

This town has always voted for the Chief Minister. People may be annoyed with the Chief Minister before the elections, but when the time comes, they vote for him as they like his mild nature. His opponents may raise as many slogans in favour of Brahminism, people do not move away from Sardarji. But the present situation is very delicate. If their demands are not immediately met, the people will forsake the Chief Minister and he would be forced to look for a new constituency. Once he has had a taste of people's anger at the time of parliamentary elections.

Either the Chief Minister was still sleeping like Kumbhkarani; or he is not bothered about the people's anger; or his silence is a deep political manipulation.

Bujha Singh was impatient to achieve his own goals. He had managed with a jathedar who was close to the Chief Minister. The day transfers take place, he would call the Chief Minister and get him appointed as the S.H.O..

The jathedar had even gone to the I.G.. The I.G. had laid down one condition though.

'First catch four-five terrorists and kill them. The moment he does that, I'll issue the orders.'

Bujha Singh was not prepared to do this. He is still facing the consequences of the earlier killing. He is better off where he is.

As it is, Bujha Singh was not as uncomfortable in the C.I.D. as he had been earlier. He had now got used to that sort of work.

Ever since the trouble had started, the C.I.D. people were also having a good time. Earlier, they had to follow the shellers, food supply or the Markfed employees stealthily; to find out when the trucks laden with rice or gram or beans are taken out of the godowns; or follow the P.W.D. people; or send men behind the forest guards. They hardly give you a share out of their earnings.

Who has the time to shadow people these days? His hawaldar is a wise man. He has worked in the C.I.D. all through, and has served only in this area. He knows each and every person living here. The staff has also been here since long. They all collect information which has to be sent above: some of them from the reporters; others from the political leaders; and the rest from various sources. The rest is invented. For instance, every fifteen day a report has to be sent above that some new terrorists have sneaked into the area. An untoward incident can take place anytime, or

the extremists are recruiting young men in an attempt to widen their base. Weapons are being collected in the area.

This they have learnt from their officers. Every year on 15 August and 26 January, the Delhi Police makes such an announcement and publishes the photographs of four five boys that these dangerous extremists have entered Delhi. Any untoward incident can take place. They are planning to foment trouble during government functions. If the Delhi police can do it, why can't they do it? The local police run about foolishly.

If a hartal is about to begin in the town, even then, the report is ready. The same words are used: the Sangh is making preparations to start some violence in the town; meetings are being held in the temples; some weapons and a large number of sticks have been collected; anything, from looting of shops, to arson and murder, can happen; the buses would be surrounded and stopped; government employees will be stopped from going to office etc... This report also they have based on the report prepared by their higher officers which is issued on the occasion of festivals.

If the hartal is being arranged by the Akalis, then, a few words would be changed. The word temple is taken out and 'gurudwara' put in, 'sticks' is substituted with 'kripans', the rest is left as it is.

If there is a government meeting, then send a report of great enthusiasm among the people; if the meeting is organized by an opposition party then report that the people are largely indifferent. When you are writing a report of a meeting of the ruling party, one can conveniently put two zeroes behind the actual number; and remove one zero from the number of people attending a meeting of the opposition. That is all. You are a successful investigator!

Such reports now come very easy to him.

Most of their attention is now on the rising extremists. If a boy is seen in a saffron turban, they spread a net for him. Bujha Singh doesn't know what to do in this, but his staff is very good at it.

They catch a victim every second or third day.

First day, the constable meets the boy's parents. They tell them that the boy keeps bad company; he reads out the proceedings of the meeting, the boy has attended; he tells the parents with great tact, that he has come to inform them because he feels he is close to them; things can yet be remedied, if handled properly; a letter has come from above, instructing them to keep an eye on the activities of young men, and also, to report on their characters and conduct; once the C.I.D. writes that the boy mixes with the extremist elements, the situation would become serious. He would also give many references about someone who has been killed in a police encounter; about another who is rotting in jail. Once a history sheet is started, it is like a bad disease. A murder can take place anywhere, be it Delhi or Bombay, the police would immediately summon him to the thana; they will keep him there for days. Every time they will have to give money to get him home.

The constable explains all this very carefully to them. And the same night, Bujha Singh raids their home. After getting the boy to confess, he lets the boy off, keeping in mind the pleadings of the parents.

The work is completed by hawaldar Sewa Singh. He knew well, the art of extorting money from all.

They had been playing this game of writing a name among the extremists, and then removing it, since long. But, they were still called the C.I.D. wallahs, they are not given those facilities that the thana people have. If you see a movie, you have to first inform the manager who you are. You have to show your identity card if you travel in a bus. People are afraid of those in the thanas, because they recognize their uniform.

No senior officer respects the thanedar. There was a time when, at the instance of a murder, a thanedar was transferred the next day. Now, no one is bothered, even if a firing takes place in front of the thana itself. The C.I.D. are the ones who are harassed. Why did they not get information about this? How can the C.I.D. find out about this? No one thinks about this department. The extremists have Enfield motorcycles. The policemen don't even have bicycles. They hold their meetings at five-star hotels. The C.I.D. men can't even drink a cup of tea at a dhaba. How can the C.I.D. pursue them? If you even crush a small bird under your feet, the police get the money. The C.I.D. get only threats.

That is why Bujha Singh is now concentrating more on earning money rather than on his real work. If he earns a little money, only then he can ferry the jathedars in cars. These days, even the jathedars have become very demanding. They don't step out without a car.

Many jathedars have spoken to the chief minister about him, but he is still not responding. He does promise that he would transfer him when the general transfers take place, and that is all. These jathedars have not able to convince him that police transfers are continuously going on. Why wait for general transfers?

Now, Bujha Singh is concentrating on hartals rather than on the Chief Minister. These hartals will not go in vain. Their effects have now started showing in the surrounding towns. People in many towns have also gone on hartal in support of the people here.

There was a possibility of a Punjab bandh, according to a report in a newspaper.

Once the matter becomes a state problem, the Chief Minister would come to his senses. Once he comes to his senses, only then can police transfers take place. Once these transfers take place, then alone can Bujha Singh get his chance.

Right now, all these are only castles in the air. To a disheartened Bujha Singh, nothing seemed to be happening.

The Chief Minister was regularly monitoring the events in his constituency.

Every evening he would pore over the C.I.D. reports and the news reports in the papers.

Much had been written in the newspapers about Bunty's murder, but this appeared in the newspapers of the regional languages. The Chief Minister did not give much importance to these newspapers. The first reason was that these newspapers were connected with some group or the other, and they looked at every incident from their point of view. The second factor was that as their readership was limited and they were forced to make every bit of news juicier. These newspapers have such knack of making a mountain of a mole hill, that their readers are astonished. If you read the headlines, it would appear that the whole Punjab is burning. Every Hindu is an enemy of every Sikh. You don't want to step out of your home. You feel that if you go out, you would be surrounded in the lanes and bullets would be pumped into you. You are scared to travel. Who can say when a bus may be stopped? Passengers belonging to one community may be taken off the bus, and shot dead.

If you go out of your home, the situation is exactly the opposite. Neither the Hindu is an enemy of the Sikh, nor is the Sikh that of a Hindu. They have the same relationship, the same sharing, social mixing and a shared culture.

That is the reason why the Chief Mminister did not think it appropriate to take action on the basis of the reports of these newspapers. Had any English newspaper taken note of these events, then he would have thought the matter to be serious.

The same could be said about the C.I.D. reports. It is now an intelligence department in name alone. Every man there feels that if he is posted there, it is due to some lapse on his part, and he is being sidelined. They all hanker after one thing alone. How can they get out of there! What good work can such men do? The Chief Minister doesn't see any person of ability who could really instigate things, nor does he see anyone with the courage to send in a real report. They file false reports without any rhyme or reason.

'There is the possibility of something bad happening. Stop the buses from overnight trips. Impose a ban on the sale of weapons. Order the shops to close at six in the evening.'

If the Chief Minister were to take serious note of these reports he would go mad by the evening. He tears up most of them, and throws them into the wastepaper basket.

But when the workers come to him with bad news then he was compelled to take note.

The circle jathedar was relating a strange thing. Babu seemed to be all out against Sardar. He goes about saying that the Sardar is directly connected to this murder. The reason is there for everyone to see. This time Lalaji had opposed the Sardar in the elections. Government supporters were threatening Lalaji since that day. Sardar had to take his revenge for that opposition, and he did. In support of his allegations, he says that the Chief Minister is quiet all the while. There is an uproar in his area, and let alone tour his area, he has not even issued a statement! The Sardar

must have told the police to keep quiet. That is why the police are freely extorting money from the people. The Sardar is not unhappy over what has happened, on the contrary, he must be happy.

Not alone Babu, even the Bhartiya Janta Party had started exploiting this incident. It was trying to organize a 'Punjab Bandh' surreptitiously. The matter could be blown up to national level. The opposition parties are always on the lookout for such issues, which can be turned into full blown agitations. What better opportunity will the Bhartiya Janta Party find than this, for it wanted to be known as the savior of the Hindus?

Finding the murder being linked to his name, the Chief Minister was upset. He was aware that he had not handled situation in Punjab the way the Central government wanted. Things have worsened during his time. The Centre was not as kind to him as it had been earlier. Whenever the Centre wants to get rid of a Chief Minister, he is first inveigled into a scandal, and then asked to go. It is possible that Babu is doing all this at the instance of the Centre? The Payal murder case was there for the Chief Minister to see this. Even important people may have to go behind bars in political murders. He was an advocate by profession. An advocate is weak. It seemed to the Chief Minister that a secret agency was planning against him. He was making a mistake by keeping silent. He should have raised his voice against this cruel incident on the very first day itself.

But, the situation was still not irretrievable.

The Chief Minister pondered deeply over the problem from all aspects. The reason he had remained silent so far was, that, let alone paying a visit to Lalaji, he did not even want to go to the town. Though, when he had won the elections, he did say that now even his opponents were his friends, but that was only a political statement. The fact was that deep down there was an intense hatred for the people of the town in his heart. He had not liked the way he had been made to bend before them to get elected.

Every time they would oppose him on one and the same issue. The Sardar is like a seasonal quail; he wins the election and goes away to Chandigarh; he is seen only at the time of elections; once he wins, the people are forgotten; his bungalow is guarded; even prominent workers have to face the humiliation of facing the police if they want to see him; they are not only searched, but are also made to answer innumerable questions; If they are admitted to his bungalow, what is the guarantee that Sardar would meet them? One must keep standing waiting for him; no one knows, when will his turn comes; Sardar may get up to have his meal; after that, he would rest; he may get up from his nap and leave for an important meeting; One may have to wait for three days or five, no one can say for how long.

Even if one gets to meet him, he does not get one's work done. He keeps stalling like any clerk.

'I will talk to the director. I will ask the secretary. If the work can be done, it would surely be done.'

If, after one has met him ten times and he rings up an officer, he doesn't impress upon him that the work must be done. He just says – 'See if you can do it.'

Can the work be done in this manner? He has only one aim. That one would get tired of making trips to Chandigarh, time and again, and stop pestering the Sardar .

Sardar had tried his best to make the people understand the actual situation. Earlier, he was only a Minister. He had to look to the Chief Minister to get many things done. Even then he had not neglected their needs or demands. When he was the Education Minister, he got hundreds of schools upgraded, and many new schools were opened during his tenure. People have forgotten all that work. They are only talking about transfers, which he could not manage, because of various compulsions.

This time he was going to be the Chief Minister. The Centre had assured him. He would change the town completely. The people have one major demand, that the town should be upgraded to a district. He would not only make it a district, he would give it all the facilities that the Capital has. He would give permits, sanction quotas, issue licenses to set up new industries and provide jobs for young men. He would get the town declared backward and shower various subsidies on it. Interest free loans would be available. The earlier loans would all be written off.

But that seemed to have no effect on anyone.

Babu and Lala had joined hands to make the situation worse. They had no other issue on which to contest the elections. They were bent upon giving the election a communal colour. The situation had become so bad that Sardar could not even think of moving to some other constituency. He was convinced that he would lose the election. If he himself loses the elections, what face would he show to the Centre? Who could stop his opponents in the party to choose their own candidate as the Chief Minister?

The Centre had been so kind to Sardar that it had given tickets only to those Congressmen that he had endorsed, Babu also had been given a ticket, only at his recommendations. Sardar was of the opinion he would not get votes in the villages, as he was a Hindu. Sardar will control the voters in the town. The urban voters are sensible. They all know that this time he would be the Chief minister. They would naturally rally round the Sardar.

The voters of this area were a mixed lot. Half of the electorate was rural, and the other half urban. There was a little possibility of a Hindu winning, because he would not get any vote in the villages. If the Congress were to give the ticket to a Sikh he would not have got the urban vote. The Sardar has been able to strike a balance in his own way. The rural vote he got because he was a Sikh, and the urban vote because he belonged to the town. Ever since he had joined politics, he had never faced a setback. He had won every single election. No leader of any opposition party had been able to get a foothold in this area. The disappointed leader would change his constituency. Things would become easier for the Sardar.

He had kept all this in mind when he had recommended Babu's name for a ticket.

The urban wing of the Congress was already a divided lot. Within the Congress, the number of those opposing Babu was larger than his supporters. Half of them would go to other areas to campaign. If they stayed here, they would have to come out with Babu and ask for votes. If they do so, then he would surely get some votes. If they go out of town, they would work for someone who would be useful to them later on. They would also be able to defeat Babu.

Many senior leaders would openly oppose Babu's candidature. When they had been nominated, Babu had opposed them, saying that the high command given them this chance at his cost. When Babu had gone all out to see them defeated, then what good would they do to him?

The clever bania had now released a new genie out of the bottle! Lala supported him, and thus had begun their new game.

They were already saying the Babu is always working for the people and looks after all their needs; he even fights with the officers to get the work of the common people attended to; and is always ready to help one and all, without making any discrimination between the rich and the poor. There is no need to spend five hundred for something worth fifty and go to Chandigarh. They were highlighting the fact that Babu was of their community and religion.

Lala was the one who garnered votes on the basis of religion and caste. He had set up a committee in each mohalla: Agarwal Sabha in one, Brahmin Sabha in the other. He himself became the president of Agarwal Sabha. He handed over the responsibility of running the Brahmin Sabha to the Yuva Sangh. Mahavir Dal, Geeta Bhawan, all came out in support of Babu. The Chief Minister was not getting support from any mohalla. He had been isolated.

The Sardar was trying to win over Lala till the last day. From chairmanship of the Improvement Trust to the membership of the public service commission, nothing could tempt him. He had only one answer, he is helpless this time. Babulal is his childhood friend. If Lala plays the role of Dashrath in Ram Lila, Babu plays Ravana. If Lala organizes an eye camp, Babu gets some Minister to inaugurate it and collects money for that camp. Babu gets food for Mahavir Dal, and the langar is run by Lala. It was for the first time that Babu needed the help of the various organizations of Lala. He could not let him down. If Babu wins, his organizations are bound to benefit. They would be able to work in a better manner. People had no hope from the Sardar.

This was the thorn which had stung him deep in his heart. The Sardar could not forget Lala's obstinacy. His heart revolted when he thought about taking any action on the Bunty issue.

But, when he reflected with a cool mind, he realized that he was the Chief Minister. A big man should have a large heart. He should not take small things to heart. They are all political creatures; sometimes in one camp; and another time in the other. Moreover, Lala has not always been against the Sardar. Earlier, he had always stood shoulder to shoulder with the Sardar in every election, and had given him all help. If, this time he was helping Babu, what is wrong? And, Babu had lost even after that.

On the other hand, their Brahminism had ultimately helped the Sardar.

At one time, Babu used to help the young men with extremist leanings on the sly. When they had gone underground, Babu had helped them against the police. In gratitude, they had given help to Babu in whatever way they could. They were dominating many of the panchayats. They had many followers. Had Lalaji not raised the bogey of caste and creed, these boys would have got many votes for Babu, and would have harmed the Sardar's chances.

The Sardar had, through his supporters, criticized the progressive views of those boys. He got posters put up against them. The question raised in those posters was – Is asking for votes on the basis of religion progressiveness? The boys had to sit up and ponder over the questions raised. If they helped Babu, it would have not only hurt them ideologically, but would have tarnished their personal reputations as well. If they withdraw now, then the Sardar will not lose the election. Once the progressive forces retreat, those votes will go only to the panth, and nowhere else.

Babu had some criminal elements also under his influence. Babu lived in the town, and dealt with the big officers by giving bribes and gifts. He also had a standing in the court and the police. He helped these criminal parties when the need arose. He would manage to get the cases against them dismissed through his contacts.

They also were helping Babu. To wean them away from Babu, the Sardar had also used to the communal card. He, of course used police to put pressure on them, but also pleaded in the name of religion. If the town people can set up Brahmin Sabha and Agrawal Sabha, then he must give them a befitting answer. And, this answer could only be given by strengthening the hands of the Panth.

This way, Sardar should be pleased with Lalaji rather than be angry with him. It was Lala's half-baked political move which had made it possible for him to win.

There was another reason behind the Sardar's avoidance of a visit to the town. The abduction or murder of a child was an ordinary incident. These days when buses are stopped and all its passengers off-loaded and shot to death, whole families are killed. There are women and children also in these families. This was not such an important issue in which the Chief Minister should personally intervene. There was going to be uproar in the whole state. Why is the Chief Minister so worried about one particular child? Why he is not worried about the whole state? What answer did he have?

Now, listening to the jathedars, the Sardar felt it was not only the whole town, but even the jathedars are now asking him what is he doing about the welfare of his town.

The Sardar had nothing to say in his defense.

The Chief Minister felt that it was essential to retrieve the situation. Or else his chair would be in jeopardy!

He is the Chief Minister. He can do anything to beguile the people. He can give a statement; make big promises and do certain things that he had been putting off doing.

It would not be sensible to let more time elapse.

He first summoned his Press Secretary and told him to prepare some extremely well-worded statements capable of moving the most hard-core person.

He would tour the town tomorrow. The news of this tour should be immediately given to the press. The radio and T.V. news bulletin should also announce this tour. Their teams should also be ready to cover the tour.

The Chief Secretary was ordered to prepare a gist of all previous news items and to prepare a list of the various demands of the people. Those demands, which could be met immediately, should be listed separately.

He himself sat down with his political advisers and jathedars to prepare a plan for the tour.

The circle jathedar's view was that there is no doubt about the fact that the Akali Party has no existence in the town. Whatever votes the party gets, they come because of the personal reputation and standing of the Sardar. Because of his silence and the highhanded behaviour of the police, even his supporters are annoyed with the Sardar. They have to bear the jibes and taunts of the people. The whole town was under a pall of grief, despair and fear. People were unhappy at his silence on Bunty's murder. There was only one solution to this, and that was transfer of police personnel at the highest level. The police had behaved in a very highhanded manner with the people.

The Sardar had no problem with large scale transfers, but the D.G.P. was very stubborn. He was devising such methods the whole day long which could help him raise the low morale of the police. He was bound to oppose these transfers. He would say that this would increase the unrest among the police. The people are already alleging that the police, out of fear, lock up the thanas as soon as the sun sets. Anything may happen outside; they would not open the doors. In the border areas, it is the militants who rule the roost at night. The Centre supports the D.G.P. on this, but if the Chief Minister's chair itself is in danger, why should he bother about the morale of the police? And then, what was the police doing all this while, that it would stop doing? He would order the transfers.

The chief minister wanted to keep the jathedar happy. If he wanted any of his relatives to the town, he would get the orders; he has only to give the name. He would get the orders for the posting.

The jathedar thought with all his might. Not a single relative of his was a Deputy or even a thanedar, though, some of his acquaintances were. Many of them had visited him many times for a transfer to a good thana. The jathedar did not want to give their names. His experience was that all policemen are the same. They seem to be different at first, but once they get power, they oppress those who have helped them. Anything is fair in love and war! If he were to recommend someone, then later on he could get too big for his boots. And he may be called upon to side with him even in his wrong deeds.

The jathedar gave the name of Bujha Singh alone. He must be given a thana. He has promised him.

The Chief Minister was not happy with Bujha Singh. The Chief Minister had received the full report of the dirty tricks he had been up to, but he did not reveal what was in his mind. He thought, he could be sent off to Ropar. This will make the jathedar happy; it will also make the people happy, and it will also teach Bujha Singh a lesson for opposing the Chief Minister and sending reports against him.

The political advisers want the issue to be dealt with seriously. They are getting reports that the opposing group is moving closer to the Prime Minister. One cannot trust the Centre, it may embrace them.

There should be a big conference in the town. Some Central minister may also be invited. There should be a show of power, and also, all allegations made against the Sardar should be refuted in sweet, yet strong words. It should be announced that a big memorial would be made in Bunty's memory, and this also would go a long way in winning over the estranged people.

The Chief Minister was not in favour of a conference. Treating this incident as a political event would go against the Chief Minister. This murder should be treated as an individual problem. He would visit Lalaji's home. Spend some time with him. And concede the demands of the people. To appease the people, it is essential for him to sit with them. Nothing would come out of delivering speeches from large stages.

The Chief Secretary's report was ready. With the exception of a few of the demands, the rest could be met immediately.

This time the Chief Minister was not in the mood of only making announcements. Whatever announcements he would make should be implemented immediately. Therefore, he ordered the Chief Secretary that the Deputy Commissioner and other district officers should be present on the spot, and such an order should be sent immediately.

After finalizing the program of his visit to the town, the Chief Minister's felt relaxed. He turned his attention to other affairs of the state with a relaxed mind.

XXII

The news of the chief minister's visit sent a wave of happiness through the town.

The government departments were the ones to do the maximum running about. They had very little time to prepare for the visit.

The municipal people faced the biggest problem. The executive officer had to cancel the leave of the sanitation department and issue orders asking them to report immediately for duty. Other tasks could be shared by men of other departments, but cleaning of the roads, lanes and sewers could not be done by anyone else.

The damaged roads were repaired. Potholes of the lanes of all the mohallas were filled up. Though, the Chief Minister was not scheduled to spend the night in town, even then, all fused bulbs and tube lights of all street lights were changed.

The Intelligence people surveyed the various houses. Decisions about fortifications were taken, and, it was also decided where to post more informers, and where to put less. The number of patrol parties was increased with immediate effect.

A visitor from outside got the impression that preparations were afoot for a rich man's daughter's wedding. The ambience of a wedding had been created. Water had been sprinkled in the whole town. All roads that the Sardar had to cross to reach Lalaji's house, were lined with lime.

The attention of all officers was on Lalaji's area. Arrangements had to be excellent in that area; and nothing left unattended. D.D.T. was sprinkled in all the sewers. At some places, even incense was burnt. Had it not been an occasion of mourning, welcome-gates would have also been put up.

As the sun rose higher, the number of visitors at Lalaji's increased. Today, there were more politicians and officers to share his grief. The S.D.M. would come to inspect at times, and at another time it was D.S.P.. Anyone who came, touched Lalaji's knees, sat on the ground, and then enquired humbly if he could do anything for him. The real meaning of this was that Lalaji should be kind to them. He should forgive their lapses. He should not tell the Chief Minister about the stupidity of the officers.

All else was as it should be, but Kanta refused to get ready to welcome the Chief Minister. She was still in bed. She, the one who always got up with the rising sun, to finish most of the household chores in no time; but, it appeared as if all her energy had evaporated with Bunty's disappearance.

The Sangh was making arrangements for tea. A tent had been put up on the terrace for this purpose. Crockery had been sent for. When the programme to welcome the Chief Minister was being drawn up, Kanta had opposed the idea of giving him tea. He was not coming to attend celebrations at the birth of a son, that sweets and tea should be served to him. Drinking tea on this occasion was like drinking Bunty's blood.

Kanta did not even want the Chief Minister to visit, for she considered him unlucky. Bunty was a victim of the chaos and unrest in the state. She held the Chief Minister responsible for all this unrest. Ever since he had become the Chief Minister and a war for chairs had ensued amongst the Akalis, such gatherings for mourning and dead had become common in the state. In Kanta's eyes, the Chief Minister was Bunty's murderer. His weak policies had resulted in undermining the powers of the police. Their morale had sunk so low, that they were afraid even to lay their hands on a criminal, standing right before them.

What had to happen, had happened. What was the need to shed crocodile tears now? It is Kanta who had lost everything that she had. Let the Chief Minister be happy with his political influence.

Kanta had wreaked all her anger on Lalaji, the previous night.

Lalaji agreed with what she said, but was helpless. He was impatient to see the wretched faces of those culprits who had sunk so low and had lost all sense of humanity that they did not flinch at throttling innocent children like Bunty to death!

They can only be captured and unmasked when the Chief Minister would order the police to go all out to arrest them.

Kanta wanted to cry at the arguments advanced by Lalaji and his followers. If one wanted to see Bunty's murderer, they should look at the face of any political leader: Prime minister, Minister, all are murderers. Someone had murdered Bunty, others have killed many others like him. To expect the Chief Minister to order the capture of the murderers was a proof of the mental bankruptcy of the Sangh. Does anyone put one's own workers in the dock?

Lalaji had no answer to Kanta's arguments. His eyes were filled with tears, like a woman. He did not have the courage to stop the Chief Minister from visiting him. He begged Kanta to get ready for the sake of his honour.

What could Kanta do except to surrender to the wisher of her father-in-law? But, how could she get ready to receive the Chief Minister?

It was not the first time that Kanta's wishes were being ignored. Who listened to her in this home? Many times, it seemed to her that she was born to be trampled upon.

Men being what they are, even nature seemed to be bitterly opposed to her.

Two years ago, she had lost her husband. Kanta, who had been full of life, suddenly became a widow. Her Baldev had been crushed under a truck.

Kanta still could not believe that her Baldev would never come back home. She had not been able to see him even for the last time. What could they show her? The truck had left nothing for anyone to see! His body had been crushed into pieces.

Kanta could not believe even now, that Bunty was dead. First, she had been told that they would bring him home. He would be put in her lap. Then, she was told that the postmortem had been delayed. It was difficult to bring the body home. The sun would soon set. Kanta was dragged to the mortuary. She had felt betrayed, betrayed through and through.

Whatever little time she was given to look at Bunty, she couldn't even look at him properly. The body they showed her did not look like Bunty's. The child appeared to be emaciated, just a handful of bones. Her Bunty was healthy. This child was dark, but Bunty had been fair. There was no resemblance between Bunty and this corpse.

Gathering her courage, Kanta uncovered the stomach. If it was Bunty, then there would surely be the birthmark on his stomach. When she saw the big untidy stitches on his stomach, she fainted. There was no time to see the birth mark.

When she regained her consciousness, Bunty had gone into dust.

Lalaji also had the same doubts. He did not express them openly, but often let a few things drop, which revealed the doubts that assailed him. Many a time, he had said that the dead child was not his grandson.

To Kanta it appeared that the police was afraid of searching the Gurudwara, and, had therefore, put some other mother's dead child in her lap.

Kanta still believed that Bunty was alive. He couldn't leave her and go away.

Even then, it seemed, as if the whole family had turned against her. His clothes had been given away to poor children. His toys, his new clothes, books and photos had been stored in the cupboard. It was a good pretext – Kanta talks to these things like a mad woman, the whole day long. She puts them out and calls out to Bunty .

All traces of Bunty seemed to have been wiped out from his home. Kanta felt more aggrieved. She should have really left home, had not her two daughters barred her way.

To Kanta, sometimes her daughters seemed like light of life; and at other times, they seemed like bitter venom.

Bitter, because they would quarrel with Bunty all the time; snatch his toys, or biscuits, even his copy and pencil. Because of his tantrums, even Kanta would give him a slap or two now and then. Bunty retaliated only in one way – he would dash his head against the wall. Once he started crying, it went on for hours. He would not stop in spite of cajoling.. How could Kanta like these sisters who had hurt Bunty?

Since the day Bunty had gone missing, the girls were badly frightened. Kanta was irritated with them for their wild behaviour.

‘Now, you do whatever you want to, you wretches... go about all alone.... Keep all the toys... copies and pencils... he is gone, the poor dear!...’

They would cling to Kanta, crying loudly. Touching their ears to beg forgiveness, they said, ‘Mummy, bring Bunty home once, we will never fight with him, we will never ask him for anything... just bring our brother back.’

The younger one collected the various games she had and put them under Kanta’s bed. ‘When Bunty comes back give him all these games.’

Listening to them, Kanta shed tears. From where would she bring Bunty back?

Her beloved girls would seem like witches to her. Kanta had never thought that such a day would come in her life. She had always asserted with pride that there was no difference between a daughter and a son.

When Sheelu was born, the whole family was disappointed. It was only Kanta who was overjoyed. She had dreams of bringing up her daughter in such a way that she would be more capable than a son. ‘A girl is the incarnation of Lakshmi,’ she had said. The family ultimately had to concede to Kanta’s point of view.

When she was expecting Neeru, Baldev had wanted her to undergo a sex test. They wanted only two children – a boy and a girl. But, Kanta had refused. Whatever it was – a boy or a girl; was acceptable to her. It is not essential that there must be a son in the family. If it is so, then they can adopt someone. Even a son-in-law can be persuaded to stay with them after he marries their daughter.

After Neeru’s birth, the family was upset. Even the neighbours had come with sad faces, as if someone had died in the family. Kanta had refused to entertain them, and had scolded them all. She was not sad at giving birth to another daughter.

Baldev was also annoyed with her for a long time. He averred that Kanta's obstinacy had saddled him with another responsibility. Lalaji also did not demonstrate any affection for his grand-daughters.

When she conceived Bunty, Kanta had wanted to get rid of the unwanted pregnancy. There was no need for another child. Baldev, however, insisted on a sex test, and also threatened her. Ultimately, Kanta had surrendered. Fortunately, it had been Bunty.

After Bunty's birth, Baldev forgot about a small family. Now, he wanted two sons. The girls would get married and leave home, and go. What can you say about an only son, who knows what may happen? If they were to have two sons, their future would be safe.

Baldev would cite many examples to support his arguments.

First of all, he would take the name of Kanta's maternal uncle. He had one son and had then stopped at it. The child was very intelligent. He had a scholarship till the eighth class; in the ninth year, he was diagnosed with brain cancer. The treatment went on for three years; they spent all they had on him. Ultimately, they were left with tears. Her aunt spoilt her eyes because of constant weeping. They tried for another child, but there was some uterine problem, and they could not have another child. Their pitiable condition was beyond words. Had they had two sons, perhaps, things would have been better.

Baldev's bank manager was in a similar situation. He had married late. Then, the child was also delayed. The mother thoroughly spoilt the child. By the time, he reached college, he had crossed all limits: he took to drugs, theft, all that was bad, evil and wrong. He was arrested many times. The father threw him out because of his addictions. His drunken son could be sometimes found at the railway station, and sometimes at the bus stand. He couldn't have another child at this age. The couple is in a bad shape.

Kanta's views were different. If you have two, can't both of them die? How can one say that if you have five boys, they all can't turn bad? Kanta could cite names of people having many children, but the parents were neglected and not looked after properly. Many a time, the sons threw the parents out. They, at least, have two daughters. Daughters look after their parents. There was no danger to their future.

Kanta wanted to avoid another pregnancy.

How was she to know that one day Baldev's fears would come true? Kanta's life, without Baldev and Bunty, had become meaningless.

Her whole life lay ahead of her. And, she was now doubly cursed. She was a widow and she was also – niputi – without a son. What was her age at present? Only thirty two! Many of her friends were not even married!

She had lost an opportunity for employment, because Lalaji didn't want it. She could have got a job in the bank, in lieu of Baldev, but Lalaji did not want his daughter-in-law to consort with men. A widow needs to be, and should be, pure. If she would sit among men, laugh and talk with them, she would be tempted. At that time,

Kanta had accepted this. When you don't have a husband, then there is nothing left in life for you. She was restless. Had she not had children, she would have taken sanyas, and renounced the world.

The blows that life had dealt her had changed Kanta's attitude. How long could she survive on Baldev's gratuity? After Bunty's death, Lalaji had become very weak. He won't be there to support her all her life. Kanta did not want that her daughters should have to look to others. To make her daughters independent, Kanta would herself have to become independent.

Kanta had, long back, made up her mind to take up a job. She had got her name registered at the employment office, without telling Lalaji. She had studied up to the tenth class. Perhaps, she may get a job.

Had she not had her two daughters, and Bunty, she would have remarried. After all, how long could you mourn the dead? Neither the dead would come back, nor would they praise you for the sacrifices you may make in their name. But, she couldn't spoil the future of her three children, for her own comforts.

Kanta was dragging on with her life.

Bunty's death had left her bereft and shaken. All her plans had been swept away.

Ever since, hope of Bunty's return home alive, had been lost, Kanta had turned to stone. She had lost her appetite. After Bunty's funeral, she had bathed only once. Her hair was all tangled, her clothes were dirty. Her face was stained with constant tears.

Darshan did not like this face of Kanta – ragged, dirty and tear stained. The Chief Minister may arrive at any moment now. It would seem strange for her to go before him like this.

Darshan was busy taking plates of biscuits to the terrace. Every time he passed this way, he would peep into Kanta's room. He hoped that the next time he came round, she would be up and getting ready. When she kept lying, the way she had been, he could no longer stop himself. Going into her room, with the intention of advising, he said –

'Bahenji, have courage... if nothing else, at least wash your face... the Chief Minister would be here any time now.'

'Do I get ready and go for my muklawa*? Let your Chief Minister and Sangh go to hell... I am not going to meet anyone!'

The joy on Darshan's face was a provocation for an already incensed Kanta. To her, Darshan and Sardar were the two sides of the same coin. Both were determined to gain the greatest political mileage out of Bunty's death. She turned her face to the wall to hide her spilling tears. She wanted to ask Darshan why should she be happy at the Chief Minister's visit? Will he bring Bunty back?

*Muklawa – the ceremony when a newly-wed goes to her in-laws for the first time.

Kanta's scolding had taken the wind out of Darshan's sails. He had nothing to say, and retreated. As he went out, he gave the girls some biscuits.

Kanta snatched away those biscuits like a vulture. She had forbidden the organizers of tea not to get any biscuits. This showed that no one in this house was bothered about her wishes.

The image of Bunty asking for biscuits flashed before her eyes.

Bunty loved biscuits. Kanta always had a box full of biscuits with her. That day, she didn't know what had happened to her, there were no biscuits since the night. She had forgotten to send for more. When Bunty was about to leave for school, and there were no biscuits for him, he staged a vehement protest. He refused to go to school without biscuits. He rolled on the floor and dirtied his school uniform. He pulled his hair. Something had come over Kanta. She also did not try to console him, or quiet him. She was tired of Bunty's tantrums. She thought he would soon be tired of crying. Lalaji also was not at home. Had he been at home, he would have hugged Bunty to his chest. Kanta waited for Bunty to calm down. Ultimately, Bunty gave up. He sighed deeply for a few moments, and stopped crying.

When the buggywallah came to take him to the school, he picked up his bag, and went off. Neither he took any money, nor did he take his lunch box. Kanta was hysterical by that time. How was she to know that he is going away forever? If Bunty had to go, he should have at least taken leave of his mother. It would not have hurt the mother that he had gone from home, without eating anything. That also, for the sake of some silly biscuits!

At that time, Kanta had vowed that as long as she was alive she would not let biscuits enter her home, then why were biscuits brought today? The flame of revolt already burning in Kanta's heart became stronger. She wanted to act like a mad cow and destroy everything. Pull out the tent, break the crockery, and trample upon the biscuits and barfi. Keeping her father-in-law's prestige in mind, she could not do that, but took out her ire on her daughters. She snatched the biscuits from them, and threw them out in the gali.

The Chief Minister had reached the town. A Sangh worker had brought this information. After a brief stopover at the rest house, he was about to come here.

In minutes, the whole mohalla was full of the police. There were two constables to each civilian. The C.R.P. took position on the roofs of the houses. The women of the Intelligence Department also came in, to sit with the women gathered there.

The press reporters wanted to meet Kanta. They had brought their big cameras. They also wanted to photograph her. The papers wanted to show Kanta's grief to the people. Kanta had refused to everyone. Was there anything left to be said? What had occurred was known to all.

One very sharp photographer took a shot of Kanta as she lay on her bed; and, also of her bewildered girls. What could be the better representation of a family in mourning?

The journalists went out after Kanta's admonitions.

Finding Kanta alone, an aunt-in-law came to sit with her.

Consoling Kanta, she advised her to face up to her future with courage. She was also widowed at a young age, like Kanta. She had cremated two grown up sons. Her daughters are now married and in their own homes. She was all alone in a house which had been full of joy and mirth but, she had not surrendered to her grief. Kanta also has to be brave. Those who were destined to go, have gone. Let them go. Kanta should now live for those who are alive. No one will come back, if she does not eat! If something were to happen to her, who will look after her orphaned girls?

She had brought a glass of tea for Kanta, which had by now become cold. She brought more tea for her and also some pieces of bread. She should eat and also feed her daughters. They had been clinging to her since the morning, in bewilderment. No one had bothered about them because of the uproar in the house in connection with the Chief Minister's visit. Their mother also had thrown away the biscuits! If their own mother turns against them, what can they expect from others; and why should others bother about them?

Her aunt-in-law's words were like honey to Kanta's ears. She hugged her two daughters to her chest. Tears trickled down her cheeks. They sobbed as they clung to their mother. The mother that they felt was lost to them had come back.

Kanta made them sit with her. And, slowly, she fed them with bread.

'I'll not let you suffer, my dears... I am prepared to make any sacrifice... I shall try to look for a companion who can give you the love of a father... we will leave this house...' She wanted to share her decision with her daughters, but they were yet not old enough to comprehend this!

After feeding the girls, she sent them out. A large crowd had collected. This would divert their minds from the gloomy atmosphere inside the house.

Lest any other photograph may be clicked, she covered herself with a khes, and lay down on the bed again.

A little later, shouts of 'He is here!' 'He has come!' could be heard. Whistles were blown. An earthquake seemed to have rattled Lalaji's home. People ran helter-skelter.

It took the Chief Minister half an hour to reach the sitting room. There was a large crowd of his followers with him. Everyone wanted to shake hands with him; wanted a photograph of that moment. For this, many had brought their own photographers. Others had fixed up with the photographers present there, and given them specific instructions to click as soon as they came near the Chief Minister.

The Chief Minister sat down in the sitting room. Some workers of the Sangh, a few jathedars, his staff and officers were with him in the room.

The Chief Minister asked about Bunty with moist eyes. How old was he? Which class was he in? When did he go to school? What efforts had the police made to recover him? etc..

Lalaji answered all his questions, one by one.

When the time to make the crucial announcements came, then he acutely felt the absence of a particular person. He had not seen 'Bibi' there.

Lalaji had to go himself to her room, to bring 'Bibi' to the sitting room.

She was still in bed, covered with the khes. Lalaji had to beg Kanta to come out. Afraid of creating a tamasha, Kanta finally got up.

Cameras flashed as soon as she stepped into the room. The T.V. crew also shifted the focus of their cameras from the Chief Minister to Kanta.

The Chief Minister made Kanta sit next to him. He patted her back affectionately; gave her the stale advice of accepting all as a matter of destiny.

Kanta sat with a bowed head. The room was small, and the crowd large. Knees prodded Kanta's back. She tried to peek with lowered eyes. The Sangh workers and the jathedars were eyeing the cameras. The cameras were focused on Kanta and the Chief Minister. Those prodding her were seeking an opportunity to get closer to Kanta and the Chief Minister, so that their faces may also be covered by the cameras. They were hankering after one thing that their faces should be seen on the television in the evening! Kanta wanted to remove herself from there. She wanted to go back to her room.

The Chief Minister stopped her. The work, for which he had come all the way, was still pending. He also did not have much time. Taking advantage of her impatience, he began making the announcements.

He first announced a grant of one lakh for Bunty's mother. He explained that the government ordinarily pays only twenty thousand to the heirs of those killed by the terrorists, but as Bunty was his own child he was, therefore, using his special powers. His announcement was not only an announcement; he had also brought the cheque along. The District Collector handed the cheque over to the Chief Minister.

The Chief Minister wanted to hand the cheque personally to Kanta, in the manner in which a trophy is handed over to a victor. He did not move till the cameras were ready.

Kanta was reluctant to take the price for Bunty's life. She did not stretch out her hand for the cheque. She sat silently.

Lalaji tried to salvage the situation. He came forward to take the cheque. Photos were taken in the flash of an eye.

The next announcement was no less important. Kanta was to be given a job as a clerk in the education department. She had studied only up to the tenth class. Had she been a graduate, the Chief Minister would have appointed her on a gazzetted post. He assured her that she would be posted wherever she wanted.

As soon as this announcement was made, the District Education Officer stepped forward. He handed the appointment letter to the Chief Minister.

The Chief Minister was hesitant to put out his hand with the envelope, lest the same thing that had occurred earlier may not be repeated. It was Kanta this time who put her hand forward. She would take the job.

These announcements were meant to offer solace to the bereaved family. He wanted to immortalize Bunty's martyrdom. The first thing he did was to announce that the Sadar Bazar was being renamed Bunty Bazar. The District Commissioner had already announced that a big memorial would be raised. The Chief Minister announced to grant one lakh rupees for that memorial.

After this, the Chief Minister gave time to the people. Let them come forth with their complaints; he will solve all their grievances. People were sitting silently, as if there were no complaints.

He looked at them for a few moments. When the silence was not broken, then he prepared to leave.

Darshan could no longer restrain himself. He began narrating the story of the police atrocities when he saw the Chief Minister getting ready to leave.

As soon as Darshan began, other complaints were also voiced.

The Chief Minister had come fully prepared for this. He was not going to announce police transfers on his own. It would be done when the people demand it.

'Transfer everyone... send honest and strict officers... those who make no concessions for anyone...' Darshan came forward with the suggestion, when asked for a solution.

'Right, you ask for the transfers of hawaldars and thanedars. I announce the transfer of all officers up to the rank of the Captain of the district. I also promise that I shall send such police officers here, who will arrest the murderers of Bunty and bring them before you before Bunty's bhog*.'

People forgot that this was a mourners' assembly. They gave a thunderous applause at the announcement.

*The conclusion of religious ceremonies after a death.

Now the crowd was in a good mood. The Chief Minister got up to leave.

Lalaji came forward to stop him. Tea had been served.

How can this be? How can the Chief Minister have tea?

After his departure, the rest of the assembly went up to the terrace. If he has not taken tea, it is fine. They will drink tea to their hearts' content. They had won a battle by forcing the Chief Minister to make all those big announcements!

The Yuva Sangh members seemed to be puffed up with pride. The Chief Minister had bowed to their struggle. The most satisfying thing was that all the announcements made by the Chief Minister were implemented immediately.

The old officers were told to leave immediately. The new officers appeared just like mushrooms and, had taken over by the evening.

The C.R.P. and the B.S.F. also descended like a swarm of locusts on the town. All dharmshalas and temples in the town were full of them. All government schools also had to be vacated. They began patrolling the roads and lanes of the town. The fear that had laid heavy on the people disappeared.

The new appointments were made under the new policies of the government. People had not even been given the chance to complain that a particular officer had helped a particular community because he himself belonged to it. The Deputy Commissioner of the district was a Hindu. The new police chief was a Sikh. The thana was connected to the villages, therefore a Sikh was made the S.H.O.. The town was under the city thana, therefore, a Hindu was made the city in-charge. A Muslim was brought in to take charge of the C.I.D.. This was not all; the appointments at the lower level were also made on the basis of this policy.

The police officers sent, were also carefully selected: They were stubborn and ferocious. They were indifferent even to the Chief Minister; capable of openly humiliating those who came to plead on behalf of the culprits; had the courage to punish the guilty. Such officers alone could find out the murderers of Bunty.

Everything else was fine, but the Sangh members could not understand one thing. No one had the guts to say anything openly against the police before the Chief Minister. Now, wherever they go in the town, everyone appears to be boasting. That man is behind the transfer of the particular officer.

The contractors were making the biggest claims. They were openly saying that Deputy had been packed off because of them. The whole town was aware of the fact that he had picked up a quarrel with them during the investigations concerning Bunty's murder. Had the speaker not come to his rescue, he would have been transferred long back by the Chief Minister. The Sardar had promised the contractors that he would see that the Deputy bites the dust at the first opportunity. The Chief Minister has kept his promise to the contractors. They were extremely happy. The new officer will think twice before coming towards their liquor vends.

The nambardar of Khudi was also going from home to home like mad, making claims that the contractors are only making vain claims. Actually, the Deputy has been transferred on the basis of the D.I.G.'s report, and no one knows that Nirbhay Singh is a close friend of the nambardar's. According to the statements of the nambardar, Nirbhay Singh had written such a report against the Deputy, that the minister had to transfer the Deputy. The Sangh has no role in this.

Vedu, sattewallah almost quarreled with Darshan. He wanted to know who was bothered about the Sangh? Had the Chief Minister listened to the Sangh, would he not have transferred the tehsildar when the Sangh had sat on dharna with this demand for fifteen days? The Sangh had tried to create far bigger pressure at that time.

After assuming office, the Akali government had immediately stopped the Red Cross tickets which were being forcibly sold to the farmers to extract money from them in the tehsils.

But the tehsil people had got so used to this legal bribe that they were furious at this ban. They invented a new method. If the Red Cross tickets were not to be sold, then they would sell tickets for 'Gurdas Mann Night'. This scheme was the creation of those people who were the drinking pals of the tehsildar. This way, the tehsil people would make some money, and also have a good time. A number of good dancers would be invited for the 'Night'.

The Sangh had started a jehad against this loot. People were being looted in two different ways. First, the hard earned money of people was being spent on dances by prostitutes. Second, the tickets were not being given to the people, and if they were given the tickets on payment, the application writer sitting outside the office buys the tickets at half rate and takes them back to the officer. This way, a ticket gets sold many times.

The Sangh had sat on dharnas, and also organized hartals; big headlines were published in the newspapers. Many deputations met the Chief Minister, but to no avail. Tired, the Sangh had to come to an agreement. The program was cancelled by the tehsildar, and money collected was deposited with the Red Cross. After a month, they again started on the same track.

Thus, Vedu was not very wrong. It was not the Sangh who was given more importance as far as the transfers of the city police were concerned, but the speculators. Their voices had carried more weight.

The city police had been harassing the speculators. They were already extracting the 'monthly', but also looked for a daily payment. Manbir Singh was all right, but his subordinates had crossed all limits. As the sun set, the hawaldars took turns to visit them. They were willing to bear the expense of liquor but the jeep that was parked in the lane would prove a danger. Four constables with stenguns would stand guard on the road. If the police is on the premises, how can the clients visit them? That was the time to earn some money. Those visiting them for speculation are not going to be big tradesmen or industrialists. Their visitors are going to be workers and daily wage earners. Finding the police there, they are bound to be scared, and would disappear. This is not an addiction that if you do not get your dose today, you'd die. If not today, then tomorrow will do as well. The day a jeep would be parked in the lane, the income would be reduced by half. If you want the jeep to be parked at a distance, then bribe the constables, and also give them liquor. The speculators were fed up.

Vedu had forwarded his complaints to the officers through his contacts with tradesmen. It was because of the speculators that the entire dirty element had been removed from here. Or else, except Manbir Singh what connection did the other members of the city police have with Bunty's murder? It was Vedu's opinion that the Sangh should not take too much credit for all that had happened.

The pradhan of the halwai union, Gyan was blowing his own trumpet. He was saying that in the last four months the union had been fighting a cold war against the police. They were doing whatever the police had wanted them to do. The police could drink tea at any shop. No one asks for money. If someone picked up a few pieces of barfi or even laddoos, that also was overlooked, but what did this mean, taking away full jars of cashews on the occasion of the tour of senior police officers? One officer is to visit, and twenty shopkeepers are made to pay. Barfi from one, paneer from another, samosas from yet another!

The police had become greedier in the last few months. Every now and then there would be a wedding in some policeman's family or another. If there is a wedding in the family of some senior officer, not only sweets are taken from the shop free of cost, but even a halwai is taken to cook, gratis. If they felt like then they would get some milk, else that was also on the house. If it is some junior employee's wedding, then you have to send paneer and khoya. You did not even get fifty rupees for something worth five hundred.

Then, there is no gratitude for things taken and done. The ban on milk products comes later, and raids on the halwai shops are carried out before. The halwais are not let off and not only physically harassed, but even money is extracted. The manner in which money is snatched from them shows as if the halwais owe them something.

The halwai union had sent a complaint in writing to the Chief Minister. A deputation of the union had met the Sardar last time he had visited the town. The halwais had also threatened the Sardar, that if their complaints are not heard, the next time they will boycott him.

This was the result of that struggle waged by the halwais, that the noose had been taken off their neck. Now, neither will the halwais serve tea to any policeman, nor would they do anything else free of cost.

Darshan knew why the pradhan was so elated. It was true that the union had complained against the police with some trepidation; but the pradhan had not made this complaint for the benefit of the halwais, but to take revenge for a personal humiliation. The city police had confiscated his brother-in-law's truck loaded with cement. His brother-in-law was an overseer in the P.W.D. department and was notorious for selling government cement and iron in the open market at wholesale rates. The cement bags in the truck had been stolen from the government godowns. The pradhan had wanted that the truck should be released without him having to pay any money. The police did not want to let go off the bird in hand. The Pradhan did not want to create more trouble for his brother-in-law, and did not therefore, want to alienate the police. He had been forced to pay. Since that day, he felt that he had been publicly insulted. He would talk against the police the whole day long.

This was the best opportunity for him. By taking the credit of transfers, he was making an attempt to restore his leadership in the town.

The Sangh leaders were worried with this sort of propaganda going on. The struggle had been waged by the Sangh; they had organized the hartals; they had made the complaints to the Sardar, but no one gave any credit of this to the Sangh. If this

sort of propaganda was carried on, then the people would accept the lie for the truth, and all that the Sangh had done, would be forgotten.

It was essential to tell the people about the achievements of the Sangh. They could not broadcast this from the housetops. There was only one solution to this. An all party conference should be arranged. It should be arranged as a thanksgiving to the Sardar for his magnanimity. Also, the demand that murderers of Bunty should be captured by the bhog, as per his promise, should be reiterated. The Sangh would naturally gain mileage from this.

The Sangh did not have many workers of its own. Nor did it have good speakers. But it was also not good to depend only on one political party. To have a good audience, it was necessary to have representatives of all political parties.

The Sangh took plenty of pains to organize the conference, but the result were not what they had hoped for.

Not a single important leader of any political party participated in the conference. Only second rank leaders were sent, as if the conference of the Sangh was like a training camp. Darshan felt that there were two factors responsible for this. First, the leaders were scared of speaking against the terrorists. Second, the main agenda of the conference was to thank the Chief Minister. How could the opposition praise the Chief Minister? Its duty is to criticize the government.

The Sangh was also unhappy about the fact that the conference had not generated the publicity for the role they had played. Every speaker had only one point to speak on, and that was to show that the police were very cruel. And the credit for the transfer of the policemen goes either to the speaker, or to his party. No one talked about the killers or Bunty.

Darshan had got the zaildar to inaugurate the conference. He had hoped that he would speak mostly in favour of the Chief Minister. In the very first sentence he vented his anger on Bujha Singh. He had a note-book, with all facts and figures. How much money had Bujha Singh taken from which Sikh young man. He had all the figures by heart. He was unhappy that Bujha Singh had not even hesitated to harass him. Once he had quietly taken ten thousand from the zaildar's grandson's brother-in-law. The zaildar had been agitating against him for a long time. He had raised his voice against Bujha Singh in all forums at party meetings, grievances committee meetings and also before the Chief Minister. He is grateful to the Chief Minister that though he had delayed, but he did transfer him. The Sikhs are thankful to him. He had rid the Sikhs of this terrible curse.

The real reason behind this enmity with Bujha Singh was not that he was extracting money all over. Darshan knew that Bujha Singh had confiscated a truck of poppy seeds belonging to the zaildar's in-laws. He had not even relented in the face of the zaildar's influence and status. On the other hand, he had already told the Chief Minister about it. When the zaildar ran to the Chief Minister, he was reprimanded by the Chief Minister. Since that day, the zaildar, also, like Gyanchand, had been spitting poison against Bujha Singh. He was also impatient to take credit for Bujha Singh's transfer; only then he could save his face.

The speaker of All India Mazdoor Sangh, Budh Ram, went all out to talk about the highhandedness of the constables. He explained how they trouble the poor workers of Food Corporation; how they leer at the poor women workers; how they humiliate the poor beggars who collect the spilt rice; how they hover around like eagles when they hear about some special train coming. They take away sacks of gram on pretext either of a demand by officers, or for use in the police mess. They slap false cases of theft of grain on the workers, and extract liquor and meat from them.

If the labour resort to a legal hartal, even then they are subjected to a danda parade. At that time, the constables forget all friendship between them and the labour. They only remember the money and whiskey they get from the capitalists. He was aggrieved that more than half the sentries had been here for fifteen years or more. They were misleading the officers by giving false reports. They were not touched even in these transfers. Who knows why does the Chief Minister have a soft corner for them?

Darshan was furious when he saw Budh Ram taking the conference in the wrong direction. The conference was to thank the Chief Minister and not to oppose him. There was a personal reason for his speaking against the constables. He himself was busy the whole day long in nurturing his leadership, but his two sons would always be sitting at the goods godown to buy the stolen wheat. The constables had arrested them many times. Those constables were present in the conference at that time. Budh Ram had got the chance to mount a platform after many years. He was hell bent on frightening the constables.

Darshan could no longer bear the nonsense Budh Ram was talking about. At first, he made signs to him to change the direction of his speech. Then, when he did not stop, Darshan had to take away the mike from him by saying that the time had run out.

The next speaker turned out to be more clever than him. He was Rajinder of the Krantikari Front. He was critical of the Chief Minister and police, but he was also critical of the Sangh.

He wanted to know why were they keen to thank the Chief Minister?

Was it because he waited quietly for ten days till Bunty was killed? Or, because he had priced Bunty's martyrdom for one lakh, or because the entire police system had proved ineffective?

What was the guarantee that another Bunty would not be kidnapped in future, or that the new police officers would be honest and committed?

The Chief Minister had not come to express his sympathy with the people, but to fool them. The people were emotionally upset. He was compelled to come to the town, and the people had been taken in by his clever moves.

Have the problems of the people been solved with the announcement of the aid of one lakh? Many Buntys would continue to be abducted and killed till the people do not learn to distinguish between truth and falsehood. If you want peace in the state then try to understand the nature of the fundamentalist forces at work here. Those who encourage these separatist and extremist elements are not outsiders, they are from

amongst us. Fundamentalism in our State originated with the party of the Chief Minister, and the Central Government is allowing it to grow and flourish. Both have the same goal: to remain in power in whatever way they can, or else to capture power anyhow. Both are being benefitted by the unrest here. People should understand this trick of theirs.

He was also advising the Sangh. The problem is not only of Bunty. And it could not be solved by the grant of one lakh rupees. There are many more Buntys who are the victims of this problem. The Sangh should use its power not to thank the Chief Minister, but to unmask his real intentions, and to bring the people on one platform. This would be the real and proper tribute to Bunty. Rajinder's speech confounded Darshan.

So far the Sangh had thought that it was the one, which had forced the Chief Minister to bend. He was compelled to surrender to the hartals and threats organized by the Sangh. But the claims made by various men and the speeches made by their leaders, forced the Sangh to think that neither the Sangh, nor the jathedars and nor any other union was responsible for the announcements made by the Chief Minister.

There were some other reasons behind it, and that was beyond Darshan's comprehension. May be, one of them, as Rajinder had pointed out, was to fool the Sangh.

XXIV

Had Pala wanted, he could have run away from home, and saved himself.

Balwant, the constable, had come to him, last night, at ten o' clock, to tell him that the new police regime had opened all the old files. Any criminal, against whom a case had earlier been registered, would be interrogated by the police. And Pala has been a notorious criminal. His home would be one of the first targets for a police raid.

Balwant had also told him that the new staff is very fierce. It is natural for them to break a few bones or limbs. They are not even afraid of killing. Each one of them has killed a few people. The senior thanedar has come from the interrogation centre at Amritsar, and is very cruel. He can twist a man's neck, as though, he is not a man, but a fowl. The Sahib has given him full powers. The killers must be captured before the bhog ceremony at any cost. And to achieve this aim, he has been given a free hand, even if he has to kill twenty.

It would be good for Pala, if he leaves home for a few days and save his neck.

From the concern of the old man, Pala had guessed that whatever Balwant is saying is absolutely true. Balwant is their old friend, and has been helping Pala and his companions. As soon as he learnt about the plan, he immediately came to inform him. He did not even stop for a minute. He had yet to inform many other friends.

On the verge of tears, Pala could do nothing else but tremble with fear. His body suddenly seemed to ache all over. He almost shrieked aloud as he imagined the beatings of the police. Earlier, he was bold. He was able to bear the beatings. But, now almost all parts of his body have been broken. As soon as the cold winds start blowing, his body aches begin. Now his body cannot bear the beatings.

If it was possible to get rid of the problem by running away, he would have done so. He had tried running away many times. In that case his whole family is targeted. His old father's beard is pulled at. His brothers are hung upside down. The treatment that is meted out to his mother and sisters can't be just described, and when he thinks about that, Pala hates himself. His sisters are stripped before his father and brothers. They are told to pull out each other's pubic hair. His sisters are not only subjected to the lust of the policemen, but have even to work for them, until Pala's return.

His parents are taunted for having given birth to such a son! When Pala presents himself at the thana, then again, they are stripped and the whole process is repeated.

Pala was not aggrieved at the sufferings of his parents. At that time he considered them responsible for making him a thief. They deserved whatever happened to them.

His parents were earning good money as workers in the retailer's shop. There were many workers, a total of eleven people. The normal earning for a day was fifty-sixty rupees. During the season, there were heaps of grain and corn to look after and store. Then, where was the need for them, to steal wheat, cotton or paddy from the threshing arena? They would fill a container of wheat from one heap, or would grab a bundle of cotton from a heap. Neither the retailer admonished them, or the munim. It was only later that Pala understood the cost his mother had to pay for this kindness of the tradesman.

When Pala grew up, he was taught the same skills. The bigger the theft, greater the praise he got. At times, he was even given a sackful of corn. He could sell it and buy whatever he wanted to eat.

If you have money to spend, then there is no shortage of things to eat. Ice cream from Vasdev, kachoris from Ram, laddoos from Leela and jalebis from Mota, spicy chaat from Nanha and bhallas from Meenu!

He got so used to eating spicy food that normal food did not appeal to him. Pala would sell a sack of wheat and pocket the money. He would spend that money on movies, biris and meals with his friends. It was at the cinema that he had met Meeta, Ninda and Gharoo. Meeta was a pickpocket. Ninda and Gharoo were thieves. Their faces, physique and clothes were similar to Pala's. Their parents and families were also similar. They would all go to movies on the sly. In a few days they had become good friends.

Gharoo suggested a very clever method of making money. Steal the brass cycle bells and their tops from the cycles parked in front of the cinema halls. Nanna would give a full plate of chaat for one brass bowl. It was not easy. The contractor often

caught them and thrashed them. They started stealing from cycles parked in hospitals, post offices and banks.

Ninda made a discovery. He found the junk dealer to whom Nanna was selling the bowls. Ninda also met the junk dealer. If they were to sell the brass bowls directly to him then they could get two rupees per bowl. A plate of chaat cost only eight annas.

They made friends with the junk dealer.

Sometimes, they would roam about in the lanes. They would pick up glasses or bowls left lying on the terraces or platforms outside the doors. They made good money out of them.

‘You are no longer children, stealing cycle bells. Steal a cycle itself. I’ll give you fifty rupees per cycle.’ One day, the junk dealer told them, and made them feel grown up.

Meeta was now adept at picking pockets. He rarely met them. Only these three were fast friends.

The trade in cycles was good. It was the junk dealer who had shown them the way to steal. ‘Park your cycle next to the cycle you want to steal. Go about for a short time, and then, walk off with the cycle you want to steal. If you are caught, apologize and say it was a mistake. Show them how you have mistaken it for your own cycle. Walk off with your own cycle. If you succeed in taking away the stolen cycle, come back after some time for your own cycle.’

Once you have brought the cycle to the dealer, you take your money. Once it is there, in minutes, the cycle is dismantled.

They had a very cushy time for many years. Pala stopped coming home. He would roam around the whole day. He also stopped working. If he felt like, he came home, if he did not want to, he stayed overnight at the junk shop.

Then they felt that stealing cycles was not enough as it did not bring in big money. How much could suffice fifty rupees, and that too when they have to be divided between the three of them? A bottle of liquor costs fifty. What about the other expenses?

It was the junk dealer again who came to their help. They should try their hand at stealing scooters. Gharoo could drive a scooter; Pala and others would protect him. The modus operandi was still the same; you had to be very careful. You had to extend the area of your activities, and even go out to the surrounding areas. The junk dealer even gave them a scooter to start their work.

This business did not go on for long. Scooters were usually insured. To make a claim for the insurance money, one had to report the theft to police. It was not a cycle which is stolen, and the owner sits at home. If anyone did go to the police, the police would ask him to prove his ownership and avoid the trouble. The scooter owner would insist on filing a report.

When a few cases of scooter thefts were reported, the police got worried.

They were caught lifting the fourth scooter.

This was his first trip to the police station.

A couple of trips more and the fear of police wore off. The police was less cruel and more friendly. They would give you a bad beating at first, but became good friends even before your wounds were healed. They would also decide the mode of sharing profits.

Their group of friends expanded with their trips to the police stations and jails. Many other groups of thieves became friendly with them. What is a mere cycle theft? Burgle the bungalows!

Now, going to the courts and police station was a routine for them. The advocates had taught them all the tricks of getting free. They started burgling homes without any fear. They were not caught in most thefts, or it could be said that the police did not catch them. If they were caught, they would take the police to the houses of those who had bought the stolen goods and get them money.

If the thanedar was stronger, they would accept their guilt, and spend some time in jail, and he would be happy. His case would be successful.

If the thanedar was weak, they would manage to come out on bail. The witnesses would tire of coming to the courts, and ultimately, would give up their trips to the court. Half of the witnesses would refuse to tell a lie while swearing by sacred books. If the witness speaks the truth, then they are free. If there was a clever witness against them, then, Pala and his friends would bribe the public prosecutor. He would himself manipulate things and they would be let off.

Pala had really come to like this work. It was real fun. The friendships made in prison were very useful. At times, even smugglers would help them out.

Then there came a thanedar who was known as B.A., and who really made things very difficult for him. First, he made him sit in front of glaring lights, and this affected Pala's vision. How would he commit a theft, if he could not see? Then the thanedar saw to it that his hip was broken. He kept him in the thana for a month; did not even let him get any medical aid. Pala became lame.

He broke Gharoo's arms. He got something put in Nikka's ears and he lost his hearing.

None of them was now capable of committing a theft.

After spending a year going to hospitals, Pala could now barely distinguish between shade and light. He did not need crutches, but he could not walk fast. His whole body and bones ached.

Had Jeevan the retailer not supported him, Pala would have had to sit in front of a temple or a gurudwara and beg to survive. His father put his turban at Jeevan's feet, and his mother implored him. Reminded him how she had slaved for him all her life. Pala also begged for help. He was now paying for his bad deeds. He looked a man of sixty when he was only twenty five. Now he will sin no more.

It was an opportunity for him to turn a new leaf. Jeevan got him treated by an ophthalmologist. With the help of thick glasses and could now see properly.

He saw neither Gharoo nor Ninda again. Pala forgot them.

Last year Pala got married. He was now about to become a father.

Had he run away from home after Balwant had given him the information, he knew fully well what would have happened. His sisters are now married. His mother is not worth taking to the thana. She was suffering from tuberculosis. She would have died at one threat from a policeman. His wife was the only one at home to be taken to the Police station, and stripped. He did not want to give his wife into the hands of policemen.

Putting his blanket on his shoulder, Pala went to Jeevan. He would help him present himself before the police through an acquaintance.

Jeevan mulled over the question, which officer should, he take Pala to? All officers, from hawaldar to the Deputy had been transferred. This had never happened before. A couple of transfers would take place, and you could come to know the new officer through the old one.

Had the previous Deputy been here, no one would have summoned Pala to the thana. Two years ago, he had got his history sheet closed, after watching Pala's good record. That was no joke. There were hundreds of reports, but the Deputy was Jeevan's companion on drinks. It was on his guarantee that Pala's name had been removed from the list of bad characters.

Jeevan was also not the one to give up so easily. He also knew many judges. But for this work, the recommendation of the government advocate was enough.

Pala presented himself at the police station through Gurmit.

The police was not annoyed with Pala, because he had presented himself. He was ordered to sit on the platform near the mazar and wait.

Pala was watching the main gate of the thana. Every ten fifteen minutes, a police vehicle would stop at the gate. And either a notorious character like Pala, or one of his family, would alight from the vehicle.

Watching the growing crowd in the thana, Pala trembled. Any time now, violence would be unleashed against him.

Though, he had been clean for the last few years, the previous list of cases against him was very long. In many cases, he had been punished, while in others, he had been acquitted. It was on the basis of these sentences that he had been declared No.10 – a bad character. These punishments could any time result in his being hung upside down.

Pala had actually been waiting for the police since the day Bunty's corpse had been found. The police needs criminals like him for such cases, but he had escaped because the police force knew Jeevan, the tradesman. Jeevan also knew that now Pala does not leave the shop even for an hour. He had forgotten all his past, and now taken to cleaning and sweeping the shop, filling the sacks, and sewing them up.

Pala now had a deep aversion to theft. The daily wages had gone up in these days of inflation. Then one could collect about four seers of grain. This much of earning was sufficient to fill your stomach for a couple of days.

Even then, the new police had needed him.

He had himself come to the police station to answer their questions.

He didn't know how, but the police had brought in all his old friends. Some others had also been rounded up, who had at some time or the other met Pala, at the thana or in the jail. But he had never met them anywhere else.

The ones to be caught first were his companions, Gharoo and Ninda.

There were Santu, Mehru, Palu, Gheechcar and Bantu of the same group; the pickpocket, Meeta and his followers, Daru, Ramu and Sunder; the brewers of illicit liquor, Ninder, Murli and their friends; the Bihari bhaiyas who were employed by the nambardar to deliver opium packs; the employees of Vedu, the sattuwalla, Ramesh, Darshi and Janak. Banty and Jassa; the rickshaw-pullers. They were compulsive gamblers. They would sit down and gamble at the station itself, if they had a few rupees in their pockets. They had been caught many times. But they paid the fine and were let off. Then there were Gheechar and Nihala of Dankiya, who were known for stealing wood from the forest department; Pilu and Dhicku, who are fond of dressing up well and to be known as bad characters. Whenever Pabbi would go to take possession of land, they would lead the way in their ironed kurtas and chaddars, curling their moustaches with their guns slung on their shoulders. They have killed many. They have been acquitted sometimes, and, at other times have had to spend a few years in the jail. The best of lawyers help them. There were Dhichu and Sadhu who have killed their own people in drunken sprees; There were Sansi and conjurer. All old criminals, friends of Pala.

There was no dearth of new faces also, but they were all from the same brotherhood as Pala.

Where the criminals were not at home, their family members had been dragged in: Prince's sisters and Nanno's mother; Shalu's father had also been brought in; Shankar's chacha. Where there was no one at home, they had brought their goods in and had also brought in animals belonging to them. By the afternoon, the thana was full of criminals. There was plenty of noise and din.

As soon as a criminal came in, he was welcomed. Two constables were at the door. As soon as he was brought in, they would start hitting him: in the neck, on his face, on his body. They would deform his appearance. His turban would be thrown off. They would push him on the ground, and kick him. Pull him by the hair and make him stand. Abuse him and then take him to the S.H.O..

The S.H.O. would open the history sheet after verifying the name and the address. Then after scrutinizing his old record, he would decide to which investigative team to hand them over to.

Pala was impatiently waiting. He did not know which party he would be handed to.

XXV

Constable Balwant was not wrong.

The new thanedar was really a giant, six foot tall. Light eyes. Curling moustaches. When he walked the earth shook. And when he talked the listeners quaked within themselves.

His assistant, the assistant thanedar, Nazar Singh, was as dangerous as him. A heavy body, broad chest, threatening and frightening everyone with his red eyes. Whosoever he accosted would blurt out the truth out of sheer fright.

The hawaldar was also an incarnation of a devil. Constables were worse than them!

The courtyard of the police station seemed to have turned into a battleground. On one side were the weak, unarmed criminals; and on the other, armed constables with the strength of stud bulls.

The S.H.O., Lal Singh, had assessed the ability of officers of the investigative team on their capacity to beat. Culprits were handed over to a party on the basis of this capacity.

Various parties were ordered to use different methods. One party was to use the churner; another, the chair and yet another, the cot.

Some culprits were tied to the peepal tree. Some were hanging from branches as if they were ridge gourds. One was upside down, another was straight. The rope was tied to some one's ankle, and to the wrist of another.

If one was being tortured by being stretched in a cage, another was put on blocks of ice.

The sweepress sitting near the toilets was very happy. She had a trough full of shit by her. She had a large ladle for sweeping up shit. Ramesh, Darshi and Janaka had been given to her. She had very happily pasted filth to their faces. Their hands were tied at the back. The thanedar had given strict instructions. Until they make a sign of showing their willingness to speak, this muck should not be removed from their mouths. They go about in courts and the thanas. They may have overheard some criminals conspiring.

Gheechar and Nihala were stronger than them. Therefore, they needed greater force. The possibility of their having information about the murder, could not be ruled out. They were handed over to the hawaldar who was sitting on a chair in front of the munshi's office. The hawaldar had sticks in both hands. The criminals were made to sit on their haunches before him. To set their spoilt minds right, they were pounded on their heads as if they were corncobs. A few times they tried to ward off the beating by putting their hands on their heads. This made the beating faster.

They collapsed without admitting anything.

Two constables came up and pulled them towards the barracks.

Freed of one investigation, the hawaldar saluted the thanedar for new orders.

The police had too many men, but not much time. The day was about to end. The work was not even half done.

Lal Singh had spent most of his time in warding off the pressure of the people with recommendations. Recommendations from judge to the Deputy Commissioner had been received. Fed up, he had disconnected the telephone. From Congressmen to the Comrades, all had come to the thana. Lal Singh had deliberately, treated them rather high handedly, so that they dare not come with any further recommendations. Irritated, the thanedar had ordered that the gate of the thana should be locked. Till the culprits inside are being interrogated, the gate should not be opened to anyone.

If the thanedar was cunning, the culprits were two steps ahead of him. They could go right up to the Captain and get him to send a wireless message. He wanted to finish his work before any recommendation from above.

Naazar Singh had just finished with Dhichoo and Sadhu. His own blood pressure had shot up while punching them. He was panting. His forehead was wet with sweat. He had to stop few times as he submitted his report.

He had come to the conclusion that Dhichoo and Sadhu are innocent. They were simple boys. The complicated conspiracy behind Bunty's murder was beyond them.

The constables dealing with Pilo and Pichkoo were having a hard time. A churner should be used on them. One who has murdered many people, and faced the trials, what does he care about a mere investigation? Only a thanedar like Naazar Singh could get something out of them.

Naazar wanted to have some time to rest before he took on Pilo and others, and also some more men. He needed at least ten more men to use the churner.

Lal Singh could not give time to Naazar; men he could give.

Though he also had a hawaldar waiting, but he had to give him some other men to investigate. Naazar Singh worked with the help of constables.

Lal Singh threw a glance at all the parties to see which were now free.

He felt that the two constables pulling at a Sansi's flesh with pliers, were surplus. The two constables who were pulling out the nails of a conjurer could also be spared. What of the Sansi and conjurer? You could do whatever you wanted, whenever you wanted. No one is going to put in a word for them!

Pilo and Pickoo were political creatures. A word for them could come from any level, right up to the Chief Minister.

Though it may be troublesome, Naazar should deal with them. There is no need for him to fight with them himself. He should keep sitting in the chair, and question them. And get rest of the work done by the constables.

He gave all the four constables to Naazar.

If more men are needed, he could take Pala who has been sitting here, idle since the morning. He has plenty of experience of beatings at the thana. He could control the limbs of the criminals being beaten.

Naazar agreed. If he gets these men, he could do the work.

‘Get up, you son of an ass! You are sitting here like a laot sahib with your hands in your underpants!’ Naazar shouted at Pala, kicking him and making a sign to him to stand up.

Stars seemed to dance before Pala’s eyes as he heard Naazar’s command. He forgot the terrible pain that the stick could give him; he only remembered that now his number had come. Who knows what may happen now?

Pala had seen Naazar’s stick raining blows on Dheecheu and Sadhu. If it could rain blows for an hour on petty criminals, then how can a thief like Pala hope to escape? Anything could happen to him.

Trembling, Pala stood up with folded hands. Waves of pain wracked his body. He could not think of anything. Which part of his body should he present for the assault? No part of his body was capable of bearing the assault of investigation.

‘Come, bring the churner.’ Naazar struck a blow on Pala’s folded hands and pointed out to an extra wooden bar lying under the peepal tree.

Pala began sweating profusely at the mention of the churner. His knees were once broken by strokes of such a churner. His knee still gives him trouble. Where does he have the strength to undergo the same treatment?

Semi-conscious, Pala did not know when he brought the churner and when he spread out his blanket, on the floor.

He did, however feel that the order to undress was given to Pichkoo, and not to him.

‘Sit on his neck. Watch, that he should not even move,’ when Pala received this order with a blow on his ankles, then he realized that he had been ordered to catch hold of Pichkoo, and he recovered himself.

‘Tell us whatever you know about Bunty’s murderers. Or else, the churner is ready.’ Naazar gave a last chance to Pichkoo, who had been stripped naked and told to lie down on the blanket.

‘I swear by Waheguru, I don’t know anything. I can tell you all I know about the murders we have committed.’ Pichkoo pleaded.

‘If you accept easily that you are guilty, then who will call you a badmash? Just see, how you accept killing Bunty...? Give him a taste of the churner, young men!’ Naazar kicked Pichkoo in his back as he had sat up to plead, and threw him back on the blanket, and ordered the beating.

Pala caught hold of Pichkoo’s neck. Two constables caught him by his arms. One put a towel under his knees, and then, fitted the churner into them. The other two, caught him by the ankles, tried to bring his legs closer to the back.

As the pressure on the ankles increased, Pichkoo's screams became louder. He was sweating profusely.

Pala could well understand Pichkoo's pain. He knew what this torture does to one's body; bones cannot bear the pain, and seem to crack. The heart starts jumping; there is a hurricane in one's mind; the flesh tears; and the mouth runs dry; tongue sticks to the palate; the eyes pop out. One wants to die rather than live, waiting impatiently for the time when the churner is pulled out from under his knees. Those moments seem as long as centuries, and one swears never to again commit an offence.

This was Pichkoo's condition. He was shrieking at the top of his voice, imploring to lower the pressure on his ankles, and swearing to his innocence, and giving proof of that.

When his screams slowed down, and the fluttering of his limbs slackened, then the pressure on his ankles was decreased. Gradually, his legs were lowered to their original place. The wooden churner was lifted from the hollows of his knees, and his calves and knees were massaged to restore the circulation of blood in the body. His dry lips were moistened. When he opened his eyes, the two constables helped him to stand up and walk. He walked a few steps with their help, and then started walking on his own.

He was made to sit on one side to recover himself.

The manner, in which Pala helped Naazar, impressed him a lot. He now used Pala in all other investigations.

Pala was happy. The police had forgotten to beat him.

XXVI

There was dearth of such leaders in the town, who could walk into the thana without being stopped, and get an innocent men released.

Among the few who could do this, Babuji's name was at the top. Whosoever be the thanedar, no one could challenge Babuji. If Babuji needed the police to protect his image in the public eye, the police also needed him.

Babuji's contacts in the party extended right up to the central leadership. He was the district president, and a member of the All-India committee. Though, he had attained such high rank in the party, yet his contact with the people had not weakened. He still rode his old cycle, though he had a car. He would go about town on his old cycle. Every week he would also visit a few villages. This gave him the double advantage. His influence increased, and he would also get a few cases for his lawyer son-in-law. As it is, someone or the other was always at his door, pleading to accompany them to the thana. This way he had the opportunity to visit the thana. If there was peace, then, he would himself go to the thana. He would pretend to have received a call from the Captain at Sangrur. He would note the details of any work that someone wanted to get done, because he would meet the Captain. If he saw a

criminal in the lock-up, he enquired about his problem. He would send for his family and get the case dismissed, or ask his son-in-law to get him bail from the court.

Many who were arrested by the police were often released through the efforts of Babuji. He gave greater attention to problems of the villagers rather than those of the town people. The villagers did not only give him more money, but they also felt obliged to him for life. The town people got the work done, but did not hesitate in complaining that they had to spend more money than planned.

This time, even Babuji was helpless. The new staff gave him no importance. When he visited the thana, no one even offered him a chair. He came out as he had gone in. When he asked for the release of Pappu of Dhankias, then Lal Singh admonished him.

‘It is the duty of the leaders to help the government, they should not obstruct the police in its duties. He has just been brought to the thana, and you have come asking for his release! On one hand, you do not hesitate in asking for favours, and on the other hand, you complain that the police do not catch the culprits. How can the police function like this?’

Babuji came back with a long face. He was thankful that no outsider was present in the thana at that time, or his reputation would have really been marred. As it is, the Akali Party was insisting that the centre was trying to destabilize the Akali government in Punjab. This trouble was at the instigation of the Congress. If an opponent were to know that Babuji had gone to the thana asking for some one’s release, he would broadcast it to the whole town. His name could be involved in a matter like murder. Members of his own party would have hurried to ruin his political career.

Babuji had no explanation to give to the crowd which had gathered outside his home to justify his refusal to go the thana. There was no one to listen to his plea in the government circles. The party in power was an opponent. As it is, it was the Chief Minister’s constituency. Each officer was claiming some relationship to him, however distant. Babuji could reach the Central Home Minister; but in such a complex matter, even the Centre could not go against the Chief Minister.

He could think of only one way to get rid of the people. The police are not inclined to listen. He is going to Delhi to meet the Home Minister. He would try to get the thanedar transferred. He would not come back till the transfer comes through.

Which fool would go to Delhi? He went to Chandigarh to stay with a friend. When things would settle down, he would come back.

After Babuji, it was Pandit Deen Dayalji of Bhartiya Janta party, who had plenty of influence in matters connected with thanas and courts. He was responsible for hushing up many problems of the town. When Babuji disappeared, people ran to him.

Deen Dayalji was in favour of the culprits being caught. He held the arrests to be necessary. If the police would not ask anyone, then how will it catch the killers? Then, it is the low caste people who have been arrested. The Congress or the

Communist Party should try to get them released. Had the Lalas been arrested then he would go!

When he was compelled to go, he got the same answer: 'Pradhanji, we did not expect this from you! If this is what you want, then we will release all those who have been arrested. We will sit comfortably and do nothing. Then you alone can catch the killers before the 'bhog', the police cannot do that.'

The pradhan had no answer. He came back without getting any one released, even after some arguments. He thought it would be dangerous to get involved in an acrimonious argument.

Who knows how the arrogant police may react? They may involve him in this business, and may also issue some statements against him.

His reputation and office could be safe only if he is not seen here for a few days. He caught the train to Bangalore that very night, on the pretext of buying cloth.

Even the pradhan of vyopar mandal and Master were ready to get people released, but they would not even talk before they got paid. And, at present, there was no possibility of money being very effective.

No one approached the second and third rung leaders, and they also were not willing to go. They frankly admitted that getting anyone released at this juncture was not possible for them. They would not lose anything by accepting their shortcomings frankly.

The helpless people did not know whom to turn to.

And police was picking up people on the slightest pretext.

Sweepers lived around the veterinary hospital. They were also arrested on the pretext that either the killers had been hiding here, or they must have seen the killers moving around. These people have come from another place, and they speak a different language, dress differently and even their physical body structure is different. They can always recognize people who do not belong to their community. They should tell the police who the murderers are.

The chowdhary of the sweepers raised a big row. Where do they have the time for all this? Their morning is spent in cleaning the filth of the town, and the afternoon they spend in begging for rotis from houses, and the evenings they spend in cleaning up the containers, and troughs.

No one paid any heed to what the chowdhary had to say. He was kicked in his own basti.

Next morning, many men were beaten in front of the temple. One man had been kicked in his abdomen, he was still retching; another had his soles swollen, and yet another's thighbones were still paining.

The twine-twisters were harassed because one of the rickshaw pullers of the school was from this area. Who knows, he may have been lured by someone? He was also absconding. May be, someone may reveal the whereabouts of the rickshaw puller. Their supporter, Jathedar, also seemed to have disappeared.

Many of the twine-twisters were brought to the hospital next morning. Tara was unconscious; he would scream in pain and again sink into a stupor. Chajju's ankle was broken, and it had to be plastered. Jaggo could not see anything; his eyes were burning.

Things were not well even in Lalaji's neighbourhood. Anyone who ever had even a small squabble with Lalaji or his daughter-in-law, had been summoned. The fury of a woman is bad. Some barren women had also been targeted by the police. Children are often kidnapped to be sacrificed in tantric rites to ensure the birth of a son. The child may have been abducted and killed for this. To investigate this angle, the servants of the household were summoned. Such an act cannot be committed without the connivance of the servants.

Anyone who had been called to the thana, did not come out safe and whole. If one had his arm in plaster, another's ankle was bandaged.

People were now upset. If the arms and legs of the people continued to be broken like this, then in no time, the whole town would be full of the lame and the crippled. And the biggest problem was that there was no one to listen to their grievances. The leaders had gone into hiding.

There was another problem worrying the populace. It was getting increasingly difficult to go out of town. If one went out even for a couple of days, the police would declare him to be an absconder. And, he would either be arrested on his return, or his family would be harassed in his absence. The police had announced that anyone wanting to go out must take prior permission for that. If anyone sought their permission, he was made to sit in the thana for many days. No one dared to go to the thana. What could one do?

When Ashok, who had just come back from a visit to his sister, was arrested, the situation took a new turn.

Baba Gurdit Singh was reading the newspaper in the courtyard, when Ashok's frightened mother told him this bad news.

Baba knew that Ashok had been on a visit to Chandigarh since last three days. He would have come back in the evening itself, but his brother-in-law had insisted that he stay for some time. He had just been transferred to Chandigarh, and he wanted to take Ashok around Chandigarh.

The news was unbearable for Baba. He had been tolerating the atrocities of the police all these days. He came into a bloody rage, but he could not do much. The police had frightened the people thoroughly, that no one dared to come near Baba. To come together and oppose the police could not even be thought of.

Baba had talked to Lalaji also. His dear one was now dead. But, at least he should not get the sons of poor people beaten. The whole town was terrorized. The town was abusing Lalaji. They held Lalaji responsible for the police atrocities.

Lala burst into tears. He did not want Bunty's killers. He had, many times, himself pleaded with the police. Don't torture the soul of his grandson by breaking

bones of other people's sons. The cries of these people will not let his grandson rest in heaven.

But what could he do? Who listens to him? The police brush him aside by saying this is a mark of his greatness. The police also have a duty. The Chief Minister has given them a big responsibility. The police must capture Bunty's murderers before the bhog.

Lala was willing to cooperate with Baba in every manner. The terror unleashed by the police must be stopped.

What could Baba do along? The people were reluctant to come forward and support him.

Whenever any of his workers was in need of help, Baba had stood by him like a rock. When an attempt was made to slap a false case against Shamu of the Punjab Students' Union, then all their groups had swung into action. And many others had also been released along with Shamu.

Ashok's arrest was a challenge for Baba. It was now impossible for him to sit quietly. Ashok was dearer to him than his own sons. Those born out to one are not the only sons. Real sons are those who are willing to carry on your ideology further.

Ashok was very important among those young men who were willing to carry on Baba's ideology and principles further.

The responsibility of two very important organizations was on Ashok's shoulders. He was the main spirit behind Lenin Kala Kendra, and the State Secretary of Bhagat Singh Naujawan Sabha.

When leading social activists and leaders were scared of uttering a single word against the terrorists, both these organizations were working shoulder to shoulder against terrorism. They toured the villages, staging street plays and singing songs explaining the vested interests working behind the communal and fundamentalist forces. How could these young people, who preach cultural affinities and seek to expose enemies of the people, and who talk about the welfare of the society, be terrorists?

Baba was angry. Had they lost the C.I.D. reports? Did they not know that not only Bhagat Singh Naujawan Sabha or Lenin Natak Kala Kendra, but every organization connected with Baba's party had condemned Bunty's murder in harshest words, and had organized rallies against it? Not only Bunty's murder, but they condemned each terrorist act. Many of their workers have been martyred.

Baba must go to the thana, before Ashok's bones were broken.

Had the situation been what it was earlier, Baba would have stormed the authorities. But he has now slowed down because of old age. His knees and limbs were weak. His eyes had also lost their brilliance; the only thing which was as alert as ever was his mind. It was now sharper and more farsighted. It was gaining greater wisdom every day.

There was a time, when this very mind of Baba had taken years to solve an easy puzzle.

This was when Baba had lived like a rich man. What worry could the son of a capable doctor have? He ate well and lived well.

They had a bungalow about two miles away from the station.

Once, when Gurdit Singh had come home for summer vacations, his father forgot to send the car for him. He had to come home in a rickshaw.

The rickshaw puller was happily talking away, but his chatter was irritating Baba. Why was he bothered about where he was coming from, and what did he do? He was studying engineering at Lahore. He answered the first question. But, at the next question, he scolded him and asked him to shut him up. He had no right to peep into the private life of Gurdit Singh.

When the rickshaw puller refused to accept any money, Gurdit Singh realized his blunder. This young man, the rickshaw puller, was his childhood friend, Changa. He had been overjoyed to see a thoroughly westernized Gurdit. That was why he had been eager to know about him.

That day Gurdit Singh confronted a question. Why did Changa lag so far behind?

In childhood, Changa had been the class monitor. Teachers praised him for his memory and comprehension. He had a quick mind. Their teachers were confident that one day he would go very far.

But he could only become a rickshaw puller, because his father was a common worker. He was not a doctor like Gurdit's father. Changa's father had aged much before Changa had grown up. His mother's work could not keep the home fires burning. Changa could not become a big officer even if he had studied further. Empty stomachs needed bread immediately. They could not wait interminably for him to complete his education. Changa had washed utensils at a hotel first. Now, he was driving a rickshaw.

Baba was overwhelmed by Changa's situation. Why did Changa not get an opportunity to better his lot? Why could he not become an engineer like Gurdit, or a doctor? Why should a worker's son remain a worker? Why should a doctor's son be a doctor? Why should a king's son be a king?

Baba read many books to find an answer to this question.

Ever since he found the answer, he devoted his life to this.

Gurdit had begun writing and acting in plays when he was still in college, to help people like Changa to a better life.

When he became an engineer, he tried to help the workers, rather than the officers.

First, he rebelled against his father. He wanted Gurdit to be married into a jagirdar's family. Gurdit wanted a companion who should be wise, and not rich. He

found such a mate in his own drama troupe. There was uproar in the house. The girl belonged to a lower caste, she was disabled too. Baba was not bothered.

When the Bhasha department gave five thousand rupees as an award to Balraj Sahni, he handed over the money to Baba.

Baba immediately drew up plans to publish popular and inspirational literature. He started a monthly magazine to encourage up and coming writers, and to create a love for good literature among people. He has published hundreds of books and has helped many authors to come up to the first rank.

When the revolutionary period came, Baba was inclined towards the ideology of the young men. He favoured a violent revolution.

When the movement died out, their hopes were also dashed.

Baba was not the one to lose heart. He initiated many projects to create a base amongst people. Set up drama troupes; established cultural organizations; set up the Krantikari Sabha; encouraged the rationalists to come forward.

When the state was wracked by a wave of militancy, he fought against it with greater determination. Put up plays, addressed public meetings, organized rallies and marches.

On his way to the thana, Baba felt that the time to confront the police had come.

The sentry did not have the guts to stop Baba, who entered the thana like a whirlwind.

The constable bowed his head respectfully, and again putting his rifle on his shoulder, saluted him as though Baba was the Chief Minister himself.

There was no dearth of Baba's supporters in the town. There was hardly anyone in the town, who had not been helped by him sometime or the other. Getting a tricycle for a disabled; arranging an old-age pension for another; and a scholarship for a brilliant student. The whole town respected him.

The sentry's salute was sufficient to inform the staff inside the thana of Baba's importance.

Everybody fell silent and stood wherever they were.

Ashok was sitting under the peepal tree. He was yet to be presented before Lal Singh. The S.H.O. was still busy interrogating another suspect.

As Baba walked into the thana, Ashok stood up.

Baba entered the thanedar's office without permission. Ashok followed him.

All the policemen inside the office stood up to welcome Baba. One bowed to touch his knees, gave him a chair to sit upon.

'Haanji... Sardarji.... Why have you arrested this boy of mine?' Before Lal Singh could understand who Baba was, why the policemen did welcome him with such great respect, Baba's deep voice expressed the anguish in his heart.

Lal Singh was confused at this question. He first looked at Ashok, and then at the hawaldar standing near him.

‘Why are you silent? Say why have you summoned him?’

Lal Singh tried to shift the onus of the action on to the hawaldar’s shoulders.

The hawaldar was no less shrewd. He was not the one to let anyone fire a gun from his shoulder. He shifted the burden on to Naazar.

Naazar was called, but he was nowhere.

Baba was ordered to wait. He was assured that if the boy is ‘clean’, then he would go back home with Baba.

‘His only fault is that he was out for three days.. Listen to me carefully. He has nothing to do with the murder. We are the ones fighting against this atrocity. I am taking him with me. If you find something against him, send me a message. I will myself bring the boy to you.’ And with this, Baba took Ashok by the arm and began to leave.

No one had the guts to stop Baba. They all looked at one another. When he saw that his subordinates were all silent, Lal Singh also turned to a statue. Lal Singh may be new to the town, but the constables were all old. The old man took away the suspect, and they all stood around, frightened. The old man must be some personality. Lal Singh also was not the one to invite trouble. He stood silently watching the pair disappear in the crowd on the street.

The news about Baba’s action spread like wildfire in the whole town.

It seemed as if the people had found a new way, they had forgotten. The other leaders had slunk away. Baba was not the one to turn his back. His companions were also made of the same stuff. They were always ready to put up a fight.

People now made a beeline for his home, as if he was dispensing some lifesaving drugs, which could infuse new life into a dead body.

Was Baba the one to withdraw? If the people are willing, then he would be the first to fight and sacrifice all.

A meeting was organized in the Nehru Park that evening. Hundreds of young men who had been oppressed by the police were present on the dais.

The people were there to attend the meeting, but secret messages from political people were also received. If a common front is formed, then, they are also willing to raise their voices against the police. Not only the opposition parties were keen, but even a few jathedars were also agitated over what was happening.

Let the Chief Minister be angry, they would not tolerate oppression any more. If they keep quiet at this stage, what face will they show the people later on?

What objection could Baba have? The formation of ‘Lok Sangharsh Samiti’ was announced at the public meeting. A few political leaders were included in the Samiti, but majority was of his supporters. He knew that the political leaders run away at the time they are most needed.

A march past was fixed for the next day. They would continue till every single innocent person held in the thana is not released.

Baba had sent out instructions to all the groups of his organization. The Drama Centre, The Musical Groups and the Intellectual Centers were told to keep their activities suspended for the time being. They should all come to the town and guide the people's movement. The Inquilabi Sahitya Sabha was also asked to come. Literature could be created later; first, history has to be made.

Baba also sent for some of his underground companions. A violent struggle may become necessary. The rural units and Bhagat Singh Naujawan Sabha had already been alerted. People were willing to come in droves from the villages at one signal from Baba.

The Samiti achieved success within two days.

Let alone arresting anyone else, the police began releasing the persons it had captured earlier, one by one.

XXVII

The manner in which the arrests by the police had created panic among the people, the same way, the agitation by the Samiti had succeeded in reining in the police.

The scared police, had either sent the special suspects to the police stations at some distance, or hid them in the homes of their informers.

The police was now impatient to release those who were either not needed, or who were only slightly injured. It was afraid those if all those, who were detained, are released immediately, the Samiti will collect them; get them medically examined and create problems for the police. The Press was already spreading poison against them. This will add grist to their mill.

The police was looking for such a person, who could assure them that the detainees would neither go to the Samiti, nor will they take any action against the police. If such an assurance was forthcoming, he may get all of them released, the police had no objection to it.

The old man, Balwant, was highly annoyed. This was such a grand opportunity to earn money, but he had not yet been able to get even fifty paise.

Balwant was as angry at the new staff as were the people.

Balwant had joined the police thirty-five years ago. Except for a few years, the rest of his time had been spent at this thana. Balwant was proud of the fact that no culprit could dare look him in the eye. Balwant could even recognize culprits in the making!

Though illiterate, Balwant's influence was like that of a Deputy's. He seldom wore a uniform. Some thought him to be a thanedar, and others took him to be a

hawaldar. Why did he need to wear a uniform? The work that ten constables in uniform could not do together, Balwant could do single handedly. He had such wide contacts in the area.

Whenever a new thanedar was posted here, tales against Balwant would be narrated to him. The thanedar would keep Balwant at an arm's length. Attempts would be made to keep him out, by sending him to serve summons in Mumbai or Kolkata, so that he would be out for many days. Balwant would gleefully watch the whole farce being played out. When the investigations would flounder, Balwant would be summoned to help!

Balwant was not like the constables of today that he could not do without a motor cycle. Well, one could go round the whole area on a motor cycle in an hour, but can one get any information this way? Balwant went out on a cycle. Suck a sugar cane in a field, eat a meal at another's, and spend the night at another's. Drink with one, and talk about family matters with another. One could get all the information about the village. Because of this clever approach, Balwant had been able to solve many complicated matters easily. When the investigators failed to make any headway, they would come to Balwant. He at once would be able to point out the solution.

Tales against him were carried even to the new staff. The allegations, this time, were serious. He is used to 'leak information about the police plans for money.' Some evidence was put forward to prove the allegations. Some weak culprits, threatened with a beating, were brought forward to agree that they had run away from home, at Balwant's instigation.

Balwant was sitting idle, and worrying over the stupidity of the new staff. Men were being quickly released. These fools did not know how rich a particular person was! One who could give five thousand was asked for five hundred; and who had ten to give, was asked for five hundred. Had Balwant been there, no one would have dared to utter a word!

Balwant was trying to be patient. He felt that perhaps this was also for their good. The police was collecting money in such a manner, as though they were to retire in a few days.

These beatings were not going to last very long. People were agitated. They may give hundreds of guarantees in the thana that they will not take any action against the police, but as soon they are out of the thana, they are bound to go the Samiti. Which innocent will tolerate his bones being broken, and then pay five thousand on top of it?

The fire had been lit. It is bound to turn into a flame. If Balwant were to get involved in it for money, then he would also surely be burnt.

He was getting his 'daily' as it is. Of course, there was some advantage of the strictness of the staff. This time, if someone was picked up, there was no information about his whereabouts. Where was he? Is he alive or has he been killed? If he is alive, then how is he? Balwant was charging a fee to give information about the welfare of the detainees.

But he was not satisfied with this meager amount. He was used to large sums of money. As he was honest in his accounting, therefore all thanedars trusted him. As for the criminals, he was like a messiah. They gave him money without fear. They knew that either the work would be done, or he would return the money to the last paisa. He would not even keep the price of a liquor bottle. It was on the basis of this trust, that he had collected all the 'monthlies' of the whole thana. And from one tenth of this alone he earned as much as the thanedar of an important thana.

Because of the manner in which the police had humiliated the leaders, most professional leaders were not willing to come to the thana. Earlier, a Congressman would come in; then another from Bhartiya Janta Party would come in; and also a Sanghi may walk in. They would quietly take the thanedar to his quarter, talk to him and get their man freed. If they felt like, they would give ten rupees to someone else, and if they did not feel like, they would quietly leave.

Now, when leaders were scarce, Balwant had to replace them. The constable close to Lal Singh had spoken so much against Balwant, that he was not even ready to let Balwant stand beside him. Letting him 'talk' to people was a far cry!

People had to get their men freed. If the leaders have run away, then there are various other ways.

Balwant may have been pushed aside; even then he was getting all the information: who was being let off, and how.

Jeevan, the retailer, was a wealthy party. He did not demur in paying twenty thousand in rewards. He had a cordial relationship with all officers. He thought it better to spend money to get something done, than going after others for recommendations.

His son, Titu, had been caught. His was a small fault. He was friendly with some Jat boys. His friends were all absconding. May be, they had been visiting him, off and on.

The old staff would not have arrested Jeevan's son. He had to go to the judge because of the stubborn nature of the new thanedar. Had the S.H.O. been good to Balwant, then Jeevan was a reliable man.

If the thanedar had not taken money, the judge would surely have. Otherwise, the judge would not have come to the thana. It was for the first time in his service of thirty five years, that Balwant had seen a judge himself come to the thana for such a trivial case. So far, the police would have released a man at a sign from the judge.

The judge may have been hesitant, that the S.H.O. would not listen to him, if he phoned him. He had phoned once earlier. Lal Singh had stalled him with some answer.

That he has himself come to the police station means he must have taken an hefty bribe. Jeevan was related to the judge who was posted here earlier. He was willing to go all out for Jeevan's sake. This one was not the one to do anything without money.

Jeevan had said that he was an uncle, by marriage, of the judge who had been posted here earlier. But, many told a different tale. The judge was a Jain, and Jeevan an Agarwal. How could they be relatives? The real story is that Jeevan's second wife was a great beauty. The judge was also very handsome – like an Englishman. They were having an affair! To Balwant this story seemed to be true. Whenever Balwant booked a box at a cinema hall for the judge, then he noticed that Jeevan's wife was always a part of the group watching the movie.

The judge also dined at Jeevan's at least three or four times a week. Both the families were always going out together. Jeevan's car was always at the judge's residence, for his use.

Jain was now posted at a distance of two hundred kilometers. Before leaving, he had introduced this judge to Jeevan. This judge was not as friendly as Jain had been with Jeevan, but he does accept money through Jeevan. Balwant had got the work of many parties done through Jeevan. If the judge had come to the thana with Jeevan, then, the thanedar would have to release the person. There could be no stalling as the conditions had now changed. The judge was already annoyed at the initial response.

Yesterday, when they had gone to his bungalow to get Chimna's remand, he had kept them waiting outside for full one hour. The humiliated police kept waiting outside. No one gave them any chairs to sit, nor even offered them water to drink. The police kept standing like criminals.

A message had come after an hour. As the lawyer of the culprit had not come, therefore, he should be presented tomorrow in the court.

The police was scared of presenting Chimna in the court. His thigh was broken. If the police get a remand for fourteen days, then alone would he be able to walk. If the remand is not given, then the Samiti will get him out on bail and use him against the police.

The judge was adamant. Not until Lal Singh himself appears and offers an apology, the judge would not give remand.

After all this, he gave a remand of only four days. If you want a longer remand, then you have to do what the judge wants.

This was not all. The number of men they had beaten up, that way, the judge was needed at every step. A few lawyers had now joined the Samiti. Whichever culprit was presented before the court, they would immediately present an application for medical examination. If the judge were to accept this, then there would be so much proof against the police that they would have to be attending the court all their lives.

The judge would order a medical examination for the first time. When the culprit was being taken to the jeep, the police would warn him. If you get the examination done, we will flay your skin. He would refuse to go for the medical examination out of fear. If the judge is annoyed, he can refuse to take cognizance of the refusal, and thus cause problems for the police.

The police had no alternative except to send Tito with the judge. The second recommendation was that of the doctor.

Pritpal was the son of his nurse. The wise doctor did not do what the judge had done, but the amount he had sent, did not seem adequate to Lal Singh. But, though he did not want to keep the small amount of a thousand rupees, he also did not want to send it back.

Balwant knew that though Pritpal's mother was a nurse, his father was a bank manager. He had the authority to grant huge loans to big industrialists. He had a large income. Five-seven thousand were peanuts for him!

Pritpal was also not a good man. He was the leader of the gang which had lately set fire to the station. He was often seen putting up provocative posters and making inflammatory speeches. Though these days, he was member of the Youth wing of the Akali Dal, but his old activities could not be forgotten. It was absolutely necessary to question him. If the record of the son is bad, and the father is a wealthy man, then, Balwant could have easily made him shell out ten-fifteen thousand. Now, it was up to the thanedar to keep or return the thousand.

The doctor was a government doctor, and one could not say 'no' to him. He had already said 'no' to him once. But after the blow that Baba had delivered to the police, it was still feeling very shaky. In these bad days, they would need the services of the doctor anytime.

Many suspects who had no relatives, had been admitted to the hospital as sick. The police still had to get their medical reports. A sick man had to be shown as healthy and a healthy man shown as ill. Who knows when would someone blow the whistle on the atrocities that he had undergone? That time, the doctor alone could help them. It was he who could give in writing that the dead man was a heart patient, and did not die of the beating, but of heart failure.

Once, if out of avarice, the money is accepted, the doctor would have to be paid for every case. Lal Singh had to swallow his greed, and release Pritpal, and also, return the money.

Balwant was elated. This is the result of keeping Balwant out. Pritpal's father knew Balwant. He had also come to him. Balwant had sent him back. Now, that the thanedar was losing his money, Balwant was happy.

The government advocates also were making hay while the sun shone. They also would be needed all the time. Though, they could not create problems for the police, but then they could always help in aggravating the trouble it was already facing, as public opinion ran high against them. They could find hundreds of faults in cases prepared. If the police did not heed them, they could also create problems for it in the court. People had to be released by the police. They let go two at their request. What was the problem in that? They would be happy and give the police officers all respect in the court, and also get the judge to do what the police wanted.

All other things being fine, Balwant was astounded at what Bhani had done! Who doesn't know that wicked woman? There is no constable in the police station with whom she has not slept. She was about fifty. She still used make up and put bindi on her forehead, though she had been widowed. And, she asserted that her son, who is

in the military, had stopped her from going out of the house. She had now given up enticing young girls.

Wise officers had cleverly fooled her. They did anything that she wanted without taking any money from her; and then getting information from her all the year round. She could reveal the innermost secrets of most dreaded criminals. She was also helpful in pleasing the officers.

The younger constables were all taken in by her. The moment she came into the thana they would all hover round her! Balwant did not even know when she had struck a friendship with the thanedar. He came to know only when, she had brazenly come in and sat beside him.

It hardly took her a minute to get Zaila free. He could not even find out whether the deal was for Zaila's sister or his mother. Zaila's mother does not have money to give. There is no question of anyone being freed without something being received. When Bhani has come, it means it is a deal for someone's sister or daughter.

The thanedar also seemed to have tired of releasing people for free. The speed with which the movement was gathering momentum, it seemed that it was very likely that the inspector may have to sit at home. If he has some money to spare, then things could be managed.

He chose the old and tried method of earning some money.

The new tyres of the thana jeep were taken off and the old ones fitted, and the jeep was parked in the courtyard of thana. A 'tyre fund' was started for new tyres for the jeep.

Those who agreed to give money did not have to contribute to the 'tyre fund'. If anyone was to be released without money, he was asked to contribute for the tyre fund. Not even the highest officer could refuse to such collection for a 'common' cause, on the other hand, he got a chance to spend money.

The last S.H.O. had started a 'pillar' fund. The pillar of the thana had crumbled last year during the rains, and it had opened the door of funds for the police! The thanedar was an experienced hand. First, he would take a big fee himself. Then, he would also ask the man released for some or other work. Though those days were days of peace, yet, he would collect about five hundred by the evening. But, when you have arrested people in such large numbers, the money coming in also should be big. By Balwant's assessment, Lal Singh should have collected at least about twelve thousand rupees by now. He had summoned Jeevan the tradesman on some pretext to the thana, and had also asked him for some favour.

Balwant was astounded at Lal Singh's cleverness. It was known for thanas to collect wheat during the summer harvest. Every village had to give at least five sacks of wheat for the police mess. This would bring in many truckloads of wheat. The same number of sacks was sent in by the panchas and sarpanchas. The rest came in from the big landlords.

Neither a pillar had fallen, nor were those the days, of harvest, yet, the money was coming in.

The first contribution to this fund came from Vedu the speculator. What he gave to the thanadar was not known, but he did deposit two hundred each for his three men, in the tyre fund.

After this, Vedu developed such friendship that he was at the thana, every few minutes.

Balwant was extremely annoyed with him. This very Vedu, who could not even find a guarantor to vouch for him, had himself become a leader here. No one knew if the constables were to get some share from the tyre fund or not. The previous thanedar always divided the money equally. But from Lal Singh's attitude, it seemed that he would himself keep all the money.

These days would also pass. When Balwant gets his chance again, he would surely teach Vedu a lesson.

The contractors came for Saathi, Ninder and Murli. Earlier, they brewed liquor, but since the price of jaggery had skyrocketed, there was no profit left in illegal distillation. Now, they sold liquor for the contractors. The contractors, in connivance with the excise department, do not allow country liquor shops to be opened in many villages. They send their own men to sell liquor there. It is not necessary that the government coffers should be filled! They give some to the excise men, some to the police and the rest of the profit is theirs. They were willing to pay any fine for their employees.

The contractors were no small men. Whatever you tell them, they would have to do, as they are caught. They can't even take the minister's name. Balwant, the constable was at odds with the contractor. The contractors oblige the big officers, but look down upon the poor constables. Even one bottle in a month had to be begged for. And if you needed another, they did not even give you a discount of two rupees.

Balwant had really been happy during the 'dry days'! The shops would be closed two days in a week. If the contractors demurred, the police would camp before their shops. No one dare buy even a quarter in their presence. Customers would, run away, the moment they saw the police!

Now, it is exactly the opposite. The police itself see to it that liquor is sold. These are the government orders! The contractors are given protection against the terrorists. Why should they look after the constables?

Lal Singh had done well to ask them for tyres. The contractors pleaded. These men are poor. The thanedar stuck to his demand. Finally, they paid up.

Darshan Bhukkiwal came for Bantu and Jassa. Darshan took the whole responsibility on his own shoulders. They may be anything else, but they were not extremists. They had been beaten enough. If they were left locked up in the thana, there was a danger of their losing some limb or other. It was essential to take them to the hospital for medical help and care. Darshan happily paid for one tyre.

The thanedar made them swear at the mazar and let them also go.

Bhapa, the vegetable seller, got Sadhu released.

Bhapa had won over the inspector in two days. He brought new fruits for the thanedar so that he forgot to ask for the tyre fund.

Bhapa did have this gift. He was the lord of the town's vegetable market. There were three shops in all. They took the price they wanted, but also took a cut from each pile. If one piece is taken from each basket, even then a basket could be filled. The other sellers put extra vegetables in baskets and sold them, but Bhapa did not do this. He would fill bags with vegetables, and send the bags to the various officers, according to their status and reputation: from the Deputy to the hawaldar; from the judge to the naazar; from the I.T.O. to the clerk. Vegetables were delivered to each one at their homes. The employees of the lower ranks could buy from the market.

If you are eating free vegetables from someone every day, and when he wants you to do something for him, then what do you do? Lal Singh had the grace to accept this. Sadhu works for him, and therefore he can have no connection with Bunty's murderers. He could take away Sadhu.

One by one, practically all the suspects were freed. There was only one useful person left in the police station, that too because of Balwant's stupidity. He was Balwant's maternal uncle's brother-in-law's son. He had missed his bus and slept at the bus depot. The patrolling party had brought him in.

Mithu's parents had come to know about it only yesterday. They had come to Balwant with a bagful of money last night itself.

The whole night his uncle implored Balwant. The boy is docile like a cow. Let whatever amount be spent, he must be released.

In his heart, Balwant was scared. He had not been able to establish a good relation with the new thanedar. He did not have the guts to talk directly to him.

He also did not say no to his uncle. First, he gave a few excuses: the thanedar is stubborn, and doesn't listen to anyone; even if he agrees, he would want a bagful of money.

They gave five thousand to Balwant and told him that he could spend five more.

There is no credit in the business of bribe. Thinking this, Balwant very sweetly explained to his uncle, that the thanedar will not say no if we show him ten. Offering only five will not serve the purpose.

He gave another hint to his uncle as he was leaving to get more money. The munshi and others are no less. Something would have to be given to them also. He should get a few more thousands.

This was now the best opportunity to talk about Mithu with the thanedar. Lal Singh was slightly agitated. He did not harass any employee if he could help it. Also, now he was not as rude as he had been earlier.

The thana was now practically idle. Who was going to come for the likes of Pala and Meeta? Jeevan could come for Pala. Jeevan's own son had just been released.

The tyre fund had also been started. Many a times, the one who had come with a request for release of some man, had been told to contribute to the fund.

So far Balwant had not let anyone come to the thana with a recommendation for Mithu. The thanedar must have thought him also to be without any family.

‘Sardarji, this Mithu is a relative of mine... this five hundred for the tyre and this five hundred...’ Balwant broached the subject with the thanedar who had been sitting idly, and put five hundred before him.

‘If he was your man, then you should have said so earlier... what are you doing? Let it be...’. When Balwant tried to put five hundred in his pocket then Lal Singh tried to stop him as a matter of form. Mithu had to be released, so he was.

Seeing Mithu leaving with Balwant, the munshi was greatly incensed.

‘Oiyee... at least get us some money for the mess...’, stopping Mithu at the gate, the munshi told Balwant.

‘He is my relative. I’ve given five hundred for the tyre fund. How much more do you want?’

‘He has been sitting here for three days. That means three hundred.’ Munshi tried to explain things to Balwant by giving him a broad wink. He was willing to split the money with Balwant.

‘There is a Green Hotel just ahead which charges hundred rupees for a day! As if you were giving him chicken to eat every day! How hungry can a man feel when he sees the danda parade? I am telling you he is my relative. You write whatever you want in my account,’ Balwant said arrogantly as he walked out with Mithu.

Balwant had no sympathy with the munshi. He had taken enough money. No way did it cost five hundred for the mess, and he would stick at this. When he conducts personal searches, he takes whatever is found in their wallets, whether there is fifty or five thousand. He takes it all. Many are scared to come back for even their watches and rings.

Had he forgotten Balwant, earlier? He had never got a paisa for him! If a party has come to Balwant, then, his mouth is watering!

Handing over Mithu to his uncle, Balwant felt very brave. He had enhanced his reputation among his relatives, and had also earned eleven thousand!

He had no complaint against the new staff now.

XXVIII

An insult at the hands of another rankles in the heart of even the lowest of man. There was no such word in the dictionary of the police. If one, who is always addressed with respect, is insulted; and the one who has insulted him, walks out with the man he has come to get free, then it should be a matter of deep shame for the one insulted.

It was not only a matter of tolerating it, but also of consequences. Today, Baba had taken away one; tomorrow some jathedar will come; and the day after some Jan Sanghi. If this continues like this, then the fear of police will die out in no time.

Lal Singh in a rebellious mood had released all detainees. He did not want to keep even Pala and Meeta. The old munshi got after him. He had to hand over charge to the new munshi. A lot of material had to be prepared. Pala and Meeta knew everything about the thana. Earlier also, whenever they had been caught, they would help the munshi in his work. There was no one to bother about them. They may remain at the thana for a month, no one would enquire about them. Lal Singh had to accede to the munshi's demands.

Since the last two days, Lal Singh had no other work except to put up his feet on the table and read the paper.

If the government is in no hurry to catch the killers, then why should Lal Singh put his job in jeopardy? How do the politicians matter? When their own thrones are in danger, then they do not hesitate in making a scapegoat of another. On one hand, he was being told to catch the killers at any cost before the bhog; and, on the other, nothing is being done to deal with Baba, who is obstructing the investigation, by blocking it like a rock.

Lal Singh adopted the same attitude, as the higher authorities had adopted. He stopped the investigation into Bunty's murder, and turned his attention to other crimes. The crime rate had gone up rapidly as most of the police was involved in Bunty's murder-case. Information was coming in about poppy dust being openly sold in the market. The contractors were in an uproar. Liquor was being distilled in every other house. The speculators had doubled the number of their workers. A couple of fights also had taken place.

When Lal Singh fell silent, there was peace all over. There was no detention, no interrogation, and also no meetings and processions. The town seemed very happy.

The new Captain did not seem to have any other work. He was repeatedly asking for reports. He was worried, as only a few days were left for the bhog. The Chief Minister wanted to attend the bhog. He could only attend it if the murderers were apprehended before the bhog.

The government had declared a reward of fifty thousand rupees for each killer, to encourage the police. One promotion was announced for all those policemen who were part of the investigation. These were the promises of the Chief Minister, not of an officer. He need not ask anyone else for giving a promotion. He himself took all the decisions.

Lal Singh watched everything quietly. The police does not have the magical lamp of Aladdin that one could rub and order the jinn to get catch the killers! Interrogation of suspects was essential in order to arrive at a decision. It is not written on anyone's face whether he is innocent or guilty. One does sometimes cross the limit while interrogating. As long as Baba is not asked to shut up, and Lal Singh given a free hand for investigation, Lal Singh would not summon any suspicious person to the thana. This was his last and final decision.

Lal Singh had given the full report to the Captain. Baba was not an insignificant person. He is the man of international status. If, Lal Singh were to get entangled with Baba in any way, then it would raise a storm in the whole country. For arresting Baba, they needed at least a nod from the Chief Minister.

Baba's supporters, unlike those of Lala's, were not confined only to the town. His contacts were spread all over the state. His friends were not like Lala's – rich industrialists, businessmen or religious leaders. His supporters were either students of colleges and universities willing to lay down their lives for their cause; workers with bodies of steel; hardworking peasants; and dalits who had been trampled upon by society all their lives.

If Baba had dedicated his life to them, they were also ready to make whatever sacrifices they were called upon, for him.

Lal Singh narrated Baba's history so that the Captain understands his compulsions and helplessness; but Lal Singh also felt that the Captain seemed more concerned about his own self. He stopped short of issuing orders to arrest him.

Lal Singh was ordered to first file some case against Baba. Then, he should secure a warrant for his arrest from the court. By this time he would get the permission from the Chief Minister.

What was in filing a case? On his return to the thana, he immediately filed a long F.I.R. against Baba. Even the allegations were true. Obstructed policemen in carrying out their duties; took away a man from police custody; insulted police employees; entered the thana without permission... Lal Singh slapped twenty different sections on him.

But the captain was not satisfied with the F.I.R.. The story appeared to be false. And it also showed the police in a bad light, exposed its weakness. What kind of police was it if it could not protect itself from an old man? This report had made Baba a hero. He has the guts to free a detainee from the thana even at this age!

File another paper; if it is based on some event, all the better. The event also should be such, which may help in lowering the reputation and influence of Baba amongst the people, and they could be weaned away from him.

There are only two ways of giving a man a bad name: womanising or fraud of trust funds. Baba was no longer of the age where he could be involved in womanizing. They had not collected any funds for the Samiti, that rumours could be set afloat that he had committed some fraud. Then, if a man who has not kept even a single paisa with him, and has given all his property and earnings for the 'welfare' of the people, is accused of fraud, who will believe it. On the contrary, the one making the allegation would be laughed at!

Lal Singh could think only of one thing: to somehow, organize a procession against Baba. Then, create some disorder in the procession; put the whole blame for this unruly disorder on Baba. Then, it would be easy to arrest him. But who will organize the procession? He could think of no one.

The Sangh was very unhappy, at the slackening of the police. Whenever they visited the thana to find out about the progress of the investigation, Lal Singh had the same answer –

‘We don’t want to be stripped of our ranks. Your Baba doesn’t let the investigation move forward. Whosoever we catch, he gets him released. Sardar is also quiet. It seems he is afraid of Baba.’

What solution did the Sangh have? If Baba has got anyone released, then he must be innocent. Baba is not the one to support the terrorists.

Lal Singh then explained the situation to the Sangh secretly.

Baba’s record is not good. At one time, he was the leader of young men who believed in violence. This murder can also be the work of some group who supports Baba. The rationalists criticize the sadhus and sants. They reject all exorcists and charmers. The whole group is atheist. Who knows, they may be opposed to Lalaji’s religious preachings? Baba must be dealt with!

‘If the Sangh has now understood the matter, then it should help the police.’ To Lal Singh the Sangh seemed to be the most appropriate group to organize the procession.

The Sangh was not refusing to help the police. They want the killers. The Sangh is ready for any sacrifice.

It is the police which will make the sacrifice. The Sangh should only give its help.

To undermine Baba’s morale, it was essential that a very large procession should be taken out against him. The number of Baba’s admirers was hundred times more as compared to Sangh’s membership. More than half of its workers were supporters of Baba. Then, some of Baba’s supporters had gone underground, they could shoot the workers of the Sangh at any time.

Why does Lal Singh want the workers? Get as many people as were willing to come. It is Lal Singh’s responsibility to swell the number in the procession. The police only needed men who could shout slogans.

They should not be scared of those who are underground. Police would accompany the procession. Lal Singh would himself lead the police. No one even dare to look at the members of the Sangh.

But this work must be done immediately. The procession must be taken out, before Baba’s supporters get even a whiff of the plan.

If the leaders of the Sangh are needed only to raise slogans, then it can be taken out any time.

They decided to take out a procession at four in the evening.

The procession was to start from Bhagat Singh’s statue, and wend its way through the bazaars, to Baba’s residence.

The Sangh had planned a very soft role for itself. They were only to raise slogans.

Reaching Baba's home, they would request him not to interfere in the work of the police, and to let the police hunt for the killers. The Sangh was confident that Baba would surely accept this demand.

When the procession started from the statue, there were about twenty-five or thirty people. The number of policemen far outnumbered that of the workers.

Darshan was afraid. By the time they reach Baba's home, there may only be a couple of men left.

As the procession moved forward, the number of supporters also increased. At every turning of the road, ten to twenty more joined the procession. Darshan's enthusiasm also increased as he saw the numbers swelling. The pitch of the slogans he was raising also rose. And by the support his slogans received, it appeared to Darshan as if the whole town had turned against Baba. The town was united on the question of catching of the killers.

Gradually, the attitude of the crowd changed. Slogans were being raised by someone else from the crowd. The slogans were also not the same that the Sangh had selected. They were altogether new:

'Bunty's murderer... Baba the dog...'

'Baba should.... Be hanged...'

'Baba... the protector of killers... arrest him... arrest him...'

'We shall set on fire... set on fire... we shall burn Baba the murderer...'

At the last turning of the bazaar, strange looking men joined the crowd. They had sticks, choppers and also naked swords. Many had bricks and stones in their hands. One man was also carrying a couple of tins of oil.

'Throw him... burn him.... Kill him... kill Baba the traitor... the killer...'
strange slogans were filling the air.

Darshan was agitated, and his feet wanted to turn back, but Lal Singh was in a hurry.

Darshan could not understand who were the men who had joined the procession? They were neither workers of the Sangh, nor the residents of the town. Yet, the faces seemed familiar and known.

Finding Darshan silent, one new leader got on to a rickshaw. He took the mike from Darshan's hand. He began shouting slogans in a high pitch in favour of the Yuva Sangh, for Lalaji, and in favour of the police.

Darshan heaved a sigh of relief as he got off the rickshaw; Ram Swaroop was also taken off from the rickshaw by someone else. He also joined Darshan.

They were all confused. The procession had been taken off from their hands. What would happen next, no one knew.

Lal Singh whispered in the ears of the new leaders. They were guiding the procession towards Baba's residence with greater speed now.

Lal Singh had received information that the news of the procession against Baba had not only reached each lane and area of the town, but had also spread to the villages.

Many groups were now getting ready to bring out a procession in Baba's support.

A group of men and women from the Sansi's area was already on its way. It was being led by Shamu, of the Punjab Students Union.

A police force had been already dispatched to stop them midway.

A strike had been called in the thread mill. Ashok was leading the mill workers. They were creating uproar, as they marched this side.

Some workers of the Krantikari Front had already reached Baba's house, with arms.

The Rationalist Group was collecting in the dharmshala. Baba's home was close to the dharmshala. They could clash anytime with the procession.

People had been asked through loudspeakers to come to the town on trolleys. And people from the nearby villages had already begun moving towards the town.

Apprehending trouble, the market had closed down.

Lal Singh was very apprehensive: a real clash could take place. If this happens, then Lal Singh would lose rather than gain.

He was walking briskly in the procession. He was explaining something to the people in the crowd.

The last part of the distance they covered fast.

As soon as they reached Baba's house, they started pelting stones and bricks. An attempt was made to break down the door with choppers and sticks.

'The Big revolutionary! If you have guts, come out..'

'We will see how you escape while sheltering killers...'

'Fry the traitor.... Burn the whole family...'. With stones and bricks the slogans were also high pitched.

Those with oil cans threw the oil on the doors, and one of them was about to put a match stick to it, when Baba growled from the terrace –

'Where are you, you stupid Sangh members?... Can't you see that all these men are policemen or hired thugs.... Can't you understand this?... This is a conspiracy by the police to make us fight each other...'

The procession was silenced by the loud cry of Baba. Sticks and axes stopped midway. A few tried to open their mouths.

Baba stood on the terrace. Five or six armed young men were around him. They were aiming at the leading figures of the crowd.

‘If anyone tries to come forward, we shall shoot.’ One of the young man with the gun shouted, and the man with the oil can dropped it. Half of it he split on his clothes.

The slogans being raised by the procession of the Rationalist group could be heard as they drew closer to this place.

Before they could arrive on the scene, someone from the crowd fired in the air.

Firing began from the terrace. In a few moments, the crowd had decimated: Some one left his jooti; another - his turban, and yet another - his chaddar.

After a few shots both sides fell silent.

Within this short span, Lal Singh’s problem was solved. He again filed a first information report against Baba and his supporters, under various sections of law: Section of keeping illegal arms; section of spreading hatred between the two communities; of sheltering culprits and encouraging them; firing on a crowd with the intent to kill; obstructing government employees in their duties, and of rebelling against the government.

Sahib was not happy with this case also. This was not an invented story. The whole town had seen the incident with its own eyes. The photographers had photographed it, and the journalists had reported on it. The people were also angry with Baba. He should not have fired on an unarmed crowd.

Sahib had only given Lal Singh an assurance. What objection would the government have about ordering his arrest on the basis of this case?

It was the second day since the event. The propaganda machinery of Baba’s supporters worked very fast. In two days they had made the people realize that the police was behind the procession. The men were also of the police and so was the plan. They distributed the enlarged photographs among the people, in which the faces of the policemen could clearly be seen.

Darshan and Ram Swaroop also accepted the Samiti’s stand. They admitted their mistake in open meeting. They also revealed that they had done this at the instigation of the police.

The silence on the part of the government made Lal Singh think that even this gamble would go against him.

Lal Singh now decided not to go any further in this affair. Let this investigation go to hell. Let the Chief Minister’s promise be damned. When the Chief Minister is not worried, then why should the police bother?

Lal Singh applied for ten days leave as he saw the anger of the people rising.

When he got the permission to arrest Baba instead of leave, Lal Singh heaved a sigh of relief.

The Chief Minister had given Lal Singh a free hand. He could arrest Baba as well as his supporters. If he thinks that Baba would get a bail, then they can use the National Defense Law against him.

Lal Singh was happy. Now, he had the opportunity to show his merit.

XXIX

Had the orders for Baba's arrest not come, Pala and Meeta would have been released that evening.

All those who had been arrested with them, had gone home. There were two reasons for detaining them at the thana: first, none from their families had come for their release. Meeta had no one. Pala's mother had sat outside the thana, and then gone back, for no one had listened to her. The second reason was they helped the Naazar during the investigation; they helped the munshi also in preparing the list of things recovered on the site of the crime.

No other suspect was now detained at the thana for questioning, but the munshi's work was not yet complete. The new munshi had been sitting since many days. The munshi had to make a list of each and every item in order to hand over the charge.

Lal Singh did not need them. The munshi had the right to release them. The munshi could let them go whenever he thought fit.

The munshi was putting off their release. It appeared as if he had to prepare the list of all goods at the thana. They would complete one task, when the munshi would assign them the next job.

'This needs to be done. Finish it and run off.'

They would eagerly get down to the work.

The first day they filled hundreds of bottles and cans with water, and tied mouths with cloth, and string. The knots of the string were sealed with wax. Then the name and address of the culprit was written on the container, so that it could be connected with some culprit. And, illegal liquor was written on all bottles and cans.

After the bottles, the work of filling up the sacks began. A truckload of sawdust was brought from the saw mill. The sacks were sent by Jeevan, the retailer. Sawdust was weighed and the sacks filled as if they were filling the sacks with cashew and not sawdust! It had to be exactly the same weight. The inscription 'poppy powder' was written on the sacks.

The store was filled with the sacks. There was hardly any empty space left. Now, the munshi must release them. They went on working hard with this thought to give them some solace. When they felt a little tired in the afternoon, the munshi gave them a pinch of opium to eat. They were again working like bulls the rest of the day.

When they went up to the munshi to get permission to go home, he gave a leer, exposing his ugly yellowed teeth, and said:

‘Why? Are you going to lord it at home? Eat drink and be merry!’

It was true, that they were no longer being troubled in the thana. Whatever beatings had to be given, they had been given. They were now living in the thana as other staff members. There was no restriction on their going out. They had plenty to eat. They could go into the mess and eat whatever they wanted, no one forbade them.

At night their duty was in the quarters. They served drinks to the thanedar. And, whatever remained they drank themselves.

All this they did not have outside. Even then, they craved for freedom, and were as frustrated as caged birds. They were impatient to get back to their huts.

There was only one job left to do for the munshi. They were to prepare opium overnight and, then, fill it in boxes. Tomorrow the munshi will hand over charge. They should work hard and may go home in the morning.

When he saw signs of fatigue and disappointment on their faces, the munshi again showed some sympathy. He gave them two packets of opium. They could make strong tea and drink it to refresh themselves. They would no longer feel tired, and also not think about their homes.

Once the opium job was over, then a heap of knives and pistols was put before them. Put stickers on each one of them. Clean them and put them away in the pigeon holes...

When munshi let them go, then the thanedars called them. Their boots are to be polished, and their clothes have to be washed.

When they saw Pala and Meeta washing clothes, the constables also handed their own dirty vests and underwears for washing.

They had given up all hope of escaping from this trap, when the government advocate Gurmit arrived at the thana. They had not even broached the subject of going home since morning. They had felt that the police are taking an undue advantage of them. Whenever they asked to go home, some or the other work was put before them. They finished the work as quickly as they could. But when one assignment was done, another job was ready for them. No one was willing to lose servants who did not cost them anything.

Gurmit recognized Meeta as he was picking up the empty tea glasses.

‘How is he here?’ He had got Meeta out of his entanglement long back.

The munshi had no answer to the question why Meeta had been brought to the thana and detained there.

Before leaving, Gurmit ordered the munshi to let both of them go home by the evening, in all circumstances.

By the evening, the police got involved in the arrest of Baba.

With Baba’s arrest, the thana was again bustling with people.

Baba was questioned a great deal, but he did not reveal anything. It was dangerous to keep him in the thana, therefore, he was sent to the jail at night.

The police was running short of time. They wanted to arrest suspicious people as quickly as possible.

Plans were drawn up and people arrested, right through the night.

It was Lal Singh's view that two types of persons were involved in terrorism. A great majority was that of professional criminals. They had joined the extremist groups after giving up their criminal activities. Money was earned easily, and they also had political protection and sympathy from the people. The area of brotherhood had become vast. Weapons were also easily available. The police was frightened to catch them. People were terrorized; though they knew many things, they were not willing to give information. It was this type of terrorists that the police had caught hold of and beaten up in the first phase.

Second type of terrorists consisted of those who were looking for importance rather than for money. Sons of the zamindars and sardars came in this group.

Nothing had been achieved from the first group. This time, the police had its eye on the second category.

The morale of the police had soared with the arrest of Baba, and those opposing it were now confused. The biggest proof of this was the principal of the college. The police suspected that the college was a base for the extremists. The possibility of terrorists hiding in the hostels of the college could not be dismissed. The principal, however, was a hard nut to crack. He prided himself on being a class fellow of the Chief Minister. He would not let the police enter the college. It was to deflate men like him that the police had given wide publicity to that order of the Chief Minister, wherein, he had said that the interference of even his closest supporter should not be tolerated in this serious matter. They had already taught Baba a lesson. Now, it was the principal's turn.

The police had no solid report about the activities of the college students. They only knew that there were many unions in the college. Unions of different political hues, Congress, and Bhartiya Janta Party and Akali also, but they came into prominence only on specific occasions. They would fall silent after getting prominent space in the newspapers or after pleasing some leaders of their particular parties.

There were only two important groups. One was the terrorist group. They supported those who were fighting for the freedom of the Khalsa nation. This group followed all the instructions issued by the terrorists, and all their programs.

The second was the Punjab Students' Union. They believed in Marxist ideology. They labeled the terrorists communal, and tried to torpedo all their plans and programs. They worked under Baba's guidance.

These groups had clashed many times. Once, even firing had taken place. Many cases had been filed with the police. Both the groups were bitter opponents.

The police had a list of boys, whom it needed in connection with these cases. The principal was not willing to give any further information.

Which boy was in which group; how dangerous was he; and had taken part in which incidents; the head clerk had a full list of this information.

The police was arresting people on the basis of that list.

The Punjab Student's Union had no connection with an incident like Bunty's murder. Even then, it was essential for the police to arrest them. If they are not arrested, they will start agitating for Baba's release. The police was looking for the leaders of the rationalists, the workers of Krantikari front, and Naujawan Sabha leaders. The police wanted to root out the existence of the sangharsh samiti.

The arrest of the terrorists was more important than all this. It was necessary that the murderers should be arrested within the short time of two days. The Chief Minister was impatient for the arrests.

The leaders of both groups were already absconding.

The police had to make do with the second grade workers.

The situation was the same as it had been earlier. The police force was small, and men to be tackled more in number.

Under these circumstances, there was no question of releasing Pala and Meeta. They were doing the work of constables.

Lal Singh had stopped their release at the recommendation of Naazar. It was a matter of a couple of days. After the killers are arrested, why would the police need them?

As it is, Pala and Meeta were now happy with the crowded thana. They were not as idle as they had been earlier.

XXX

The S.H.O. acknowledged the wisdom of old Balwant, the constable. Actually, there was no other constable as capable as him in the whole district. No one could gather as much information as him, and also, bring in as much as him.

If Lal Singh has to catch the killers before the bhog, then, he would have to seek Balwant's help. He had, for this purpose, pampered Balwant, and had bestowed on him the title of one closest to him.

A group of ten-fifteen young men, with no political affiliations with any group, and from the families of sardars and seths, had been given to Balwant for interrogation, at first. This was at Balwant's own request. They had one and only one work, and that was, to sit in the canteen, drink coffee and tease girls.

These boys had been arrested mainly for two reasons: first, to collect money from their parents; and second, to show that the police was impartial. In a few hours, they would be released. That also, in presence of the press.

Keeping in mind, the delicate physique of the young men and the status of their parents, Balwant started with softer methods of interrogation.

Demonstrating that he was a gentleman, Balwant made them sit in a row, and gave them a chance to speak the truth. If they came out with the real facts, then Balwant would not say anything. The government's award for information would also be given to them, and they would also be given all the credit.

When all of them shook their heads, Balwant was greatly annoyed.

'If you do not know, it doesn't matter. Let me see how fast you bastards would start recollecting your fathers' names! My name is not Balwant, if I don't make a train out of you!'

With this, he first pulled out Yash of the banias, by his hair.

'They stayed in your factory for two days; you took food for them; now you say you do not know anything... tell where have you taken your fathers..?' And without waiting for an answer Balwant, slapped him hard on his face some eight-ten times.

Yash was trembling. Screaming, he would bend towards Balwant to touch his feet, and would be pulled back by Balwant, again, by his hair. And every time he did this, he repeated his questions.

'I swear by the Devi, I don't know anything...'. He screamed and tried to explain again and again. He was hoarse, his cheeks were red, and his ears were swollen. He had wet his pants.

Another two slaps and he was reeking. He was tottering on his feet.

Yash was asked to take off his pants, and they were handed over to Meeta. He was told to tie it up the two legs and then fill it with sand. Then, the sand filled necklace of the trousers was to be put around Yash's neck. And Yash would be told to do some sit ups with that round his neck. Till the necklace is ready, Pala should take him to the toilet.

Balwant now turned to Jeeti and Ninu.

They had already turned ashen. As Balwant drew close they were sweating heavily.

They were told to take off their trousers and were given loose pajamas to wear. Mice were let off in the pajamas. In no time, they were in a bad shape. They had tried to catch the mice a couple of times, but Balwant had hit them hard on their fingers, which were now swollen.

They were also screaming like Yash.

Looking at the humiliations suffered by the sons of the seths, Pala and Meeta were smiling to themselves. Now, these spoilt brats would know what it is to always abuse the servants; and kick them without any fault; how deep those kicks hurt you? They watched the suffering of these young men with great satisfaction.

Giving Jeeti and Ninu time to recover, Balwant now turned to the trembling group.

The youngsters were told to lie on the ground, face downwards. First, they were beaten with shoes on their buttocks. Then, they were told to roll on the ground. They were told to roll from one corner of the courtyard to another. And, then they were to roll back again.

Their expensive clothes and well coiffured hair were dirtied and muddied in moments. Their knees and elbows were bloodied. Their mouths were filled with dust.

Those who slowed down had to suffer the strokes of Balwant's baton. As soon as it crashed on their ankles, they moved faster.

Some of them also fainted.

Balwant's plan had been fulfilled by humiliating and disfiguring them. Even then, he told them to dust their clothes, and be ready for the next round, to keep them under greater mental stress.

Balwant's next assignment was to meet those who had brought recommendations for these boys. The sentry was saying that all the shops, from Pahalwan's dhaba to Pande, the application-writer's, were full of those who had come to plead their cases. He should contact them now.

Before leaving the thana, Balwant again warned the boys.

'You breathe easy now. Think about the killers. If you want to tell me something, do tell. Else wait for the next stage of the interrogation.'

What would the next stage be like, this they could get from Naazar, who was at that time dealing with the terrorists.

Naazar had been given only those terrorists, who were either the leaders of their own groups or were justifying the various acts committed by their groups.

All those boys who had lost their balance at the first beating by the police, and had confessed that they had wanted to join the extremists groups, had already been segregated.

One of these boys had said that he was friendly with the daughter of Bhapa, the cloth seller. Balbiro, the girl was as beautiful as a fairy. She liked boys who were 'hero' types. The boy could do nothing else therefore he had joined one of the 'jathebendis'. And, to show off before Balbiro, he would participate in all such activities of the group where Balbiro would be present. He has never taken part in any secret activity of the group. Ever since Balbiro had joined the university after her graduation, he also had given up the jathebandi.

Another was short of attendance in mathematics. The professor was not willing to condone his shortage under any condition whatsoever. He had joined the jathebanti because he was afraid he may not be permitted to sit in the exam. The professor had then condoned his attendance, out of fright. Now, the boy had given up the jathebanti, was studying hard for his exam. He was a science student, and as it is, he had already missed a lot.

The boys with Naazar were not willing to reveal anything. They stood, motionless and serene.

Naazar wanted to make them talk.

‘I want that you should tell us everything, without getting a taste of my hand. I am not a professor of mathematics that I would be frightened of you. I would rest only after frightening the devils inside you.’

Giving them some time to think over his proposal, Naazar went home. One needed courage to question the workers of dangerous groups. Whiskey was one such thing which could generate that courage. He downed two large pegs and ate some spicy kachoris, and then came back to the police station.

‘Look here, Pradhan, then, you be ready to be the first.’ With the flourish of his rod he indicated a handsome, tall young man.

The young man advanced towards Naazar without any hesitation.

‘Take off your clothes and go to the blanket...’

‘You, Meeta, fetch that kilometer...’ Naazar ordered both of them, one by one.

The youngster was not willing to take off his clothes. Meeta had brought a wooden plank called kilometer. Pala had spread the blanket on the ground. Two or three constables came up to stand around the blanket.

‘Take off your underwear and vest also...’ the Pradhan did not pay any heed to this order of the Naazar.

Pradhan’s shy nature was well known in the whole college. He was the only brother of five sisters, and many of his habits were effeminate. He would be upset if even a calf or a leg was exposed. Death would be preferable to strip before his classmates.

‘We will then take off other things also...’ Naazar put the rod in his hand in the upper end of Pradhan’s underwear. The whiskey had started showing its strength. His enthusiasm was high.

‘I have told you about all the activity undertaken by our group. We have no connection with Bunty’s murder. No true Sikh can murder an innocent child... This is the deed of some criminal...’ Pradhan repeated his first statement.

He had already told them that his group was mainly involved with getting cigarette shops closed, and they had also threatened the contractors of country liquor to stop selling liquor, and the meat sellers to change their profession. They also did not want the wedding parties to exceed ten persons.

Shopkeepers, who had disregarded their threats, had been harassed; their vends were looted, cartons burnt and the cigarette sellers were hunted out of town. A couple of ‘baraats’ had been returned without the wedding taking place.

They had not been involved in any other activity of the terrorists. They had neither asked for ransom from any one, nor had they troubled anyone because he belonged to a certain community.

That was why there was peace in the town.

Neither the S.H.O. was satisfied with this statement, nor Naazar. They had one satisfaction that the boys were now accepting their guilt. With a little more of strictness, the secret of Bunty's murder would also come into the open.

All preparations for the use of 'kilometer' had now been made. Naazar now ordered Pala to take off Pradhan's underwear.

As Pala came forward to put his hand on Pradhan's underwear, a hard slap was administered on his right cheek.

Pala staggered back with his ears ringing with the slap.

It seemed to Naazar that this slap had not hit Pala's cheek, but his own. Had it been an ordinary criminal, by now he would have been groveling on the ground. As he was dealing with the leader of terrorist outfit, he had to swallow his anger.

'If he doesn't want to strip, doesn't matter.' Naazar consoled himself, and ordered the youngster to sit on the blanket and stretch out his legs straight before him.

Ordinarily, they are told to open their hair when the kilometer is being administered. One constable opens the top knot and holds the hair in his hand, so that the man writhing in pain could be controlled. But, with the experience of the underwear fresh in their mind, Naazar did not have the courage to put his hand to Pradhan's hair. He hesitated in asking him to take off his turban.

Pradhan's hands were taken behind and tied. His ankles were also tied and a constable held the rope tightly in his hands.

Two fat constables were to climb on to the plank at both ends. Each one of them weighed about a quintal. It seemed as if they had been recruited only for this purpose.

The constables, standing on Pradhan's right and left, put one foot each on the plank. They jumped a couple of times, and then climbed on to the plank.

The pain was intolerable, and all Pradhan's muscles tautened with full intensity. His whole body turned red. Tears came into his eyes. The palpitations of his heart could be clearly heard.

Pradhan was trying his best not to let even a scream escape his mouth. He went on reciting his prayers with his tongue under his teeth. He was fairly successful. Yet, groans did escape him now and then.

'Will you tell something... or you want some more...?' Naazar repeated his question catching Pradhan by his neck rather than hair.

'What I knew, I have told you... I don't know anything more...'

'Come on you two, also....' Catching Pala and Meeta by arms, Naazar pushed them also on to the plank.

The plank creaked under the weight. It seemed to Meeta that Pradhan's bones were breaking. Scared, he stepped down. The constables also got down. Pradhan was near collapse.

The same thing was repeated. Oil massage on his thighs, a glass of milk and walk around the thana supported by the constables.

All the beating given to other workers' was also in vain. Drained with fatigue, Naazar sat down. His blood pressure seemed to have shot up. Things could no longer move any further. He wanted to rest for some time, and therefore, went home.

Lal Singh himself was dealing with the progressives.

He wanted to teach them such a lesson that not only these youngsters, but even their future progeny, should never dare to confront the police.

Eight young men of this group had been picked up by the police. After enquiries, it was found that if one was from the Sansis; another was of the masons; if one was a Pandit, then the other was a Sikh. Lal Singh could not believe this. They all looked the same. Their hair was shorn, and all had a light growth of beard. Their facial appearance and hairstyle was very similar to those boys who stood around Baba with guns, that day. The only difference was that of age. These boys were young, but those were grown up men.

Lal Singh was very angry with those who had fired, but he had not discovered who they were. Neither had Baba opened his mouth, nor had these boys given any clue. If he were to catch them, wouldn't he beat them and throw them into the canal? They had completely upset the police plan! Baba was again becoming a hero.

Lal Singh had no need to ask them about Bunty's killers. He wanted to give them a taste of the power of the police because they had dared to oppose it, and to learn from them the names and whereabouts of Baba's supporters.

No one was volunteering any information. Whomsoever Lal Singh asked, he began by reciting the constitution of his party.

Their group is not based on caste, but on the thesis that society is divided into two classes. It opposes the exploitation of the lower class, by the upper class. They are striving to secure for the working people their rights. They preach democratic ideas and distribute literature propagating the people's rights. There is a small library in their party office. Books of great writers such as Chekhov, are stocked beside the Balraj Sahni Memorial publications.

They had also set up a Rationalist society. They wanted to educate people against superstition and exorcism and warn them against false sadhus. They had helped many on the right path. Two months ago they had uprooted the trees which, it was widely believed were the dwelling place of the five pirs. It was believed that who so ever would uproot the trees, would die.

They are not religious preachers like the terrorist groups. They put up plays by Gursharan Bhai and show the path of liberation to the people.

Lal Singh was tired of these speeches of theirs. He wanted to be told about Bunty's killers, or else, about the men who had fired on the police and the procession, to scatter it.

Megh Raj, the leader of the Rationalists, was answering his question in the same language. They should study the C.I.D. reports. All their groups have been opposing murder. The Punjab Student's Union has opposed every communal demand made by the fundamentalists. They have helped in holding classes under the rain of sticks and strikes organized by the terrorists.

On what ground is the police saying that they are connected with Bunty's killing?

They are not going to reveal anything merely by asking. Lal Singh had never believed in the idea that criminals can be made to own up to their crimes without the use of force. 'Danda' parade is necessary to make them open their mouths.

At this point, this was not important whether they are speaking the truth, or, are lying. At this time, only one thing was important. That was to quench the thirst for revenge which was tearing Lal Singh apart, for the humiliation and insult heaped on him by Baba. This was only possible when Baba's bones were broken.

Lal Singh now enumerated the charges against the members of the groups.

The saws that the killers had used to cut the bars of the windows of the hospital were from Ajit Singh's workshop. The police had found them in the fields near the hospital. Ajit's father had identified them as belonging to him. The old man is himself a pious man, God fearing. His father says that his son doesn't believe in God. He is not in his control. Has Ajit Singh used these tools or has he given them to someone else to use? Ajit Singh must tell how did these tools reach there?

Whatever Ajit Singh had to say, he had said.

Lal Singh also had no other option. To find out the truth about the tools, he had to make Ajit Singh suffer the atrocity of chair.

Ajit Singh was made to sit on an armless chair. His arms were pulled back and tied at the back. The constable's hands shook as he tied Ajit's wrists behind the backrest of the chair. The cloth slipped from his hands and the knots loosened.

He was taken off and another constable told to do the work. The new man tightened the knots, and then inserted a rod between in the cloth between the two wrists, and twisted slowly. As the rod twisted, the cloth shrunk and the wrists dragged closer.

'I say it again. We are in no way connected with Bunty's killers. We are against this whole agitation.'

But Ajit Singh's logic had no impact on any one. He had to undergo the torture.

The constable went on twisting the rod. Ajit Singh's shoulder blades seemed to stick to the chair. His body was being stretched beyond tolerance, and his bones cracked. It seemed as if the skin would break and his bones exposed.

Ajit Singh closed his eyes. He disregarded the sweat rolling down his face.

When Ajit Singh did not say anything, his arms were loosened. He was given some relief, and, again the same process was repeated by tying up his ankles, so as to torture his lower body.

Ajit was Ajit. He did lose his consciousness, but he had not apologized to Lal Singh, even when he was asked to do so a great many times.

The charge against the leader of the Rationalists Megh Raj was that some time back he had put up posters against an astrologer staying at Geeta Bhawan. He had challenged the astrologer's claim of changing the stars to help his clients. Along with the astrologer, the management of Geeta Bhawan was also threatened, that they should not allow such frauds to stay here. Geeta Bhawan's management was directly under Lalaji. The police was convinced that this was the doing of the Rationalists.

Megh Raj offered no argument. They were being punished for being members of the Lok Sangharsh Samiti, and would be punished. Therefore, he was ready for his trial by fire, and kept quiet.

Megh Raj was given the 'jharalu' treatment. A stick on which chilli paste had been liberally applied was pushed into him. The pain of the flesh being torn and the burning of the flesh were excruciating.

The charge against Shamu the Sansi, was that Bunty was murdered by a group of Sansis, who had been instigated by him. Only Shamu could give their names and whereabouts. And, he should also help in recovering those spindles and hoes that they had held in their hands when they had taken out their procession in favour of Baba.

Shamu was given the 'rope' treatment, so that he could be taught a lesson.

Lal Singh enjoyed his meal that day when he had beaten all the progressive half dead.

XXXI

When the warrant officer arrived at the thana, only Lal Singh was present there.

The evening had fallen. Beatings had been going on the whole day through. The process was to start again at night. All hawaldars and constables had gone home for some rest, to have their meals, and to down their drinks.

The Rationalists and members of the Krantikari Front had been arrested after midnight. The hostel had been raided in the morning.

Lal Singh could not even imagine that the Samiti would act so fast. It was no easy task to prepare a list of all those who had been arrested, to reach Chandigarh, and file a writ and get a warrant officer appointed, and to get him to reach here. It was also not a task for a couple of men. It seemed that Samiti had its contacts in Chandigarh also. All this must have been done through the phone.

Raids by the High Court were not new for Lal Singh. He had faced twenty such raids earlier, but this was different and unique in itself. Earlier raids were either by the bureau, or by some notorious smuggler. Such raids were for one main purpose, to get their man out of detention. Once the man is free, they were out and gone. They would not even remember that the warrant officer has to be put on the bus to Chandigarh.

Once, he has handed over the freed man to his family, the warrant officer would stay back at the thana itself. Then, he would, after the exchange of some money, write whatever the thanedar wanted, in his report. By writing that the man was not in the thana would save the thanedar from repeated appearance in the High Court. The warrant officer would be happy, for he has taken money from both the parties, and so are the two parties involved.

If a party was too obstinate, even then the officer would give enough time to prepare the daily-diary register. The police would show the arrest of the person on a trivial charge, and thus save its skin. The roznamcha would be enough for that.

The warrant officer would give the thanedar the time to prepare for his own defense, and would also hand over his card when leaving. This would save him from appearance before the High court by filing a report to that effect.

In all these years of service only one officer had proved adamant. He insisted that he would see that Lal Singh is punished. Lal Singh would be punished when he would get punished. First, Lal Singh had made him grovel.

Lal Singh took his identity card and the warrant and put them in the drawer. Now what proof did the warrant officer have that he was a real warrant officer? These days, terrorists play such games every day. It may be a new trick to take away a culprit!

By the time the warrant officer had assured Lal Singh about his identity, Lal Singh's smart constables had sneaked the detainees out, put them in a car and taken them away from the thana.

But Lal Singh couldn't make any headway with this warrant officer.

He had tried to take this officer aside and talk to him in confidence. But those who had come with him wouldn't allow this. The journalist with them was very alert. He would immediately pull the officer down to to his seat.

Helpless, Lal Singh was getting annoyed with the sentry.

Night had fallen. Why should he have admitted these people at this time? There was a government order to keep the doors of the thana locked at this time. The terrorists have many times tricked the police. They create a small diversion, so that the police rush to the spot immediately. And they themselves attack the police on way. Many police officers have lost their lives.

Lal Singh had given the sentry clear instructions, that he should ask the name and address of the person wanting to enter the thana. He should send him only when he is fully satisfied. If he had even the smallest suspicion, he should tell him to come back in the morning.

What can the police do even if it reaches the spot of an incident immediately? It gets the information after everything has happened and done with. If there is a fight, then the culprits have disappeared after having cleaned the weapons. If there is a theft, then the goods have already been sold and money divided. If a murder takes place, then the one murdered has already died. The police have to get only the postmortem done; and if that is done two hours later than earlier, how does it matter? Even, if

anyone is distilling liquor, how does it matter? If you give him two smacks on the head, next morning, he himself sets the liquor before you.

But, the sentry had clean forgotten all instructions, as soon as he got fifty rupees. On the contrary, he escorted them in. He says that they are respectable people. Someone has snatched their scooter. Write their report.

He did not know that they were going to file a report against Lal Singh himself.

Lal Singh had become suspicious the moment he had seen them enter the thana. Many of them seemed familiar. Though, some of them had turbans, but Lal Singh's memory was not yet so weak that he could not recognize them. They were the same men who had been protecting Baba, their guns raised, on the day of the procession.

His guess was not wrong. When, instead of wanting to file a report, the warrant officer showed him his identity card and the warrant, Lal Singh was taken aback. One of them was the reporter of some English newspaper. The others were there to identify the boys who were being illegally detained.

There was no way he could get out of this. The daily-diary register was not being written since the last seven days. The munshi was on furlough since yesterday. Had he been present, perhaps, something could have been managed.

The reporter was impatient. It was very late. He had to send in his own report. If it is delayed any further, then the paper would have been printed. Stale news would not help him in any way.

The warrant officer was looking through the daily register. This made Lal Singh fume at Naazar inwardly, because he had warned him many times, that both the parties involved are dangerous. Their arrests should be shown in some earlier cases. There was no problem about the members of the Samiti. Lal Singh had filed the report against Baba very carefully. There was no other name except Baba's in the report. Only description of appearances had been given. The appearance of each member of the Samiti was similar to the one described in the report. Naazar had been needlessly evading this. He believed that the boys would tell them the names of the bodyguards of Baba. He wanted to enter the names of the real culprits. Now, nothing could be done! They would all back off, and the only one to be caught would be Lal Singh. He was the S.H.O., and also present in the thana at that time.

Had it been some other party, then, Lal Singh would have got the warrant officer to act as a mediator, and come to an agreement. But would these rascals agree to that? They had already been threatening to see Lal Singh behind bars. Many of the youngsters in the lock up had marks of injuries on their bodies. They would examine them, and also present them before the high court. They were not scared of the fees of lawyers like ordinary people, nor of the police.

Lal Singh felt that now there was no escape for him.

This was the third defeat at the hands of Baba that Lal Singh had suffered.

Finally, Lal Singh asked the names of the boys who were needed by the warrant officer.

Listening to the names of eight boys, Lal Singh's anger had reached frenzied heights. This meant that there was someone from within the thana who had been passing out information. There was neither one name less, nor one name more. Some constable must have given a list of the names of boys here, and must also have given other information.

'There is not a single boy out of these here. We had definitely called them, but have let them off long back. Come on; let me show the lock up.'

'We have seen the empty lock up.' The press reporter gave full evidence of his investigative skills.

'Then, that is fine. Any other doubt?' For a few moments Lal Singh's agitation abated.

'Can you open that room?' The press reporter pointed out to the room next to the munshi's office, and which had a board, 'investigation room'.

'No, that is the thanedar's office. He has gone out after locking it up. I cannot open it in his absence,' Lal Singh answered with great politeness.

'This is a lie. Our men are locked up in that room. You can find out by calling out to them.' One of the four, who had been silent so far, now spoke.

'Megh Raj son of Ramji Das, Ajit Singh, son of Natha Singh, Shamu, son of Buaji, Balkaar Singh, son of Diya Singh, please call out if you are here....'

Warrant officer did call out, but there was no force in his voice.

The press reporter was not satisfied. He asked those who had come to identify the detainees, to call out loudly.

'Nachittar, Amarpal, Sukhdev, Kishan... Say where you are?'

The voices of four resounded in the thana.

The warrant officer put his ear to the door to listen. He could hear someone groaning inside.

Now, Lal Singh had to open the door. Those, whose names had been called out by the Samiti members, were all there in that room.

Nachittar told them about the others. They are confined in Lal Singh's quarters.

Freeing all the workers of the Samiti, Lal Singh cursed all of them. It had not even been an hour since they had been locked up in that room. The information had already been leaked.

Lal Singh was deeply disappointed. When your own people are your enemies, then, how can you succeed?

Lal Singh believed that the warrant officer was aware of each big and small thing which had taken place in the thana. There was no sense in hiding anything.

He quietly handed over the boys to their guardians and took the summons from the high court. He would see whatever happens.

XXXII

There was just one day left for the bhog.

More than half of the town had been beaten. Each and every one of the scoundrels in the area had been interrogated more than was necessary. Anyone who was under the slightest of suspicion had been brought in. It appeared as if the killers had descended as aliens, and after having committing the deed, had disappeared into thin air.

Let alone getting any information about the murderers, they had not yet been able to find out from where had the killers come; where had they picked up Bunty from; and where had he been hidden! Who was writing and posting the letters? Where was Bunty kept and where had he been killed?

When they had not been able to find anything in ten days then what magic is going to work in twenty four hours? There was nobody left to interrogate also. No divine intervention was going to take place!

The police Captain was making statement after statement. This morning newspapers had carried the news of police parties having been sent to capture the killers as they had been identified.

It was on the basis of these reports that the Chief Minister was also proudly claiming that the culprits would be caught before the bhog.

But there was no clue about the killers as yet.

The thana was empty. Some of the suspects, the warrant officer had taken away after getting them released, the rest they had let off.

Lal Singh was now frightened of the militant groups. He could manage the High Court cases. But, if a warrant comes from the 'high court' of the militants, then it would be difficult for him to save his life. And, in his enthusiasm he had definitely gone overboard in harshness! They will destroy his whole clan.

He could see only one way to deal with it. This way the enemy would be decimated and he would not have to do anything. The Chief Minister's word would also be honoured, and the police would also win plenty of praise for it.

After having made up his mind and convincing himself, Lal Singh called a meeting of those officers who were close to him. They all immediately agreed with him. This was the only way to save their jobs.

No one would even suspect. Both were old and notorious bad characters.

Happy, Lal Singh now assigned duties to his various colleagues.

The hawaldar was to overnight arrange for milk-white kurtas and pajamas for Pala and Meeta. New gold embroidered jootis must also be got, and black turbans with red fifties, to be worn under the turban, must also be bought.

Balwant took their fingerprints on rods, bottles and containers. Then, very carefully, he buried them. Later on, these things would be recovered in the presence of the public.

Imprints of their hands and feet must also be taken on those articles which had been examined by the experts while inspecting the site.

Sand must be sent for and Pala and Meeta be asked to walk on it. Then, moulds should be prepared, as had been done, earlier.

Naazar was ordered that he should put these in place of things with their fingerprints. If the people at the laboratory make any fuss about it, then they should be made to talk to the Sahib. The Sahib would explain things to them. Sahib had already given his consent to Lal Singh's plan.

Meeta was totally illiterate. Pala could write a little in Punjabi. He was made to write letters similar to the ones sent by Bunty's killers.

The actual letters were taken from the file and burnt, and these letters were put in the file.

Collecting proof from old dates, they prepared for a confrontation.

At four in the morning, whistle-blowing policemen, seated in the jeeps, blowing their horns full blast, were racing through the town.

Those curious were told that an encounter was taking place between the police and the killers near the Sem canal.

Then, came the news that heavy firing was going on. The whole area has been sealed. The traffic on that route had been diverted.

The news that one hawaldar and some constables have been injured followed. No one knew how much ammunition the killers have. It doesn't seem to come to an end.

The siege was strengthened with the arrival of the Deputy on the scene, with his force.

The Deputy also had to fight for an hour and only then could they be overpowered.

It was a good thing that the culprits had been captured alive. Else, there could have been no questioning.

By the time the police came back to the thana, it was afternoon. Two killers were caged in their bullet proof cars like lions.

The B.S.F. was ordered to guard the thana and area, and the roofs surrounding it. The thana may be attacked in an attempt to free them.

No one was allowed to come near the thana. Any unfortunate incident could occur any time.

The press reporters were not willing to leave the area. Many English newspapers had sent their special representatives. The police was not willing to give

any information. It was itself in the dark. The culprits were not willing to reveal their names.

No photographs were being allowed. The faces of the culprits were covered. They were to be presented before the court in the same manner, so they could be identified by witnesses. Law did not permit that their faces should be uncovered before an identification parade. If photographs were to be taken now, then they could be released on the basis of this lapse itself. Yes, if they refuse to be identified by witnesses, then the photographers may click as many times as they want.

Thus, the press would have to wait till the time the culprits are presented in the court.

When would the culprits be presented in the court, no one was willing to say anything about this.

XXXIII

Keeping the Chief Minister's busy schedule in mind, Bunty's bhog ceremony was delayed by an hour.

The Chief Minister was to come in the late afternoon. It was not even confirmed whether he would come or not. His visits to the town were often announced. But, it seldom happened that he himself came. A minister, close to him, or a higher district official represented him on many an occasion. He would explain the Chief Minister's busy schedule, and apologize on his behalf. And, leave after deputizing for the Chief Minister.

From the strict security arrangements being made, it appeared that the Chief Minister would surely come himself.

Patrolling in the town, had been tightened, and made more frequent. In the outer areas of the town, a hawaldar and four constables were put on duty along with the traffic police. No other vehicle, except cycles and scooters, were to be allowed into the town. Numbers of the scooters were being thoroughly searched.

The stretch of two miles between the thana and the court, was carefully monitored. One constable was posted at the turn on this road. He was keeping a strict vigil on the whole area.

The people of the town were agitated. They had never seen so many policemen in the town. The police may have got some information, and may be apprehensive of some unfortunate occurrence. Many of them have stored food-items. Female teachers going outside the town to teach have sent in leave application. If curfew is imposed by the time they return, then what would happen to their children? They have already seen what happens during a curfew.

People could understand the logic behind security arrangements in the town, what they could not understand was why the court had been surrounded by the police! Constables were posted at every step from the gate to the court room, from the cabins

of the advocates, the tables of the application writers, and at every place where four persons could sit together. Informers and men in civilian clothes were standing.

The advocates were whispering amongst themselves. There is definitely some danger; as never before had B.S.F. men even been positioned on the roofs of the courts in this manner. They were standing with their stenguns and light machine guns, poised in such a manner as though a war was about to break out.

The Chief Minister did come to the courts occasionally to meet the advocates. On that occasion some sort of security arrangements were made. But, no such information has been received by the president of the bar association today. Lawyers, who were close to the Chief Minister, were not in the court. They must have gone to the place where the Chief Minister would stay. Or, else they would have been here roaming about like lost cows all over the place.

There could be only one reason behind this tight security here that some dangerous militant would be brought to the courts today. Incidents of attacks on the police to take away the prisoners were common these days. In a crowded place like the court, such an incident could be staged very easily.

The faces of the judges also looked pale. Each one of them felt as if a bomb was to burst in his courtroom. Search of the petitioners coming in, was valid, and to a certain extent, the search of munshis also could be justified, but this time they were not even letting the lawyers get in without being searched. Even the search was not casual. It was very thorough.

The lawyers wanted to go on a strike against the police, but the whole atmosphere had become so mysterious, that no one dare call a meeting of lawyers. They wound up their work, and went back to sit in their cabins.

The judges also withdrew into the retiring room, so as to prepare themselves for any approaching danger. One could attend to the work in the court only when his mind is at peace. When not only the petitioners, the lawyers, but even the judges are scared, then what sort of justice could be done?

Lawyers went into the chambers of government lawyers. Perhaps, they may be having some information; but they also seemed like others, and knew nothing. They only knew that a slender constable had come to stand before their offices.

Gurmit Singh had received a message from the thana that he should not go anywhere. The police is putting up some very dangerous culprits before the court. They want a remand of full fourteen days. He should be prepared.

When they heard this, people were relieved.

Though who these dangerous criminals were, was not yet known. The lawyers again sought the help of government advocates to ask about the identity of these dangerous criminals.

They had no answer to this. The names of the criminals had been kept a secret. Looking at the tight security arrangements, they must be very dangerous. Full information would be available only when the file is brought in.

In the court, the number of Yuva Sangh members was increasing. From this the lawyers has assumed that the criminal must be the dangerous killers of Bunty. They had been caught yet yesterday, but no names had yet been revealed.

Even the press had not been able to get any information. They were tired of interviewing these police officers who had made the arrests, but nothing had come of it.

The whole market was singing the praises of the police. The president of the vyopar mandal had convened a meeting last night itself. The traders were preparing to honour the police, as they had promised earlier. The seths had made announcements.

Singla of the cloth traders had promised uniforms of terrycot, Bhapa promised utensils: one tiffin carrier to each. Babu Ram the general merchant, a briefcase; and Sardar of provision stores, had promised a tin of four kilo of desi ghee to each of policemen.

In the morning, when the news of this honour became public, the list of donors became longer. The thread mill management, the poultry farm people and the shellers, each made an announcement bigger than that of the other.

The Yuva Sangh announced a rally at the Nehru Park for the ceremony. The felicitation would take place in presence of the Chief Minister. They requested all agencies that had announced the awards, to come to the Nehru Park with their awards, in the evening in time.

The Sangh would ask the Chief Minister also to keep his promise, and to give promotions to the policemen. They have really saved the town by capturing the killers on time as promised.

The Yuva Sangh wanted that the faces of the killers should be blackened and they should be paraded in the town.

The inspector did not allow this. Neither from the legal point of view, nor from the point of security, was this possible.

He also did not consent to the second demand of the Sangh. The culprits could not be taken in an open jeep to the court. Their supporters could strike any time. The police could not take any risk.

The Yuva Sangh was now fully under the influence of the police, and it agreed to everything that it said. The police had won over the Sangh totally by arresting the killers.

The enthusiasm of the Sangh workers soared as the police jeeps left the thana with the culprits. They shouted slogans, applauding the police with full strength.

There were such large crowds on the roads that it became difficult for the jeeps to move forward smoothly. People were pushing each other aside to come to the front themselves. They all wanted to have a glimpse of the faces of the killers.

Except for slim and slender bodies, white kurtas and pajamas, black turbans and gold embroidered jootis, nothing else could be seen. Their arms had been

handcuffed behind their backs. Their feet were chained. Their faces were covered with their turbans. Only their dangerous eyes could be seen, which were glaring at people.

It took the police three hours to reach the courts. A very large crowd followed the jeeps.

People were forbidden to enter the court. The crowd had been stopped outside the gate.

This was a good opportunity for the Sangh. Till the time police come back after getting the remand, they could narrate to the people the story of their struggle.

Some enthusiastic young men picked up the wooden seats of the petition-writers, and stacking them on top of one another, succeeded in putting up a high stage. Their leaders got on to the stage, relating their frightening stories.

Inside the court, Gurmit, unaware of all this, was impatiently waiting for the official file. The matter was serious. The press reporters were in the chairs in the court, to file their reports. This was the moment of test of the wisdom of the government advocate.

Dangerous criminals hire lawyers that are expensive and strong. Gurmit is no less. Yet, in order to speak against the criminals, it is essential to read the details of the case. He has to know each and every detail of the investigation. He may also need to consult some book in order to rebut the arguments of the defense.

He has called the thana many times to ask for the file. He gets the same answer every time; it is in the inspector's bag. The inspector is with the culprits. When they came they were directly taken to the court. A useless constable was sent to call Gurmit.

What will he say without knowing any details? Gurmit was annoyed.

'What would I do in the court without any information, play the drum?' Gurmit sent the constable back. If the police needs the government advocate, first tell the inspector to come and explain the whole situation, and also bring the file.

Keeping in mind the slogans being raised outside and the delay being caused; the inspector was compelled to come to his office.

He still did not have the file.

The inspector could not contain his happiness. It was perhaps for the first time, in police history, that the whole town was raising slogans in favour of the police. Else, slogans are raised mostly against the police. In his joy, he had forgotten to bring the file.

'You come in; you would only have to stand there. We have already talked it over with the judge. We shall get the remand. The culprits have not been allowed to get a lawyer. They will also refuse identification. We have explained everything to the culprits. You don't worry.'

'If it is like that, then what do you want me to do? You can present them yourself. You have been doing it earlier. If you want me to come, then you have to get the file.' It was not Gurmit's habit to function like a rubber stamp.

It was a case which would test Gurmit's intelligence and skills. He took even the smallest thing very seriously. It was his good heartedness which had brought him so far. But, the early part of his life had not been very good.

His father had been a patwari, but he could not fleece people. A patwari earns plenty of money by using fraudulent ways in surveying land and maintenance of land records. But his father neither defrauded people of their land, nor extorted money to build bungalows for himself. The sum total of his lifetime earning was a small semi built house; that also in an area which was supposed to be the worst in the town. The cremation grounds were opposite to it and the sweeper's colony, next door. His friends and relatives had advised him against it. If you want to buy land, buy it in some good area. Here, your children will get spoilt because of bad company. His father disregarded all advice. His father wanted to educate his children in town, but he did not have enough money to buy land in a better area.

But, what had been predicted came true. Gurmit got into bad company. No boy of his age went to school. Many of them swept the roads; others went to clean toilets, or helped their mothers in sweeping and cleaning; the rest went about roaming on the roads looking for odd jobs. They were free by afternoon, and then they played on the roads. Gurmit was the only one who had to go to school, carrying a heavy bag, and on his return home, had to contend with a heavy load of studies and homework. His father used to teach him, and that also with great discipline. There was no way of avoiding it.

The free life of his companions attracted Gurmit. First, he started out going with them on holidays. Then, he began bunking school. His friends would be busy in their work, and Gurmit would accompany them. At times, he helped them in their work. His friends also shared what they had earned with him.

Had Gurmit the freedom to do what his friends were doing, he would have kicked his bag away. He was a Jat boy. There was no other option for him except to go to school. He kept on studying.

As soon as the road in front of his house was tarred, the sweeper's colony was demolished. One Vaid of ancient lineage recollected that half of the houses of the sweepers were built on his land. When the land was worthless, he was not bothered. But, as soon as the prices rose, then of course, he had to be concerned about it. Who could trust them? They may claim the land as their own. He got the whole area vacated, by threatening some; by pampering others; and by giving small amounts to some others. He got small plots made along the road, and in no time, a whole new colony came up around that area.

That land became so expensive that even the sweepers' who owned their houses, sold them out of greed, and went to live near the dirt pond, outside the town, beyond the grain market. As it is, they were no longer comfortable in that colony. They were being rejected in their own area.

In that changed atmosphere, even Gurmit changed. His companions changed. His new friends attended school; studied in earnest; played the best of games.

His parents were happy. The boy had improved his ways.

Gurmit had changed, but the companions of his childhood did not forsake him. They were still an important part of his mindset. It was now that he had understood that the life he had thought to be heavenly was actually even worse than hell. Time had clipped the wings of those free birds. Many became victims of disease. Others had been struck down by the machines of the factories. The ones who were yet alive, they were worse off than dead. Some suffered from T.B.; others from asthma, and yet another of epilepsy. Some had lost either an arm or a leg. Some had even lost their vision. They were compelled to take to their traditional work. Hair and beard grey; sunken cheeks; handful of bones. Often, Gurmit had difficulty in recognizing his friends.

Why does this happen, he understood only when he was in college. Those days, the progressive movement was at its height. Young men were full of a new point of view. They were preparing for a violent revolution. Meetings were held in the hostel, and literature was distributed. Gurmit also got involved in it.

He now started reading books that encouraged him to think rationally and scientifically.

The answers to the various questions that bothered Gurmit's mind were in those books. Gurmit now understood why were his childhood companions suffering, and what was the solution to the problems they faced.

The Movement dissipated before Gurmit could come to the point of leaving home. Many of his friends were killed; others were arrested, and imprisoned.

What if the Movement died out? The flame that had been ignited in Gurmit's heart, still burnt bright. He tried to apply his rational approach to all things in life.

He was working, but he did not like it. The police called him anti-police. It is the duty of the government lawyer to bolster the police, and build up its case. But, in many cases, he would go against the police itself.

The judges were also uncomfortable with him. He did not mix with them. He himself doesn't do anything, nor does he let them do anything. Those, whom he wants to help, what can they give to the judges? Those, whom the judges want to help, are not liked by him. He defines law in so many different ways, that they are upset.

His own department was also annoyed with him. Gurmit did what he liked. He did not do anything out of fear. He was friendly with poor people. Wherever he went, he made friends with the downtrodden.

This was exactly what was happening now.

From the attitude of the inspector, Gurmit guessed that he was trying to ignore his very existence.

The inspector had to bow to Gurmit's insistence. The remand could be obtained even without the presence of the government advocate, but he did not want to take any risk. Tomorrow, this small matter may blow up in his face.

Taking the file from him, Gurmit looked for the information report.

'We have yet to write that.'

‘There was no time....’ The inspector was upset at being caught on the wrong foot by Gurmit.

‘What if the judge has to sign the information reports?’ Gurmit’s anger had not abated. He was bent upon humiliating the inspector.

‘I am telling you that I have talked to the judge. No one else would look at the reports. When the culprits do not have a lawyer, who is going to object?’ Gurmit’s fault finding was now irritating the inspector. His tone was now harsh.

After examining the file, Gurmit now examined the remand documents. His hands shook as he read the names of the culprits. The pen slipped from his fingers and fell on the ground.

‘Pal Singh... Meeta Singh... the same pick pocket... thief... who have been bad characters of this thana?’ picking up his pen from the ground. Gurmit questioned the inspector with trepidation, to satisfy himself.

‘Yes sir... yes... these are the same bastards.... Just see how big a crime they have committed... saale...’ the inspector’s voice did not have the earlier enthusiasm. He felt like a thief, who had been caught red-handed.

‘They were at thana for the last ten days... I have seen them myself... I had myself presented one of them.’

‘No, no, you must be mistaken.’ The inspector was flustered by Gurmit’s questions, like a criminal is upset by the interrogation of police. He was now impatient to get Gurmit’s signature on the papers so that he could leave.

‘What was the need for all that farce to capture these poor boys? Where would they have run away? There is no one to rescue them...’ He put his pen back into his pocket without signing the papers. He was now on the verge of losing control over his anger.

‘You please get up now... ask all the questions you want later...’ The irritated inspector got up from the chair, and took the file.

Gurmit’s eyes focused on the inspector’s wrinkled brow. He could see the shadows of many innocent people hanging in the folds of each wrinkle.

A strange scent emanating from the file stung Gurmit’s nostrils. The file stank of putrid flesh, of filth and blood, freshly shed.

Outside, the slogans being raised by the Yuva Sangh, were getting louder. The demand to hand over Bunty’s killers was becoming more vociferous.

The slogans from the crowd seemed to relieve the inspector. He wanted to draw Gurmit’s attention to the crowd’s anger.

Gurmit was not the one to be scared by a crowd of this type.

The past, the present and also the future flashed in Gurmit’s mind. He could very clearly see what would happen later.

Bunty’s murder... the action by the police.... The Chief Minister’s announcement... the misfortune of Pala and Meeta... the two new images of his

former companions...police remand and violence. This was the past of this murder. The present resounded with slogans. The judges were being influenced. News was being published. Praise was being showered on the police for its brave deeds. In future, questions about this incident would be raised in the assembly, and even parliament. Slogans would be raised outside the session court to hang the killers. False witnesses would be presented. Advocates would make impressive speeches. The frightened judge would deliver the judgment of execution. And Gurmit would be one of the characters in all this drama.

No, Gurmit will not betray Pala and Meeta. He was sick of betrayal. He would not sign on any false investigation.

‘I am not going to sign on this false document. Ask some other government lawyer to sign it.’ Gurmit was now feeling as if a burden had been lifted from his heart, after he had given to inspector a flat refusal.

No slogan had been heard from outside for quite some time. It seemed as if the enthusiasm of the crowd had subsided.

Gurmit went up to the window to find the cause for this.

The Sangharsh Samiti had also put up a stage on the left of the Yuva Sangh’s. Though the number of their supporters was still very small, yet, their meaningful speeches had come as a setback for the leaders of the Sangh. The Samiti members had been able to learn the names of the alleged killers of Bunty; and also the fact, that they had been in the thana for the last ten days. Those members of the Samiti who had just been released, were witness to their presence there.

The crowd was now rushing to the Samiti to know the real facts of the case. That was why the slogans being raised in favour of the police had subsided.

The speeches of the workers of the Samiti were balm for the troubled Gurmit. They had also found out that Gurmit had refused to sign the documents. They were praising Gurmit for this boldness, and explaining to the people the reason behind his refusal.

Gurmit’s enthusiasm was strengthened. He was now proud of the decision he had taken. He was not the one to take a wrong decision. He was a law graduate of the best university of the country; the one and only gold medalist among all the government lawyers. Had he not taken up the police appointment, he would have been one of the leading lawyers.

Standing at the window, Gurmit reviewed the ten years’ of his professional career. After all, who was getting the benefit of his intelligence and skills?

Gurmit had thought that by becoming a government lawyer he would be helping men like Pala, and save them. He would see to it that the big smugglers are imprisoned, but nothing of this sort was happening. He could not think of a single case, where he had been able to get his will enforced.

Then, why should he waste his time for a small salary?

The government was upset by his intelligence. His professional acumen was needed by hundreds of innocent men like Pala and Meeta. Gurmit should have been their lawyer.

The number of people surrounding the Samiti was increasing. The Sangh members could no longer be seen. They had packed up and gone.

Full of a new ardour Gurmit picked up a sheet of paper, wrote his resignation, and after posting the letter at the post box outside the Naib court, he went towards the Samiti's meeting.

Finally, Gurmit was happy. He had now started on the road to that struggle which was inevitable if he were to be rid of this rotten system which had enslaved them so far.

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