

Kaushal Shrivastava

Short Story

The Bloodhounds

Ajeet Cour

Translated by A.S. Judge and the author

I am sure that you are telling the truth, that you have never come across any place inhabited by living souls so devastated and desolate - a veritable *shamshan*, a cemetery, a cremation ground, where restless souls roam around on hollow, moonless nights. But, then, just spare a thought for us. We who go on living are, in fact, dead!

Ever since we passed through that hell, Babu keeps lying on his sagging string cot all day long. At night he gets up and starts walking round and round on the roof, as if its enclosing parapet has imprisoned him and he is desperately struggling to escape from a cage.

You won't believe it, but what I tell you is true. A cage with iron bars is not the only thing that makes a prison. You can have the feeling of being confined anywhere. Even on a roof surrounded by a low - walled parapet.

When my kid sister Hindi's body was finally handed over to us, they had dissected it and stitched it together again like a bunny bag. But I could still see her anguished eyes dilated with terror; could hear her screams, the piercing wails frozen on

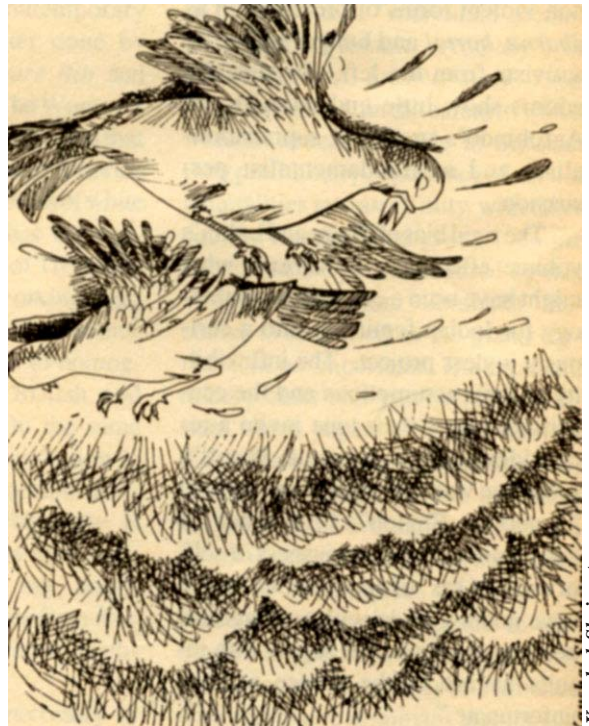
her pale-grey lips.

Yes, both the bodies were lying together.... Bindi's - Bindi was the pet name of my younger sister, her real name was Salvinder Kaur - and Jiti's, her friend, whose real name was Sarbjit. The two of them were like a pair of doves. They did everything together: going to school, returning, reading and writing, spinning and weaving, stitching and embroidering. Poor girls! Even when death came they embraced it together, just as their death they ... No, I am not crying. It is fury which rages within me. A cauldron of anger and indignation boils within me, under which huge logs of wood keep bursting into flames. Crying? No, I just can't help it

What I really feel like doing is pulling out a burning log from under the cauldron boiling within me and setting fire to the whole world... getting hold of an axe and hacking everything around me into pieces. No, there is no substance in what you say. In this country law does not mean a thing!

After having thought over it for a long time, it is only now that I have understood that there is a basic twist in the law which makes it practically

unworkable. You can't approach a court until you have lodged a report with the police, a First Information Report (FIR). If the complainant is a powerful person, his report is written down in a regular and proper way. By powerful, I mean powerful in every way ; the person concerned may be the leader of a gang of goons, maybe the paternal or maternal nephew of a politician, or he may have his pocket stuffed with currency notes. The F.I.R. of such a person would be weighty. And if the nobody, a powerless nonentity who has neither proper connections nor has a defender, then he is bound to end up in the same position as did both 'Babu' and Jiti's father.



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If the FIR is not written you cannot approach the court.... And to be barred from the court means to be barred from justice.

Well, you do have a point. Where is the guarantee that you will get justice from the court? In a court you cannot give a first hand report of what you yourself experienced. This has to be done by a lawyer. Here again you come back to the same vicious circle. If you have plenty of money you can hire a lawyer who is both competent and clever. But if you are an ordinary person seeking justice, you will end up with an ordinary lawyer. And, in the court the weighty lawyer of a weighty person opposing you will vanquish the ordinary person with the ordinary lawyer. A judge has no option except listening to what the lawyers say. A judge can neither see the boiling cauldron nor the raging fires within you.

It is a strange unending rigmarole. A blind street! The moment I start thinking about it, my head begins to reel, and everything around me - the world, the earth and the sky - go into a whirl. I can hardly make out what is what!

Bapu does not utter a single word. Mother keeps lying motionless, like someone on the verge of death, and brother spends all his time in the *gurudwara*.

I think I did tell you that Bapu serves in the *gurudwara* as its *granthi* (one who recites from the holy book). But these days he does not stir from his cot. It is my brother who goes there and performs the early morning ritual of reinstalling the holy *Granth*, after which he keeps lying around there. He comes back late in the night, swallows a few morsels of food and goes to recline on his bed. Again, early in the morning he leaves the house while the stars are still shining. Actually, it is his wife who keeps the household going.

It is for that very reason that I came from my in-laws to stay here. But even



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though I am here I am hardly of any use to anyone. The little that I do is what I am doing now: exchanging a few words with anyone who comes to console us. And if the visitor is someone like you, from a newspaper, then I just.... And that is how I pass the day. The long, burdensome and tedious day.

And, at night, I often wake up with a start. Look towards mother's cot. Even in the darkness I can hear her intermittent sobs. She does not cry during the day.... Why doesn't she cry in the day time?... Can you tell me?... Why does she cry only at night?....

What a strange sort of death this is! You can't even weep loudly.... You can't bang your head against a wall... or beat your breast and give vent to the excruciating pain left by the one who has departed, whom you loved so much, who was a part of your life, giving it meaning and substance, and who is no more, gone forever! Tears give an outlet to the pent up grief within you. I agree, the wounds never heal.... They keep festering for years, for as long as you live!

If a person can't give expression to his agony by crying, then all the

accumulated grief gets settled in his heart, like a hardened chunk, hard and weighty, and he keeps corroding from within. Just have a look at mother and Bapu!

People, you said? What can they do? All that they can do is come here for a while and sit around talking over and over again what happened. Does it help? No, it doesn't. For pain, as for love, you need seclusion. The deeper the pain the lonelier you are.

No, I am not casting aspersions on you. You neither belong to this village, nor are you a relation or neighbour. Your only desire is to ex-pose the anarchy that has come to prevail here. I understand as much. That is why I want to pour out my heart before you. Otherwise, ever since Bindi and her friend died, I find it difficult to talk to anyone, even to my own people.

But with you it is a different matter. If a word from your pen opens the eyes of someone, pinches someone in such a way that it arouses his conscience, if by what you write those wolves could be exposed who go about in their well creased uniforms, concealing underneath it their blood-soaked jaws, and claws sharper than knives, it would be worth it. The dead can't come back, but they can certainly.... Or can they? I am not sure!

Believe me, they are vultures, out-right vultures, who even gnaw at the flesh of living beings.

I beg your pardon. I know I should tell you everything in a simple straightforward manner. But I lose track and get lost in the thorny bushes and brambles of my thoughts. Thoughts, after all, are not crumpled clothes which can be straightened out by giving them a simple jerk, or even by ironing them. They always go zig-zag, they move in a whirl. I hope you will forgive me for that.

Now what was it I was talking about? Oh yes, those wolves. How come wolves have brought back those hounds to my mind? No,

actually this has nothing to do with Hindi's death. But I don't know why, of late, it has started haunting me.

Before my marriage, Bindi and I always shared the same bed. She was much younger to me. My brother came next to me. Bindi was the third child in the family. The love between us was one of those natural things, like it is among all sisters.

There were times when she suddenly started screaming in her dreams. Actually, the way she cried out, it didn't sound like a scream. It was more like a terror-stricken groan, as if she was being strangled.... as if she was desperately trying to extricate herself from someone's grip. I used to shake her, calling her name softly, "Bindi!.... Bindi!..." And when she woke up I could see the terror floating in her tears. She remained frozen in that state for a long time, not believing that she had escaped from that dreadful dark cave, from the clutches of.... I would wipe her tears and try to assure her again and again: "Look, Bindi, I am here. With you! Were you scared?"

Have you ever seen a person fully awake in the vice-like grip of a dream? The person is awake and yet he is caught up in the clutches of a dreadful nightmare....

Lying frozen in between the real world and the world of his dream, completely inert like a stone.... as if the fear embodied in the form of a wolf had come out of her dream and had kept walking side by side with her, in that azure zone between sleep and wakefulness.

No, it wasn't the wolves she saw in her dreams. What she saw was a pack of hounds..... bloodhounds.

When I aroused her from her sleep

by shaking her, uttering words of endearment, consoling her, touching and caressing her head and face softly, the spell cast over her by the nightmare broke, and gradually she came back to the world of reality. The terror frozen in her eyes would begin to melt. After regaining her consciousness and finding me close to her, she felt secure. I whispered sweet words into her ears, made her



laugh and dragged her out of the magic spell woven around her by her dreams. It was then that her tears would start dissolving into soft, hesitant smiles. She probably felt she had escaped unharmed from the jaws of death. Now the danger had disappeared. This was her home with secure walls around it, and the hounds could neither leap over nor make holes in them to come in.

Occasionally she related her

dreams in great detail : "You know, sister, I feel as if I am lost in a jungle. Well, not exactly a jungle, but just wilderness with thorny bushes, brambles and trees. There is neither light nor darkness. These are moments when you feel that night has fallen and you hear strange sounds. But even in the dark-ness of night you can still see the thorny overgrowth. Probably it is daytime and I only think

that it is night. But then, while I am dreaming, I am fully convinced that it is a pitch dark night." "I have lost my way in the jungle. I start going in one direction but realise that I am again on the wrong path. Then I go in the other, and the realisation dawns upon me that even this path does not go towards my home." "Just then I hear the sound of barking dogs. I think of hiding myself, but suddenly all the shrubs and bushes seem so diminished and dwarfed and wide apart that it seems impossible to take cover behind

them. I run hither and thither, but the dogs keep running towards me. Now I can easily see their open jaws with their tongues hanging out - their sharp teeth, panting bodies and bloodshot eyes, I can see everything. They keep coming nearer and nearer, throwing a ring around me. I can neither find a way to escape them nor a place to hide. I scream. They pounce on me... I scream ..."

After that she would begin to tremble. Not quite the same solidified terror, but a strange sort of fear would begin to peep out of her eyes. I would gather her in my arms and embrace her tightly: "Silly girl! What is the sense of being scared of dreams? Actually, reality is just the reverse of what you see in a dream. If you happen to see your dead body, you live longer."

I don't know whether she believed me or not, but still, lying in my arms, she would slowly sink back into sleep.

It is only now that I have begun to think that the dogs of her dreams were no different from the ones who closed in on her and Jiti in broad daylight on the canal bank where the ancient acacia trees and cactus, thorny brambles and bushes, jand and karir grow.

If I get a gun from some-where, I will shoot those dogs down!

No, I am not crying. It is just that....

Yes.... I will tell you.... tell you what happened that day.

It was a Sunday. Early in the morning. Hindi's friend came over. Both of them sat down to study and were busy doing so when mother said to them, "Listen girls, I want to remould this *chulah* (cooking stove made of earth). If you take a break and bring me some soft clay from the canal bank, I can get on with the job and finish it."

Taking the bucket together they went away, laughing and cooing like doves. Filling it up with soft clay from the canal bank they brought it back. Mother saw it and said, "What marvellous clay! One can sit down and mould a human being with it."

Hindi said, "Then make a talking human being with it, mother." Everyone kept laughing over it. Who? Me?.... No, how could I be here at that time? I was in my husband's house. It was my brother's wife who later told me everything. Mother refuses to utter a single word. The only thing she did was that, on the day they cremated Bindi and Jiti, beating her breast she kicked the *chulah* with her feet and smashed it into pieces.

After that she went back into her shell; and now she has become one with her cot. While she was kicking

the *chulah* she uttered such heart-rending screams that it seemed as if someone was tearing her apart, sawing her down the middle with a blunt saw.

After emptying one bucket, both of them went back to fetch another. Later we traced that very bucket. It was lying on the canal bank. But the two of them were nowhere to be found.



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It was not yet time for the mid-day meal. Must have been around eleven when they left. Later, when it was time to eat, mother and brother's wife kept waiting for them. Mother casually remarked, "These girls are simply crazy.

It seems they went away to Jiti's place and settled there, forgetting everything else."

A little before dark Bapu came home. Mother told him that the girls went out to get a bucket of clay in the morning but hadn't returned ever since. Bapu immediately turned back and set out for Makhan Singh's house. Jiti's father, uncle Makhan Singh.

The girls were not there.

Bapu turned towards the area where crops are grown, collected Makhan Singh from his field, and together they kept looking for the girls on the canal bank, kept calling them...

"Bindi....i...i...! Jiti....i...i...!" And then they found the mud-spattered empty overturned bucket lying by the side of the canal.

Members of both families kept enquiring from each other if the girls had any other friends and if anyone knew where else could they go to look.

Both families kept looking for the girls till late in the evening ... till nightfall. They looked at their teachers' houses, at the homes of the headmistress and their class fellows. A couple of teachers came from the neighbouring villages. They even made the round of their houses, but found no trace of them.

You know, while going from our house towards the canal, there is a bazaar. There too they enquired from everyone. Most people had not, but some people had seen them carrying a bucket.

The first time, when they had brought back the bucket full of clay, Ruldu, the grocer who owns the corner shop, had seen them. Holding it from either side, in order to balance the weight, the two of them were carrying the clay filled bucket hanging between them. Jokingly, he had questioned them, "Aye girls! You still play around with clay?" To which Bindi had replied, "No, uncle... mother asked us to fetch it.... from the canal bank.... soft clay to remould her *chulah*. "Oh, I see! Good girls always help their mothers like that", said Ruldu and then blessed the two of them in his own simple hearted way

My Bapu being the *granthi* of the *gurdwara*, almost everyone knows us here. In fact, people give a lot of honour and respect to every member

of our family. It was a pity that at that time everyone was busily engaged in their own business.

This place, being a village, after all, a few people did see them and a couple of them even talked to them. Just imagine, if it had been a city, no one would have known anything about them. There, even the neighbours don't know the people living next door. I know these things because of my husband, who happens to work in the city.

No, not in an office. He teaches in a school.

Even Jiti's people are held in high esteem in the village. No, the land owned by uncle Makhan Singh's family is not all that much. You are right. Honour and respect goes to those who are either big landlords or those who belong to the leading families. Actually, the two things go together. Apart from such people, respect is conferred on those who strike terror in the hearts of people. For example, take the police inspector. When he barges into the village for some investigation, everyone stands before him with folded hands.

Well, investigations, as a well informed person like you must know, have now become a matter of routine. Ever since the beginning of the disturbances someone or the other is always here for that. There are occasions when whole companies of uniformed personnel barge in and go about shouting. They threaten and abuse everyone

without any provocation. They kick the old people out of their homes. They have no deference for grey hair nor any shame in behaving improperly in the presence of a sister or a daughter

It seems they don't have any sisters or daughters of their own! Or even a mother who gave birth to them! They have descended straight from heaven with their uniforms on!

I know. It is no use being angry.

Once anger takes possession of you, it burns you up. It singes the core of your soul. When the proverbial pot boils over, it only burns its own edges. Actually what I am trying to tell you is that now it is the eighth or ninth year in a row.. These creatures just don their uniform and rush into the village like bulls gone wild. And once they are on rampage, anything can happen!

What have we done to deserve that? You want to know our fault? It would be better if you ask them about that. Sometimes they say that we had given shelter to terrorist youths in our village. At other times they say that such and such persons had their meals and spent the night here. "Who were those guests of yours and why had they come here? They must have come here after unleashing violence and murder somewhere. Why did you give them food? Why did you provide them with a cot to sleep on?"

Sometimes they round up the vil-lage youths who have not done anything wrong, take them away, and beat them up badly. When, weeping and wailing, their parents go to them to bring back their sons, they give the parents a thrashing as well and take away all the money they can grab. The harassed parents finally return home - everyone thanks the Lord when his son comes back home alive.

And the variety of uniforms that you see around here these days is simply amazing. My husband has often tried to tell me the difference between one and the other but somehow I always forget. I can't distinguish one uniform from the other. They all look the same to me.

Oh yes, I was telling you about Jiti's father - uncle Makhan Singh. No doubt their landed property is not large, but in the village they are looked upon with respect. After all, nobility of character is not something that can be ignored easily!

This girl Jiti was studying with

Bindi, in the same school. She used to say that after completing her education she would take up teaching in a school, and if she secured good marks she would put on specs and teach the college girls; earn money and place it in the palm of her Bapu. She used to say that she did not want to get married. Both Bindi and Jiti were scared of marriage. Their only desire was to achieve something after completing their education.

No, I am not crying. Actually, I was thinking that, in the end, everyone has to die. Whatever has been moulded by that great Potter will, one day, come apart.... will be shattered to pieces. But then, it was not a death like any other! At that age, girls play around and laugh without a care in the world! On the threshold of youth the two little ones were torn apart and devoured by those bloodhounds!

What a way to die!

To cut the long story short, the search was still on when night enveloped everything in darkness.

Everyone spent the night in great agony. The whole village was caught in the grip of anxiety.



After getting up in the morning, Bapu,, uncle Makhan Singh, my brother, the two sons of uncle, and some prominent persons of the village left for the police station at Hargovindpur to lodge a report.

No, our village Bhim has no police station of its own. But no one knows which police force had stationed the picket of its men here for the last so many months. In fact that too moved out last month. Actually, it is the village people themselves who got it removed by making innumerable complaints and dozens of requests to the higher authorities. All those four or five policemen who were stationed here roamed all over the village the whole day long, grabbing free meals, roasting stolen poultry, and created a rumpus after getting dead-drunk at

night. At least two of them were like overfed bulls. They kept ogling the young daughters and sisters of the village folks, passed lewd remarks and whistled at them. They simply had no sense of shame or propriety.

Ogling and whistling at a girl by someone belonging to the village is unimaginable! Such a thing can't be even thought of! All that is a part of city life. I too live in the city but basically I am a village girl. I hardly go out of the house on my own.

All of them reached the police station at Hargovindpur to lodge a complaint about the disappearance of the girls in broad daylight! But the police inspector did not take down the report. Probably, the reason was that they told him that their suspicion fell on a couple of policemen who belonged to the picket lifted from the village last month. The name of one of them was Purshotam Dev but they were not sure what the other was called. This very Purshotam Dev had come to the village without doing anything noticeable, and then went away.

The inspector did not write down the report but sent them all back with a false sense of hope by suggesting that they should continue looking for the girls on their own, try and find out if their relatives knew anything. In the meantime the police, too, would keep searching for them.

Every morning the entire Panchayat and some other prominent persons kept going to the Hargovindpur police station along with *Bapu* and uncle

Makhan Singh, and time and again named Purshotam Dev as the prime suspect. Obviously, nothing was to happen and nothing did. The report as usual remained unregistered.

On the fourth day the inspector said to them, "Now that you gang up and come here every day, let us go to Purshotam's village and see if his village. The only thing that the inspector did was to go to his house and enquire if he was there. Obviously, he was not there, so all of them came back.

Is this the way investigation is conducted? Anyway, I leave it to you to decide for yourself.

It seemed that the inspector already had inside information and knew everything, and that was why the report had not been registered.

It was the fifth day.

To call it a day would be travesty of truth. Every day that came was like doomsday and every approaching night proclaimed the end of the world. The whole village seemed to be completely paralysed. People had forgotten to do their daily chores. After all, it was their own girls, young and innocent, so sweet and simple, who had disappeared from the vicinity

of their own village. It was nothing less than a dreadful calamity for them.

It so happened that on the fifth night some policemen barged into the village around midnight. They informed us that they had found two corpses, right on the canal bank, but about twenty kilometers away, lying in a deserted

we can find out anything. Go and bring a taxi."

Now, you tell me. Is that the way the police performs its duty? Are the very people who are already down and out expected to mobilise taxis for the police investigation?

Anyway, the taxi was brought. *Bapu* and uncle got into it along with the inspector and a couple of constables.

Purshotam was not to be found in area. "Come and see whether they happen to be your girls", they said.

People from all over the village, it must have been about fifty of them, got together. They told the policemen that recognising the girls would be difficult at that hour of the night, "especially when you tell us that the corpses are lying a little away from the roadside. Let us wait till morning. When so many days have already passed, a few more hours won't



t mean much. It is already two hours past midnight.” But the policemen did not relent. They told them that if they wanted to come they should do so straight away. Otherwise, the people from the municipality would cremate them as unclaimed corpses.

Unclaimed! No one could stay back after hearing that word. They could be their girls! So about sixty odd people immediately got into a truck of the village Sarpanch and headed towards Hargovindpur.

When they reached there, they saw two stark naked bodies lying in a small mini-bus. It was pitch dark and the corpses were stinking. To make out anything was difficult. So all of them approached the inspector and said, “We would be able to do better if you manage a torch for us. How can we recognise them like this when we can’t even see their faces?”

“Am I running a torch factory over here?” thundered the inspector, hostility spilling over from his words, and turning to his men ordered, “Come on Harnamia, start the bus and take them to Batala for the postmortem. It may be light or dark, I am sure a person can recognise the members of his own family if he wants to!” And he said to Bapu and uncle Makhan Singh, “Probably these are not your girls after all. That is why you are finding it difficult to recognise them.”

Everyone decided to accompany the mini-bus to Batala. By the time they reached there the day would dawn, and then they would be able to see them properly.

But the inspector was trying to avoid taking them with him. As far as he was concerned he had completed the formalities by offering the bodies to them for identification. Now he could declare the corpses as unclaimed and have them cremated by the people from the municipality without any complication.

After that, what could anyone know

from a heap of ashes?

Twice or thrice, with a harsh voice, he ordered them to, “Go back to your village! If we come to know anything we will certainly call you over. Haven’t we done that this time? The police force is not lying idle, after all! It is only for people like you that we keep running around day and night!”

But all our village people kept standing there without uttering a word.

I feel that if only Bapu and Makhan Singh uncle had been there, the inspector would have had their thumb impressions affixed on a statement saying, “No, sir, they are not our girls.” And the formality would have been completed. But, the presence of sixty odd people perhaps deterred him from doing that.

All of them decided that they too will go along in their truck.

When they tried to start the minibus carrying the corpses, it failed to move. It is difficult to tell what went wrong with it. Actually this bus too had been grabbed by the police from somewhere, free of charge. In the meantime the inspector was giving vent to his frustration by going after the driver, and the latter, shaking with terror, kept checking the engine, saying, “What can you do with a machine like this? It simply refuses to budge when it decides not to. I am doing whatever I can, but my hands don’t stop trembling.”

Both Bapu and the Sarpanch told him that if that bus refused to run, then he was free to load the corpses on their truck. “We will take them to Batala”, they said. But the inspector simply wanted to keep them at arm’s length; in reality he had no intention of showing them the bodies properly. So he did not pay any heed to what they said.

Just then they saw a bus coming from Batala. The inspector stopped it, ordered all the passengers out of it,

and asked the driver and cleaner to take out the bodies from the mini-bus. They were to be taken to Batala.

By then the sky was getting pale grey with a yet distant dawn. While the corpses were being dragged out of the mini-bus, Bapu recognised both Bindi and Jiti. Uncle Makhan Singh stood where he was, completely bewildered, his eyes like two frozen pools, his mouth slightly open, his arms dangling by his side like dead wood. The corpses had become so bloated and their faces had become so horrifying that it was difficult for any-one to recognise them. But Bapu recognised the girls. He uttered a heart-rending scream; he unwound his turban, tore it in half and covered both the corpses with it.



Please forgive me for this long pause. All this time words simply refused to come to my lips. You say why do I cry haltingly?... letting out a sob every now and then.... You say that unrestrained weeping lightens the heart’s burden.... What you say is right. But then, do you hear the groans of Bapu sprawled on his cot out there?... He too only cries in his dreams. We are all dead people. We don’t weep during the day time. At night we get up from our burning pyres, wander around, and weep.

When the inspector heard the piercing wail of Bapu, which went tearing through the heart of both earth and sky, and then saw him tearing his turban and covering the corpses, he changed his tactics. He took the Sarpanch aside and said, “Look, if these girls are yours, I am awfully sorry. What was ordained by fate has come to pass. But the fact is that no one really knows the circumstances in which they lost their lives. Now people are going to say something or the other, and everyone will have his own version to give. The whole village will earn bad reputation. You are all

respectable people, with families of your own. Sardar Sahib, believe me, I too have sisters and daughters. I understand everything. That is why I am advising you that so long as the post-mortem is not performed and the cause of the death is not established, it would be better for all of you to keep quiet. Otherwise, you are free to follow your own wisdom. As far as I am concerned I am already doing my duty. Regardless of whether you claim these girls as your own or not, the post-mortem on them, in any case, has to be performed. I have to do all that my duty demands. Now it is up to you."

"What do you expect us to do?", asked the sarpanch.

"I would advise you to be discrete. After all, it is a matter of honour! I don't want the name of your village to be tarnished", the inspector advised.

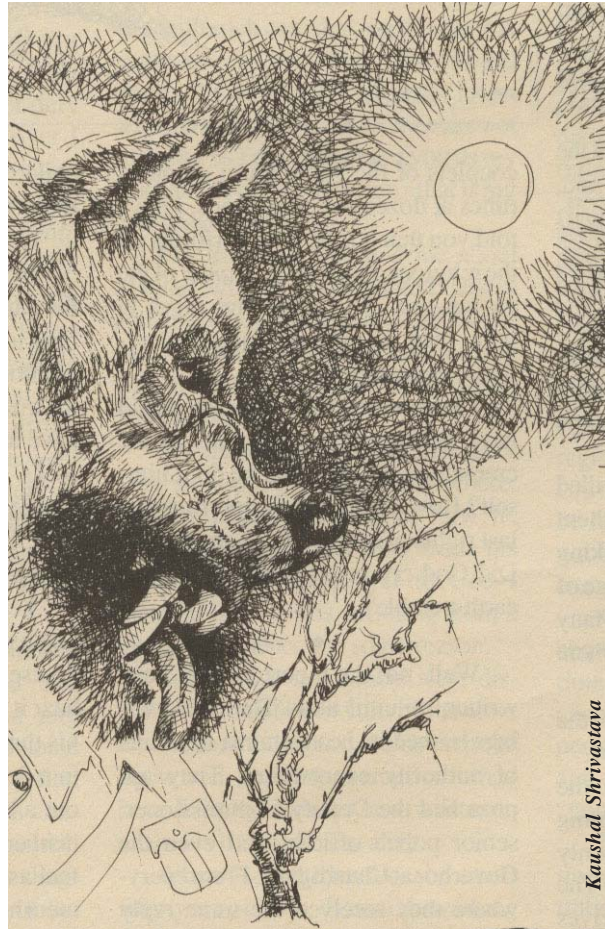
"And how do we explain why we are running around with you?"

"That is hardly a problem. Just say that you came along to help the police. After all, it is the duty of every citizen to help the police, isn't it?"

In their naive innocence, the sort of trusting innocence which all the simple villagers are made of, they all agreed. In their mental condition and given the calamitous storm that raged in their heart at the time, they were not left with any sense of judgement to know that this too was a police stratagem, a trap. The police was bound by law to have the post-mortem done. The inspector's plan was that, by declaring the corpses unclaimed at the time of the post-mortem, and getting

them cremated by the municipal authorities, he would easily destroy all the available evidence.

Anyway, all of them reached Batala. The post-mortem was over. When they asked that the bodies be handed over to them, the concerned doctor said, "These corpses are unclaimed. That is what the police told us before leaving. They can only be



handed over to the municipality for cremation."

There was no trace of the inspector anywhere around. Having completed all the formalities he had disappeared from the scene.

I repeat, had the crowd of villagers not been there, things would have gone exactly the way the inspector had planned.

Now they had only one option left, and that was to take permission from the S.D.M. for the bodies to be handed over to them. So Babu and three or four others left to see the S.D.M., while the others stayed back to keep a watch over the corpses.

The inspector had done a thorough job, leaving no way open for them. Some time had passed; without having been approached by anyone, the municipal employees reached there with their corpse carrying cart. The inspector must have made all the arrangements before making himself scarce. All the villagers protested against handing over the bodies to them. In the face of so much opposition from so many people, the corpse carriers disappeared.

After sometime the inspector reached the hospital with his retinue in tow. He abused our village people, threatened them, and beat up uncle Makhn Singh in the hospital corridor itself, and that too right in front of everyone. "You bastards! You can't keep an eye on your girls; and when they take to the streets, and illegitimate worms begin to crawl in their wombs, and they go and commit suicide by jumping in wells or canals, you create problems for the police! Hasn't the police anything else to do? Is it the job of the police to keep your daughters under control?"

When the sarpanch opened his mouth to say something, the inspector did not spare even him and dug his elbow in his midriff. "Listen Oye Sardar! You may show your authority when you go back to your village! This area comes under our jurisdiction. Just imagine! I offered

you the best possible advice, telling you that the more you expose yourself, the more vulnerable you are, but you hardly understand anything.”

When some of the young boys started getting restless, with dark anger and indignation welling up in their eyes, the inspector and the other policemen accompanying him virtually pounced on them, shouting, “Don’t you show us your temper and try to jump out of your clothes! These days the government has made such laws that once you are put behind bars, no one will know whether your mothers ever gave birth to you!”

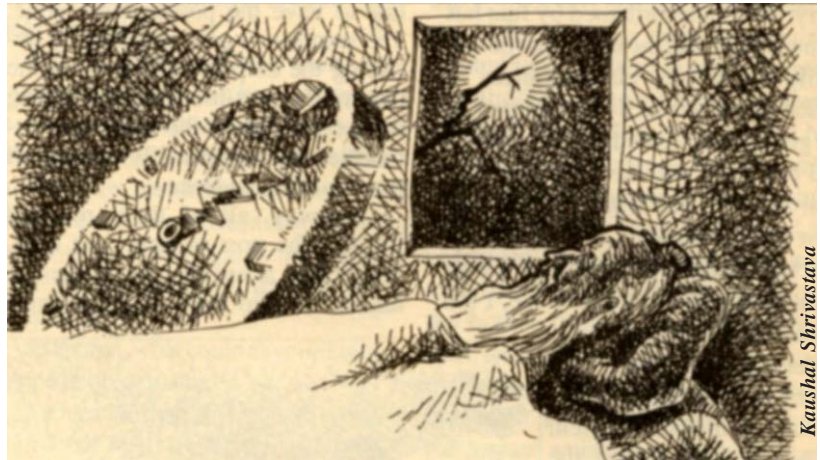
Uncle Makhan Singh, almost on the verge of tears, came forward and said, “Why have you become so inhuman? Absolute power has corrupted you absolutely. We have lost two daughters. Two innocent, young girls! Pieces of our heart! Is this the justice that you are intended to protect? Can’t you do anything other than just crushing us with your uniformed authority?”

“Who knows, you might have killed them yourselves and dumped them there! You know, if you keep talking like that, I can arrest you on a charge of murder and put you behind bars. Many ‘Jats’ have been doing just that. There is nothing new about it.”

Just then Bapu came back with the letter of authority from the S.D.M.

The inspector handed over the bodies to them but kept on threatening them, “I know everything. I was only trying to salvage your honour. The girls have either drowned themselves or you have murdered them. If you want to avoid further investigations, you must cremate the bodies here in Batala. I can’t allow you to jeopardise and vitiate the peace of the village by taking them back home.”

So the bodies were cremated and the two families came back with bags



of bones and ashes.

I think Bapu must have recited the couplets of the Ninth Guru umpteen times at dozens of cremations. I have told you that it is he who performs all the religious duties as the *grant hi* of the *gurudwara*. But when fire rages in your own breast you forget every-thing, even your God!

I keep wondering how he would have performed the last rites in the cremation grounds. Did he do it himself? How does the father perform the last rights of his own flesh and blood? Did God cry in his heaven? Did the earth tremble?

Well, no, the report has not been written up until now. The entire vil-lage bashed its head against the walls of authority everywhere. They ap-proached the Deputy Commissioner, senior police officers and even the Governor at Chandigarh. From everywhere they received the same reply “No, the situation in the country is not as chaotic as you think. You don’t have to worry about it. We will have the matter investigated. Rest assured!”

And at the lime of investigation everyone says the same thing, that there is no witness.

It makes me so angry that I want to get hold of each one of them and ask them, “You wretched brats! Who

can bear witness to the fact that you are the children of your own fathers? Where is the evidence?”

Evidence, indeed!

Nearly a month has gone by since the day Bindi and Jiti went to the canal bank to fetch a bucket of clay. Time does not stop, it goes on and on. But I tell you the truth when I say that those moments have frozen inside our hearts like solid rocks. That moment of time refuses to recede and become the past. It is still here, butchered and bleeding, with its own ghosts hovering around it.

Yes, what you just heard was an anguished groan coming out of the hoarse throat of my father. When you hear it you feel as if someone is slitting his throat with a blunt knife. Engulfed in a dead stillness he occasionally lets out a hoarse croaking sound which is neither a scream nor anything else. You feel as if he is being sawed. The moment he sinks in a fitful sleep, he begins to groan like that. In the beginning it used to give me a fright. But now I have got used to it. I am sure he will keep doing that as long as he lives. Every man remains confined within the four walls of his misery, a dark zone where no one else can enter.

There are times when I think that those bloodhounds of Bindi’s nightmares have now entered Bapu’s dreams, to gnaw at his flesh forever!