

LIVES; A Show of Faith

By Meera Nair
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"There's a dead Hindu in the building," says the Muslim watchman. We are standing inside the gates of my apartment complex in the South Indian town of Hyderabad. Outside, except for a stray dog nosing through a garbage bin and the armed soldiers at the corner, the sun-rinsed street is deserted. The city is under curfew for the eighth straight day, and the soldiers have orders to shoot violators on sight. They announce this fact at intervals, politely, over megaphones.

It is December 1990. Hindu fundamentalists have once again tried to tear down a 400-year-old mosque in Ayodhya. They claim that Babar, the Mogul emperor, razed a Hindu temple to Ram, the Hindu god-king, to build the mosque. The mosque is only slightly damaged. But it is enough to make mythic hatreds between Hindus and Muslims bubble to the surface.

"It was a mistake," the watchman says. The dead man was a laborer, newly arrived from North India, one of a gray, overlooked brigade that polished floors. His downfall was that he spoke an unfamiliar rural dialect.

"He was shouting something, but no one understood." The watchman is insistent, a town crier with an important proclamation. "So the Hindus thought he was a Muslim and cut him."

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"Where was he?" I ask.

"His wife found his body in the alley behind the building," he jerks his thumb over his shoulder. "Fate! What else?" he cries, trying to answer the unanswerable. "He had to be there at that

time." I look away from his darting Kohl-rimmed eyes and his rumpled khaki uniform. I didn't want him to sense my unease.

I want to believe his version -- that it was a tragic misunderstanding. But first, I want him to explain how he knows the details -- the worker's futile pleadings, the identity of his killers. "How do you know they were Hindus?" I ask him.

"They were," he replies and starts to walk away. Too quickly, it seems to me.

Did he see it all? The scuffle in the alley, the knives to the belly. Did other tenants stand by, watching from their windows? Letting a man die because he was Hindu? Until that moment, it hadn't occurred to me to be afraid of my neighbors.

My brother and I were among the few Hindus in a predominantly Muslim complex. We had moved in four months before. We hardly knew anyone in the building. But we liked the place and didn't mind the smell of biriyani rice in the corridors or the hordes of children playing loud cricket on holidays.

Even when the curfew emptied the streets, I felt safe, surrounded by the ordinary. But that was before the laborer was killed. Now, after, I am afraid of drawing attention to myself and ashamed of my fear. I don't want to see the changed, severe faces of my neighbors turning to watch me as I walk past the knots of women talking in the courtyard. The escalation of attacks -- women and children, Hindu and Muslim, killed in their beds -- angers me. I can only imagine what it makes my neighbors feel.

We don't nod hello to each other anymore. How can we? In the streets, our people are doing unspeakable things to one another. There are rumors about the revival of an age-old torment: mobs from both sides stop men at random and demand they declare their religion. Those suspected of lying are forced to undress. Once naked, they are easy to indict or set free -- only Muslims are circumcised.

One evening, our food runs out. During a brief break in the curfew, my brother goes for groceries. We hear the stores are empty. But he must try.

The knock on the door, when it comes, is soft and hesitant. I hear my breath, noisy in my chest. "Kaun hai?" I ask in Hindi. "It's me," my co-worker Muhammed answers. "And Anwar. Open the door." They live 20 minutes away. I have known them for years. Yet for one horrible, shameful instant, I stand in my doorway and wonder if it is safe to invite them in. They must have read my face because they rush to state their purpose. Muhammed's mother has sent me a gift: potatoes and onions in a string bag. Last year, she showed me how to make sheer korma, the creamy vermicelli dessert she made each year to celebrate the end of Ramadan. I didn't know what to say.

"Leave the door open," Anwar says, as I let them inside. "This being a Muslim area, we thought it was good to show people that we know your family." They stayed for some time and left only when my brother returned.

I'll never know whether we were in real danger. Were Anwar and Muhammed just playing it safe? Or did they know of actual threats against us? I never could bring myself to ask them. It was a terrible time; and when it was over, none of us wanted to talk about it anymore. So I only told them how wonderful the potatoes had tasted. I never told them that I had eaten dinner that night more terrified and more grateful than I had ever been.

Drawing (Bob Hambly)

