

4+1

Nabarun Bhattacharya

ONE

It was a day of incessant rain, though not torrential enough to cause waterlogging. The wind was shivering cold and the light was weak. The tram driver could have been more cautious but not that he didn't press the brake. The tram had just taken a turn and wasn't running that fast either. In spite of the brake, when it skidded on the tracks before coming to a stop, the accident had already happened. The two at the front suffered minor injuries but the other two at the back got away with it. One of them had a crack on his forehead. Another hurt his nose and gums and teeth. They were bleeding. This was hearsay from the crowd which gathered immediately on the spot. Apart from the four men, there was one more who was dead. He hadn't died in the accident. He was an unmistakable corpse before all that could happen. They had been carrying him on a cot; his body bound to it with ropes and covered by a black plastic sheet. Generally we see flower and incense sticks around these cots in which corpses are carried but this one had nothing. It was known later that there were a broken pair of black rimmed glasses, a few pieces of chalk, some torn papers and a half-eaten thin arrowroot biscuit—all tied up in a dirty piece of cloth near the head of the dead man. It was hoped that the papers would offer some clue about his identity but they didn't. There was nothing on the papers barring some meaningless doodles. Perhaps one could draw a far-fetched meaning from them but there was no meaning to that meaning.

The tram driver was frightened for sure and there was no reason for him not to get frightened. The moment he had taken the turn, he could see them coming. The four men with the corpse. They were coming straight towards the tram. He was stunned and stood motionless in his driver's cage. There weren't too many pedestrians that day and yet a crowd gathered quite quickly. Everyone was shocked to find things as they were and the police were called in soon.

After colliding head on with the tram, the four carriers of the corpse had stopped for good and didn't move a bone. Until the police came and took them away, they hadn't given room for the tram to pass. Two of them at the front were bleeding. Everyone asked them to stand clear. Some excited young men thought they were deafened by heavy drinking. It was a cloudy and blurry day of rains after all and though the houses in this part of the city were old

and quite high, they did have bright new shops on their ground floors. The shadows creep in quickly in the afternoon. And that day, they were getting thicker by the minute. The intelligent citizens, who can always smell a rat or two, had said that it was just a stunt, a spectacle. According to them, the corpse was fake and the man was still alive and all these were actors. For them, everything was planned. Perhaps it was an ad for an upcoming play or some macabre idiot's bizarre joke. The policemen, who had come first, guessed something similar. And yet the four men didn't look like those lumpens who have a great time decking up a corpse during Dolyatra.¹ May be they were high on heroin. The common man and the common police think alike. Over them we have the uncommon thoughts of uncommon men and uncommon police. The newly appointed IPS officer had thought alike. Not that there was a lot of trouble. A few trams had stopped one after the other in a line. There was a crowd, four dead silent carriers of a corpse and the corpse itself, covered in a black plastic sheet. The corpse was that of a sinewy middle aged man with a cracked black rimmed glass covered in a dirty piece of cloth near his head. The frame of the glass had an old world thread attached to it. It looked like one of the glasses distributed in the free cataract operation camps that are set up in localities from time to time. Beside it were some remainders of chalks. One could barely write with them. And then there were the doodled papers with plus signs, dots and the number five written on them, according to the claims made but all this is the result of fruitlessly speculative research on almost illegible pencil scribbles. No one had any idea who had eaten half of the shabby looking biscuit. One could say with some certitude that it wasn't the dead man at least as nothing like that was informed after the postmortem. When trams stop after one another in a cue, the naked street children with festering wounds on their bodies rush in like blowflies to play their little games of climbing up and down. In the meantime the young IPS officer had instructed the policemen to arrest the four men along with the corpse. He used his resources to make sure that the corpse was immediately transferred to a mortuary where it could be preserved. The corpse could well be a booby trap. The four men were handcuffed and taken for investigations. The police report said that though they were holding on to the four legs of the cot tightly, when they were handcuffed, they had lost a bit of their stubbornness. They always looked straight ahead with eyes wide open. They wouldn't drop their eyelid, not even during the investigations, it is said.

The IPS officer was well within his rights to be suspicious. There were explosions in Bombay, Kokata² and southern India. Speculations about a Pak³-fed terrorism were in the air. In those horrible times, there was no taking risk, either in central or at state level. From

his Lenin, he well knew how the ultra-left and the ultra-right joined hands. They needed to know who these thin, slimy and experienced looking men were. It's true that Carlos⁴ had been caught but so what? Where's Tiger Memon⁵? What about the mystery of the actress falling to her death from a skyscraper⁶ or Nargis's son⁷? RDX, AK-47, drug, Uranium and Plutonium smuggling. Does India have an atom bomb? Whether they have it or not, under these circumstances, nothing is negligible. Real life isn't a 'Roja'⁸ or a '1942—a love story'⁹.

TWO

Before the investigations began, the forensics dealing with the corpse informed that it was the body of a weak and thin old man who had everything in his body that a human body would have but in an 'insulted' form. When a body part gets injured, or becomes weak due to a disease, the doctors say it's 'insulted.' For example, if one has had jaundice twice, once he gets well, the doctors would say, his liver has faced 'insult' twice over. The corpse tied to the cot with ropes under the cover of a black plastic sheet had 'insults' written into most of the vital organs—liver, kidney, bladder, penis, eye, scrotum and so on. Recently in the United States, experiments have shown that things like religion, poetry, love, violence, justice, theft, hunger, sexuality, wifely feelings, consciousness of having children, silence, desire to rape, love of music are all properties belonging to the different lobes of the human skull. This corpse hadn't been subjected to such experiments but there is hope still in the fact that the government has decided to preserve it and it still remains in the peace haven entirely on governmental expenses. Therefore, we can say that it's ready for those experiments.

The interrogations started gently so that information could be extracted from them by using that gentleness as a strategy. In investigations, there are always these twists and turns which eventually bamboozle the interrogated person and force him to speak the truth. But in this case, it didn't work because they didn't utter a single word. Those who interrogate are not always masters of speech and occasionally they even resort to violence. Some say, they do that deliberately while others believe it happens in the heat of the moment. Whatever be it, this second type of interrogation started with the two at the back who were unharmed by the accident. Slaps made no impression. They were dangled and kicked but that didn't work either. Things could have become lethal, had the young IPS not intervened. He stopped the

violent interrogation. After treatment for a couple of days, they once again stood up on their feet. And then all four were sent to the doctors.

THREE

Let's not get into the mundane details of experiments like flashing light on the eyes or knocking the knee joints with small hammers. More than one electrodes were inserted into their brains. Let's make one thing clear to the readers here that they mustn't take this as a third variety of investigation. Science isn't torture though torture uses science. The eminent doctors called a meeting after observing the lines of light on the monitoring machine. After this they gave the head of the police a detailed report in English. He kept a photocopy of it and forwarded the original to the Ministry of Home Affairs where they too preserved a photocopy and sent the original to higher officials. The report used complicated technical expressions like "no evoked potential in auditory/visual cortex on peripheral sensory stimulation" or "sensory aphasia" or "sensorial deficit" etc. What all that came down to in simple language was that all four of them were blind, deaf and dumb. If someone is blind and deaf, he has to be dumb. And if that's the case, it's impossible to establish any communication with him. All efforts failed. When you supplied food to them by making them hold the plate or the glass, they would respond. One can't know if they can smell. The countenance doesn't change at all and the eyelids don't fall either. They don't hear, they don't see and they don't speak. They'd never hear, see or speak. There's no way one can ever know anything from them. They have been imprisoned in one particular place. On the other hand, the original continues to get transferred from one place to another with the number of photocopies on the increase with every movement. But even that journey will eventually come to a stop with the governor. Even then, there's no chance of knowing anything about the four blind, deaf and dumb carriers of the corpse.

FOUR

The corpse is in an ultra-modern preservatory now. Only a few American billionaires have kept their bodies intact in preservatories more sophisticated than this. They are hoping that science in near future will be able to bring them back to life with its newest discovery. And if that happens, they'll wake up after a few hundred years skipping two or three generations and

resume their business and recreations. We can't say that our own corpse has similar thoughts and desires. Though if he can be revived, perhaps the veil of mystery will lift. The young IPS officer didn't think on these lines.

As we have already said, the four men are locked up elsewhere. The doors of their chamber are as strong as they can get. They are always locked with security guards sitting outside all the time. There is a little square opening with net on the ceiling through which the lights of the sun and the moon do their diagonal scribbles across the room. And when the sun and the moon change their positions in the sky, the light flees in a moment like a magical cat, as if never there. Sometimes there are squirrels that come and sit on the net and peck on it. Occasionally the gay wind glides into the chamber and looking at the four prisoners, stumbles into stillness. Their eyelids don't move. They sit silently on the floor. The security guards don't like to do their work, especially at night. Some of them have made claims of hearing murmurs and chuckles from inside the chamber. The young IPS officer still visits the place from time to time but it won't be fair to continue calling him young because time is passing as relentlessly as ever. Only inside the corpse-carriers' chamber, time has come to a stop, as it were.

Whose corpse is it? What's his name? Does he have a friend or relation in this world? How did he die? What's the identity of the four carriers? Which burning ghat were they going to, that day? How could they ever reach the burning ghat? How could something like this ever happen?

If anyone knows anything about this, he or she is requested to come forward and inform the concerned authority. The authorities are still waiting.

-----Translated by Arka Chattopadhyay

Glossary:

¹ The Indian festival of colours.

² Bombay and Kolkata are names of metropolitan cities in India.

³ 'Pak' refers to Pakistan, one of India's neighbouring countries with whom it has always had a fraught relationship.

⁴ Carlos is the pseudonym of an Indian terrorist who was in the news in mid 90s when the story was written.

⁵ Tiger Memon was another Indian terrorist who was allegedly behind the 1993 Bombay bomb blast case.

⁶ This is perhaps an allusion to the Bollywood actress Vidya Bharti who fell to death from her five-storey apartment on April 5, 1993.

⁷ Nargis (1929-1981) was a popular Hindi film actress whose son Sanjay Dutt (1959-), also a film actor, was accused of being involved in the Bombay blasts of 1993 with charges of illegal possession of arms.

⁸ 'Roja' (1992) was a Tamil film directed by Mani Ratnam which tackled issues like border terrorism.

⁹ '1942—A Love Story' (1994) was a Hindi language film, directed by Vidhu Vinod Chopra. It dealt with the Pre-Independence years and the violent struggles and counter-struggles of Indian independence.