

Translation

Waryam Singh Sandhu*

The Fourth Direction

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A note about the author: Waryam Singh Sandhu, born 10 September 1945 in Nanke in British Punjab, is an Indian author of Punjabi-language short stories. He published his first story *Akhan vic mar gayī khuṣī* (n.d. “Happiness Has Died in the Eyes”) in the Punjabi magazine *Prītlarī*. Sandhu holds a Doctor of Philosophy and was a professor at Lyallpur Khalsa College, in Jalandhar, from which he retired. He began writing non-fiction after his retirement. He wrote volumes about the Ghadar Party, an early anticolonial movement among Punjabis. In 2000, he was awarded the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for his short story collection titled *Cauthī kūṭ* (Fourth Direction), from which this eponymous story derives. In 2019, he returned his Sahitya Akademi Award in protest of the Modi administration. His work has been translated in Hindi, Bengali, Urdu and English. In 2015, two stories from *Cauthī kūṭ* were adapted into film, including this story. This story is situated in the Punjab during the so-called Khalistan insurgency when the state was mired in communal violence between Sikhs and Hindus as well as violence perpetrated by Khalistani militants and security forces alike.

A note about the translator: C. Christine Fair is a professor at Georgetown University within the Center for Security Studies. Her translations have appeared in *The Punch Magazine*, *Orientalia Suecana*, *Bangalore Review*, *Borderless*, *Kitaab*, *Setu*, *Muse India*, *The Bombay Literary Magazine* and *The Bombay Review*.

Just as the sun set in the west and slunk below the tall trees, my heart began to sink heavily.

I sometimes glanced at my watch. At other times, I glimpsed the speed of the bus or the driver, and sometimes I looked outside at the spreading darkness. I looked at Juggal Kishor’s face. He was seated next to me to my right. I looked for signs of fear or worry on his face, when Juggal instead flashed a smile.

“This driver is such an asshole. He slows the bus down if any vehicle comes from the opposite direction. It’s like he’s saying, ‘Oh My Majesty! You go first, sir! I’ll just halt this bus for you if you ask!’...What a fucking moron.”

Then, Juggal tossed his head askance to indicate his annoyance.

Instead of responding to his remark, I began counting those passengers on the bus who appeared to be Sikh and those who seemed to be Hindu. Those wearing turbans outnumbered those without by two. I may have gotten the count wrong because of distractions and my haste. So, I cleared that count and began again. Now the counts of both kinds of passengers were equal. I managed to beat off a feeling of defeat. I sighed in relief and leaned back into my seat for a minute. I removed a comb from my pocket and ran it through my hair.

Then I put the comb back in my pocket. I watched the evening’s twilight spreading outside the window.

Looking into the darkness, it seemed the blackness chased off the momentary sense of relief I found in my count.

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After the sun goes down, bus travel is tantamount to taking a stroll with death.

And then, traveling in this direction?

Some days ago, I received a letter from my cousin, Rakesh, who lives in Delhi. He wrote, "I wanted to attend Sheela's wedding. But brother! To tell the truth, I was afraid of coming to Punjab. Coming to Amritsar, in particular, reminds me of when we were young when Grandmother told us that "Fourth Direction" story. You remember that story, don't you? So many times, we would huddle together, wrapped in her quilt, listening to that tale. Back when we were in the fourth grade, I stayed with you for three months in Amritsar when I came down with typhoid. After I recovered, Grandmother took me to the Golden Temple to bow down in the inner sanctum. She had me bathe in the sacred pool beneath the sacred juju tree in the Golden Temple. In the evening, when she went to sleep, and in the morning when she'd wake up and eat, she would recite, 'Oh Guru Ramdas...Oh Guru Ramdas.' I wanted so badly to go and get a glimpse of that divine soul's face. I don't know whether she has a year or six months to live. That's it, brother. Because of fear, I am not coming. There is no other excuse. I am sending a draft for Rs. 500. Please get something for your sister from me. Also, please convey my apologies to Uncle and Auntie. No matter how old a man may be, who doesn't want to return to his maternal home? But..."

In my mind, we were young and were listening to grandmother tell us the story of the prince, Rajkumar, upon whom this condition was laid. He could travel in three directions without fear—but not in the fourth direction. Should he move in that fourth direction, with every step and every turn, he will endanger his life evermore. He won't be able to return alive if he goes in that direction.

But the prince, out of curiosity and bravery, set off in the fourth direction. And, having fought all those dangers single-handedly, not only did he make it back alive, but he even returned with many priceless treasures.

While my name Rajukumar means "prince," I was a pale shadow of the brave prince in that story. I am but a clerk in a high school in a village far from the border in the district of Amritsar in whose mind there is only enough curiosity and bravery that I would reach Jalandhar by bus as soon as possible...at least before the last train from Jalandhar to Amritsar.

However, where I go to perform my duty, just doing your job in those villages requires no less bravery for men who look like me. And what about bravery right now? You never know who is going to shoot at you from your right side or left. You never know who your enemy is, what he's capable of, or when he will attack.

The bus light was shining directly over my head. The light made visible some lines written on the bus ceiling.

"Passengers, your belongings are your own responsibility."

After I read the lines, I looked towards Juggal. Smirking, I told him what I had just read.

"Someone should also write here, 'Passengers, your life is also your responsibility.'"

Juggal began laughing. He pointed toward another line of writing on the other side of the bus and began reading it aloud: "Do not stick your head or arms out of the bus." Then, speaking on behalf of the gun-toting militants who would often board the bus, "Do not put your head or arms outside...we will come inside instead..."

We tried to laugh at ourselves, but our laughter was tinged with dread.

We got Juggal's work done in the office of the Chandigarh Director of Public Instruction. We then reached the bus station and found that we had missed the last bus to Amritsar by five minutes. It's not difficult to imagine the difficulty that people like us face when we miss the last bus and have no place to stay. Especially nowadays, when there is no place to stay, just staying alive is a challenge of epic proportions.

We needed to reach Amritsar by night. We had committed to returning home on time. If we didn't reach home by night, it would mean that the family members of both households would be fearful

and anxious all night long. I have never stayed out at night until now except for going to a wedding or a funeral. As soon as the sun goes down, we'd return to the house and lock the door...There was one more thing—in the morning, the daughter of my colleague, Master Harcharan is getting married. Harcharan was a good man. When my sister Sheela got married, he loaned me Rs. 10,000, which I still hadn't repaid. We also relied upon him for mustard seeds for oil, basmati and other rice, jaggery and sugar cane as we required. I never behaved towards him as if I had a higher status. Whether dealing with the efficiency bar or the office of the District Education Officer, I would have the matter settled...without taking any money from him. Now, if I don't reach by morning, then what will he say? I couldn't even countenance the possibility that I would not return to celebrate the bride and groom. Now, where will people like us find the money to spend a night at the hotel?

"Raju! Look! Remember those days when we'd finish our work and go have a small peg, watch a film, take a late-night bus from Chandigarh to Amritsar, then take a brief nap and be ready for duty first thing in the morning?"

He seemed to be speaking of some Punjab from a bygone era. Like a dream...so far away...somewhere back in time.

Someone said that the last bus to Jalandhar had yet to leave. If we took that bus, we could catch the last train to Amritsar from Jalandhar.

Throughout the journey, my mind was racing faster than the bus. Time and time again, I looked down at my watch to calculate how much time it would take the bus to reach one city and then the next—Khararh, Ropar, Navanshahr, Banga, Phagwara—as if the bus were following the fixed schedule as I had imagined. But at each destination, the bus arrived later than I had estimated. It seemed that the gap between when it should've arrived and when it arrived was widening. I began to fret, 'What if we don't reach Jalandhar on time?'

I told myself, "Don't think about reaching Jalandhar on time; rather, think about getting there safely." I felt as if someone might put the cold barrel of a pistol to the driver's temple and tell him to turn the bus in the direction of a link road to some village then, in the next moment, the Sikh who was seated behind me would open his "account" by killing me first to begin settling this evening's score.

Juggal, recollecting the old times, said, "Look! In those days, if someone missed the bus, people would sleep wherever they wanted, using their arms as pillows. What have they done?"

I agreed with him. Suddenly, I became fixated on the last sentence, "What have they done?" I asked myself, "Who has brought all of this upon us?" Then, an image of the baptized Sikh who the Director of Physical Education from our school came to my mind. He said, "Brahmins! Who else?" He couldn't bring himself to say "Hindu." He would simply say "Brahmin," in a grave tone of voice. Then he would say, "What a community of thieves, dishonest and untrustworthy, clever and deceitful, they can never be trusted. At first, they said 'Stay with us.' Let us get independence. We'll give you a place to live in and enjoy the warmth of freedom.' Then independence came, and now we are a criminal class. And then they put a burning tire around our neck. Then, they came to some agreement with us, but they backtracked from it all. If the Singhs raise their voices, the Brahmins will scream. The Sikhs are carrying all of India on their head."

The truth is, I never said a word to counter him. Whoever did speak up, they just said "Yes. Yes." and left it at that. Sure, I was angry that our entire community was being denounced as untrustworthy. But no other staff member said a word. We just ignored what he said. Who wants to invite death by speaking up? Now, a young man who had studied in our school up and left to join a militant group. Four months hadn't even passed before militants barged into a high school in a village adjoining our own and, in under a minute, shot and killed three teachers in broad daylight, then absconded.

The bus jerked to a sudden stop. It was Jalandhar Cantonment. We thought we could easily grab a train from here and save time. We asked someone standing on the station stairs. He informed us the

train had already left. He said, "Take a three-wheeler. Go ahead and try to catch the train from Jalandhar. It just left here a few moments ago."

Cursing the bus driver, we hurriedly took a three-wheeler. When we arrived at the Jalandhar railway station, we learned that the train had already left. I slapped my forehead in exasperation.

"Now what?"

Juggal's fearsome question was like a spear piercing my body. I racked my brain, trying to find an answer.

"Now our only alternatives were to sprout wheels on our feet or sit on a flying chariot and shoot through the sky until we reach Amritsar.

I sat on a wooden bench on the platform. I felt the exasperation in my words.

Instead of talking to me, Juggal began complaining about the government, which stopped running trains or buses to Amritsar with a fixed schedule after dark.

After some time, a train arrived from Ludhiana and stood on the platform. I got up from the bench optimistically. The passengers began getting down from the train. Before I could say anything, Juggal asked a detraining passenger, "Is this going to Amritsar?"

"No, sir. I don't think so. It only comes as far as this station." Then, the passenger went off ahead. The last glimmer of hope in us was extinguished.

The detraining passengers slowly made their way outside. We were stranded on the platform, disheartened, sad and worried.

Some security employees—including men from the Railway Police, Central Reserve Police Force, and Punjab Police—entered the empty compartment and checked them. They wanted to ensure no anti-social elements were hiding on the train. One by one, they were closing the windows and doors of the compartments.

"Sir, are you trying to reach Amritsar?" A middle-aged Sikh clutching a small suitcase came over and stood near us. He had watched us inquire about the train.

I gave the Sikh a once-over from head to foot. It's a fact that I viewed him with suspicion. But in the next moment, my doubt dissipated.

"I too need to reach Amritsar...I was running late...I made a mistake...This train is supposed to be going to Amritsar from here...but it will go empty from here...without any passengers...Maybe if we beg someone..."

He shared our predicament, and our shared need brought us together.

"Who should we ask then?" I asked him.

"The guards who are accompanying the train...Maybe one of them will have some mercy."

A sergeant from the Punjab Police stood outside the compartment before us. He told a soldier who had entered the compartment: "Chindia! Look above and below the seats thoroughly!"

We considered speaking to that sergeant. Juggal and I were two steps behind him. The Sikh was the most appropriate person to ask the Sikh sergeant.

"Sir! Sir! The three of us are travelers trying to get to Amritsar. Would you possibly be able to help us? We will return the favor in any way you require."

It seemed to me that the Sikh was very thoughtful with all that talk about "returning the favor."

We were looking in the direction of the sergeant's face.

"No. No. Brother. Those of us in the Punjab Police already have a bad reputation...and...um...if we take money to take passengers...Go ask someone else, sir..." Then, without even paying us any attention, he asked the soldier getting down from the train, "Everything okay, sir?"

"All good. F.I.T., fit..." the soldier replied. Then, laughing, he stood up and began walking towards another soldier.

All three of us began to look at each other.

"I'll find out..." Dugal said as he headed towards an employee of the Railway Police. He returned a short while later, and before we could even ask, he began laughing and said, "What a bunch of sons of whores. No one is going to help. We are screwed."

That same sergeant passed by us again. This time, I entreated him, "Please, Honorable Sikh Sir! Please have mercy upon us."

"Have mercy upon whom? Sir, is this my father's train?" He was a little irritated. But he did come near us to say, "Go talk to the guard."

We set off towards the guard's compartment optimistically. He was speaking with someone outside. We stood a few steps away from him, out of courtesy. But it didn't seem like they would ever stop talking. How long would we be standing there? Maybe long enough for the train's departure time to come and go, and we still wouldn't have been able to speak with him.

"Sir! You do the talking..." Perhaps having seen the guard's appearance, the Sikh prompted me.

I went forward and began to stutter, "Sir! We are stuck in a massive way. We got off the bus from Chandigarh. We thought we could catch a train from Jalandhar. But the train had already left...Please take us to Amritsar...We would be so grateful to you...After all, only men can help out other men who are in trouble...Perhaps we could go in your compartment, standing?"

From his looks, the guard seemed like an amiable fellow. I was anticipating his kind response.

"Good sir! Take a good look at the situation...Taking an extra person...It would endanger my job...rather it would endanger my life...I have no idea who you are...whether or not you are trustworthy...If the situation was normal, why would we even take an empty train? Usually, the government stops the trains only with careful consideration...I understand your predicament...and I sympathize with you...But I just cannot take on this responsibility...because of the situation...I am sorry..." He shook hands with the man beside him and entered the compartment.

"Uncle Situation," Juggal laughed and then began talking about Pandit Ram Chand who these days says repeatedly, "The situation is very bad...it's very difficult for a thinking person to stay alive in this kind of situation. This is not that situation when people would come out to help people like brothers, hug each other, and be happy. These leaders and greedy ministers have poisoned the situation...No one can be trusted...A man wanders around, thirsting for the blood of another man...That situation no longer exists...!"

People gave Pandit Ram Chand the nickname of "Pandit Situation." People would tease him "Pandit Situation Sir!...Now when will this situation change?"

Juggal began to ask, "Where has this 'Guard Situation' come from?"

That same sergeant came and informed the guard, "OK Sir! Ready."

"Are your men seated?"

"Yes. Yes..." The sergeant instinctively lifted his hand to salute.

The guard stood in the compartment door and waved the green signal. The train whistled then began to shake and lurch.

Now, what can we do?

All of a sudden, I went to the door and grabbed it. The guard was standing in front of me.

"What are you doing, sir? Get back."

I took two steps and began begging, "Sir, please! I am your Hindu brother...If you can't sympathize...who else will? Please have mercy upon us."

I felt as if there was some small degree of flexibility in his demeanor. I put my foot on the doorstep and entered the compartment. Juggal came in right after me. The guard said to Juggal angrily, "Look! What are you doing? Are you out of your mind?"

In that amount of time, the train had slowly begun to depart. The middle-aged Sikh with the suitcase started running with the train and begging the guard. The guard was blocking the door.

"No sir. No Honorable Sikh Sir."

"For god's sake...I won't add much weight to the freight of this train...May your children live long."

I stayed silent because I feared that that guard might make us get off the train. But then I began to feel some affinity for the Sardar.

"It's nothing...He's with us...Let him come..." Once inside, I felt I had established some right over the compartment and even over the guard!

"If you have so much sympathy, get off the train..." the guard said, looking in my direction to rebuke me. In the meantime, the Sikh put his neck under the guard's arms and forced his way into the compartment.

The guard, in helplessness, was saying, "You have crossed the line, friend! You are a piece of work...This is not the way..." He was muttering at the three of us.

In the meantime, the train had already departed from the platform.

"Maybe I should stop the train at some station like Butari and toss your likes off the train somewhere along the way. You are only thinking of yourselves. Not anyone else. I gave one of you permission, and the three of you barged into the compartment. There is no place for compassion. Let's go on and see what happens..."

In his words, "Let's go on and see what happens," there was a big and terrifying warning. Upon crossing the Beas River, it seemed as if he might stop the train and kick us off the train. In the tall elephant grass where the terrorists hide or where, on the pretext of having to piss, terrorists escape police custody and abscond.

"It's nothing, sir...nothing." Juggal put his hands on the guard's knees.

"Oh," he turned his head in anger and hatred.

I became very worried when, upon coming back to my senses, I looked around in this smallish cabin. There were four more people. Two were sitting, having tightly squeezed themselves on the seat for luggage, and two were sitting upon a wooden trunk. None of them contributed to our conversation. Maybe they were like us. Their silence spoke as if it were trying to tell themselves:

"You just mind your own self...what business do you have to do with anyone else?"

My mind was numb from the day's hustle, rush, fear, and anxiety. I began to examine closely the faces of every person in the compartment. The two Hindu men sitting on the luggage seat, with their heads bowed, were perhaps railway employees. I concluded this based on their conversation with the guard. Two Sikh young men were seated together on the wooden trunk. One was a slender boy whose mustache and beard were just coming in with a maroon turban tied tightly upon his head. His turban seemed to be that of a college youth. The other was about five to seven years older. He was heavy set. He was wearing a blue turban and had a thick and flowing beard. They didn't speak with anyone. They just sat there, huddled together in silence.

Their silence struck me as being somewhat conspiratorial. People who sit silently like that are like crouching leopards waiting for the appropriate moment to pounce.

I looked again with a little more attention, and the older youth reminded me of our school's Director of Physical Education. He too, was looking at me very attentively. At least, that is what it seemed to me.

Looking at his face, it seemed as if he was looking for a chance to say something. Perhaps, like the Director of Physical Education he might say something like "At last, I have the offspring of Gangu the Brahmin in my custody. Even if you escape today, where will you run, son? The incident at the Harmandir still pangs me. No one has ever won when fighting against the Sikhs."

Then, all at once, I began to tremble when that young man called out to me in a loud voice "Sir Ji..."

I tilted my head as if I were a child asking a question.

"One of you should come over and sit with us...we'll make room for you...two of you can sit on that trunk near you. Sit down. There's a long way to go...it's going to take at least an hour or an hour and a quarter...You will get tired standing that long..."

For a moment, it seemed that in my fear, my imagination was turning ropes into snakes. I recognized concern in that young man's voice, and I felt ashamed. But still, I didn't want to go near him. I told the middle-aged Sikh to go.

"May you live long! May you live long! Wonderful!" The Sikh squeezed himself in and sat down while patting the back of the Sikh in the maroon turban.

I motioned to Juggal that he should sit on the trunk. Juggal motioned to the guard, who was looking out the window, staring intently at the dense darkness and the lights shining far away in the distance. I glanced down to suggest that he could sit down. We had just sat down when one of the two men who seemed to be railway workers began to say to us, "You watch yourself so that you don't break that trunk with your weight."

The trunk was heavy and strong. But, having seen how the guard behaved with us, he wanted to impress the guard. Seeing us sitting on the trunk, the guard barked, "Go ahead and break it! Just break it. You can't do anything good..."

I immediately got up as if I were a student, fearful after being rebuked by a teacher.

"Sit down...Sit down...Now..." He announced his verdict by lowering his hand. Like a trained dog, I quietly sat down on the trunk. I felt like one of those toys that you wind up with a key. Without a heart or mind. Without flesh or blood...Just a rubber machine.

I had encountered very few such terrifying nights. I could recall just one such night. About ten years ago, I had to go to my wife's family in Rampur because her sister was getting married. That day, I went with the headmaster to withdraw the salaries from the bank. It got late distributing the salaries to the teachers. I also needed my salary. How could I attend a wedding without money? When I reached the city and boarded a bus with my wife and son, it was already 5:30 during those winter days. But those were good times. Upon getting down at the bus station, the sun had already set. The road to Rampur was a mile ahead, passing through another village. There was another road. It was an unpaved road that came out from the fields of Rampur after traveling some 25 or 30 acres through the fields of another village. This road went straight to the outskirts of Rampur. Because that route was shorter, I picked up Nitu, and I told my wife to follow behind me, and we began making our way along the mud foot paths between the fields. It was a dark night. Slipping and sliding on the dirt path, we continued along in a straight direction. My wife was mad at me for making us leave so late. She was wearing jewelry about her neck. We were carrying money. If we were to run into any hooligans, we might get robbed. But I was encouraging her. I thought I saw a bulb flickering ahead on the property of that farmhouse from which the dirt road to Rampur passed.

When we reached the bulb, it was not the house with two acacia trees from which the dirt road to Rampur began. Instead, it was a small house for the farm workers, on top of which the bulb shone. The sounds of people talking could be heard from within the house. In the faint light of the bulb, gray smoke was rising in the air, and the smell of freshly brewed liquor had spread throughout the air. Drunk men...a lone woman with me unarmed...suddenly hundreds of ugly thoughts came to mind. I began to tremble.

We got lost. I put my finger to my wife's lips and told her to stay quiet. Far off in the distance, some eight to ten acres away, a bulb shone on the left side and another on the right. Maybe the actual farmhouse we are looking for is somewhere between the two bulbs. I looked back towards the bus station and, adjudging it to be on the right; I thought that the bulb on the left must belong to the farmhouse.

Slipping and sliding on the mud path through the fields, frightened and worried, we headed straight toward the bulb while remaining vigilant about our surroundings. Nitu, hearing our fright-

ened whispers, became afraid and began to sob. Upon reaching the farmhouse, there was no sight of the acacia trees. Where were we? My wife became tearful. After falling into the canal, her feet and sandals were caked in mud.

"You are going to get me robbed today..." She said tearfully, and then she began to sob. Inside, I felt the tremors of fear and anxiety. Still, I gathered my courage and told her, "Don't be absurd."

"I'm going to call out to the people in the house...there's livestock...so there has to be a family in there..."

"No...No...No...Be careful..." My wife cautioned me. She was terrified.

"It's nothing. You just take Nitu. I'll check it out first and then come back..."

I hollered from outside when a dog began to bark inside the house, followed by someone saying, "Who is it?"

A 30- to 35-year-old young man came to the door.

"Oh my friend!...The fact of the matter is that I am trying to get to Pandit Ramnath's house in Rampur...I am his son-in-law. Instead of taking the main road, we set off on our own through the mud paths toward the dirt road. Then we got lost..."

"Aha! That road is over there, to the east. You have come west," said the young man standing in the doorway.

"Hey! Who is it, Surjit?" came a woman's voice from inside."

The young man explained who we were when a 50- to 55-year-old woman came into the courtyard, "Son! Bring them inside! Any son-in-law of Ramnath is a son-in-law of ours! Son! Our village is also in Rampur...Because our fields were far away, we settled here. You must be the husband of the eldest sister, Dulari?"

"No, mam...I'm the husband of the younger daughter, Parvati...who married in the city..."

"Come inside. Surjit! You're blocking the path...Let them come in..."

Surjit laughed and let us go. Because there was no danger, I told my wife, who was standing behind me, to go in first.

"Come, Paro! This is your uncle's house...you crazy girl. Why are you standing outside..." She came forward and batted Parvati's head.

Then she sat us on a bed and warmed some water. Then Kartar Kaur had Parvati's muddy feet cleaned.

"Are you crazy? You shouldn't be traveling in these early hours. Fine. You are coming to see your sister's wedding. But girls are supposed to come two to four days early to help with the arrangements...but sisters! You are a city girl now...you don't have that kind of time."

Then, despite our numerous refusals, auntie ordered her daughter-in-law to warm some milk for us.

After giving us milk, she told Surjit to go with us, "I was just saying, son! You should stay here! But, because today is the wedding festivities, if you don't reach, then Misr Huni will worry. So go then Surjit. Take them to the border of the village..."

Surjit, with a flashlight in one hand and stick in the other, came and stood near us, "Give him sister. Hand Nitu over to me...Come you little city boy." He extended his arms towards Nitu. But seeing an unknown man with a stick, Nitu became frightened and clung to his mother's shoulder.

"It's nothing brother ji..." Parvati said.

"You dirty darling! This stick isn't for scaring you; rather..." Surjit didn't finish the sentence.

Then, Surjit turned on the flashlight and began walking in front of us, while shining the flashlight upon the mud path, he showed us the way to go and, after taking us to the limit of the village, he returned.

Chug...Chug...Chug.

The train was crossing the bridge over the Beas River when the sound of the train brought me back to my senses.

"You behaved poorly...getting on the train forcefully like that..." the guard again addressed me.

"Should I toss you from the train, or have you arrested?" He hit me over the head with another hammer. What other form of torture did he have?

"Sir! Please forgive us, we were desperate..." It seemed from his brusqueness and rude behavior it seemed that he could do anything.

"You only appreciate your own desperation, but not ours...If I get caught for taking you...What would happen to my job? How will I manage in these times? Do you understand the atmosphere? Who knows who you folks are or what kind of people you are...Who knows whether you are those sorts of people...And if there is some mishap, what recourse do I have?"

He was right according to his own logic. I looked towards the young man who resembled the Director of Physical Education 'Who knows if he's one of those people...'

The guard seeing me look in their direction, perhaps, understood that I wanted to know why the guard was silent about them. He wanted to balance the scale of his logic.

"Now, these Sikhs gave me such a compelling reason that I could not refuse them. They were a small group so I could let it go..." Then the guard fell silent.

The older youth spoke, "We are so grateful to you...We are indebted to you..."

Then for some time, there was silence in the compartment. The sounds of the train were bumping around in my thoughts. I again began to feel ill at ease. What kind of irresistible reason did these Sikhs give? What did they tell the guard?

The guard was looking outside. The middle-aged Sikh who climbed on board with us said quietly, but in a way that the guard could hear, looking half towards the young men seated nearby and half at us "We should help him out in some way. At a minimum, the cost of the fare..."

He withdrew a Rs. 10 note from his pocket. I then Juggal and I handed over Rs. 10 notes to him. The youth with the open beard took out a Rs. 20 note and handed it over to the Sikh.

The guard was now looking at us. Seeing the young man hand the note over to the Sikh, he said "Leave it. Leave them and return the Rs. 20 note..."

The Sikh extended the Rs. 30 towards the guard when the guard told one of the two railway employees, "Murari, take it..."

Murari took the Rs. 30 and put it in his pocket. Once he put the money in his pocket, for a moment, I felt free of tension. I closed my eyes and tried to relax. But that spark of doubt inside me began to burn again. "Maybe the guard isn't afraid of them...?"

Then it seemed to me that the face of that young man and the face of the DPE began to merge into one large face that spread throughout the compartment. In my ears, the voice of the DPE echoed, "We, too, will eventually dominate."

Harcharan and the other Sikh teachers rarely said such caustic things to others. Among themselves, they may say whatever they want, but in mixed company, they tend to talk about issues we have in common. Amongst themselves, they probably said all sorts of things. But they rarely spoke as openly as the DPE. On that day, he was saying "Now, the police are murdering young men in fake encounters like what happened to Brother Mir Manuu. Incidents like the one with Mir Manuu have doubled and quadrupled...Where are the laws and courts? The police are the law...Police are the witness...Police are the judges...and the police are the executioners...This is our democracy."

That day, Naresh, a math teacher, upon hearing the DPE's "domination" speech, pulled me aside and began to say, "He's unnecessarily making a hue and cry...The police...the witnesses...the judges...everyone has been murdered...who is going to convict them in the courts...regarding this nonsense of "eventually dominating," whatever party comes to power in the Punjab, the Chief Minister will be

from their community...The president of India belongs to them...at the center, there are always one or two important ministers from their community. In the army and police forces, the high-ranking officers are theirs...Compare their numbers and the percentages of important posts they occupy..."

Before he even finished, I burst out laughing and said, "Now brother, even the domination of the days and nights are theirs...a murder here...a murder there...bang...boom."

The young men sitting in front of us were silent. The younger one may have spoken once or twice during the entire journey! The danger I made them into now seemed so baseless.

But that danger loomed over our heads. When we crossed Mananvala, the guard told us, "We cannot let you off at the station. We have to let you off before. If you get off at the station, you and we will be needlessly interrogated...maybe you'll be arrested."

Upon entering the city limits of Amritsar, the train began to slow down. Just as the train passed through the railway crossing at Jaure we reached Golden Avenue, where the train's speed slowed down considerably.

"Go, sir, go! Get down sir...This is an ideal place to get off the train...It's flat..." Even though there was a faint moonlight spreading out, he nonetheless turned on his flashlight and told us to jump off at the sight of the level tracks. "Hurry up...Hurry..."

I was in front by the door. I grabbed the bar on the door and put my foot on the step, then turned my body such that I was looking forward and slowly and carefully stepped down upon the track. After a distance of some 10-15 yards, Juggal also got off. And after a short distance, the others began getting down from the train. But we had neither the need to see nor wait for them. Following the tracks at night was not a trivial danger. Someone could say accusatorily "They were sabotaging the tracks and trying to cause the train to flip over..."

I told Juggal "Let's get off the railway tracks and head straight towards those poles, towards the population..."

We then began walking very quickly. The truth of the matter was I was afraid of those Sikh young men. Who knows who they were? They were suspicious. Mysterious...Silent...

While walking, I turned and looked back. Those two had gotten off the train and were heading straight for us. The older Sikh perhaps got off somewhere further up the tracks. Seeing them coming towards us very quickly, my heart began to race. I told Juggal to walk even faster.

"They sure seem like dangerous men to me..."

In the meantime, along with hearing the sounds of their fast steps, we could hear them speaking softly.

One was saying "Run and catch up with them." This voice was perhaps that of the younger one. I was sweating from head to toe. I envisioned them catching up to us any minute and then "Bang! Bang!" Bullets, entering my back and passing out through my chest. I paid attention to the voices behind me "No! We should call out..." The older young man was saying.

We were frightened and didn't say a word to the other. They were coming even faster and the distance between us was closing. I began to tell Juggal to run when a voice from behind said, "Sir" ...In absolute terror, I froze; it was as if my feet were shackled. Juggal also froze.

"You guys just fled...you didn't take us with you..." The older youth began to explain, "The truth of the matter is that my aunt, the little one's mother, died today sometime around three o'clock in the afternoon. I was bringing him back from Jalandhar. He got delayed. We begged the hapless guard, and he said gave us permission to come."

I couldn't think of anything to say. I couldn't fully free myself from the grip of terror.

"Come on, let's go!" he said. I stood there, terrified. Seeing me frozen in fear, the older young youth said "So the truth of the matter is that both of us are afraid that perhaps someone from the CRPF or police would see us and discern from our appearance that we are Sikh and shoot us...these

days, no one bothers with investigating murders. ...If we encounter someone, we'll be spared if we are with you..."

As he spoke, the fog of tension and fear slowly dissipated. The blood that froze in my veins began to thaw and flow again.

Relaxed, I began to walk ahead of them and told them not to be afraid.

I was walking ahead, and the thought occurred to me that I was Surjit and in my hand was a stick and a flashlight!

Then I, who was that prince Rajkumar if only in name, was heading into the fourth direction bravely.