

Prisoners in a Burned-Out House

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: The Hindi original appears on pages 15–23 of the October 1998 issue of the Delhi literary magazine *Hams*. This translation is copyright ©2009 by Robert A. Hueckstedt.

Being incarcerated in a burned-out house is a strange experience, especially since I know the owner – Meem Naseem.

In 1975, when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared a State of Emergency, he was so humiliated that no one ever saw him again. According to one rumor he committed suicide. Others maintained he had gone on pilgrimage and could still be seen today at any of a number of saints' tombs. Those who said they had seen him at such places described his appearance as much altered. Instead of his well-groomed, glistening black beard was a totally white, unkempt beard and mustache; instead of his English pants, vest, suit coat, and expensive tie was a choga, a knee-length, black woolen cloak. And so on.

But all that is ancient history. Gradually, Meem Naseem became entirely forgotten.

In this very house he had conducted an extensive business in chikan cloth, that fine embroidered muslin famous in this area. His wife and servants carried on the business for a while, but that's all people know now.

Naseem had been my fellow student in university. We studied English and philosophy together, but we were never close.

Now in this burned-out house, I remember him — very quiet. On his face neither a smile nor anger. A very fair face, huge eyes. Without curiosity or detachment. A very soft voice, as if his words enveloped tiny, transparent, glass toys.

None of those memories came in any sort of order. Stress contorted all our faces. One of my arms hung almost completely limp due to its injuries, and two fingers on the other hand, crushed by a shoe, burned so much it was almost impossible to ascertain the condition of anyone else. Before being imprisoned here we had been placed in a dilapidated factory's godown where it was difficult even to breathe. Compared to that, this place was an improvement. I recognized this as Meem Naseem's home. It was somehow comforting that I had been placed in familiar surroundings.

The boundary wall surrounding the house was very high. If there had not been so many of us, then staying there would not have been so difficult. Surrounded by the rooms of the house, there was even a fairly large courtyard, but making use of it was difficult because it was the monsoon season.

Every day after the rain stopped, the high humidity made the sweat pour off our bodies.

Since they had boarded up the burned-out window frames with thick planks and strong nails, an unavoidable stench slowly reigned inside. Fans were on the ceilings, but the fire had been so intense that the fans had melted and their blades

hung limp. The doorway of the stairs leading to the roof had also been boarded up and closed off.

While it was impossible for light to enter these rooms, with the coming of night they became even blacker because of the soot on the walls. It seemed as if vicious vultures were perched above ready to attack any of us they found inattentive.

After being brought here and imprisoned, we rummaged around for a while through the piles of Meem Naseem's incinerated possessions. In a pile of burned up paper, charcoal or cloth we would sometimes find a piece totally untouched by the conflagration. In a black pile of rubbish we even found a book. It was quite burned. In fact, it wasn't a book at all but a manuscript that had been bound. Written in nagari script in red and black ink, it was an astrological text — certainly, all that was left of Meem Naseem's collection.

Though we had not had to march very far, we were all terribly exhausted. Even more so since few, if any, of us had had the opportunity to sit down last night. And food was not provided. Most of us had been taken from our homes in the middle of the night. Since the fire in Meem Naseem's home had blackened everything around us, as soon as twilight fell, it seemed as if night enveloped us very suddenly.

And with that, a terrifying fear also overwhelmed us. They had shoved us all inside and were quickly boarding up the door with thick sheets of plywood when we noticed one of them near the boundary wall overturn a metal canister. Since the smell quickly pervaded the area, we soon knew the liquid was kerosene.

We stared at that canister until we could no longer see it. Even when the door had been completely boarded up, we stood there for a long time, silently.

Without saying a word, everyone of us concluded that after they had blocked off every path of escape, they would sprinkle that kerosene all around and set this building on fire again. Almost everyone standing near the door must have had that idea because in a little while, when the smell of the kerosene intensified, a commotion occurred. Everyone retreated from the doorway.

I wondered what I would do if they set us on fire like that.

I had never seen the inner rooms of Meem Naseem's home. Did it have a secret doorway? Was there any escape from the rooftop?

I thought that if the kerosene did not get inside, then for a little while we would be able to remain alive.

At the first jolt of terror the people retreated, of course, but then they hesitated. First, because they were running out of space and second, because everything that had happened to us so far had to some extent exhausted our fear. After many long minutes of mortal apprehension we learned the situation was not what we had expected. There was no light in the surrounding area, and our guards had brought some kerosene lanterns.

Someone's voice outside: "Abé, what good will eight lanterns do for such a large house?"

A voice farther away: "That's all we got. We need more space, too."

"There's so many of the bastards; they're packed in like pigs."

"If one of the bastards even sticks a leg out, cut it off and throw it to the

vultures.” He said that as if we were his intended audience more so than his colleagues. “By morning something else will be arranged. For now, carry on as planned.”

“Yes, sir,” the first said. “We could do it even without the lanterns. Eyes like a leopard’s. We can see even in the dark.”

A third, even farther away, laughed maliciously and said, “We can even smell out these haramees. Even from a long way off a secular sala smells just like a Muslim.”

Much laughter. Then one of them took it a step further: “And Muslims have smelly beards and these guys don’t have beards at all!”

Much laughter again, as if someone had made a first-class joke.

So much had already happened to us that words had become absolutely incapable of causing us any pain. Furthermore, since we realized they were not going to burn us alive then and there, our taut tension loosened.

How long were they going to keep us in this strange jail?

There was a fair amount of noise while they got the lanterns going, then suddenly it was quiet. As if someone had given an order.

The thump of footsteps could be heard for a while, then in a loud voice someone said, “Remain alert during the watch!”

After that, they began an odd prayer. Who knows how they not only wrote a prayer for a time such as this, but they also remembered its melody. It was an imitation of a film song, with different words.

Shortly thereafter we felt that that prayer was not being sung merely near

Meem Naseem's house, but wherever they happened to be in the city people were repeating this very same prayer. After the prayer they repeated those very same five principles which at one time we had made so much fun of.

That prayer and those principles certainly had an effect on us. Hearing them, the aversion we felt for those people somewhat lessened the shock of our situation, and in that incinerated darkness and confined space we each began searching for our own spots.

Now we realized what a large crowd we were.

Human beings have a peculiar propensity. No matter what situation a man finds himself in, the very first thing he does is search for a place he can call his own, whether his situation affords him any scope to make that claim or not. In ordinary situations people indeed have this experience, but in unusual conditions this behavior is not only stronger it can also take on a cruel sort of violence.

This behavior is very common among people living in urban neighborhoods. They usually cannot stand it if your wife spreads out her towels to dry on their part of the parapet. I've seen this contentiousness even in protest demonstrations.

Once, we were on our way to Bombay. The center's Congress government had raised the wheat import quota a huge amount.

To protest the importing of wheat we were going to set up a dharna at the docks. The train arrived at the Bombay Station around eleven o'clock at night. Our entire group went to a place called Caupati to spend the night.

We were shocked when we saw it. Over the sand for quite a distance tents had been erected. Not enough durris had been put on the sand, so sand covered them.

Those arriving first undid their bedrolls.

Despite being extremely tired from the journey, Anand Mohan Saraugi gathered up his ancient frame and sprang toward the head of a relatively clean durri to claim it as his own. While he carried out that procedure, one of his sandals snagged on the sand and came off. Placing his bedroll and shoulderbag on his selected spot, he went back for his sandal. It was not readily found. Because of the people coming behind him, it had become buried in the sand.

Saraugi found his sandal, wiped it off and returned to his spot only to find that the well-built Caran Gosai had pushed his shoulderbag and bedroll aside and on that very spot was spreading out his own sheet.

Anand Mohan Saraugi was livid with anger. He violently jerked Gosai's sheet off the durri and threw it aside.

Near this disputed spot was another place just as good. In fact, there was no difference between them. Both were full of dust and sand, and both were located next to the pathway so in both one was sure to get hit by the feet of passersby. Having attached some imaginary quality to the first, however, neither was willing to withdraw his claim. On our way back after the dharna, when we made fun of this "folly of possession," Saraugi sheepishly confessed that in order to maintain his claim to that spot, all night long he withheld the urge to get up and urinate, fearing that as soon as he left, Gosai would come back and re-establish his claim.

Since the darkness was so thick in Meem Naseem's house I could not say who had the better spot for sleeping. From outside we started hearing "Stay alert!" "Stay alert!" They were probably making their security rounds.

Since my right elbow hurt so much, I slept on my left side. When I rolled onto my back, my feet struck someone else. With my temple resting on the floor the smell of the things that had been burned was quite strong.

After a fire has been extinguished a strange smell remains on the things that have been burned. For a long time it continues to make its complaint. I could not identify what had burned and fallen on the ground and was now fast against my temple. If it weren't for my right elbow and the fingers of my left hand hurting so much, I would have probably tried to push the rubbish away from my face.

It was odd how absolutely quiet all of us were. The only sounds were coughing and bodies trying to get comfortable.

Despite being in a huge crowd, in thick darkness a man becomes quite alone, especially in silence. In that loneliness my very first thought was of my wife.

When they were slapping me around and dragging me out of the house, she screamed something or other at them. I was unable to look back.

They had come in a large group. In the darkness of night, and during such a swift attack, it was impossible to count them.

Though for some time we had been expecting such an attack, we were not prepared for how swiftly and thoroughly it occurred. Every day for a few days people on two or three motorcycles had come through as if they were doing a reconnaissance of my house. One of them, strong and healthy, wore the yellow robes of a sadhu.

A day after that, when I went out to take one of our dogs for a walk, I noticed a red ocher handprint on each pillar of our outer gate.

The very next morning our house was stoned, seriously injuring my wife. The blood that dripped from her head stained the floor inside the outer walls for quite a while, and every time our dogs went out they would sniff that first. Much of the blame for getting injured lay, in fact, with my wife. I was sleeping then in the back-most room. Even through my sleep I heard her say, “Get up now! My head’s broken!”

For a short while even after waking up I was unable to understand anything. Her salvar-kameez was drenched in blood, and she was holding her blood-soaked dupatta against her head.

The stoning had begun very early in the morning. The dogs started barking loudly. My wife began to open the door to see what was going on. With the door open just a crack our smallest dog, her most loved one, slipped through. She never let that dog out because, for one reason, he was somewhat on the dumb side, and two, he had so much hair in front of his eyes he couldn’t see where he was going. He had escaped out into the street once and getting him back had been touch and go.

As soon as she went out the door to grab him, a piece of brick hit her in the head. All the same, she was still able to grab her little dog and bring him back in. That was when her blood splattered all over the floor.

Lying down on burned rubbish, I reflected on the peculiar kind of courage she had. The stone throwers certainly would have grabbed her, too. And most likely she would have put up a fight. She would fight for anything worthwhile. Having seen the incivility with which those people behaved toward women, she could

not have been held back, even against that violent crowd — this I knew well. It's also true, however, that her irrepressibility would further inflame a crowd that was already tending toward violence.

About a year had passed since the stone-throwing incident. Maybe a little more. Those days the Rashtriya Svayam Sevak Sangh and its associated parties were engaged in a strange movement they called "The Challenge." They would go out in a group. Some of them held little yellow flags, but the rest carried clubs or hockey sticks. They would go into any neighborhood and make an infernal racket. If they saw a Muslim's house, they would bang their sticks against its front door, spreading terror all around.

Although Muslims were their target, they similarly terrorized Hindus, too, whom they had heard were not in agreement with "The Challengers." Often, to express their contempt, they would spit on such people's doors or urinate on them.

Once, seeing some boys ready to do something like that, my wife roundly scolded them. She even angrily threatened to let our largest dog loose against them.

They shamelessly mocked her and moved on, shouting slogans all the way.

One evening after my wife had suffered her head injury, I happened to open the door only to see five tall young men right there. They were probably just about to ring the bell. As soon as the door opened one of them said, in a rancorous manner, "I need to speak with you."

I told them I was just on my way out. They should come back another time.

Coming forward slightly they said, “We must speak with you now.”

“About what?”

One of them who stood a little behind came forward and said, “Your column in yesterday’s paper – we have to talk about that.”

They entered the room, and two of them sat down. The others stood nearby, collectively showing their anger. They were quite aroused and not at all ready to listen to reason.

“What’s going on here? Do you know who you’re talking to?” My wife suddenly stood at the inner doorway. “Is this any way to hold a conversation? Is this how you speak to very important people? People a million times more consequential than you touch his feet.”

Sometimes, when my wife would get upset with someone and say something like that about how important I am, I myself would get embarrassed. This time, though, it was amazing how she took the sharpness right out of the tongues of those angry young men.

Even the ones who had sat down stood up. On their way out, they made a threat, but not clearly. They were clear, however, that if I did not agree with them, they would use a bomb to convince me.

Their threat had no effect on me, but I was disturbed by the fact that they were not prepared to listen to any reason at all. They were not uneducated, but nowadays one often meets people who act like marionettes in fairy tales. They reject any logical argument out of hand. And to any question they have one and only one response: “You people are anti-Hindu!”

It was very interesting to observe how my wife was able to prevail over those young men simply because of their own lack of sophistication.

By evening the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya had been totally destroyed. Indian media were then broadcasting a cricket match being played in some other country. We learned about the destruction of the mosque from the BBC. Others must have received that news from the same source.

On a building not far from our house someone had attached a large placard naming it Satsang Bhavan and had begun a program of religious teachings. Every morning and evening they cranked up a loudspeaker as loud as it would go and sang kirtans in a most off-key voice, or very enthusiastically but with terrible pronunciation they would recite religious texts.

At the fall of the Babri Masjid the singing stopped and they all came out into the street celebrating and chanting slogans until late.

Meanwhile, phone calls came one after another. Some callers tried to engage in long conversations. I simply became more confused and felt even a sort of despair. Then I heard my wife speaking in a loud voice to someone outside.

In light of recent events my apprehensions took over. I cut off a caller and rushed outside.

Two boys with little yellow flags had climbed up on our outer wall. Another stood down in the street. I immediately understood. They were trying to attach their flag to the brass rod on the corner which held a light bulb.

My wife kept yelling at them, “Get down from there! Come on! Get off! Who gave you permission to climb up there? This is how burglaries happen. You lot

must have been the ones who cut off a bunch of bananas from our tree and ran off with them. You could run off with any number of things sitting around in this house. Our hammer, for instance. Just where did that walk off to, I'd like to know!"

Not even I could have devised such a wonderful trap for those boys whose enthusiasm was based on blind faith.

Stunned, the boys on the wall mumbled something. The one on the street told him to get down.

All three of them turned around a number of times as they went off, stared at us and mumbled something.

My wife had used an amazing weapon — thievery — and that, too, of a bunch of bananas and a plain old hammer. Perhaps they were left speechless because the charge of burglary was of such a degrading nature. If she had charged them with proper robbery, then they might have had an answer.

Despite the tension I smiled and said, "Yar, the burglary of that plain old hammer!"

"You don't know. They are thieves. And what's more, when we don't have that hammer when we need it, it causes a huge problem." And she went back inside. Only because our old hammer had gone missing was the victory flag not allowed to flutter on our house.

This time, though, the situation was different. These attackers could not be defended against by a charge of banana and hammer theft nor by a proclamation of my great importance.

I tried to imagine how far she might go if she were angry enough. Could she physically attack someone with something? But with what? There was hardly anything in our bedroom that could be used to cause injury. The only things we had that could be called weapons were our kitchen utensils.

Many years ago in memory of my father I gathered up some of the things he had used. In terms of weaponry they were clearly from the Middle Ages — for example, two lances, a rusty dagger, something similar to a cutlass, and a pair of tabla. Once, I took the tabla to have heads put on and then forgot all about them. Nothing else was even useful as decoration, so they lay rusting wherever they happened to be pushed out of the way, and after every housecleaning one or the other of them would go missing, to the point where we did not even have anything like a fighting stick anymore. Even the lances, which had long ago been carefully wrapped and stored, were nowhere to be found.

Even if we did have weapons, it is difficult to imagine our being able to use them. While I did gain some knowledge of and ability with weapons from my father, I could not muster the enthusiasm he had for using them. He knew how to use all kinds of weapons, from the tigerclaw of Shivaji to the scythe of the smartly dressed master of Lucknow. For a while when I was little he taught the use of weapons to the neighborhood boys. He gave them a complete, step-by-step training, putting them through their paces while shouting out 1-2-3-4. For a while, I, too, learned how to use the knife, the spear and stick, and the sword, but then I gave it up because he wanted me to read more so that I could go to the university and become a lawyer or judge.

It was startling how similar those days were to now. What's more, if my father were alive today, he would not be using a hockey stick, he'd be taking his tigerclaw around to the homes of Muslims and people like us to terrorize them.

After Father's weapons had become lost we often worried about what we would do if a thief did break in.

Once, after a burglary in the neighborhood we decided we had to do something to protect ourselves. One evening I came up with a marvelous plan. All around the veranda three feet above the floor I installed copper wiring. Before going to bed I would electrify those wires. The idea was that if the thief came in he would come in contact with the wire and die.

That system lasted all of two nights. Then I took it down because I was so afraid I would bump into it myself in the morning before remembering to take the electricity out of it.

For a long time I lay there in Meem Naseem's home and wondered what my wife must have done when they came.

This time they were not the kind who would slink away shame-faced when accused of stealing bananas and a hammer.

The image I got of the Hindu chauvinists while they made their rounds of the riot-torn areas of the country after the destruction of the Babri Masjid on December 6 was terrifying. In one place they systematically tore every stitch of clothing off some women and ran them through the streets while beating them, all the while calmly videotaping the entire incident.

It must have started raining outside. To get some fresh air some of the men

incarcerated in the house had lain out on the veranda. Now, they pushed and shoved others so that they could get out of the rain.

The rain broke my thoughts. I hoped it would come down even a little stronger so that there would be some relief from the heat. And then I fell asleep. I had the same dream I've had for who knows how many years. For at least two years I've seen it regularly. Sometimes, quite frequently.

It almost always runs its full course, and it's so realistic it remains with me even after I wake up, sometimes for many days.

When the dream ends, it seems as if a very big poisonous snake has come slithering out of my throat. Even after my sleep has been broken, for a long time I have no desire to move.

Just as always, my dream slowly slithered out of my throat, leaving me drained though awake. For a long time, and with eyes wide open, I could feel that snake's skin, its cold fear, and its silent slithering.

The darkness lessened a little, and one of the men outside began reciting a prayer in a very loud voice and in such a melody and rhythm that it sounded like the Muslim call to prayer. That was the first time in my life I had ever heard a Hindu prayer sound like that. When that imitation of the azan was over, last night's prayer was repeated.

By then, sleep had totally left me. Most of the others, though, had already gotten up. A little later the reason became clear. Everyone was concerned about his morning defecation. Throughout that extensive house were seven bathrooms, meaning that only seven people could go at once. It's fortunate that the thought

of everyone of us was diverted by the faces of the others. Since we had all spent the night trying to get comfortable in a pile of black, sooty rubbish, the soot had attached itself to us all quite well. If we hadn't kept moving around, we would have looked like a pile of partially burned pieces of wood. Even in this atmosphere of terror and desperation many of us broke out laughing looking at each other.

From the foyer of that burned-out house, near the front door, a loud voice said, "Hey, you idiots! Recite the prayer correctly! Are you a bunch of illiterate fools who can't even recite a simple prayer!"

Then came a slightly restrained voice: "Please let it go, sir. What is it to us whether they recite the prayer improperly or whatever?"

The first speaker made his voice even louder: "Aré vah! This is something! Who gave these people permission to foul up the prayers? Ignoramuses! Stop this spectacle of sacred recital!"

In a little while, and not due to that man's objection, the prayer recital stopped on its own accord, and someone outside said in a very rustic tone, "Who's the bastard going on and on?"

The one with the restrained voice then said, "Let it go, sir. Please come. This way. Let them do whatever they're doing."

The same rustic voice from outside could be heard again: "Wait a minute, if this doesn't pass muster with that overly critical throat of yours, then just what the . . ."

The one with the restrained voice was probably dragging further inside the

house the gentleman who was criticizing the incorrect prayer recitation. “Come on, come on I tell you. Why waste words on those people. Please . . .”

Some other voices: “Let them be, sir, . . .”

Despite the soot all over us I recognized him who was being brought with some difficulty from the front foyer to the inner veranda. He was Sadanand Shastri, the Director of the city’s Arya Samaj Institute. When he recognized me he was startled and said, “Aré bhai saheb, you too?”

“That’s what I was about to ask you: what are you doing here?”

Shastri ji suddenly laughed and said, “Ah, what a marvel, bhai saheb — here we all are blackfaced with soot, and those wretches who can’t even recite their prayers properly are walking around all clean and shiny!”

A few others laughed a little, but the people who had brought Shastri ji away from the front door became quite serious. Given our present circumstances, they were ready for no lightheartedness at all. Most of the prisoners were concerned with the availability of water and the state of the latrines. They did not want to step outside those necessary concerns. Then the most frightening problem of all arose. The water we had all taken for granted ceased to flow from the taps. The people who had already taken baths realized that their enthusiasm had put everybody else in trouble. Many people were still waiting their turn. Their natural modesty had prevented them from being aggressive enough to claim an earlier time in the latrine, but that modesty was gone as soon as they heard the water was finished. One man stuck his head in a lavatory, immediately withdrew because of the stench and said in a vexed voice, “After all, why would it be so necessary to

take a bath now?”

Those who had already bathed slowly gathered and stood in the open courtyard. A noise arose. Some prisoners voiced their anger. And then a voice arose over the others: “Look, what’s done is done. The question is: if there’s a solution to the water problem, then what is it?”

In a loud voice someone said, “Great. When such intelligent people are here present who, even though they know the circumstances we’re in, still can’t do without the luxury of a bath, then how can there be a solution to the problem?”

The other individual replied, “Why won’t there be a solution? The people who have locked us up in here – don’t they have any responsibility?”

Meanwhile, someone came up with a solution to the problem of defecation, and he was no less delighted than if he had been Archimedes himself. While others tried to figure out what that solution might be, that very excited man started looking for something. In our present situation there was neither the opportunity nor the necessity for anyone to know anyone else’s name, but many people recognized that man. He was the one who had previously collared anyone he could in an effort to explain to them about the horrible atrocity committed against his wife and children. He readily found a garden tool. On two sides of the courtyard, against the high walls, were fairly wide flowerbeds in which some singed plants were still evident. Vines growing on the walls had also been significantly burned. While digging in the bare ground, the man said, “Use this like footrests and then cover it up with soil — job done. There’s a lot of soil. Everyone will have to bear up. If only my wife and children were with me.”

The burgeoning argument over bathing suddenly ended. With keen interest everyone looked at that man. Then someone said, “The footrests and everything are fine, but what about water?”

Again, silence reigned.

Nor was that the full extent of our problems; it was only the beginning, even if only the most mundane one. Many of us used to say that if they ever came into power, the first thing they would do was attack us. We felt that the attacks on our homes were the kinds of things they would continue to do — pushing and shoving, beating, and some insulting and cursing — and then we hoped they would be satisfied with that. Many hoped that not even any of that would happen. People like Shastri ji always said that once they came into power they would become so involved in the regal perquisites of office they would forget all about attacking us.

But perhaps they, in fact, did not need to remember all that. Those who were behind them, who brought them into power, they were the ones who remembered. Those running the government were actually quite innocent of all this. In fact, they had immediately issued a statement saying that all this that was going on was not on their agenda at all. The party, however, said that all this certainly was on their agenda and of the highest importance. Their first initiative was to take over important institutions — the radio, television, universities, academies, and so on. No beating or violence was necessary. Party members merely assumed the highest administrative positions, with much “humility.” We voiced our strong objection to all this, held demonstrations and dharnas, and gave speeches. And

in many newspapers and magazines we published a number of opinion pieces voicing our objection.

And then suddenly there was darkness. Newspapers stopped printing our articles, and in the streets, lanes and neighborhoods a particular kind of commotion arose. A band of boys would roam through any neighborhood they wanted, guffawing loudly. Loudspeakers sprang up at intersections through which bhajans were sung and religious slogans declaimed. No one knew where the voices themselves were coming from. Sometimes the boys would surround a lone, nervous individual, abuse him loudly and then pull down his loongi or pajama. His private parts exposed, the boys would raise a ruckus and run him away. This was a way of trying to evoke a response, and it succeeded. Before the boys surrounded someone again like that, someone lobbed a makeshift hand-grenade at them.

Which played perfectly into their plans. At dusk, for a number of days we observed from our rooftops something like soot spreading up over the darkening sky and then red and yellow lights flashing through the soot. Homes were being burned. Clearly, Naseem saheb's home would have been one of them.

Everyone of us in this prison held out the hope that, even if it be late in the day, arrangements would be made for our drinking water and food, but there was no sign to that effect. Oppressed by the stifling heat and still air, in the late afternoon we saw clouds mass in the sky. Rain perhaps. A good rain would certainly lower the temperature and perhaps we could use it somehow to slake our thirst. But the clouds merely remained as they were, like mold on a piece of food – smooth, poisonous.

Mohan Lal, leader of the University Teachers Union, again repeated his point, “We’re prisoners of war, after all. How can we be treated like this?”

Since morning he had repeated the same thing many times. We all knew that what was happening to us was not right, but what could we do? No one had managed yet to solve that problem.

Dusk began to fall, and the air, suffused with a wet heat that boiled up one’s insides, remained absolutely still. Oppressed by hunger and thirst, we once again sought out our own spots to sit and lie down in, this time carefully avoiding one another. Almost everyone realized we were not really prisoners of war. In the silence a voice arose: “Damn it! It’s a crying shame. We’ve been boarded up in here like sheep. We could have done something, at least made use of our hands and feet a little.”

That was Muneer Singh, the University Vice-Chancellor. But his voice sounded peculiarly hollow. We listened to him without replying. Only Shastri ji turned his face toward the boarded-up front door as if he hoped for a response from that direction. But from outside came no reply. And then I realized that outside, too, silence prevailed. We were not even subjected to their evening prayer. Will we now have to listen to their loud laughter as we did the past few days? From late afternoon the lanes and streets had become silent and then, with the deepening darkness many people passed by, laughing in a particularly loathsome, almost ghoulish manner. For a long time a tense silence seeped slowly through every window and door-frame of every home. On such occasions my wife would purposely stub her toe or put a pot down on the shelf particularly loudly so that I

would not worry about her.

But now, where is she, and how is she? I had already heard many stories about these people's barbarous behavior toward women. Considering the inhumane way they attacked our homes, I could not honestly hope for any humane behavior from them. But what has happened to her? Has she been incarcerated as I have?

Splitting the frightening arrogance of the silence outside, a slogan arose in a man's voice – *Bande mataram!* In response came a number of voices — *Bande mataram!* As part of the campaign against the Babri Masjid this slogan was used far and wide because in *Anandmath*, the book where they learned it, it was used as a call to war against Muslims.

Then the darkness inside Meem Naseem's burned-out home arose like a flock of bats and hung here and there on the shoulders of the swarthy night. For a moment our pulses raced, and outside we heard someone giving orders in a sharp, crackling voice, like the commands given those people for their morning drills. Then we heard the simultaneous crack of many boots and the sound of them marching in unison. In a little bit it was silent again. In that silence we could hear something like a truck coming from far away. Maybe it was coming right here. Near the house it growled a little, and its headlights went off and its engine stopped.

In the darkness inside someone said, "It looks like they're preparing to take us someplace else."

We listened in silence. Then some man ran up to the front doorway through which we had earlier been stuffed in and which was then boarded up with thick

plywood and heavy nails. A heavy iron thing was stuck in and wedged into place, and crowbars were used to pry off the plywood. Then someone shouted, “While the bastards are coming out, don’t let them pull any fast ones — be alert!”

From farther away another voice said, “Take them two-by-two.”

This commotion, too, like wicked laughter crushing the silence that had reigned in the lanes and neighborhoods a few days, sent a jolt of electricity through our nerves. The plywood came off readily, but not all of it. Some of the lower planks, after having been pried off, jammed up against the heavy iron thing and became stuck. The iron thing was a strong, latticed wall the police used to block off streets. From farther back someone shouted, “Come out one at a time. Two . . .”

Inside, we all became quiet and stood up. A slight breeze came in through the hole in the doorway. Outside were a number of people with torches. The truck was not visible. It must have been parked someplace nearby.

“I said — come out one at a time!”

After a slight hesitation Shastri ji said loudly, “But why?”

“Because we are setting you free.”

We were all skeptical.

“Then why do we have to come out like this?” Said Professor Munee Singh to us. Those outside perhaps heard him, too.

“We have to take care of some paperwork first, then you are free to go wherever you’d like.”

“At this hour?”

“Yes,” said someone else outside, stifling his laughter, “at this hour. Come on now, come out silently.”

In the darkness we remained standing silently. Then one of us said, “Go on. Why are you just standing there?”

He started shoving his way toward the hole in the doorway, but from behind Shastri ji shouted, “Don’t go! No one should go outside! It’s dangerous!”

Another voice from near the doorway said, “But they say they’re letting us go; and besides, how much longer can we survive in here?”

“No! Absolutely not! Beware!” It was Shastri ji himself who shoved his way forward and turned around in front of the doorway. “I know what’s going on here; you people don’t. You are being deceived. I’m telling you — no one should go out.”

Outside, in the back, someone said, “Pandit, see who that is.”

The one called “pandit” replied, “I’ll take a look at that rat right away, but I need some more light inside.”

A few men brought their torches near the opening in the door. Then a big, muscular man bent over and came in. Getting in, he bumped up against Shastri ji’s back who himself then stumbled up against the people standing in front of him. Turning around, he looked at the man who had pushed him and said, “What’s this?”

“Oh, it’s you! But your . . .”

With us looking on, that huge man picked up Shastri ji and tossed him outside through the hole in the door as if he were a bedroll that had come loose.

“Kill the bastard!” shouted voices from outside.

That large man straightened up the sacred thread that crossed his bare torso, stared down at the crowd of us and said, “Now I’ll take care of you lot.”

Just then a commotion arose in the crowd. The man who had solved the defecation problem by digging a hole in the bare ground came forward as if he had swum over the heads of the rest of us, and screaming “Kill him!” he stuck the thing he had used to dig up the ground right into the big man’s stomach. It was a huge pair of heavy scissors for trimming hedges. That mountain of a man grabbed the trimmers with both hands, and it looked as if he would pull them out. But that did not happen. With wide, frightened eyes he looked down at the trimmer’s handles sticking out of his stomach and fell to his knees. His mouth opened slightly, but no sound came out. The first thing to happen after he slowly fell over to one side was that the men holding the torches outside screamed.

None of us said a word but, our faces black with ashes and soot, we all knew a decisive battle had begun.