

TRIVIKRAMA

Something deep down bothers me.
We seem to be convinced that it is
immoral to be strong and virtuous
to be weak.

Gen. K Sunderji in an interview
with *India Today*.

1

Walking on the road leading to the airport, perhaps daydreaming, it was quite a sight to watch a bicycle being hit by a three-wheeled auto rickshaw at the crossroads right ahead. Possibly the cyclist must have been very casual, whistling away to glory and must not have seen the auto, or must have tried to turn the cycle with both his hands off the handle bar. The road was as deserted as the cemetery one could see further down the road.

On closer observation, it was clear that the cyclist's leg was caught below the auto that turned turtle. He was trying to extricate himself. The feeling that the expression of the cyclist changed as soon as the auto driver went up to him might not have been just an illusion. The woman who emerged out of the rear seat of the auto looked down at her bare feet and started searching for her footwear all around. Some cars that were passing by at a high speed slowed down almost came to a screeching halt and realising that an accident had occurred, proceeded further. They would just disappear round the corner, faster than they appeared. At least one of these vehicles, which so disappeared, could have stopped, but none did.

The auto driver stood there like a statue, not knowing what to do. The fact that there was a man on the rear seat of the auto, along with the woman, was realised only when he tried to emerge out of it. It was first the partly grayed longish hair, which was followed by a long bare forehead and then came his small mongoloid eyes, a flat nose, the portion above the upper lip over which a moustache never grew or was cleanly shaven and so on as the man was trying to emerge out of the vehicle inch by inch. It was then that a white collar attached to a pink shirt showed up and quickly dissolved into the saree the woman was wearing which was also of the same colour. The woman had lifted her saree a wee bit and was looking around for her footwear. As the man was struggling to get out of the auto, the driver went to his help. He put his hands under the man's arms and tried to lift him up. As the man tried to put the weight of his body on his own feet, the cyclist who was carrying the whole weight of the auto rickshaw on his legs bellowed.

As everybody was rushing away from the spot in the fear that they would have to stand witness to this accident in the court of law, a big question of having humanitarian considerations emerged,

coupled with an urge to help these people out. When the mind was occupied with the feeling that it was necessary to extend a helping hand, as this was not an accident that might pose great problems later, the feet started moving. It was then that the auto driver put his head up and spoke:

"It would be a great help if you could kindly inform the police sir and also call for a doctor."

The driver was acknowledged with a nod and the hand naturally went into the pocket to find some coins - two fifty paise coins to be precise - and the feet proceeded towards a possible pay phone ahead. The afternoon heat was sucking away the moisture in the body in the form of sweat.

2

So, the problem of an individual was in fact elevated to a universal level, in order to proceed further. At a short distance a bakery was seen. The baker had a telephone with him but did not permit the use of the instrument. Further down, where the baker pointed his finger was a chemist. There was a pay phone that was recently installed, fixed on the wall. The effort of walking down to that place seemed wasted. The reason was: The telephone needed a rupee coin and not two fifty paise coins as in the old pay phones. A search in the pockets proved futile. The chemist, the baker and the small hawker next to the baker also did not have coins of this denomination. The feet went back to the accident spot in the hope that the auto driver might have a couple of coins; the scene that appeared there was unbelievable - was it a dream or was it for real? Which of the events were to be trusted? The present scene or what was seen earlier? There were questions and questions and nothing else.

It was a surprise. A surprise filled with fear. On return, it was seen that the scene had completely changed. People were standing all around the auto rickshaw. The windshield was shattered and the glass pieces were scattered all around. One of the larger pieces had found its way into the intestines of the cyclist in a peculiar way. There was blood all over the place. As the number of people around the corpse was growing from one to two, four, eight, sixteen and so on, the number of flies on the corpse also grew. When the crowd grew large enough to encroach upon the road and obstruct the traffic, the curious people from the cars also started coming down to find out more about the accident. The talk that was going around fuelled the queer feeling that was gripping the body. When people started describing the accident and re-creating it as if they were eyewitnesses to it, there was a great doubt whether what was seen earlier was real or just a dream.

As an attempt was made to get into the fortress of people around the accident spot, to go nearer the body, it was surprising to see every new person adding a new piece of information. From the new information, a new detail emerged. From the detail, a new dimension and as this grew, the accident was no longer at the level of the problem of an individual! Then, the police arrived and took the auto driver into custody. By the time they took stock of the situation and cleared the way for the vehicles to move, there were a large number of eyewitnesses ready to testify. The intestines of the man were lying like a tangled rope - as if it had just been used to measure the distance between the body and the crowd. What was it that prevented the truth, which was ready on the tongue to emerge any moment, from emerging? Was it the horrible way in which the cyclist's flesh was spread out like a salad made out of beet root and the flies that had settled on it? Or the sheer terror at the dimensions this event was assuming? It was all like a well directed play. But, where was the linking thread? Who was the director? Was the invisibility of the director a reason for Jarco Petan's statement that "in a play, the director is a god, but the tragedy is that all the characters are atheists" to hold true? Questions, questions and questions. Where was the answer? The answer was missing. So was the woman who was in the auto, the man with her and the lady's footwear.

3

There was some movement in the tummy, an urge to pass urine. But, there was no secluded place around. There was also an urge to share the feelings with somebody - but not a single familiar face was found, leading to a vague lonely feeling so typical of the life in Bombay and not to this town. It might be appropriate to inform the police, but with so many willing eyewitnesses around, there was a realisation that the testification one might give would form such a minority that nobody would believe it. All the faces around seemed very keen to say something and there was not even a single face that seemed to be willing to listen. The sight of khakhi uniforms of the police force reminded one of moving pillars. The pillars did not have ears and had a great tendency to lean down and throw the entire weight on somebody who tried to speak. Why is it that everybody seemed so thick skinned? Suddenly the memory of a Deputy Inspector General whose profile had appeared in the newspapers recently was rekindled. When it was said that he patiently listened to the complaints and appeals of people and this in itself was a big news, it was easy to imagine what the others in the force were doing. News does not spread out of imagination. Even fiction is said to be deeply rooted in experience and facts. News, even if it has a base in a rumour must be having an element of truth in it isn't it? The feeling that enveloped the mind was that the incident had to be narrated to the DIG who would be in the Police Headquarters. It was now difficult to take an auto to reach the place.

How was it possible to get into an auto when the small vehicle had physically filled the eyes and psychologically devoured the mind? To get into an auto was not a secure feeling at all. As the feet

mechanically moved forward, the steps grew very heavy. So heavy that it was felt as if an auto was tied to the feet and was being pulled along. The bus stop ahead looked like an oasis in the desert. An auto meant loneliness, while here, one would find a large crowd in the bus. As the thought occurred, a bus came and slowed down. There was no familiar face even there, inside the bus.

It was informed at the police headquarters that the DIG's office was on the sixth floor. As a delay occurred in the elevator coming down, there was a strong urge to climb up the floors by the staircase. A tired body and a worn mind did not endorse the thought. Patience paid, as the doors of the elevator opened slowly.

In the elevator, every face was the face of a policeman. The huge men with close haircuts, clad in uniforms and in plainclothes, towering around, made anybody feel dwarfish. It seemed natural for a person to feel terribly guilty under the piercing stare of all those men, even when there was no reason to feel so. The elevator was going up at such a slow pace that at a point it turned out to be a debatable issue in the mind, whether the elevator was going to the sixth floor or to the outer space. One felt that one could have scaled the Everest during that. At last, when the doors opened, oxygen gushed in. Even taking a deep breath made one feel jittery. The elevator doors started closing in, even before everybody could get out of it, which awakened the mind lost in other thoughts, only to escape a peculiar predicament of being caught amidst the doors.

On the wall ahead was a nameplate with a black background and golden letters, which indicated the name of the DIG. The name itself seemed soothing. When the card was given to his secretary and a call came immediately, the sound of the air-conditioning that reached the ears on stepping in also sounded melodious. When the bottom rested on the soft seat, though there was a creak of protest from the chair, there was definitely a great relief. It was like a great burden on the mind being easily transferred, on to the cushion, below the bottom.

The DIG was patiently listening to an appeal that was being made by the middle-aged gentleman, on the chair next. A question arose in the mind as to which of the two faces looked familiar and which looked friendly. The only aspect that caught the eye was the DIG's uniform, which was neatly hung by a hanger on the wall behind his chair. It then occurred that policemen appear friendlier in plainclothes. The DIG's face did not look any familiar. But the man on the chair next looked familiar, not friendly. As the middle-aged man continued his appeal, eyes wandered all around the room and came back to him, naturally attention was drawn towards his words. As the words were being heard, the eyes were filled with his head having a closely cut salt and pepper hair, a kurta without a collar, shaky hands and in it an appeal written in shaky handwriting. As the eyes sized him up, they wandered all the way down to his feet to find one artificial wooden foot that resembled the other

natural foot to a very great extent. As the sight of the wooden foot was perceived, a new meaning seemed to emerge from his words - "I do not mind if I have to spend money sir, I just want to save my life, that is all" he said. Then, whose eyes were they that were filled with tears, as these words were uttered? Now, even his individual problem was to assume universal proportions, which led to a feeling that the whole world was filled with injustice and anarchy. This would prompt anybody to express grave doubts about the future of this universe. When sweat flowed out, the sun who normally sucked it up was found locked outside the airconditioned room, which made it inevitable to pick up the handkerchief.

4

The DIG assured the man of making some arrangement for his security. When he was limping his way out, the DIG called him back for a cup of coffee, which he had already ordered. And then when the DIG's eyes shifted away from that man to look expectantly here, the report of the day's happenings just flowed out naturally. Even after the story had been narrated, the expression on the face of the DIG did not change a bit. That small smile continued. The expression was as if: 'I hear such stories twice every hour'. When that simple look of his eyes transformed into a penetrating stare, it was difficult to fight it and it became inevitable to stare at the ceiling. The expressions on the ceiling, the walls and the face of the DIG were all the same: 'So What? Why was he even told this? The accident was witnessed. Okay. What was it that prevented a person from going home straight from the spot? Who had given this authority to be the conscience keeper of the world? Why were these efforts being made at all?' It was hard to find an answer to the expression of the DIG. As the hand went into the pocket to take out a handkerchief to dry the sweat, the DIG drew attention towards the cup of coffee.

The reason for feeling relieved on getting out of the DIG's room was not clear. Was it because everything was poured out to the DIG, or was it for having had a cup of coffee? There was some courage in the mind, which prompted a journey back to the accident spot. By this time, the sun seemed to be tired of his journey and was trying to cool himself by taking a dip in the Arabian Sea. As the steps were being put forward, there was a disturbing sound behind. Was somebody following? Constantly turning back to find out the source of this sound resulted in a pain in the neck. There was now a very strong urge to smoke a cigarette. So the walk was cut short at the next hawker. The noise behind approached closer and confirmed the fear of being followed. It was the middle aged, wooden legged fellow limping up.

"Today's accident was grotesque wasn't it? I was also there when it happened. I saw you there" he said.

Though there was a chill down the spine by the way he started the conversation in such an unexpected way, the face that came up in the mind was the one which was pleading for protection, the face which had looked familiar but not friendly. There was some urge to share everything with him again, little realising that he was very much there, in the DIG's room. And so, the recitation of the morning episode started. "Why should you bother about all these things? You could have just kept to yourself and walked away - was there something that threatened your life for you to rush to the Police?" he said in a threatening tone.

Yes.... why bother? When the world does not want a conscience keeper, there is no point in assuming the role of one. As the steps were put ahead, the middle aged fellow also started limping side by side. Even as there grew a feeling that he should be given a slip, there was also a strong feeling to have a last look at his familiar face. When the attention was shifted to his face, it dawned why his face looked familiar. Even though the partly grayed longish hair was cut closely, the head that held the hair, followed by a long bare forehead and small mongoloid eyes, the flat nose, the portion above the upper lip over which a moustache never grew or was cleanly shaven as he was revealing himself inch by inch, there was no doubt about who he was. Even he did not remain there. But, why did he come to the DIG? Was his life also in danger? All the questions remained questions. It was difficult to pick out a guy who had acquired the art of dissolving into the crowd of the city.

When the affair was assuming this added dimension, it was felt that a visit to the accident spot, at this late evening hour would be dangerous. There was a quick decision to go back home. When one realised that the loneliness of the streets could in any case not be solved at home even the enthusiasm of reaching home waned and the footsteps got heavier. Whom should one trust these days when the concept of 'trust' itself is getting thoroughly shaken up? In these days when even the face that looks friendly would not reveal its feelings, was the DIG a trustworthy person? After all what was so special about him?

5

Fear had not gone down even upon reaching home, because the predominant feeling in mind was that everybody on the road was ready to kill. It was even more fearsome just to remember this episode, involving the very man who had so easily entered the DIG's office. So, what was the truth? Was it the newspaper report? Or what was found there in the Police headquarters? Or were both of these mere myths? What was to be done now? It was like being caught in an invisible whirlpool and putting the entire hope and weight by holding on a khakhi coloured blade of grass on the mainland -

when nothing else was available. Otherwise there was nothing that could be done except listen to a few words of condolence here and there. Should the DIG be informed about the things that happened just now? On one side was a threat to life from a person who had appealed for protection of his own life. On the other were the scores of eyewitnesses that had testified for the accident. On which side would the needle of truth - which was in between - tilt? And whom would this needle pierce? Who would hold the flag of truth flying? How would the DIG's reaction be in such a situation:

"I say, you tell me..... Whom should I believe? That man says that his life is in danger. Your complaint is that it is he, who is a threat to your life. We, at the headquarters have to provide protection to every man who feels nervous. If this goes on, then half the population of this country would be in the police force protecting the other half. Apart from that, the police after all are also human beings. Even they would need some protection. Do you see an end to this? Why don't you gather some courage for yourself and allow us to investigate?"

That was also an acceptable argument. The post mortem report of the cyclist was yet to come. The glass pieces of the auto were sent to the forensic laboratory for examination and until the report of the lab came, there would be no basis for anybody to believe these words. The possibility was in giving the auto driver some third degree to make him speak up. Or somebody might hire an advocate to take him away on bail! Oh...let that not happen, *Insha Allah!!*

In the evening news on the television, the accident was given a prominent coverage. There was another piece on a murder that was committed elsewhere. Even there, it was an auto that was stopped. The passenger within was pulled out and hacked to death with a sickle. The news made the heart pound heavily and the body sweat profusely. As the body was sweating, it was also shivering. It was so hot and yet there were these shivers over and above. Such an experience was strange. All those news items started getting a new meaning, as the problem of a universal nature had come very close and seemed to have a hearty conversation at an individual level.

That night, when sleep overtook everything else, one felt like thanking God for this boon. What else but a good night's sleep does a tired mind need? The sunrise that day was not as usual - it gave a new enthusiasm, a nice feeling. How long does one live like a coward? Somewhere if one does not gather himself up, one would be chopped away like vegetables by all sorts of implements. Then the only path to take is to bid goodbye to life. Somewhere down the line, one had to give up all such desires to live. It was just then that a call came from the DIG.

"Thank you for the tip off yesterday. It was useful. The forensic report has just arrived. The fingerprints of the auto driver on the glass are very clear. Post mortem report also gives enough

reason to consider this as something other than an accident, possibly a murder. We have arrested the wooden legged fellow yesterday. The auto driver has identified him. Thanks again....."

There was a great feeling of having redeemed the world. But there was another call. This time it was a sweet voice, oozing love and affection, but having shocking contents. "We are aware that you talked to the DIG yesterday in the afternoon. It is not good for you to get involved in our private matters."

When there was an attempt made to reason out with him, he patiently - as one would explain to school kids - explained the ramifications. It did penetrate deep into the mind. It was felt that there was a great deal of difference between the villains shown in the movies and this fellow. His voice was like a mother's voice trying to feed her child by telling stories. There was suddenly a gush of love and respect towards this chap. At the same time, the dignity of his voice also resulted in tremendous nervousness. He said that there was no escape from the punishment due, for the mistake that had already been committed, but he was now calling up to ensure that the mistake would not be repeated. Considered inaction and nothing else could mitigate any further punishment. How would anybody react to such a call? In any case they were bound to cause physical harm by breaking the hand, the leg or by just killing. This was their way of taking revenge. Now, it was dangerous to resort to considered inaction. It was equally dangerous to act. Should the friendly DIG be approached for protection? Or, should there be some preparations at a personal level to the expected and inevitable assault?

6

There was a feeling of terrible loneliness as one walked heavily towards the DIG's office. There was also a feeling of a large void - felt by the fact that there was nobody to share the concerns and dilemmas. It was now dangerous to share it with the DIG. It was equally dangerous not to share it. To what extent would he appreciate the present predicament? One of the friends had recently suggested: "*Shaadi karlo, zindagi mein sahara chahiye.*" (get married, you need support in life) The answer that was shot back was - "Do you know that *sahara* is one of the largest deserts in the world?" The friend had answered that he did not know that!

Now, when one is going after these dilemmas, one feels that a companion would be desirable after all. For once, one feels that one could have fallen in love, just for the selfish needs of such situations. More stray thoughts occur. Like the thought that if what is being imagined had in fact happened and the companion was there, then would she also have been pulled into this dangerous whirlpool? Then the question that comes back is: What is *sahara* - a companionship or a desert?

It was not realised then that the reason for this battle within, which was leading to madness, was nothing other than fear. When the DIG's office was approached, the feeling was that the whole world was angry. One was being watched with mistrust. This led to a great doubt. Who was it that was mistrusting? Was it the world or the person carrying on with these dilemmas? Even the conductor on the bus looked as if he was ready to kill. The question asked by the neighbour in the bus was also killing - "Where to?" "Why?" etc. Was this fellow a part of the group? The reason for this mistrust was his question: "Why are you bothered about all these things?"

In the DIG's office, when a small form was being filled up, requesting for an interview, even his secretary had asked: "Why sir, why have you taken upon yourself to redeem this world? Don't you have anything better to do? How will you manage when you start getting summons from the court? Why don't you keep away from these wicked people?" These questions led to a doubt. Was the secretary also a part of.....? Who was real and what was false in this world?

After the interview with the DIG, the frame of mind was in no better shape. "We have just got a link of this episode. We also know where the chain would lead to, if we followed all the links. The only problem is that we do not know how to pull the chain and stop the process. This is because, we, in the police force are more bogged down by the links and we invariably find the chain cut off, midway. From there, it would be a search of a new link and a new chain. I am speaking this out of experience. If you can take my words, I would like to prevail upon you to keep away from all this." His words were a clear indication of all the good elements of cowardice that were so widely present in all human beings. As the steps fell out of the room, there was a strong need felt for a strong-hearted *sahara*.

It was, as usual, already late for work and there was a feeling of anxiousness as one got away from the police headquarters. Walking from the bus stop towards the office, there was also a queer feeling of being followed. Was it just a feeling and nothing else? Sometimes these strong feelings themselves seem to result in facts, as dreams turn out to be real. As the road became less and less crowded, the fear increased. Somebody came from behind and held the collar of the shirt, slapped on the face and gave a strong blow on the leg with a steel rod. The man smiled when he was looked at.

"This is the first lesson. It is good if you have learnt it" he said and dissolved. Not just him, at that moment, the whole world dissolved. Ultimately when one was trying to link up the lesson of living received just now, to link up fear with courage, trying to stand up on the feet, there was a beautiful girl, eagerly approaching. "Do you need any help?" This reestablished the belief in mankind which was gradually being lost over the past two days. Her beauty seemed to spread all around to

make the whole world beautiful. It was felt that it would be much better, if she did not come nearer. It took some effort to convince her that she had not seen anything now. When this effort bore fruit, there was a tail added to the conversation - in a suggestion that in future, when the circumstances were more favourable, she could be a *sahara* in life. She seemed to be confused at such blurting out. As she continued to give a kind, considerate look, she took two steps backwards.

While a great effort was made physically to stand up on the feet and mentally to catch an auto towards the police headquarters, in trying to limp towards the vehicle waiting slightly ahead, her voice sung back - "Could I know your name please?"

As a meaningful mischievous smile emerged in response to that question, the answer also slipped out of the mouth effortlessly.