

# FAITH

Grant an idea or belief to be true. What concrete difference will its being true make in anyone's actual life? How will the truth be realised? What experiences will be different if the belief were false? What in short is the truth's cash value in experimental terms?

**William James** in *Pragmatism*.

## 1

Bhaskara Rao was worried.

This was nothing new. He was always a worried man. Earlier, he would be worried about "settling down" as he shuttled between Bangalore and Mysore. He continued to be worried even as a mute observer to the happenings around him, while he was being tossed around between his three sons. The age of seventy-five is an age which makes man worried and worrisome.

Long back, he had tried telling Shravan not to shift out of Mysore. He did not want his son to move to a strange place like Hyderabad and stay in an alien environment amidst telugus and Muslims. More so, when it was fairly easy to secure an employment in the State Government as a clerk. Shravan would then have been posted either in Bangalore or Mysore. He had felt that there was no point in leading a nomadic life moving from place to place. But Shravan just did not lend an ear to his words. He not only shifted to Hyderabad, but had also built up his own house there in a couple of years. And, built a house on the other side of Chaderghat bridge in a new area bordering the walled city.

Rao, who normally liked to stay with his eldest son at Mysore, was naturally worried about Shravan the youngest, who was now far away from him. He was presently here to stay with Shravan for a few months. And even now, several days after his arrival, he had not unpacked his suitcase fully. This was his usual habit. He always kept his suitcase packed in the hope that he could leave at any moment and settle down to a peaceful life back at Mysore. This was true of Rao even when he was young and working with the State Government. Whenever he was transferred out of Mysore, he always stayed for a few days in the new place to somehow get a transfer back to Mysore! In fact, on his transfer out of Mysore, the first paper he always signed was an application seeking a posting back to his hometown. This feeling of alienation outside Mysore was not strange to Rao. Neither was his compulsive optimism in hoping to get away from any place back to his home.

When Shravan chose this plot to build a house, that too on the other side of the Chaderghat Bridge, the emptiness of the space all around had planted a sense of insecurity in Bhaskara Rao. There was not a single house around in Akbarbagh, when this house was built. That was more than fifteen years

ago. Rao was worried that Shravan had not built at least a small compound wall around the house that might have given some feeling of security. When he thought about those days, he felt, in retrospect, that all these aspects had not really bothered him then. The reason possibly was that he was still in service and was occupied otherwise. But now, Rao was deep down in his post retirement problems - being shared by three of his sons - travelling from son to son, city to city, and being literally homeless. He was now going through all the difficulties of old age. The age of seventy-five brought an equal number of problems. As years were added on to the age, new problems arose, new ailments were added and new medicines caught on with your system.

## 2

Shravan had been thinking about his father right from the day Rao arrived. Something had to be done to keep him entertained. Father generally kept to himself and kept himself to reading. Whenever he was out of Mysore that was how he was. Something seemed to irritate him - making him feel like a fish out of water. But how long could he be with Mahesh? What about the responsibility of other children in taking care of father? Father was never fussy or troublesome with any of his children. In fact one felt that he was equally at ease with all his sons and loved staying here in this house. However, he just could not stand the surroundings of Akbarbagh. This precisely might be the reason why Shravan had bought a plot in Trimulgherry - that his father might feel more at home there! Yes, come to think of it, it appears to be true that he had his father in mind when he bought the plot. Now, somehow if he could build a house there, then life could be much more peaceful. The lesser the number of people around, possibly the more similar it would be, to the atmosphere of Mysore. Sometimes Shravan wondered why he did not think about all these things when he bought a plot here in Akbarbagh. But he always found an answer for this instantaneously - he could not have gone elsewhere with the money he had then. He felt the need to explain all this to father at an appropriate time, when father was in a mood to listen. He should tell him that there was no cause for worry. Father might feel relieved at the thought of vacating this house. However, he also felt that, of late, it has been very difficult to communicate with father. This was also because Shravan carried this lurking doubt that Rao no longer believed him. That might not be without reason: Shravan had never taken his father seriously in the past. But, he felt that if he could somehow sell off this house with the help of Shafique Saab - who got him this plot in the first place - then he could build a new house with the money. Shravan continued to dream of such possibilities. Somehow he believed that father was becoming claustrophobic these days. He had been running away to the seclusion of his room whenever he saw people. This behaviour was not very easy to understand. Perhaps the new house might be an answer for all these. Shravan suddenly realised that he had not given up his habit of day dreaming even after he was past the age of forty.

This possibly was an indication of his continuing to be young and therefore was a good feeling! When such thoughts occurred, Shravan just smiled to himself.

### 3

Now, it was difficult to identify a particular cause for the restlessness of Bhaskara Rao. Sometimes he felt that the events should not have taken this course, or was it that they were destined to happen so? It was not even simple to rest under the feeling that everything was decided at the moment of one's birth and just believe in fate. It was also difficult to remain unattached and unaffected. Rao felt that, of late, he was suffering from some affliction or a bad habit. The fond memories of being woken up by his grandfather who sung a song in his ears early in the morning were now mere memories. These days, Rao could not even wake his grandson in this way. It was not easy to catch a wink early in the night. The old dictum of early to bed..... did not seem to work here. It was only after they discussed politics with the milkman, who poured milk at eleven in the night and the television announced a close down that the household went to bed. Till then, Rao just tossed and turned in the bed. Even milk being supplied at eleven in the night seemed to be peculiar only to Akbarbagh! When he thought about it, it was possible that such a strange thought would lull him to sleep. But even that was easier said than done. His eyelids used to settle on the eyes at some unknown time in the night. Then again, he would wake up at some unknown time in the morning. The deafening silence of the house was all pervading. And, when the household woke up, they were all busy with their own chores. All that Rao heard was the sound of the morning chores, which he strangely felt, was similar to the sound of one hand clapping! There seemed to be a total failure of verbal communication that made the silence even more deafening. The impatience shown in lending an ear to an old man was not restricted only to the early hours of the day.

Now, the cause of Rao's worry could have been Venkatachala Reddy, who stayed in the house behind. Or it could have been the neighbour next door - Shafique Ali, or Advocate Rama Rao, or his own son Shravan, or the grandson. Rao's son Shravan did not believe in leading an event-less peaceful life. He was like an ant - always industrious and, so, for Rao to get eternally tense he had to do nothing other than stay with Shravan. Rao seemed to be particularly tormented by the recent happenings. Venkatachala Reddy had raised a concrete pillar abutting the rear compound wall of Shravan's plot. Shafique Ali, had started getting some mysterious looking people now and then to show them around Shravan's house. On top of it, Hyderabad was going through the worst communal carnage in its four hundred-year history.

When Venkatachala Reddy put up the concrete pillar, he might have had a straightforward plan of expanding his present house and letting out a portion to get a little more money. But it seemed that

Shravan had had some objections about this and had voiced them to Reddy. He was trying to quote the rules of the Municipal Corporation: talking about the five feet set off to be given in any urban construction. He seemed to have told Reddy that the construction was illegal and therefore culpable. This must have infuriated Venkatachala Reddy. Rao could not understand why Shravan should have interfered in the affairs of Reddy. He seemed to be poking his long nose in every affair, as if to justify its existence! When Bhaskara Rao thought about the nose, he suddenly remembered his wife, Kumuda. Shravan had inherited his nose from his mother. Rao's thoughts strayed a bit, but when Venkatachala Reddy came back on his mind, the thought of his wife faded away. Rao felt that it was for the Municipal Corporation to take action if Reddy had broken the rule. He failed to understand why Shravan had taken up this task of redeeming the world when it was not his mandate. Rao wondered how one could convey this to Shravan. He himself did not have the enterprise to convey this convincingly. He continued his silence, and continued to suffer - tormented by such unexpressed opinions. Rao just could not stomach the idea of finding a foe in the Police Department. He was convinced that it was always better to have the Police as friends just in case a need arose. At the same time Rao could not tolerate the sight of Shafique Ali who continued to bring prospective buyers for this house. He always looked upon Shafique with suspicion. Was it just because he was a Muslim? No, this feeling was not as indiscriminate as he suspected. He remembered all his childhood friends to be non-Hindus. He had a friend who went by the name of Harry Jyothikumar and another by name Abdullah. But when he thought about them he also felt that the Muslims of Mysore were different from the Muslims of Hyderabad. All the same, Rao could never figure out why he had a prejudice against some people. He would never place a few faces under the 'respectable' category. He remembered a movie villain during olden days - Dikki Madhava Rao - whom he could never imagine as a respectable character! Shafique Ali also seemed to have joined this list of suspects just by the virtue of his looks!

4

Shravan could not understand why the very presence of Venkatachala Reddy irritated him. He was unable to digest the sight of this person who seemed to ooze the traditional feudal tendencies so natural to the people of Telangana. This nature of feudalism was reinforced by the fact that Reddy was in the Police Department. Shravan had tried to reason out why he had a tendency to hate such behaviour. It was possibly because of the type of work he was involved in, for the past several years. It could also have been because of his natural tendency to lean towards the left. He just could not tolerate any streaks of exploitative tendencies. Shravan was unable to explain why such a prejudice extended beyond individuals to a class, which he has stereotyped as "Reddys of Telangana." This was something that beat his own logic. Shravan believed that if Venkatachala Reddy continued to stay in the village from which he hailed and continued to behave as he was behaving here, he would

definitely have been a target of the People's War Group. There were moments when Shravan fervently hoped that Venkatachala Reddy would get a transfer to Nizamabad, Karimnagar, Medak or Warangal Districts. If this happened, he thought, then, Reddy would be taken care of by the people themselves, or by their comrades and their squads! Now he thought that the war he was waging with Venkatachala Reddy was of great significance, at least at a symbolic level. If a person like Reddy, who would not think twice before encroaching upon somebody's property was questioned on the legitimacy of taking up construction on his own plot, it was bound to create history in Akbarbagh. The pomp of Venkatachala Reddy would receive a good beating which seemed to be long overdue. And, so dreamt Shravan, thinking of demolishing the concrete pillar with a Court orders. Father might be aware of the goings on between him and Reddy. Which made him think that his father might intervene and part with a few words of advice. But surprisingly father had not uttered a single word about the whole affair till now. The fear of what father might have told him had a greater effect on Shravan than the effect his words would have had, had he uttered them. There were times when he felt that he should send his father back to Mysore. It possibly might be better than tormenting him with one's own dreams. But Shravan just could not bring himself to do anything at all. The reason was simple: He firmly believed that all this would culminate in a happy home at Trimulgherry.

## 5

Bhaskara Rao had the urge to part with a few words of advice to his son sometime. Rao wanted to talk to him calmly and explain the true value of what he called "peace of mind". He was afraid that Shravan might shout back at him if he did so. Shravan would even say that all that he was doing was registering protest against police imperialism, taking refuge in his leftist rhetoric. Bhaskara Rao could very well visualise the scene. Shravan was clever enough to make it appear as if the greatest mistake Venkatachala Reddy ever did, was to take an employment in the Police Department!

The events that occurred in the past week amounted to something similar. On the day Reddy raised a concrete pillar abutting the rear compound wall, Shravan seemed to have gone and talked to him. It seems Reddy was discreet and promised to stop the construction work immediately. Shravan must have threatened him with words like notice, Court and prolonged litigation. He was quite capable of such acts. But Reddy also seemed capable enough not to buckle under such pressures. As the talks seemed to be continuing, one nice Sunday afternoon, Rao suddenly woke up from his sleep on hearing a heated argument. He was trying to understand the goings on, as he continued to linger on - dazed between sleep and awakening. As the voices subsided he thought that they had reached an agreement on whatever the argument was.

After this incident, Venkatachala Reddy seemed to maintain a low profile for about four to five days. On a holy Friday he suddenly raised a wall and continuing to work round the clock, also had a concrete roof laid before Sunday morning. Shravan just could not tolerate the way in which Reddy had broken his promise made during the dialogue in the past week. He started spitting fire and venom of helplessness on the whole family. Not satisfied with this, he went ahead to meet his friend - Advocate Rama Rao - who promptly issued a notice to Reddy. They also quickly registered a case in the local Court. Bhaskara Rao always recognised Rama Rao by his white Maruti Van. Rama Rao always made it a point to meet and say hello to Bhaskara Rao on each of his visits. It was also true that Shafique Ali's visit normally coincided with the visit of Rama Rao. Shafique Ali had never bothered to look up Bhaskara Rao even once. This might have been one of the reasons why Bhaskara Rao could never tolerate Shafique Ali. When all the three of them joined together, they usually discussed - over a cup of tea - words such as registration, plinth area, square yards, tenancy and other vague terms related to legal and real estate matters.

Bhaskara Rao also vaguely remembered that on the day the notice issued by Rama Rao reached Venkatachala Reddy, Reddy had come home and had a decent conversation. Now Bhaskara Rao felt that he had to spend his old age amidst all this chaos. He also felt quite strongly that he should withdraw from this place and take refuge with his eldest son - Maheshchandra. But Rao never mouthed these feelings. At the same time, he also did not want to leave this place with an anxiety of indecision on the issues that were alive. He always yearned for some order out of this chaos and wanted to see the order before he left this place. He also thought that it was time for him to have a heart to heart talk with Shravan. He neatly arranged his clothes in his suitcase, as these stray thoughts continued to torment him.

The day after the notice reached Venkatachala Reddy, there were some visitors to Shravan's place. He was having his evening tea. Somebody shouted from the gate - "Sir, the local MLA, Mr. Sameer Kumar has graced your place." Shravan was terribly irritated by the way, in which the visitor was announced. He shouted back in a loud voice: "Please request his majesty to wait. I will be out as soon as I am through with my tea." The thought that this must be a conspiracy hatched by Venkatachala Reddy was confirmed as soon as he stepped out. He was, for a moment shocked at the way this small litigation was assuming political dimensions. He thought that there was now no point in having heated exchanges. He remained fairly calm and composed. Venkatachala Reddy stood there with the legal notice - served by Shravan - in his hand while Sameer Kumar explained to him the significance of peaceful coexistence and that too for these two neighbours who belonged to the same religious community. Shravan could very well understand that all these were hints being dropped essentially pointing at his friendship with Shafique Saab. Shravan chose silence. He did not even offer them a cup of tea, as they left the place.

**6**

Soon after they left, Shravan rushed to his father's room. Father was still lingering on his bed, not fully awake. That was a great relief for him. If father were awake when this conversation took place in the sitting room and could also understand the ramifications, it would have been really disastrous for him. His restlessness then would scale a new peak. As Shravan spent a while brooding over the events that had just passed by, he also felt that such event would never happen in Trimulgherry. That was his optimism. He even thought that he should have brought father to stay with him only after the Trimulgherry house was built. At the same time, Shravan was also taken aback at the strategy adopted by Venkatachala Reddy in roping in the legislator of the ruling party. He was not just taken aback. He was thoroughly shaken at the type of interconnections this affair was building up. For a moment, he thought that irrespective of the proposed Trimulgherry house, he should move out of this area and find a house across the bridge, at least for a short lease. This would also give some peace of mind to father and would be convenient to his son who had to go across the bridge for his college and for his tutorials. For just about a moment he also felt that he could send father back to Mysore. But he also remembered that he had argued with Mahesh and insisted that father should come and stay with him at least for three months. Now, if he sent father back, it would be a terrible blow on his conscience. It would be a worse blow on his ego. To top it all was this lingering optimism in Trimulgherry.

**7**

As all these events occurred, Bhaskara Rao was tormented by a strong doubt, whether these were really happening or it was just a figment of his own imagination. There was reason for this: Everything seemed to be discussed in a hushed up atmosphere. When these things were discussed, Rao never seemed to be fully awake. Perhaps Shravan wanted to discuss these problems with his wife, when his son was asleep. Shravan was probably afraid that his son might stop playing with Venkatachala Reddy's son, if he became aware of the happenings around. But did it mean that Shravan's son was not aware of the happenings here? Bhaskara Rao wondered. All said and done, Bhaskara Rao did not like the idea of his grandson playing cricket or flying kites with either Venkatachala Reddy's children or Shafique Ali's children. This used to create tension in his mind. This also could have been one of the possible causes of his worry. He was afraid that Venkatachala Reddy might vent his anger on to the boy. It did not seem probable, but in case it happened.....?

Bhaskara Rao also thought of his recently acquired affliction. Though he thought that this problem showed up between six and seven in the morning, he was not sure. He sometimes believed that he

was tormented by this affliction throughout the day. But whatever it was, the problem had fully enveloped his personality. It defied description, but what seemed to happen was this: Bhaskara Rao continued to remain in a dazed state after he woke up. It was a state where he was neither fully asleep nor fully awake, a state where it was neither a dream nor a reality. It was a state in which he did not belong to either of the categories - it was in between heaven and hell - a grey area between black and white. In such a state, Rao got hallucinations. He saw something, heard some noise and as it continued, he would slip back to sleep. When he woke up again, everything seemed to be smooth and fine till he slipped back to sleep again. He had wanted to consult a doctor sometime, but was really baffled at this ailment that defied description! He would knock on the doors of dreams during this time. Above all, he would embrace sleep even before he had realised something. Waking up and dropping down to sleep like this, several times in a day had now become a habit for him from which he found no escape. This way of living in a dream out of reality was something that had never agreed with his personality. Neither did it agree with the laws of nature.

The affair of Venkatachala Reddy also must have sunk into Bhaskara Rao when Shravan seemed to have discussed it over with his wife, early in the morning. Rao could not remember what happened after that. But the scene kept recurring throughout the day and drained off all his energy. Even then, this affair of Venkatachala Reddy had got to be true.

Rao sometimes felt that he was now losing out on chronology also. He remembered that on one scorching afternoon, following the day Reddy and Shravan had reached one of their numerous agreements, he felt that he had heard Reddy abusing Shravan and his forefathers from atop the new roof which was left for curing. Much as he tried, he could not remember the exact sequence of events that had occurred that day. He only remembered that the day before that, Advocate Rama Rao had visited their house. He had talked in a hushed voice to Shravan.

The result of those talks were:

In the afternoon, when everything else was peaceful and when there was nobody around, Shravan went out with a camera to take some pictures of the walls which had been raised by Reddy.

The objective was:

To take the pictures of the wall that was already raised and then appealing to the Court saying that Reddy was trying to raise a wall and plead for a stay order.

The Plan was:

To file a contempt petition saying that Reddy had raised the wall after the stay order was issued. When Bhaskara Rao came to know of such strange strategies, he was at a loss to understand whether this was a fact or just plain fantasy.

Whenever Rao tried to remember these facts and tried to evaluate them objectively, he always ended up in a doubt. This process always led to a strange frustration. Whenever he was in doubt or when he came across the word suspicion, he immediately used to remember the face of Shafique Ali. Along with Shafique Ali, he would remember the plot, which Shravan had bought in Trimulgherry. He strongly felt that Shafique sowed this idea of selling off this house and shifting to Trimulgherry. Possibly this was the only good deed Shafique has done for his son. There was a kind patch in his heart that appreciated Shafique. But then, after weighing all these good deeds on one hand and his prejudices on the other, what remained was always a lingering suspicion. Rao thought that the idea of shifting to Trimulgherry was brilliant. It was definitely better than living in a dirty slum here. But unfortunately Shravan did not seem to be getting a good price for the property. The area on this side of the bridge seemed to be preferred less and therefore fetched a low price. Rao knew that Shravan somehow wanted to sell off this property. He knew that Shravan had dreams of putting the money so earned in building an 'architect designed' house. This surprisingly did not seem to come under his usual leftist rhetoric, but became an obsession of the middle class bourgeoisie of having a 'well ventilated self contained' house. Rao seemed to have gained knowledge of these aspects, also during the course of what he called his 'affliction'. But then, this he thought must be real. Rao had internalised the experience of Shafique Ali getting strangers to inspect their house at strange hours during the day. Lavanya, the daughter in law had woken up Rao so many times in the noon for this purpose. He had heard the same old words of dimension, plinth area, square yard and other terms of the real estate trade every time this happened. Rao was terribly pleased at these efforts at selling off the property. At the very outset, he was of the opinion that buying property in this area was a grave mistake and therefore any effort at correcting that was always welcome. However, Rao was, at the same time, quite unhappy with Shravan's idea of trying to settle down in Hyderabad, even if it was in Trimulgherry. Rao thought that it was always better to sell off this property and purchase a plot in Mysore and shift there. The City Improvement Trust Board was selling off some plots on the Hunsur Road. Rao, who felt that he was fully dependent on his children could just not gather himself to tell this to his son. He was also convinced that there would be no resultant action and therefore telling him was futile. In such a situation he generally took recourse to reading the Gita. Not that he understood the Gita, nor that he had made any attempts at internalising it, but now Gita had become the only way in which he could kill time. As he thought more about it, he felt more and more helpless.

Bhaskara Rao felt that there was no point in entering into a long drawn legal battle for a house, which Shravan had already decided to sell. Why should the new owner purchase a legacy of litigation along with the house? He felt that this was a very simple logic that must have occurred to Shravan.

It was a principle of Rao not to pass unsolicited advice to his children after they attained the age of twenty. When they were forty, he had decided that it was better to listen rather than talk. Shravan was now five years past forty.

## 8

Shravan was quite fed up by the way his personal time was being devoured by all these affairs culminating in the Court of law. Even he quite often felt that this exercise was futile. Why should one run around like a madman if he had already decided to sell off the property? In spite of these feelings, he was not very happy giving up the process he had already begun. Moreover, he thought he was not sure that the property could be sold off easily. To top it all, it had become an issue of his personal ego in Akbarbagh. The mailman who carried the notices issued by Shravan had also carried the news around the area and now it had become a much-discussed issue. The arrival of Sameer Kumar with the entire fanfare had added a new dimension and blown up the whole affair to a greater proportion. He had now almost reached a point of no return. If only he had built up a house in Trimulgherry, he could have just shifted and called an end to this madness. But now, he was stuck in this vicious circle - unless he sold off this property, he could not build the house in Trimulgherry and one could not get married unless cured of madness!

## 9

When all these were happening, on one particular night, Bhaskara Rao suddenly woke up - shocked. He never woke up like this - right out of a nightmare. For the past two days Hyderabad was burning. Meaning: there was a continuing communal strife - the worst of its kind - between Hindus and Muslims. It was said that the reason for the riot was political and it would not affect the common man. But Rao would not believe it. He was enveloped by fear. He had found these events as absurd as one's own existence. Since he could not think of anything else, he was worried. It was said that this riot had its genesis in a small property related dispute between a Hindu and a Muslim and had now taken such an ugly face. The fact that even here it was an ongoing property dispute might have prompted Rao to attach a greater significance to the riot than it might deserve. The process of killing people, this meaningless carnage, which was neither for love, nor because of hatred had shocked Rao very deeply.

Rao was disturbed at the way Shravan was giving vent to his frustration at not having been able to shake up Venkatachala Reddy even an inch. Shravan was just fretting and fuming on people around him. The way he had converted this question of his personal property into an ideological fight as a symbol of protest against feudal tendencies seemed to be as absurd as someone killing a fellow citizen on the basis of religion and faith. For the past two days Rao was lingering between sleep and wakefulness. He was just vegetating in a semi-conscious state, as if he had consumed a large dose of opium.

Shravan had been an obstinate fellow right through. He would go to the extent of not only deciding the clothes his son should wear, but also decide the time at which the boy should urinate - and ensure that it happened so. Rama Rao was the one who fueled this obstinacy. Both of them had now joined together to shatter Reddy's pride and joy - the dream of a building - using all reasons from the rules of the Municipal Corporation to insufficient ventilation. All sorts of people ranging from Municipal workers to the *Ameen* from the civil Court to the customers of Shafique used to drop in the house at odd hours, as Shravan continued his two pronged effort at a litigation and the sale of the property.

All these people who so arrived, used to enjoy the hospitality extended by the household, examined the whole house and also saw Venkatachala Reddy's new building. It was said that even Venkatachala Reddy entertained all these people without any qualms.

## 10

Shravan was now afraid even to switch the television on. This was not without reason. He thought that switching on the television would encourage his son to discuss the communal situation in the city. He did not want to encourage such a discussion especially when there was nothing other than fear all around. Moreover, he was concerned about his father. He knew for sure that if father realised the gravity of the situation and got a graphic picture of the death and destruction, then, he would insist on Shravan staying back at home and not attending work. As such father was very anxious because they were living in an area predominantly inhabited by Muslims. It was in this context that Shravan was happy that even the newspapers were not delivered for the past few days.

But at the same time, Shravan did not believe that father knew nothing of these happenings. He was sure that father would know a great deal in any case. That was the reason why he felt that he had to spend more time with father and tell him that such events were very common in Hyderabad. He wanted to tell his father that there was no cause for worry. However, there was a valid reason why Shravan did not broach this topic. He was afraid that as soon as he entered into a conversation on this topic, father would immediately start talking about shifting to Mysore. Now, Shravan thought that

he was in no mood to even discuss such a proposition, especially when so many things were happening all around. He could very well tell father that the problems of the nature of a communal riot would never happen in localities like Trimulgherry, which was on the other side of the bridge. But he thought that in his father's view, Hyderabad - whether Akbarbagh or Trimulgherry - continued to be Hyderabad. He also knew that in trying to convince his father, he would get worked up. Shravan therefore did not find this thought appealing at all and continued to maintain silence on this front.

## 11

Now, suddenly having woken up from sleep, Rao wondered why he had started remembering all the visitors to Shravan's house. Or was it his usual state of being dazed? Rao could not decide whether he was fully awake. Something similar happened the day before yesterday. Rao was thinking about people - the potential customers brought by Shafique Ali, the government servants inspecting the construction work of Venkatachala Reddy, Rama Rao and so on. When Rao was thinking of nothing but faces, he heard the gate being knocked at a monotonous regularity. That day, for some reason, there was nobody at home. Rao came out to see a large crowd speaking in Urdu, standing at the gate. Rao just stood there, out in the open, not being sure what he should do. Slowly his curiosity got the better of him and he went closer to the gate and even opened it. As he approached the crowd, he observed that each of the persons in the crowd was armed with a knife or a stick or a sword or a cycle chain. Rao was flabbergasted and stood there like a pillar. He felt that he had seen Shafique Ali also in the crowd. Or was it just his illusion? He also did not know why the crowd stopped short, but it just did not proceed any further. The person who Rao suspected was Shafique Ali seemed to say: "What do you do with this old man - just leave him alone" in pure *Dakhani*. The crowd just dissolved at the end of the road. It was probably the first time in his life that Rao was relieved at the fact that he was an old man. All the same, he was fully shaken up by the time he closed the door. When he heard a monotonous rhythm - the door being knocked - in the evening, Rao was not even sure that he could open the door. It was only after Shravan and his wife shouted for Rao in Kannada, that he felt confident enough to open the door.

But now the cause of waking up all of a sudden and sitting up like this was not clear. Rao wondered whether he was awake or asleep. He had not told anybody about that afternoon's experience. The reason possibly was that he was really not sure whether it was just his hallucination or it had actually occurred. Now, Rao suddenly felt that there was a "*Jehad*" call in this area, which was full of Muslims. He shuddered at the thought. Suddenly, he remembered his grandson. He looked at the watch for time. It was almost daybreak. His grandson usually went to Nampally for EAMCET tutorials at 5:30 in the morning. Rao felt that there was rioting all around. He went to check on his grandson in his room. He was shocked to find the bed vacant. Rao stood there for a while, totally dazed.

Rao was by then sweating profusely. The clock was ticking away at a very high pitch, with monotonous regularity. The rhythmic sound of the clock seemed to disturb him. For the past two days, after his experience of the rhythmic knock on the gate, Rao would be disturbed by any rhythmic sound. When he felt like relieving himself, he entered the toilet. Even there he found that the tap was leaking, with water trickling down into the bucket with a rhythmic monotony. Rao soon forgot about relieving himself and washing his face. He just went ahead and turned the tap tight. But the tap continued leaking. He tried to put a cloth and gag the mouth of the tap. The silence that followed was also very haunting but it was definitely better than the monotony of the rhythm. Before Rao could come out of the toilet and heave a sigh of relief, the water was leaking again. This time Rao applied all his strength to turn the tap tight. The result was even more devastating. The washer got displaced and the tap was now running with full force. For a moment or two, Rao forgot the monotony of the water drops hitting the bucket with a thud. But when he suddenly realised his helplessness in trying to close the tap, it was like opening up the crest gates of a dam. His tears just gushed out in a flood. He hit his forehead hard with his palms and started crying aloud. He felt so helpless that he just broke down. Shravan woke up at this noise. Lavanya followed. Shravan lost his cool and shouted at his father. In this chaos, Rao suddenly realised that his grandson was after all at home and was sleeping with his parents. Now the confusion of myth and reality assumed monstrous dimensions in Rao's mind. He just walked away to his bed, pulled a pillow over his face and cried.

Rao sobbed, cried, repented and slowly, without realising slipped off to sleep.

## 12

Shravan was now tired of the people coming in and going out of his house. The communal strife in the city had added fuel to the fire and really fatigued him. He was, on the one hand frustrated for having built a house in such a sensitive area, which even came in the way of their natural movements, especially affecting his son's education. On the other hand was this frustration of not being able to sell off the house. To top these two was the behaviour of Venkatachala Reddy - walking about in the area as if he had won a war. When Reddy came to know that Shravan had decided to sell off the house, he had spread the word around that the decision was essentially because he could not fight the might of Venkatachala Reddy. In fact Reddy had also spread the rumour that he would purchase the property himself. To top this rumour were other rumours, which were normal to a sensitive situation as this, which was spreading like wildfire. The more disturbing part of it was the name of Shafique Saab being involved in the grapevine. In such a grave situation, Shravan had to grapple with brasstacks - how does one get a plumber to fix the tap? Shravan was not at all

comfortable with the idea of a plumber coming in when he was not around - especially under these circumstances, coupled with the fact that most of the plumbers were Muslims. When he could not grapple with brasstacks, Shravan had this peculiar habit of taking some policy level decisions - he decided that when the situation became normal, he should - even if it meant locking up this place - shift to a place on the other side of the bridge. Sometimes he felt that what his father said was right. Why should he continue to be in Hyderabad, when one may very well go and build a house in Mysore? What is so special about this city?

But even though he thought about all this, his mind would not permit him to move out of Hyderabad. Then, reason falls in place to support the mind - All this would not have been a cause for worry, if they were in Trimulgherry. These are not problems of Hyderabad, but are those only of Akbarbagh.

Shravan felt guilty when he thought that he had left his father alone to silently suffer this mental tension here. He felt that he should leave his father back in Mysore once the situation comes back to normal. But again, it is reason that wins him over - When everything is normal, what is the big difference between Hyderabad and Mysore? Then does it matter where father stays?

### 13

Bhaskara Rao was getting more and more confused whenever he thought of Venkatachala Reddy. For instance, he just could not understand why Reddy was oozing love from the day he learnt that Shravan was planning to sell off the property. Bhaskara Rao was confused with the modern world whenever he saw such behaviour. During his days love meant just love - love expressed in words, deed, soul and intellect. Hate meant that you would have nothing to do with the other man, not even a conversation. He was never able to grapple with the concept called a love-hate relationship. When he saw Reddy talking to Shravan, he was sometimes confused whether it is love or hate, he was confused about what exactly was the truth. This took him on a philosophical sojourn on trying to find out what was fact, what was fiction and which parts of the relationship was a fantasy. There seemed to be a very thin line between these. He remembered having read a quote by Jayant Kaikini: "There should not be a cause for a person to love another, whereas there must always be a reason to hate somebody". He had hardly found a causal factor in today's relationships. The transactions with Reddy seemed to be of a similar nature. Shravan never ticked his son off when he jumped across the compound wall behind. In fact he had even ensured that his son remained unaffected with all these happenings around. Sometimes Rao even felt that Shravan was kicking up this big row only because the wall behind seemed to prevent the movement of his son!

Reddy came to their house recently to have a talk with Shravan. The background of the talk was clearly the recent happenings in Hyderabad and especially in Akbarbagh. At one level he was trying to argue that in case one has decided to sell off the house then, why should one get into this never ending maze of litigation and Courts. At another level he was suggesting that if at all he wanted to sell off the property, then he should try to ensure that it was not sold to Muslims. In fact the latter was more of a request than a suggestion. He even went to the extent of saying that he would find a good Reddy buyer from Nizamabad who would be willing to pay a handsome price for the property if they so desired. It was natural for a common Hindu to get tense at the thought of a Muslim neighbour in this hour of strife. But Rao could just not understand why Venkatachala Reddy - who was in the business of taking care of such situations by virtue of his job in the Police Department - should at all be worried at such a possibility. Or did Rao really understand why Reddy was doing so?

Venkatachala Reddy used the same tone to argue why he should retain the wall as it is and go ahead with the proposed construction: "You all know what happened recently. All these Muslims were too willing to finish us off. In such a situation, it is just not proper that Hindus here sell off their property and go away. Neither does the solution lie in us continuing to fight amongst ourselves. You see, I will find able-bodied tenants for the outhouse I am presently constructing. They would be people with a strong will. They would not think twice before giving up their lives or even taking a life if the situation so demands....."

Bhaskara Rao was of course proud of his son who cared two hoots for this person who was proposing to convert the locality into a warfield and trying to hide himself under the cover of the local Mafia. But however this sense of pride did not reduce his fears. In fact for a moment Rao was even unable to find out whether Reddy's words were an incentive given to sell off the property to him or it was a veiled threat. He was now confused as to whether the gang of armed Muslims that came to the house recently and left Rao alone were a group of respectable citizens or a gang of Rowdies or even a group of policemen in plainclothes. In the dreamland of Bhaskara Rao he was sure that he would never want a policeman to talk the language that Reddy was speaking. Rao even felt that it would be good if Reddy returned to his home district of Nizamabad. He even felt that the anger of the Naxalites in that area might not be without reason.

Rao also came to know that Shravan was trying to let this house out and shift to Ashoknagar once the situation was back to normal. But Rao just could not understand why he could not see an obvious solution - everybody could just move over to Mysore and all the problems would naturally be solved. But he just would not say anything. All that he could do was to pack up his suitcase everyday in the hope that he could be relieved from the torture of staying here. But even that seemed to continue as an eternal dream and a major pastime for Rao.

**14**

As the situation was returning back to normal, there was an ordinance from the State Government banning registration of any property transfers in the old city area. Akbarbagh was covered under this ordinance. This shook up Shravan completely. Infact the words of the legislator Sameer Kumar, stressing the need for people like him and Venkatachala Reddy both belonging to the same religious group to live in harmony assumed great significance in retrospect. The thought of the various dimensions his words had and the resultant fall out made Shravan shudder. Shafique Saab had an alternate proposal. He suggested that since in the given circumstance it was impossible to sell off the property, he would find a reliable Muslim tenant for the house. In the meanwhile Shravan could shift to Ashoknagar. They could sell off the property sometime later when things settled down. Shravan was now in two minds especially because Shafique's name was prominent in the rumours associated with the happenings in the recent past. He did not know whether to have faith in him or not and if he trusted him, then how he should express his gratitude to this great help that Shafique was extending to him. He just could not decide anything in this big maze of doubts and confusion. He decided to leave things as they were and allow the fate to take its own course.

**15**

When Shafique Saab came this time, Bhaskara Rao was not afraid as he used to be. Infact Rao thought that he was unusually courteous. Rao felt pleased that Shafique came and talked to him in such a decent way. He even felt that he should believe in what Shravan had told him earlier, that Shafique had helped the family out on several occasions in the past.

Rao was now convinced that Shafique was infact a part of the big crowd that came armed to their house a couple of days ago. In fact Rao also believed that it was Shafique who said, "What do you do with this old man. Just leave him alone..." and he was there in the crowd for only one reason: he just wanted to protect the neighbours. As Rao thought about it, it sounded more and more plausible and he started believing it all the more. This sudden love for Shafique Saab took a totally different form in Rao's mind. He thought that if at all Shravan had to shift, it should be to Mysore, otherwise, and there was no reason to leave this house at all. Rao as usual kept this strong feeling to himself and continued his silence.

Rao thought that Shravan would some day see the merit of shifting to Mysore. He also thought that Shravan would send him back to Mysore even before that. The optimism of Rao superimposed itself on the present too, as he hopefully put his clothes in the suitcase and shut it.

Shravan saw his father putting his clothes in the suitcase for the first time. He suddenly felt the urge to say what he said. "We are not going anywhere yet, we are just staying here. Why are you putting your clothes in the box?" He also told Rao that Shafique was forming a Peace Committee for Akbarbagh. When Shravan came and spoke these words, Rao just smiled. He did not utter a word. Nobody had observed that Rao had not uttered a single word in the past fifteen days. As Rao was preparing himself for the afternoon nap, he heard the rhythmic sound of workers pounding the waterproofing material on Venkatachala Reddy's new roof. Along with that rhythm came the rhythm of the knock on the gate. With that came the picture of Shafique with a knife leading a crowd. With that, the sound of Rao's heartbeat became louder. As the rhythm of the heartbeat became deafening, Rao was staring at the roof. As he wondered whether his very existence was a fact or just a figment of imagination -

Bhaskara Rao was worried.

This was nothing new. He used to be a worried man earlier, when he was shuttling between Bangalore and Mysore. He continued to be worried even as a mute observer to the happenings around him, while he was being tossed around between his three sons. The age of seventy five is an age which makes man worried and worrisome.....